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NEUTRAL VESSEL, by Harl Vincent

Neutral Vessel

by Harl Vincent

Harl Vincent was the pen name of Harold Vincent Schoepflin (1893 - 1968), a mechanical engineer who wrote science fiction as a hobby. Vincent was one of the pioneers of magazine science fiction, publishing his first story in 1928. Over the next fourteen years he would publish over seventy science fiction stories. However, only a handful of his stories have been anthologized over the years, and Vincent is now almost forgotten.

Because his early stories have all passed into the public domain, they have slowly been appearing online over the last two years. Four of his stories are currently available at Project Gutenberg under his own name, and two more can be found at PG's online copies of the February 1930 and July 1930 issues of Astounding Stories magazine. In addition, five more have appeared here at the Johnny Pez blog. Links to all eleven stories can be found at this blog's Harl Vincent Online sidebar on the right.

It is now my pleasure to present a twelfth story by Vincent, "Neutral Vessel" from the January 1940 issue of Astounding Science-Fiction. This is the first time the story has appeared anywhere since its initial publication in Astounding sixty-nine years ago. As is the case with the earlier stories at this blog, "Neutral Vessel" will appear in a blog-friendly multi-part format. Here, then, is part 1 of

Neutral Vessel

part 1

I.

In the captive military observation sphere a hundred miles above the outer cloud layer of Venus, Tommy Blake idly punched a location spot on the calculating board. He was not greatly impressed by the alarm indication of this body's approach. Seven million miles it was off, at the limit of the sensitive magnetic pickup system. From its direction, it could hardly be a Martian battle fleet and, even if it were, they would be several days getting here. Plenty of time.

His next check on the object gave him pause. It was an hour later when he glanced casually at the distance-indicator spot which marked it. It read 5,200,000 miles! An impossible figure. Nothing in the Solar System could travel nearly two million miles in an hour.

"Hey, Masters," he called across the room. "Come over here and tell me if I'm screwy."

"I don't have to come over to tell you that," his pal grinned. But he crossed to the instrument board.

"Look here," Blake said excitedly. "See this approach-warning dot? I get an incredible reading on its velocity. Check me, will you?"

"Did you put the spectroscope on it?"

"Sure, but it's too small and too far off. No lines. Now, be a good guy and hold the stop watch while I punch the calculator. Give me ten-second intervals." Blake squinted purposefully into the vernier, his fingers on the keyboard.

Barney Masters laughed. "Man, you won't need intervals that close for anything that moves."

"Never mind." Blake was frowningly serious. "I will if this thing's traveling as fast as I think. I'm setting the calculator for serial subtraction, so yelp out the times."

A pause; Masters eyeing his stop watch. Then, "Now!" he sang out.

The calculator chuckled and clunked. And at each "now" for two solid minutes the machine did likewise.

"Enough," announced Blake, tearing out the printed tape.

Together they gazed at the figures; in unison they whistled their wonderment.

5,090,005 5,084,355 5,078,705 5,073,054

and so ran the series down to an end figure of 5,022,181 in miles distant.

Masters' eyes goggled. Blake grabbed his slide rule and pencil. "67,824 miles in two minutes!" he gasped. "565 miles a second average. See for yourself."

Masters saw for himself. He was checking it by long division. "565.2," he corrected. "And the differences are progressively slightly greater. Wonder what that means?"

Blake stared, checking back rapidly in his mind to the average of 500 miles a second for the first hour. "Why," he husked, "it means the thing's accelerating." The slide and indicator of his rule moved swiftly. "At about 160 feet per second. Five Earth gravities."

"Meteors don't accelerate," Masters remarked thoughtfully. "Nor comets, nor anything--"

"Except spaceships," Blake finished for him. "And neither comet nor spaceship ever went this fast."

"Whatever it is, it's coming this way," Masters said gloomily.

"Approximately, anyway. But there isn't a chance in a million of it hitting us. Not ten million." Blake was struck by a sudden new thought. "Sa-ay!" he snorted. "We're fools to believe this--it just isn't possible. I'll bet our base line, for the automatic triangulator, is haywire. The other sphere may be down or out of whack. We'll check up with headquarters. Have to report, anyway."

Staring at one another with a mixture of hope, awe and incredulity on their lean young faces, the two Terrestro-Venusian military observers made for the radio room. They couldn't possibly know that some five hours previously, out in space--

* * *

Captain Jeffery Brand had an uneasy feeling.

It wasn't as if the Spirit of Terra had anything to fear in the Earth-Venus space lane. The mightiest liner of the skies, though nearly new, she was tried and proven by her nine previous jaunts across the void. She was unarmed and carried no contraband. Her repulsor screens were of ample capacity to ward off any stray mines of either combatant she might encounter. She carried proudly the insignia of Earth, which planet had been steadfastly neutral through the two years of bitter warfare between Mars and Venus. Under the terms of treaties never yet dishonored, she was guaranteed freedom from search or attack in space, and safe entry at the designated

unblocked ports. Still the captain was uneasy.

Brand was not superstitious. He had no fear of anything in an atmosphere or in the far-flung reaches of the heavens. Perhaps his dinner hadn't agreed with him. Maybe he had never gotten quite used to these ultramodern liners in which every major mechanism was automatic, bridge-controlled. He'd come up through the ranks. He'd been a yard mechanic, rocket man, conditioning engineer, chartman, control operator, and skipper of a slow lunar freight. First taking orders, later giving them. Accustomed for more than twelve years to a full-crew ship, he'd rather bark his orders at a man than at a machine—even though the machine was likely to be more reliable. You began to feel like a damn machine yourself.

