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**AN
ADVENTURE
IN VENUS**

BY

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The enemy craft were almost upon us, and from the nose of the foremost one a bluish radiance swept out rendering us helpless.

An Adventure in Venus

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CHAPTER I

An Emergency Call



AWOKE to the insistent whining of the radio call on the instrument board, glanced at the clock and muttered, "darn these late calls," as I plugged in the "dynamic" on the 400-meter wave.

An excited feminine voice greeted me as I cut in: "This is Dr. N. Lawrence, space-car No. 404 B-3; I am stalled just north of the old Canadian Boundary, near Mount Baker, in Washington district, and I can't get my motor started. I fell about a hundred feet, and smashed my under-carriage. Can you pick me up right away? I have an appointment at the Lunar Observatory to-day, which cannot be put off; I must be there."

I mumbled an ungracious assent, told her to light her pickup light, and called a substitute to mind the call-board. I already knew this 404 B-3, an old worn-out 'bus; it should have been on the scrap-heap a year ago.

The batteries upon which this old-style machine depended, were absolutely all in. They lacked the snappy action necessary to swing a heavy, radial oil motor, and I had warned the girl weeks ago that she'd have a crash if new ones were not installed. But some perverse streak had impelled her to keep them going till they fell down on the job. I intended applying for a civil law ruling to prohibit space-car operation without a mechanical certificate, when the Council of Four assembled in the Spring.

I didn't relish making a flying trip to the Moon with Dr. Lawrence, and then the return trip to the wrecked car, not to mention the long towing-job on my hands. No dinner tonight for me.

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As I roared over the country through the upper atmosphere, leaving states and cities far behind, I ran idly over the highlights of my business career as an aerservice operator.

Three years ago I invested all my savings in an old, but still "airworthy," Brent space-car, to operate a service for the salvaging of wrecked and stalled aircraft. With a set of large, self-locking hook-tackles of my own design, I was enabled to clamp firmly to a derelict craft and tow it back for repairs. I generally managed a pulling speed of about three thousand, but on the smaller private craft I have often raised it to six thousand miles per minute.

My new style service was in demand everywhere, and I prospered very well.

At the end of a year's work I took in my friend as a partner, and by buying another space-car, was able to obtain contracts with most of the air-transport companies, to handle their breakdowns.

Now I own a half interest in a flourishing concern, with eight powerful service cars, two offices, and an automatic call-board, which keeps us in touch with all commercial craft plying between Mars, Venus, the Moon and the Earth.

My partner and his helpers were even now bringing in a crippled liner from Venus with the two largest tow-cars, and I always try to answer some of the calls myself. Besides, I might be able to sell Dr. Lawrence a new Dixie Space-car. We had the agency for the United States, and were selling quantities of the small coupé type to private buyers.

Just then I came to myself with a start as I saw the Bellingham blinker far below me, and set my inductor compass for Mount Baker. Till now, I had been doing close to a thousand miles per minute, and had consumed just ten minutes on the journey. Now I reduced my speed gradually circling around and cruising along until I found the bright blue pickup light of the fallen car, whereupon I landed on a flat, rocky plain. Without stopping my motor I picked up my passenger and in a

few seconds we were roaring up into the pitch blackness of the night.

In a short time we were through the atmospheric belt and then I opened up the motor and let her go.

There is always a thrill to a space-flyer when you open it wide. But it soon wears off, and you barely realize the awful speed one of these machines picks up in a few minutes.

A Daring Plan

WHEN the motor's roar had settled down to a steady buzz, (it always does, on account of the absence of air, out in "space"), I turned to my passenger with some commonplace remark, and found myself facing a large automatic pistol! Obeying the threatening glance with which she greeted me, I elevated my hands above my head, and grinned rather shamefacedly at her.

"What's the idea?" I demanded.

"You'll do as I say, or I'll blow you full of holes, and run the car myself," replied this surprising young lady, in a firm, cultured voice.

"We are going on a bottlegging trip, to recoup my shattered fortunes, and if you are tractable you will get a fair share; if not, you may find yourself quietly released in inter-planetary space! In the meantime I'll just remove your weapons."

Suiting the action to the words she relieved me of my gun, and then laid her own across her knees in full view, close to her hand.

"Well!" I exploded, "I've been in some devilish queer corners, but this is the limit! Where do we go from here, anyway?"

Taking a small roll from the rack, marked VENUS—N. HEMISPHERE, Dr. Lawrence pointed to a spot on the chart close to the Vexius forests, and gave me some of the details of as wild a proposition as any I ever heard in my life!

We were to drop down on this place at night, (4 A. M. Venus time), pick up a very heavy metal box about twenty-five feet

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long, and deliver it as soon as possible on the landing-stage at the gang headquarters on the Moon.

What the box was to hold I could not discover, but it was very evidently being shipped illegally, and of great value.

My share in the venture, Dr. Lawrence explained, would net me about one hundred thousand dollars, and I should be supplied with plenty of fuel oil for the round trip at the Lunar station. The alternative was death, I was given clearly to understand, with no chance of evading the issue.

If I decided to go, the only risk would be the accidental meeting of a Venus Patrol. Capture by a patrol would mean a twenty-year sentence in the *Loxite* mines, and our probable death.

The Venerians need lots of convicts to mine that stuff, as they use it in preference to anything else for power purposes. An ounce of *Loxite*, properly disintegrated, will alone work a "butterfly" plane for a year.

Its price, however, is prohibitive anywhere else, as the Venus government imposes heavy restrictions on exports of *Loxite* to the other planets, and its use, consequently, is out of the question for private purposes.

In my own mind I had decided on *Loxite* as the only substance worth the amount they were willing to pay for transportation alone, and when I put the question to Dr. Lawrence she admitted as much, and inquired the extent of my armament, in case we were forced to fight.

I explained that no need had been felt for any weapons on my trips, and I never carried anything but a revolver myself.

The girl thereupon plugged in the radio headset at 10 metres wavelength, and made arrangements for weapons and fuel oil at the Lunar station.

In another ten minutes I began to reduce speed and by 11:10, Earth-time, I hung over Mare Crisium, which was still in the shadows, searching for the blue lights which marked the private landing-stage while we changed our lunar suits.

When I finally located it, I dropped the car gently and found

about twenty people waiting for us. They stowed the machine away hurriedly and took us through a narrow doorway in the solid rock to a small elevator, which connected with the quarters of the outfit, some five hundred feet underground. Here I was given a hot meal, which I needed very much, and while I ate I was questioned as to my attitude toward the proposed trip.

The warm, comfortable quarters, and the food had already given me a very favorable view of these "criminals" and I found myself very much in favor of the trip, especially as my conscience was perfectly clear. I didn't mind running *Loxite* because it was wrong, but because it was dangerous!

I told them I was willing to use my car for carrying a pay load anywhere and, provided I was reasonably protected, I saw no reason why the thing should not be done.

The leader, who seemed to hold supreme authority, declared himself satisfied, as he preferred an expert operator on the job if possible, and recommended a start in about seven hours.

I availed myself of the opportunity to get some sleep in a really comfortable bed, and so began the trip much refreshed.

CHAPTER II

Off to Venus

WHILE looking over the car before leaving, I noticed several ports cut in the armor, and was informed they were our defence in case of attack from either patrols or outlaw airships. These "guns" looked more like high-tension insulators than weapons, but the machinery on the inside told a different tale. The ports were padded to prevent the leakage of our precious air into "space," and to insulate us from the terrible cold.

I recognized a "Minus Gun," for producing such a powerful "negative" ray that any electrical machinery not protected was instantly stopped by its action.

In one corner a pair of large frequency changers had been set up, whose use I could not determine. There was also a squat,

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ugly atomic release gun, which, although useful only as a last resort, produced a very deadly explosion of terrible effectiveness at close range.

Both the frequency changers and the "Atomic Release Gun" were recently invented by Dr. Lawrence herself, and only the "Minus Gun" was known to the general public.

The Venus Patrol craft would have two of these "guns" as standard equipment, but we were suitably protected by an armor of lead and titanium alloy, which completely covered our power plant.