His eyes swept the thirty-foot curve of the bridge control board. Four men, spaced along its length, their fingers twinkling over a maze of controls, their eyes alert to the flickering on and off of varicolored lights before them, were all that were required for the operation of every mechanical detail of the thousand-foot, eighty-thousand-ton ship! Of course, there was the maintenance crew. The purser and his staff. Cargo wranglers and an army of deckhands. Hundreds in galleys, dining saloons, cabin service—all coming under the head steward. But of old-time, hard-bitten spacemen like himself, there were none. Even his first officer, Gary Carlin, had never seen service on a full-crew ship.

Brand paced the bridge, along the desk rim of the control board, a thing he rarely did. The men's eyes never left their instruments and lights, nor their fingers the buttons and jacks and levers, as he passed; but he knew his disquietude was affecting them. Fortunately, he'd soon be relieved by Carlin.

He paused at the position-indicating panel. They were just under ten million miles from Venus and approaching it at the normal coasting

rate of 27.6 miles per second. A little over four days yet remained of their journey. And Brand would be glad when it was completed.

He was glad now when Carlin came in. The mate was always wearing a grin, a cheerfully boyish sort of smile. He wore it now.

"Fellow to see you, sir," he told the captain. "Waiting in your lounge. One of the passengers."

Brand arched black brows. "Complaint?"

"He didn't say. Looks harmless enough, though. Venusian, I'd say, or Venuso-Terrestrial." Young Carlin looked up at the chronometer. "Ready to give over, sir?" he asked.

Brand's eyes roved enviously over the younger man's trim, sinewy form at set off by his perfectly fitted uniform. His own square bulk, he was painfully aware, was better suited to the rigors and scanty garb of a foundry than to the gold-braided scarlet and a drawing room.

"Yes," he sighed, "I'm ready, Mr. Carlin. And, as usual, there are no instructions." He waved a knotty hand toward the control board. "It's all done for us automatically. Done in wriggling red and blue and green lines that ink themselves on the charts."

Gary Carlin had better sense than to expand his grin. "Yes, sir," he said respectfully.

* * *

The appearance of Brand's visitor justified Carlin's estimate. A scrawny little man with washed-out eyes and parchment skin drawn tight over high cheekbones. His greeting was mildly apologetic.

"What can I do for you?" the captain boomed genially.

His caller bowed in an almost servile manner. "I am greatly honored, captain, that you receive me. I am Leander Phillips of London. And I have some information I believe will interest you."

Surprised. Brand offered the man a cigar, bit the end off his own. "Name's Phillips?" he said. "I should have thought you were Venusian."

"Only on the maternal side, captain. Father was pure Terrestrial. But that is neither here nor there, sir. Excepting that my sympathies are naturally with Venus in, shall I say, the present unpleasantness?"

Brand repressed a chuckle at the little man's seriousness and verbiage. "That's not surprising, Mr. Phillips," he conceded. "Many Earthmen are sympathizers on one side or the other. I try to be strictly neutral. But I repeat, sir: what can I do for you?"

The Venusian sympathizer looked around nervously. "There are Martian spies aboard," he said with owlish solemnity.

The captain laughed reassuringly. "I shouldn't be surprised. Probably Venusian spies as well. We can't help that. Why worry about it? This is neutral territory, just the same as London."

"I know that, sir." Leander Phillips was tensely serious. "In general, I believe this causes you no concern. In this case, however, I'm convinced it should be of grave concern to you."

The man's earnestness impressed Brand. "Let's not beat about the bush," he suggested. "Just what have you to tell me?"

Phillips furtively withdrew a paper from his pocket, passing it to the captain as if it were red-hot to his touch. "First off, sir," he whispered, "I beg of you to look this over and conceal it at once."

Brand's skin crawled as he saw the meticulously drawn sketch on the paper. It was an accurate circuit diagram of the Spirit of Terra! Hastily he pocketed it. "Where'd you get this?" he asked soberly.

"They were discussing it, sir, at my table. One dropped it later. And I'm quite a bit frightened, sir, for my daughter's sake. She is with me, you know. That is one favor I came to ask: would it be possible to have our table changed for the remainder of the voyage--Zona's and mine?"

Brand frowned, thinking of his previous uneasiness. "Can you point out the ones you think are spies?" he demanded in his abrupt way.

Leander Phillips jumped a foot, then smiled sheepishly. "I can, sir, and will, of course." he quavered.

The captain jabbed at a button and bawled into the audio frame on his desk: "Tell Mr. Worthman two more passengers at my table, starting with supper this period. Leander Phillips and his daughter, Zona. That's all."

Every passenger knew that Worthman was the head steward. The little Venuso-Terrestrian bowed himself out, smiling relievedly, leaving the captain to sit scowling perplexedly in a haze of cigar smoke.

* * *

Without knowing why, Brand stirred himself in a few minutes and went into his private quarters, where he instructed his cabin boy to lay out his most impressive finery. He knew why, a moment later, when he returned to his lounge and beheld a vision. If ever he wished he were twenty years younger, it was then. A girl-vision, it was, tall and slim and auburn-haired, with features and a figure that would

have made the greatest artist forget his art. The girl's lips were tremulous and her eyes wide.

"I'm Zona Phillips," she said breathlessly. "Has... has my father been here?"

"Why, yes, my dear," said Brand, blissfully unconscious of what was an intrusion. "He left only a few minutes ago."

The girl wrung her tapered fingers. "Oh, Captain Brand!" she wailed. "I'm afraid. I... I just know something's happened."

"Now, now--" the captain started to soothe her. But he forgot what words of comfort had been on his lips in a sudden sensation that comes only to an old-time spaceman. A rush of emptiness inside him.

The Spirit of Terra had leaped into sudden acceleration! To the girl, to any passenger aboard the giant liner, this would be unnoticeable--the internal gravity compensators took care of that instantly. But you couldn't fool an old-timer like Brand.

Zona Phillips was becoming frantic when the audio frame on his desk bellowed in Carlin's familiar accents: "All stern motors and steering jets blasting full, captain. Controls not functioning. Your instructions, sir."

Brand sputtered. This was an un-heard-of eventuality. But just like these newfangled contraptions to let you down at exactly the wrong time. "Coming!" he barked at the frame. "Be right with you."

"I... I'm sorry, captain." The girl's eyes were starry with tears about to come. "I... I didn't mean to interrupt. But, my father--"

The reason for her presence had slipped Brand's mind. "Yes, yes,"

he said hastily. "Come along, Miss Zona, and tell me about it on the way. I have to be on the bridge immediately."

Trotting at his side, she said: "I can wait till you're finished with that, captain." But her voice sounded dead, hopeless.

And well it might. Rounding a corner of the corridor, they almost fell over the body of Leander Phillips, which was slumping grotesquely to the floor. The acrid smell of burned flesh was in the air. His head was almost blasted from his shoulders. The girl screamed and flopped at his side just as Brand leaped after the big figure he saw scuttling off. Her scream had warned the fugitive and he turned like an animal at bay, whipping up a stubby flame thrower. A fleeting instant showed Brand bloodshot eyes, twisted mouth, the most malignant face he'd ever seen. Then, as white flame crackled past his ear, singing his hair odorously, he hunched his big bulk into a flying tackle.

His arms enwrapped struggling legs; his square battering ram of a shoulder hit just right. The fellow went down like a toppling chimney, smacking into a floor grating with a crunch of finality. But Brand made sure with the butt of the fellow's own weapon. Kicking him over, he saw that he was a Terrestro-Martian. Phillips' suspicions had been well founded but his visit too late.

Returning, Brand found that the girl Zona had fainted over her father's body. He picked her up bodily and strode onto the bridge with her slim form draped over one arm.

There would be no supper at the captain's table today for them.

part 2

II.

Carlin at once seemed more solicitous of the girl than of the difficulties on the bridge and below.

"She's only fainted," Brand told him gruffly after one look at the control panels. He had never seen so many red lights flashing at one time in all his experience.

He glared at the mate, who scurried back to the controls. Then Brand howled into an audio frame for the infirmary. He told them about Phillips and about the daughter and to be damn quick doing something. He got the results he demanded. A nurse was with the girl almost before he had finished bellowing.

Then he glared at the indicating panel. Their speed had increased from the normal 27.6 to 45.8 miles per second in ten minutes. None of the operators spoke a word. Brand moved to the motor panels and saw that all five driving jets were on full blast, as were the four steering jets. He flicked a control key himself. Nothing happened. The jets continued to blast. They were accelerating with full power—at five gravities. Nothing serious in that—for a while. There was plenty of time to decelerate. But how long would the tubes stand the heat? And what was the trouble? The flashing lights showed everything in the ship wrong at once.

"I've notified maintenance," Carlin told him.

"What started it all?" Brand asked.

"Regular hourly test procedure, sir. The operators plugged in on their

ground indicators and everything started. Every relay clicked furiously and the jets were on. As you can see, they refuse to cut off. That's all we know."

Brand thought of the circuit diagram and of Phillips, a frown creasing his brow. "Funny," he muttered.

Carlin jumped. "What's that, sir?"

"Nothing." The audio blared and Brand jumped.

The four operators straightened tensely. Something was in the air.

"Wilson, maintenance," squawked the audio. "Numbers one, two and three drive chambers inspected. All circuit breakers closed and fused solid. Can't be repaired without complete shutdown."

"We can't shut down. What's wrong with the hand disconnects?" returned the captain.

"Fused solid, sir."

"Very well. Stand by until the others report."

"Aye, sir."

Brand turned to the mate. "Now, what in the devil could have done that?" he demanded.

Carlin shook his head. Just then the audio started talking again. Four and five drive chambers were reported in the same condition as the first three. So were the steering-jet chambers. Brand grimaced.

"Get Jarvis up here," he told Carlin. "And Tony Rosso. You and I are going below."

The mate called and the second and third officers responded quickly. Zona Phillips had gone out with the nurse, Brand noticed. Jarvis and Rosso were here, reporting in. Brand pointed wordlessly to the panels and told them to stand by.

"We're going armed," he told Carlin, as they left.

"Armed?" The mate looked surprised.

Brand explained and, stopping at the mate's cabin for flame throwers, they started below. They went directly to Brinkerhof, the head maintenance engineer, finding him scratching his head as he looked over his file of circuit drawings.

"I can't figure it out," he told Brand. "It looks as if someone had tampered with the switches all around. It doesn't seem possible."

"No," agreed Brand. "But it--"

The door to the maintenance office crashed open and an electrician collapsed inside. Blood gushed from his throat in jerky spurts. He bubbled horribly: "Machine shop. They're--"

That was all. The man died while they stood rooted with horror. His jugular had been ripped wide open.

"A mutiny!" babbled Brinkerhof.

"Mutiny, hell!" Brand snorted. "This is war. On a neutral ship, too. Come on!"

* * *

The captain's burly form nearly filled the passageway as the three made toward the machine shop. They plunged through the central

core forward of number three drive chamber and Brand glanced up at the huge disconnecting switch. Sure enough, its massive copper bars had been hand-brazed fast in their fingers. How could anyone have gotten away with this? They couldn't on a full-crew ship, that was a cinch.