A small siren sounded, warning everyone away from the platform, and a half minute later I pulled the control lever right back, stepped on the oil pedal, and we slipped neatly away from the old Moon, just as the sun appeared suddenly on our left. The dazzling white peaks and long shadows on the retreating landscape made it look a veritable fairyland, but I knew in another hour or so it would be an Inferno, whose heat would be unbearable.

Besides Dr. Lawrence I had three more passengers. One, almost my own age, who, although earthborn, had been raised on Venus, and knew the Vexius Forests locality well, was called Jan Ross. The other two were plain strong-arm men. These toughs were typical of the "Third Kingdom" men, and were carried for the sole purpose of doing any fighting during our short stay on Venus.

They were large and muscular, with small brains, and loyal to the core. During our trip to Venus they divided their time between eating, sleeping, and playing an ancient game which they called Black Jack, although why it was so named I could not discover.

The young man, Jan Ross, was the electrical engineer of the outfit, and a more pleasant companion I have never met.

Dr. Lawrence, whom we now called Norma, by her own request, continued to act as leader, and very capably too. Our little party of three passed the time very pleasantly, now that I

was definitely "one of the bunch," but I could see, as the time passed, that Jan Ross was greatly attracted by the cool, capable, beautiful woman who had planned this little jaunt into space. He was also bitterly and increasingly jealous of my attentions and common courtesies, which amused me not a little. I could see he was stirred up every time she spoke to him. But this tall blonde girl left me cold, and I just laughed at his sour glances. A small girl with dark eyes and hair could make a fool of me anytime. But a *blonde*? Never!

The Fete of Bardux

AS we neared the planet a complication arose. The celebration of *Bardux* was well under way, and everyone who owned, or could hire, or borrow a 'plane of any kind would be spending the week in a series of wild jamborees to all points of the compass. *Bardux* is the Venus air-spirit personified, just as we call our Christmas spirit Santa Claus; and everything is decorated profusely and everyone celebrates.

The buildings are festooned with colored lights and streamers and banks of vari-colored searchlights playing in every direction. Peacock flares burn all night, scattering their iridescent glow. The quiet of the countryside is shattered every few minutes by crowds of singing, shouting revellers, racing each other in all sorts of 'planes, some of which are decorated as birds, or flowers, and some as animals.

No corner could be quiet for long, and if we weren't decorated, like the others, we should be conspicuous; something we meant to avoid at any cost.

Norma, after some deep thinking, decided to approach the planet in the usual way, pass the customs and other airport officials at the City of *Ordun*, and wait there while our car was being decorated. Then we would go for a mock pleasure cruise to the forests of *Vexius*, and locate our box of *Loxite*.

The loss of time would be more than made up for by the extra security afforded by the decorations.

Dropping down through the lanes of traffic we had to wait fifteen or twenty seconds for the signals, and, when the light showed blue, for "Go," through the slight evening haze, we slid past the tower and grated to a halt outside the Customs offices.

After a wait of perhaps half an hour we were boarded by four officers in their yellow Customs uniform, and thoroughly searched, questioned, and finally passed. One of them was suspicious of the new apparatus installed in the control cabin, but we informed him they were meteor-destroyers in the experimental stage, and were a total failure. Thereupon he promptly lost interest and signed our passes without further comment.

Once through the Customs our way led direct to a B. P. shop, where Norma gave instructions for the decorating. We left the plane there, with the two strong-arm men to guard it, and set out to see *Ordun*.

I had never seen this city in the summer before, much less at this gala season, and the sights were as dazzling and strange as the land of the fairies was supposed to be in olden times. The streets were for motor vehicles only, of course; the walks being set up two or three hundred feet above, and on every hand crowds of people flocked toward the amusement buildings. The majority of these people were dressed in the wildest and most fantastic clothes imaginable, so that our sober, everyday dress drew quite a little good-natured ridicule at our expense. Suddenly a little motorless "Butterfly" came skimming down from the air-lanes above us, and a girl in her early twenties hopped out and ran to meet us.

Dorovia

JAN ROSS started forward, his face showing his delight; and the next minute I was being introduced to the most charming girl it has been my good fortune to meet. Her name was as lovely as her personality—Dorovia. I think I managed to mumble some commonplace remark, and for the next few minutes I saw nothing but this beautiful creature walking beside me.

Jan explained that Dorovia was his first cousin, and owner of the Transplanetary Ltd., a flourishing concern handling freight and passengers to the other planets.

Her father and her uncle had built the business up by forty years of steady work and then, in an express cruiser of their own design, they had been instantly killed a few hundred miles from Venus. A tramp sky-ship without lights—a collision—and both ships plunged to destruction. And as their power supply disintegrated they were literally blown to atoms.

Since the fatal crash, the business had been run by a trustee appointed by old Jim Norman's will, and Dorovia Norman was left free to continue her mad tearing around in society, spending her too liberal allowance on anything which caught her fancy.

To-day, she chose to walk with us, and checked her "Butterfly" at a nearby hangar, where she was well known by the operators in charge.

With Dorovia as a guide, we explored mazes of fairy bowers, glittering streets, and crowded amusement palaces, and ended up at a monster of a building of pale blue marble, where color-music was being shown.

We were ushered to a seat, and were soon absorbed in this fascinating combination of sound and color. While the huge orchestra played a wonderful symphony, a combination of varicolored light waves was thrown on the screen, each instrument controlling a portion of the light and colors.

On first witnessing one of these color symphonies, one has the feelings of a sane person in a crazy-house, but in a short while one's ears and eyes seem to become synchronized with each other. In half an hour you are enjoying it immensely and find yourself hypnotized by its beauty to the very last note.

As we came out into the bright lights of the streets we felt a dazed sensation almost as though we were returning from a trip through another dimension. I glanced vaguely at Dorovia, who smiled and squeezed my arm, saying, "When you've been to

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those as often as I have, you'll take them almost as a matter of course."

Back to the work-shop we tramped, after purchasing fancy costumes to match the dress of the merry-makers. Dorovia, already clad in a rubberoid dress, which could be inflated at will, looked like a very fat girl though, when deflated, a slim graceful fairy. My own costume, also rubberlike in texture, was bright red, and covered on the outside with little knobs and warts of yellow and green, while Jan Ross strode along in a zebra-like suit, having a large blue horn on the head-dress!

On presenting our ticket at the shop, we were shown to a landing-stage where our car stood waiting, almost unrecognizable as a huge white swan. Here, much to my disgust, we parted company with Dorovia, who declared herself already overdue at a party atop the Parliament Building.

I tentatively suggested paying her a visit in the near future, before our departure, and was assured a warm welcome, in the teeth, so to speak, of a rather sarcastic smile from Jan Ross.

He kept up a continuous flow of conversation for the rest of the evening on the charms and fortune of Dorovia Norman, stopping now and then to grin delightedly in my direction. In despair I tried to shut him up, but it was no use. Having found that I was sensitive on the subject he enlarged upon it at great length, and took a fiendish delight in "rubbing it in" in a good-natured way.

CHAPTER III *A Smuggling Party*

WE moved off the landing-stage at midnight, cruised slowly along as though pleasure bent, until the City of *Ordun* faded to a hazy light on the horizon, and the merry-makers became more scattered.

Somewhere near here, I knew by the chart, a beacon indicated the rising ground of the Anullam Range, and I must avoid too close an approach to those saw-toothed ridges, where hundreds

had come to grief before a beacon was installed. Soon I saw the alternating red and green blinker, and after passing directly above it, I turned and headed due North, arriving at the appointed spot two hours before dawn.

As I settled the car down in the center of the three lights I made out the dim form of a small building in front of one of the flares, and a moment later we landed. Leaving all lights out on the car, we made our way toward the building, scarcely more than a shack, and pushing the door open, we entered.

Everything seemed deserted, and as we turned to leave the place we found ourselves facing five men in dark colored suits, who seemed to appear almost from the ground! In a moment several more joined them and they menaced us with automatic pistols, at the same time informing us we were under arrest. We were trapped!

Almost instantly our "gunmen" fell to the floor, spoiling the aim of the customs men, and shooting even as they fell. Someone slammed the door, and the next minute we found ourselves grappling with our enemies in total darkness. A large hand closed 'round my throat, cutting off my breath, and I lashed out savagely with my pistol butt at an invisible head. My assailant collapsed, and the next instant I was again seized, this time from behind. Everything happened in almost complete silence except for the heavy breathing of struggling men. No one cared to chance a shot for fear of killing a comrade, and drawing the enemy's fire. A husky arm was flung round my throat, almost choking the life out of me, and in spite of my struggles my aggressor, evidently an enormously muscular man, clung to my back like a limpet.