This business of placing the drive motors as complete assemblies with their individual fuel supply in separate insulated cells was all right, he reflected, provided you never had trouble with more than one or two at a time. With all of them out of commission and the disconnects inoperative, what were you going to do?

Those disconnects were in the 13,800-volt bus from the main generator. To cut them out of a live circuit like that was something. The relays and main breakers, too, were inside the cells with the igniter tube, jet breech and fuel hopper. So were the step-up transformers, the phanotron rectifiers and the 400,000-volt D.C. for ignition. And the heat of a continuous blast. You couldn't even get in there to shut off the fuel supply. And you dared not shut down the main generators because the gravity compensators ran off the 13,800-volt A.C. And who could live to tell of sudden exposure to five gravities?

Also, and worse, the main generators supplied the current for the exciters that maintained the atomic blast which, in turn, supplied energy to turn that generator. Cut the generator, and the blast would die. With that out, the generator couldn't be restarted till the blast was restarted from a jury-rig exciter circuit. Generators weren't supposed to be cut out in transit; the exciter current for starting was supplied normally from special lines run in from dock before take-off. Rigging jury exciter circuits would take hours, and in the meantime nothing but low-voltage storage-battery power would be available.

It looked as if they'd just have to keep on accelerating for a while.

Until they could figure a way out. Meanwhile--

His reflections ceased abruptly when he saw a bent figure skulking out of the machine shop. Not in ship's uniform, this figure. Brand splashed a lance of white flame at his feet and saw a floor grating glow instant red. The man yelped and ducked into a passage leading forward.

"I'll get him," grunted Carlin and sprinted down the corridor.

Poking the snout of his flame thrower around the door jamb ahead of himself, Brand followed it cautiously into the machine shop, Brinkerhof at his heels. The place was a shambles. Not a man of the shop force was alive. They hung draped over lathe, drill press and milling machine, heads battered in or jugulars slashed. Obviously they had been taken by surprise and by a superior force. Altogether, there were nine dead. One was not in ship's uniform. Brand turned the fellow over and thought he might be a Martian drylander. You could never be sure, though, with more than five generations of intermarriage between various races of the three planets. Brinkerhof groaned as if in pain.

"Lord, captain, what's it all about?" he asked helplessly.

Carlin dashed in, panting. "Lost him," he reported ruefully. "He gave me the slip."

Brand rose from the prostrate outlander corpse. He hadn't found a single identifying mark. "Whatever it's all about, it's serious," he said grimly. "And we have to get to the bottom of it. Carlin, you'll return to the bridge. Brinkerhof, you get busy and find a way of cutting these stern jets out of commission. I'm going to the infirmary and question that girl."

"The girl?" asked the mate, blankly.

"Yes, the girl." Brand grinned. There hadn't been a "mister" or a "sir" tossed around lately. It reminded Brand of the old full-crew days.

He found Zona Phillips recovered, though pale and obviously much shaken. Her father's body was lying in the mortuary, pending instructions for disposal. So was that of his murderer.

Brand patted her shoulder sympathetically. "Sorry to bother you in the circumstances, Miss Zona," he said. "But I'm afraid I'll have to ask you a few questions."

"If I can be of any help," she said tremulously, "I'll be glad to."

"You know, of course, why your dad was--put out of the way."

The girl nodded mutely, her big eyes filling anew with the tears she was struggling to hold back.

"He thought certain parties at your table were spies. Did you?"

Zona Phillips became articulate. "I'm sure of it," she said.

"Can you identify them?" Brand asked gently.

"I... I could. But--" The blue eyes widened farther and a look of fear glazed over the sorrow.

"I'll protect you," the captain assured her hastily.

"It isn't that. I'm not really afraid for myself. It's something else I can't--" Her hand went swiftly to her mouth as if to shut off words she shouldn't be saying.

Brand was nonplussed. Was this girl willfully hiding anything? "Miss Zona," he said soberly, "this ship is in grave danger of some sort. I don't know even yet how serious it may be in extent. If you can help us to identify the miscreants at the bottom of it, you will be rendering a great service. It may be the means of saving other lives."

"Oh, I will! I will. I'll do anything."

"Do you know the names of the ones your father suspected?"

The girl looked fearfully around the infirmary waiting room. "I think so. If I can see the passenger list--"

Brand knew then that she was in utmost terror. "Now, you can stop worrying," he told her. "Come along with me, young lady, and I'll see that nothing happens to you. We've a duplicate list in the bridge office. You won't even need to cross a passenger deck."

Zona Phillips brightened perceptibly, though there still remained a look about her eyes that might have been furtive. Brand laid it to her fears. Or tried to. He still wondered vaguely.

* * *

They found the bridge in somewhat of a turmoil, the usual discipline having relaxed. The operators were fidgety at the control board. And Carlin was in a huddle with the second and third officers. They pulled apart when they saw the captain coming. All eyes were on Zona Phillips. Caressingly, almost, those eyes. For some reason, Brand bristled inside.

"Anything new?" he asked Carlin.

"Only that the radio room has been wrecked and the radio transmitter ruined. And Brinkerhof reports every cutting torch in his

stores either smashed or missing entirely."

You could have heard a pin drop on the bridge after that. Brand's eyes strayed to the indicating panel. The speed was 105 miles a second. Faster than any of them had ever expected to travel. And still the Spirit of Terra was accelerating at five gravities!

"Tell Brinkerhof to rig up an electric-arc burning outfit and cut out those disconnects as fast as he can," Brand ordered. "You, Jarvis, get after the radio and have it fixed. Rosso, get below and organize the steward's department. But make sure the passengers don't get wise that anything's up."

He moved toward the office with the girl.

"We're still in the Venus-Terra beam," Carlin reminded him in a sort of hushed voice.