In desperation I drove myself backward against the wall, loosening his grip and allowing myself a gulp of much-needed air. My head spun and my legs trembled, but the thought of twenty years in a *Loxite* mine acted as a stimulant to my faltering strength. I managed to throw my adversary over my head, by an almost superhuman effort, and as he lay prone, I groped my

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way toward the door, intent on letting in a little light. I almost paid for my foolishness with my life, for as I swung the door open a bullet shattered the woodwork at my shoulder, filling my neck with small splinters, but doing no harm otherwise. The shot promptly drew the fire of one of our men, and in the exchange of shots that ensued I crawled back into the cabin on my hands and knees.

In the weird glow from the flare outside I saw one of the customs men watching me, with his revolver pointed in my direction. The light confused his eyes, and he was only waiting to be sure of his aim before firing. I leaped the few feet which separated us as he pulled the trigger, but a sharp snap was all I heard, and I realized his gun was empty. The surprise was too much for him, and he failed to dodge as I swung a heavy blow to his chin, crumpling him up, and rendering him unconscious. As I straightened up I realized suddenly that no one else was fighting, and, going to the door, I swung it wide.

One of our gunmen was dead; Jan Ross and the remaining strong-arm man sat each astride a fallen customs officer, and Norma Lawrence lay upon the floor unconscious, with a nasty scalp wound, which was bleeding freely.

Off with the Loxite

WE revived Norma, bound the two conscious officers, also the three whom I had struggled with, and staggered with our prisoners into the nearby brush, where we concealed them.

Leaving the four dead men we returned to the car, where we tied up one another's hurts and recovered our breath.

When we were sufficiently rested we returned to the shack and although we searched it thoroughly we found no trace of the box we had come so far to find.

Disappointed at our failure, Jan Ross began poking among the stones which formed the foundation of the shack, and immediately a wail of despair issued from the darkness under the building.

A moment later we had dragged from his hiding-place an old grey-beard, who had been concealed beneath one corner of the foundations. The old man was stiff with fright, and for some minutes could not be made to speak a word. But he finally produced a piece of paper with the complete directions for finding the much-sought box.

The shooting had so terrified the old hermit that he had hidden under the old shack in deadly fear of his life, and was unable to explain anything coherently.

However, in ten minutes we had found and heaved up the thin flat rock which covered the box, and there it lay, ready for the journey, like a huge steel coffin.

The tackle and slings used for laying it there were still around the box, so we spotted the flyer over it, fastened the clamps, and prepared to depart.

Stepping over to the old man, I showed him where the bound men were hidden, and then climbed aboard the car. Not a minute too soon, either, for as we rose a small machine with a machine-gun mounted on it came tearing into the clearing, and we departed amid a shower of bullets which rattled on our armor as harmlessly as hail.

The huge box, slung below us, made the space-car a little clumsy, and she wouldn't answer to her controls quite as readily. But it rode easier than some jobs I have carried, in spite of its tons of concentrated weight.

Of course, as soon as we were free of the atmosphere I could crowd on speed, but until then I had to be careful. If that *Loxite* got hot it might begin to disintegrate, in which case we should all be blown to dust in a few seconds.

We loafed along, doing barely 500, until suddenly I saw a black speck in the distance, closely followed by two more! The chase was on!

With the load I carried, I daren't open up enough to outdistance them, so I just held my course and waited for a close enough approach to use our weapons.

Norma and Jan Ross, busily adjusting the "guns," suggested I "listen in" on the radio for any communications from the patrol ships, and a moment later I was in touch with the foremost one.

The big cone-speaker reproduced the leader's voice as he ordered us to halt, and a moment later came a second order.

I announced my refusal, and the other two ships immediately spread out, cutting off my escape, even had I decided to sacrifice the precious box.