"I know it," snapped Brand. He didn't want to think about that now, and he didn't want the girl to be alarmed further.

In the office, looking over the passenger list, she seemed more at ease. Brand was surprised when she identified five unpronounceable names.

"Those weren't all at your table?" he exclaimed.

"No, only two. But I saw those two talking confidentially with all three of the others at different times."

Brand noted the cabin numbers of the five and immediately audioed the chief steward to round up their occupants. He had no sooner left the frame when it crackled back at him in Rosso's voice:

"Deckhand says he saw several passengers fooling with the lock of

number twenty-one lifeboat. I'm going down there."

"So am I," Brand shot back. Then, to the girl: "You stay in my lounge, Miss Zona. You'll be safe there. Tell the cabin boy I said it'd be all right."

He picked up Carlin as he rushed across the bridge and they sped to join Rosso. It looked as if whoever had made such a thorough job of putting the ship out of commission was trying for a getaway.

part 3

III.

Things like this just couldn't be happening on the greatest passenger ship in the sky lanes. A neutral ship, at that. But they were happening. Brand caught himself wishing they hadn't been quite so damn neutral. His mind worked swiftly as he and the mate thudded along the corridor toward number twenty-one lifeboat lock.

"Got any theories?" he asked Carlin.

"No. Except someone's trying to get Earth into the war. It'll mean a declaration, sure as shooting."

"But why should Martians be trying to get us in on the other side? This'd mean war against Mars, not Venus."

Carlin grunted. "If we keep accelerating--"

What he had been about to say was jarred out of him by a catapaulting body that struck him amidships from out a side passage. The mate went down in a heap, thrashing wildly to get a grip on his assailant. Brand's weapon described a wide arc and crunched down on the fellow's head. Carlin rose groggily.

"Thanks," he said.

Brand searched the dead man's clothes without result. "Damn!" he muttered. "Shouldn't have killed him. Might have made him talk." On an impulse, he ripped open the fellow's shirt.

On his chest was tattooed the red orb of Mars and its two moons.

Sounds of a conflict were wafted toward them from ahead. They leaped toward the melée. The inner seal of number twenty-one life lock was open. And inside the narrow space surrounding the small craft it housed, a battle was raging. Tony Rosso and two stewards were finding their hands very full with some six or seven huskies who were trying to pulverize them. There were no searing pencils of white flame. No one seemed to be armed. Brand couldn't understand, anyway, how the one who'd killed Phillips had managed to get a flame thrower on board. He flung himself upon the one who was throttling Rosso's eyes out onto his cheeks and dragged him off with his big hands. Savagely he bent him back over his knee and bore down until his spine cracked. The fellow went limp.

Carlin's weapon spat luridly twice. His first blast splashed a hideously grinning Martian face into bubbling incandescence that drove back into an emptied skull. His second seared arm and shoulder from the one who had just slashed a steward's throat. Rosso scooped up the falling knife and killed a third with an upcurving slash that disemboweled him. The others remaining of the battling Martians tried to crowd into the small port of the lifeboat and Brand smeared them into blazing, frying blobs that stuck to the glowing spot his flames had painted on the hull. The lock was thick with choking smoke which stank sickeningly of red-hot death. The survivors piled out into the corridor.

"That's that," said Brand grimly when they were in the fresher air outside. "And that isn't all of them, I'll gamble. Listen, Rosso: I want you to go to Worthman and have him put a patrol in every blessed lifeboat corridor. Take this steward with you and tell him to arm his men from the stores. This is no picnic; it's an emergency and we have the right to small arms. Carlin, you and I are going forward and have a council of war. We can't be everywhere at once."

By the time they reached the bridge, the Spirit of Terra was ripping through the void at nearly 200 miles a second. About an hour and a half had passed since they started this mad acceleration.

Brand frowned. "I'm surprised the tubes haven't melted down," he observed.

"Guess the tungstoloy linings are better than the designers thought," said Carlin. "Looks like they'd stand maximum blast indefinitely."

"Yes." Brand shook his head reflectively. "How much time do we have?" he asked Carlin.

"Remembering we're in the Venus lane?"

Brand nodded. How could he forget? He moved to the audio frame as Carlin busied himself with his slide rule. Jarvis answered from the radio room.

"It's a mess, captain," he reported. "We have spare tubes to replace the broken ones and can repair the condensers and coils. But they shorted both generators. Armatures burned out. They'll have to be rewound."

"How long'll that take?" Brand bit the end from a fresh cigar.

"About eight--ten hours. We only need one."

"All right. Have 'em rewound." Brand turned from the frame to Carlin with inquiring eyes.

"We're still adding five gravities," he stated. "At the end of two hours from when this started, we'll be doing 247 miles a second, at three hours 356--"

"Never mind that. How long do we have?" Brand saw that the operators were cocking their ears at the board.

Carlin glanced at the chronometer and the velocity indicator. He lowered his voice. "A little over five hours to Venus," he whispered. "And the velocity then will be close to 800."

Brand turned again to the audio and called Brinkerhof.

"How you making out with those disconnects?" he asked him.

"Just tried to burn one off with a 13,800-volt arc. Killed one of my men and blew up the rig we'd made. I'm going to try it with a 440-volt outfit. Have to make up a transformer rig."

"How long'll that take?"

"Two or three hours."

"All right. Go to it. What's the temperature in the drive cells?"

"Last I saw, captain, it was over boiling. Nobody can go in those."

"That's what I thought." Brand turned to Carlin, who looked grave. "I'm going to talk to the Phillips girl again," he told him.

"The girl?" Carlin wrinkled his forehead.

"Yes. I've a hunch." Brand strode off toward his own quarters, knowing the mate's puzzled eyes were following him.

He didn't know why he wanted to talk with her himself. Certainly not because she was so attractive. He was too old for that and, anyway, the situation was too desperate. There was some sort of hunch. If only the radio were operative, they'd not have so much to worry

about. They could have the Venus-Terra beam lane cut off for an instant and, at this speed, they'd be out of the curve of its magnetic guiding forces in nothing flat. But the radio couldn't be fixed in time; they'd simply have to get a steering jet cut out within the five hours. Just one of them would do the trick; the opposing jet would swing them out of the lane and give them time to complete repairs. In a full-crew ship, now, this never could happen.

Brand almost ran headlong into Zona Phillips as she came out from his lounge on the arm of a tall male passenger with a decidedly Martian cast of countenance. The girl blushed furiously, avoiding the captain's accusing eyes.

"What are you doing here?" Brand demanded of the man. "Passengers aren't allowed here; you know that."

"Miss Phillips is a passenger," the Martian sneered.

"That's different." With a quick motion of his huge paw, Brand snatched open the front of the fellow's shirt. There was the brand of the red planet and its satellites!

Quick as a flash a flame thrower snout appeared in the fellow's fist. Another one! "Raise your hands!" the thin-lipped mouth over the ugly snout of the weapon snapped. "And be quick about it."

Brand's hands came up slowly. "Miss Zona," he said calmly, "you had better return to the lounge. You're not safe with this man."

They were backing away together, the man and the girl. No wonder he'd had a hunch about her, Brand thought sourly. She was in with the conspirators! And her old man, too, before he'd died, like as not. Or else she'd been double-crossing her own father. To look at the beauty and sweetness of her, you'd never think it. Brand was

watching for the slightest sign of relaxing vigilance on the Martian's part. It didn't come.

Suddenly the girl's eyes widened with terror and, simultaneously, the Martian's thrower belched white flame. Brand dropped flat as its pencil of death fanned his cheek with blistering heat. There crackled another blast from behind and the Martian, because no man can stand up after his head has been blown away, toppled and lay still.

"Thanks," Brand said soberly, rising and gripping the mate's hand.

"That makes us even," grinned Carlin.

The girl started into a panicky run down the corridor.

"Oh, no, you don't, my pretty," he said, catching her and drawing her arms behind her. "You'll come right along with me and do some tall explaining."

Despite her kicks and struggles and pleading, he returned her to his lounge and tossed her on a divan. "Come in," he told Carlin, "and close the door."

"Now, young lady," he demanded, "what's this all about?"

Zona Phillips tossed her head and clamped her lips to a thin line. Her eyes flashed fire. She was more beautiful than ever; Brand heard Carlin draw in a quick breath.

"Are you going to tell me?" Brand shouted.

"There's nothing to tell," the girl insisted stubbornly. Then she began crying. Hysterically, Brand thought.

The captain couldn't bear to see a woman cry. Neither could the

mate. Consulting in undertones while the girl regarded them fearfully, they decided it was best to leave her here under guard. Brand locked her in and went to audio Worthman for stewards to stay and see that she didn't get away or into any trouble. He'd deal with her later.

* * *

It was ghastly having to wait for results below. Brand left the mate on the bridge, where there was still nothing that could be done, and walked out to cool off. Out in the great central well of the ship where all the passenger decks circled like balconies, everything seemed exactly as usual. He moved along the spanning catwalk and was glad to observe that nothing seemed to be worrying the passengers at all. They had not the least inkling that anything was wrong. Dancing, cards, deck games, were proceeding as always at this time of day.

Of course, though the Spirit of Terra had accelerated to terrific speed and was still accelerating, there was no sensation observable aboard. Not any more than when traveling at normal speed, not any more than you would notice the 18.5 miles a second orbital velocity on Earth or the 21.7 on Venus. With gravity compensation functioning here as it did, you just didn't notice anything at all different from what it would be at home. But Brand knew, and he was getting impatient and more than ever concerned. They had accelerated for nearly three hours now and were doing about 350. And still those atomic jets astern stood up to the punishment. How to cut them off or, temporarily, even that one steering jet?

Rosso had reported everything quiet in the lifeboat corridors and Worthman's men hadn't been able to locate any of those Zora Phillips had originally reported. Brand could not hlep wondering about the girl, and he was beginning to think that all of the

conspirators had been accounted for. He decided to check up on Brinkerhof's gang.

He found them working at number two steering jet, in the approach tunnel, rigging up an insulated platform under the disconnect overhead. Ordinarily these disconnects were pulled open by hand with a hook on the end of a long insulating handle. Now the blades were brazed fast. And each was carrying some 10,000 amperes at main voltage.

"Nearly ready?" Brand asked Brinkerhof, who was fluttering about his sweating men.

Through the cell bulkhead you could hear the thrum of the igniter tube under its 400,000 volts and the rhythmic tapping of the tiny fuel-admission valve. The nearly continuous atomic blast of the jet was evident only by a faint tremor that was in the floorplates, the air, everything--and the heat, which was almost intolerable even here in the tunnel.

"Nearly ready," said Brinkerhof. "We couldn't find a single one of the cutting torches. One of those would be the trick."

"Couldn't we make one quicker than this?" Brand jerked a thumb toward the 440-volt cables that looped along the floor to the resistance of the arc rig that was still missing its transformer.

"No, I had Wilson check up. Machining nozzles and valves and all would take four or five hours."

Brand examined his flame thrower, then experimentally lashed its full blast up at a blade of the disconnect. The men ducked and the copper glowed red, then white. But it refused to melt down; the flame spread over too great an area. These things were made to kill men,

not to cut through metals. The charge was exhausted; the weapon valueless without reloading.