The Battle in the Air

IN five minutes the patrols were close enough, and Jan Ross cut loose with a "Minus Gun," but all the results we received came from the radio speaker, which echoed with hilarious laughter! The laughter then explained that his engines were also protected with sheathing, and advised us to surrender at once, or risk death.

By this time we were close enough to the enemy to use the atomic release. I have seen this type of machine at work in rock quarries, slicing out cubes of solid granite as easily as a knife cuts cheese, and I can assure you that in warfare the operation of a similar machine at short range is terrible to witness. In a moment more the enemy cars and their operators would be burned to a crisp, and I shut my eyes in horror as Jan pulled the lever. A moment later I opened them again, at a low exclamation from Norma.

The enemy craft were almost upon us and untouched, while from the nose of the foremost one a bluish radiance swept out, neutralizing our deadly atomic release, and rendering us helpless. I blessed the metallic sheathing around my motor, as I heard its steady rhythm continue unaffected, while I twisted and turned, dodging those patrol ships for my life.

Suddenly Norma signalled to me to slow down, at the same time fussing with the controls of the frequency changers. And as the humming of the transformers gradually rose in intensity a queer sensation struck me.

I was going blind! I could not see my operating table, nor could I make out the shapes of Norma or Jan Ross!

Glancing over my left shoulder, which was also invisible to me, I found I could still see all three of the pursuing cars, and continued my twisting and turning tactics as before. Light broke in upon my tormented mind as I suddenly realized the truth. Those frequency changers had actually rendered us invisible and the patrols were trying to follow us by the sound of the motor!

I promptly shut off my engine and dropped a thousand feet in a matter of a few seconds, so that when I cut my motor in again I was too far away for them to hear me at all.

Operating the controls of a car you cannot see gives you the sensations of a disembodied spirit wandering in the air, and when a voice spoke to me suddenly at my elbow I almost fell off my invisible chair with fright.

It was only Jan's voice, asking for a pair of pliers, but it sounded like the Archangel Gabriel to me!

He explained that although the frequency changers had done the trick the control rod had come loose, and now we were temporarily stranded in invisibility.

I marvelled at his sure touch as he adjusted an invisible rod, with a pair of invisible pliers, on an invisible and extremely intricate machine, and by the time he laid down his pliers the patrols had cruised off out of sight, baffled and beaten. It was just as well they had, for the machine was getting dangerously hot, and we had to reduce the rate of vibration considerably to avoid burning out the transformer coils. This resulted in everything becoming dimly visible, as a ghost was supposed to look in ancient times. For safety's sake I picked out a likely looking spot and dropped the car in the middle of a clump of tall trees.

CHAPTER IV

An Encounter

AFTER inspecting the *Loxite* to make sure it had not been touched we covered the space-car with green boughs, to make it invisible from above, and stripped off all the fancy decorations.

At Norma's suggestion, we decided to wait several days, until the search cooled down, before trying to make our escape. Although the frequency changers worked, they became dangerously hot in a short time so we could not rely upon them in our final dash for the Earth.

Finding the time hanging rather heavy on my hands, after the hurry and bustle of the last few days, I walked several miles to the nearest town, which was known as *Utox*. Donning my wild-looking garments I proceeded to join in the festivities with the rest, and ended up in a hall for dancing. The place was packed with revellers, and I soon scraped an acquaintance with a very pretty little girl who said her name was Cela. In the middle of a dance I caught her making signs to someone over my shoulder, and turning my head, beheld Dorovia Norman, with a young man of about my own age seated at one of the small tables.

When the music stopped we strolled over to the table and I was introduced to the young man, *an air guard at the Utox station!* I concealed my confusion as best I could and made some small talk, and presently the young air guard, who seemed to stand well with Cela, took her off to dance, leaving me with one whom I had come to regard as the sweetest girl in the Universe!

Dorovia laughed merrily when I remarked that the young man seemed to have deserted her.

"Poor Ron has an awful time. Cela runs away from him and then he comes to me and tells me his troubles! She loves him dearly, but seems determined to keep him guessing, even if he is worried and blue sometimes!"

Presently, as the handsome pair were returning, laughing happily together, Ron's face sobered suddenly, and he walked over to me.

"I'd like a word with you, Melville," he whispered and led the way out on a balcony, overlooking the gardens. "I've just remembered where I have seen you before," he said excitedly: "They got a picture of you with a Tumo Night Camera in the old shack, and the department has it pasted up in the offices of

the air guards all over the country."

"What are you going to do?" I demanded, "expose me in front of Cela and Dorovia? I'd rather finish the evening quietly and then go with you, if it's all the same to you."

He was silent for a long time, and then, suddenly, he burst into a torrent of words, explaining the dilemma he was in.

The department assigned him to the job of checking up on the Transplanetary, Ltd., a concern suspected of bootlegging *Loxite* in large quantities.

He was furnished with a social introduction to Dorovia Norman, as part of the job, and she, in turn, had introduced him to the wonderful Cela, her friend.

The Bargain

ALREADY enough information had been discovered to put the company out of business and that meant Dorovia and several of the company officials would spend half a lifetime in the mines, through his efforts. He knew what Cela would think of that! He, Ron, would be looking for a new sweetheart in about five minutes, and now, to cap the climax I had come around, inviting arrest, and putting him in deeper than ever.

How was it possible for a young man to keep his position as an Air Guard, while this sort of thing continued to happen under his very nose?

If anyone caught wind of it he, Ron, would be mining *Loxite* himself for ten or fifteen years.

I thought for a minute, and then told him that as I saw it he was in the soup both ways anyway, and I was prepared to offer him a trip back to Earth in the space-car if he cared to risk it. He had nothing to lose and everything to gain!

After some discussion we shook hands on it and I promised him his passage to Earth in exchange for his official assistance in our getaway. When we returned to the girls, Ron told them of his decision with a very tearful Cela clinging to his arm.

When they had gone Dorovia and I went for a stroll on the

terrace in the moonlight, and there I told her I loved her ; that I knew how her fortune was made, and replenished from time to time : and I ended by telling her Ron's story too ; that I was a hunted man with a price on my head.

She took it all very calmly though I could see she was deeply affected. But she gave me no satisfaction, merely saying she was very tired, and wanted to be alone for a while.

We flew to a spot a bare hundred yards from the concealed space-car, in her "Butterfly" plane, without waking the occupants, and when I would have kissed her she merely held out her hand, and I found myself helpless to do more than murmur a vague "good night."

CHAPTER V

Ready to Dash

NEXT morning, while we were having breakfast, a small motorless 'plane came fluttering over the clearing and landed on the far side. My heart jumped just once, and then fell like lead as a man in blue came from the machine. As he strode across toward us I loosened my pistol in its holster, and then grinned with relief as I recognized Ron Thaler. We shook hands, and I introduced him to Norma Lawrence and Jan Ross, and repeated for their benefit the story he had told me.

He asked permission to speak with Norma in private, and when he came out of the car he seemed mighty pleased about something, for he was grinning all over his face. He just ran across the clearing, jumped into his machine, and disappeared over the tree-tops: his little machine wide open.

"Your friend is a good business man," said Norma, walking up behind me.

"What's he up to now?" I demanded, my curiosity fully roused by this time.

"He has just swapped me a perfect escape for passage for himself and his girl. He has promised to report us as seen in the

Southern Hemisphere to-morrow morning, and while they search for us there, we will be on our way, and no one the wiser."

I agreed that it was a first-rate idea and went aboard the car to prepare for our departure, but my heart didn't seem to be in the work. As I went about, filling the lubricators, and putting distilled water into the batteries, my mind kept returning to thoughts of a little girl in *Ordun City*, whom I should probably never see again, and I felt my spirits steadily falling.

She had remembered the position of the car well enough to direct Ron there, but had not come herself. Evidently amid the whirl and sparkle of high life in *Ordun* she had completely forgotten my existence. To make matters worse, when I went into the control room for some cigarettes I found cold, calculating, scientific Dr. Lawrence sitting on the knees of Jan Ross, with both arms around his neck!

I just walked out without even an apology, and spent the rest of the day doing the hundred and one odd jobs necessary to ensure a quick move when we were ready for our final dash.

Toward evening I became so restless that when Ron arrived with his beloved Cela I borrowed his 'plane for an hour or so, and went out looking for trouble.