"Wonder if we couldn't make a cutting torch out of one of these," said Brand, handing it to the maintenance man. "Nozzle it down."

"The nozzle's tungstoloy," muttered Brinkerhof. "Another four-or-five hour machining job. And no assurance it'd work."

The men were bringing in the new transformer and swiftly connecting it in the arc circuit. Mopping his brow, Brand turned away.

"Wait, sir," suggested the maintenance man. "They'll be ready to cut in a moment." He handed Brand dark goggles.

The captain waited. He needn't have been so concerned, he thought. Cutting out this one jet would hurl them out of the Venusward course. Then cutting off number four steering jet would set their course straight in space again and give them plenty of time to get the drive motors out and start permanent repairs. Their terrific velocity could then be decelerated with the forward braking jets, which you didn't dare use now for fear of buckling the hull plates. Brand cheered up.

"Move back, sir," Brinkerhof warned as the men swung the hinged rod of the cutting arc up toward the disconnect. "There'll be fireworks."

Controlled from thirty feet away by handwheels behind an asbestos shield, the contact points snapped viciously, and there was a lurid green flare of a copper arc. The quartz tube that sheathed the heavy conductor and insulated careless workmen from the low--in the necessarily cramped power room of the spaceship--13,800-volt bus bar shattered and tinkled on the floor. The contacts moved forward again, one planted firmly on the heavy copper bus. Then the other

touched it, moved slowly away, drawing out the hissing, luridly green flare of the 440-volt arc. The metal sputtered a dazzling shower of sparks and started fusing away. In two minutes a slash opened down through the six-inch thickness of copper--and the 13,800-volt arc let loose with a roar and a blast of flame that enveloped the entire apparatus and drove everyone far back into the corridor. By a miracle, all of the men escaped death. The heat, even here, was brutal.

The high-tension arc continued, melting down the heavy bar as if it were tallow. In this narrow space the sixty-cycle note of released power was ear-shattering. Metal dripped over the apparatus and--the transformer burned out with a deep groan and a billow of thick oil smoke!

The shield above the disconnect was dripping molten metal. There was an abrupt cessation of sound and the huge arc whipped out of existence. A glowing, white-hot blob of metal had bridged the gap and reclosed the circuit to the jet cell. Nothing had been accomplished.

And the cutting apparatus was wrecked again. All to do over.

Brand cursed luridly, mopping perspiration and looking at his watch. Then he took his headache away from there and went bridgeward.

"Neutral Vessel" by Harl Vincent, part 4 This is the fourth installment of "Neutral Vessel", a story by pioneering science fiction writer Harl Vincent that first appeared in the January 1940 issue of Astounding Science-Fiction magazine. The first three installments can be found [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

As we join our story, the interplanetary passenger liner Spirit of Terra has been sabotaged by Martian agents as part of their ongoing war

with Venus. The Martians have set the ship accelerating toward Venus and destroyed outside communications, as well as killing ten crew members and a Venusian passenger named Leander Phillips. Captain Jeffery Brand and his crew have killed several of the Martian saboteurs and prevented them from fleeing the ship in one of the lifeboats, but have been unable to repair the damage done. Brand further suspects that Leander Phillips' daughter Zona is in league with the Martians. The Spirit of Terra is now less than two hours away from slamming into Venus, and time is running out...

IV.

Four hours--466 miles a second. Five hours--575. And only a little more than four and a half million miles to Venus! They'd be there in an hour and three quarters. And they'd hit with--

Brand stared solemnly at the mate as they stood by the indicating panel. Brinkerhof would be ready with a new cutting apparatus in half an hour. He thought it was all perfectly constructed and shielded now. But Brand had his doubts. It was all right to say the conspirators had been able to braze those switches shut and we ought to be able to cut them open. That was all right, but there hadn't been 10,000 amperes of 13,800-volt juice flowing through the buses when the Martians did that. And, besides, the circuits were closed when they operated. There wasn't any opening of a 185,000-horsepower blast of energy to consider. They had casually brazed the switches tight with torches whose flames couldn't ground them. Then they'd gone in the cells and loaded the jet breakers with fusible material that would lock them closed at the next automatic momentary closing for routine test. They were well out of the danger zone what that happened. And the switches were all closed to stay!

"Couldn't we slow down the main generators gradually?" asked Carlin. "So the effect of changing gravity would not be severe?"

"Carlin, if it were the passengers alone now, I'd say yes. Mars isn't trying to get Earth in on this war; she's trying to end the whole thing. The Spirit of Terra's the heaviest thing in the skyways—heavier than any warship. Moving at the speed she'll have when she reaches Venus, if we can't stop her—Carlin, there won't be any Venus City! A meteor moves only about 100 miles a second; we have, ton for ton, sixty-four times as much energy of impact. And we're the largest meteor ever recorded!

"This ship has to be stopped—and not for the sake of the passengers alone!"

Carlin shuddered. He simply could not visualize the terrific eventuality of smashing into Venus at close to 800 miles a second. With the Spirit of Terra's 80,000 tons a molten mass from atmospheric friction and the energy of impact proportioned to that mass multiplied by the square of the velocity! It would damn well destroy the planet, and that was just what the Martian conspirators had figured on. They hadn't been worried about Terra going to war on the side of Venus. There wouldn't be any Venus. Not any more.

"The lifeboats are worthless, too," Brand told Carlin. "At this speed they'd be helpless. Going out with the same residual velocity as ours, they'd never be able to decelerate with their weak jets and small supply of atomic fuel. Otherwise I'd have had them loaded an hour ago. Now it's way too late, even if it hadn't been then."