Oh, yes; I found it!

A Natural Mistake

AS I sailed along in the little machine, propelled by the disintegration of *Loxite*, I could not detect any vibration, beyond the singing of the wind in the guy-wires. The power was almost silent, and very smooth, almost peaceful in its silky strength, yet these little machines, built for Customs service, could hold a speed of two hundred all day, if necessary, without a sign of trouble.

As I sped along in the darkness I caught a sudden flash of red on my right, and in an instant my 'plane reeled under a blow. I realized I was being fired on by another 'plane, and pulling back the control, I stepped up my speed to the last notch. More bullets

crashed into the 'plane, as a second adversary appeared like a shadow to my left, and then, in a welter of shooting stars I lapsed into unconsciousness.

When I regained my senses it was to hear the voice of Dorovia Norman! That she was angry was very evident, and someone was getting an awful "earful."

Opening my eyes, I saw a big rough-looking man standing in the doorway, hat in hand, and consternation written all over his swarthy face. He was shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other, and as he saw me move my head he gestured in my direction, seemingly relieved at a chance to change the subject.

Dorovia turned 'round at once, and, coming to the bed on which I lay, asked me how I felt. Although bandaged in several places, and aching all over, I still seemed to be all in one piece, and said as much.

"I wish," said Dorovia, "that I'd never begun this miserable business; you might have been killed! I'm heartily sick of the whole thing."

These words seemed to put some life into the man in the doorway, and he came forward in a different manner, and apologized to me for the "busting up" he had given me. "I didn't know you were in the 'business'," he explained; "me and my pals were looking out for Customs men when you blew by in a Government 'plane, and we took you for one of them."

He also put forward a proposition to take the business off Dorovia's hands, naming a fair figure, and guaranteeing its delivery in Universal Currency in an hour or so. As he put it, "My pals and me have always wanted to go into the 'business' on our own, and as we always got a fair share of the profits from Miss Norman, here, we managed to save enough between us for a start. This is no business for a lady, anyway, and if Miss Norman considers selling out we'd like a chance to buy the whole works, just as it stands."

I held my breath while Dorovia considered the offer, and when

she accepted, on condition that the money was delivered by midnight, I fairly hugged myself with glee.

When final arrangements had been completed the man went away, and Dorovia, with a sigh of weariness, sank into a chair.

I thanked her for patching me up, and said we expected to sail sometime during the next five hours.

While discussing the taking of Ron and Cela back to the Earth with us I tentatively suggested, "What a pity you cannot see your way clear to come back with us also!"

In another moment Dorovia had put her face in her hands, and begun to cry softly. In trying to comfort her I suddenly found her in my arms, with her dear head upon my shoulder.

"If you l-loved me half as much as you s-say you do," she sobbed, "you'd take me with you. I don't want to stay here alone!"

When my head had ceased its mad whirling and I had gathered my scattered senses I released her gently a moment, while I asked a question.

"Why didn't you say so last night?"

"I didn't want you to think I was chasing you," she murmured into my coat-collar.

Back to Earth

BY five the next morning we were well out in space, homeward bound, and a happier group of people you never saw in your life. Ron had taken the place of our remaining strong-arm man in the car, as that worthy had elected to stay on Venus. The new owner had offered him a job with the Interplanetary Company, and Norma was glad to pay him his wages in full to be rid of him. He had done his work well, and there was no further need of his services, while space on the car was rather crowded.

Ron and I shared a bed in the control room, and Jan Ross took his blankets into the motor-room, so that we managed, and Jan and I spelled one another at the controls the whole trip.

We seemed to arrive in sight of Earth in an amazingly short

time, and after dropping the big box of Loxite at the appointed spot, we headed for my home office. When we came close to the traffic lanes my enthusiasm over-ran my caution, and I became so excited that I couldn't manage the car properly, so, fearful of accident at the last moment, I cruised over the office and signalled for a pilot.

My partner came up himself, his face wreathed in smiles, driving a brand new Dixie flyer, and climbed aboard our craft.

"Talk about your 'Super-Service'," he chortled, pumping my hand, "How on earth do you expect to give service when you have to call a pilot to take you to your own hangar?"

THE END

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