The audio frame blared in Rosso's voice. "Just caught a couple more at thirty-six lifeboat," was his amazing news. "Trying to get away. And a girl with them."

"A girl!" roared Brand. "Redhead?"

"Yes, and she won't talk. What'll we do with her? We blasted the two

men."

"Do with her? Send her back to my lounge with three--no, five stewards to guard her. She got away from two and I'm going to find out how." Brand turned a foolishly beaten gaze on the mate. "What do you know about that?" he demanded.

Then he lurched toward the lounge, the mate following.

* * *

Tommy Blake sat white-faced at his calculating board on the observation sphere above the clouds of Venus. He had finally caught the mysterious speeding object in the spectroscope. The shifting of the lines had checked its velocity of approach with the calculating board. Its speed was now over 600 miles a second. It would be here in little more than an hour. And would meet up with the planet at 780 miles per second, he figured.

"The thing's in the Venus-Terra magnetic lane," he told Masters. "It's bound to hit us."

"Doesn't seem like the right direction at all," the other objected.

"I've tried to tell you," Blake explained patiently, "that the beam is constantly shifting its curvature in space, due to the motions of the two planets in their orbits. This thing's in the lane, all right."

"But what is it? Accelerating like this."

"I'm just taking a determination of its mass," replied Blake, his lean young features drawn into grim lines.

The calculator before him was clacking and chuckling merrily. At last it stopped with a decisive clunk and Blake tore off the tape.

"163,705,040 pounds," he read off. His voice dropped to a whisper of despair. "The Spirit of Terra," he said hopelessly. "That would be just about her weight with passenger and freight load. And Zona is on board!"

Masters eyed him sympathetically. He knew how much his friend had been looking forward to the coming of the only girl—to their marriage, which had all been arranged on the q. t. "Maybe they can pull out of it, Tommy," he said without much conviction.

"Pull out of it, hell! Something's jammed her stern jets full on. She's a runaway. Even if they could get them off now, they'd never be able to decelerate in time."

"Well, if they do hit us, we'll never know it," commented Masters.

"No, we won't." Blake was trying to figure the momentum of this hurtling mass at the square of its inconceivable velocity. He jumped up and paced the floor like a madman. "We've got to stop it from hitting, and I'm going to do something about it even if I'm court-martialed."

Young Blake strode into the radio room and spun the transmitter dials away from the military wave. He called Venus Spaceport, a most flagrant violation of regulations.

"Spaceport?" he asked, when a sleepy operator replied. "What report have you on the Spirit of Terra?"

"No report. She's still four days out and hasn't radioed at all."

"Oh, yeah?" Four days out. She'll be here in an hour--only you won't know it."

"Who the hell is this? What're you talking about?"

"Listen, fellow," Blake mouthed frantically into the microphone. "I can't tell you who I am, but I'm above the clouds in an observation sphere. And I tell you the Spirit of Terra's a runaway. She's doing 600 miles a second right now and still in the lane. Get that beam cut off, for God's sake!"

The operator laughed raucously. "I'll say you're up in the clouds. Six hundred--why, you're nuts--" His carrier cut off abruptly.

Blake groaned. "There you go. Nobody'll believe us, Masters."

He dialed down and started calling G. H. Q., watching the chronometer anxiously. Another sleepy operator answered. "Get me the major p. d. q.," Blake shouted. "Military emergency."

"The major's asleep. What do you mean, emergency."

"I tell you it's real," cried Blake. "You've gotta believe me, or we'll all be dead in another hour. Get me the major."

Evidently Blake's panic got through to the G. H. Q. operator. "All right," he said with sudden decision. "I'll get him."

"If only they'll cut out the usual red tape and do something, we may get somewhere," Blake groaned, eyeing the time. "But you know how it is in the service."

"Yeah." Masters looked dubious. He had not yet become really afraid. He would in a few minutes.

The G. H. Q. operator was back on the air. "Major threw a shoe at me and told me to get the hell out," he told Blake.

"Listen, fellow." Blake's voice was wheedling, frantically insistent. "We've got to put this across. Listen, do this for me, will you--"

The youngster in the black-and-white uniform of Venus was begging for Zona, for himself, for another billion and more lives. He put all of his fears and hopes into his quivering voice. G. H. Q. would have to listen. They'd have to get that beam cut off--something--

* * *

Captain Brand found his cabin boy and two stewards locked in his serving pantry. He raged when he let them out.

"She asked for a cocktail, sir," one of the stewards explained.

"And it took three of you to make it for her!" Brand wheeled from them as three other stewards came in with Zona Phillips.

The girl was holding her head high, a spot of color burning on either cheek.

"So, now," the captain bellowed. "Now, young lady, you're up to something again. And you're going to talk this time."

"I'll talk," she said simply. "Send these others out." Her sweeping gesture embraced the goggling cabin boy and five goggling stewards.

Brand shoed the out and, as a precaution, locked the outer door to the lounge and pocketed the key. "Well?" he said, trying to keep his voice stern. Somehow, you couldn't stay angry with Zona Phillips.

"I was only trying to get away," she said breathlessly, "because I'm planning to get married on Venus."

"Married?" said Brand blankly.

"Yes, to a boy in the Venus forces--Tommy Blake. It's forbidden, you know, and my passport's no good except for a visit. The Martians promised to land me secretly. That's all. I haven't done anything really wrong, have I?"

"Well, I'll be d-doggoned." Captain Brand looked his amazement. Then he spoke to the girl: "Wrong, no, but foolish, my dear. Do you realize how fast we're going?"

"N-no." The girl's eyes widened to their full blinding blue.

Brand told her. He told her what would have happened if she had succeeded in getting away from those Martians; that the little lifeboat would use up all its fuel trying to decelerate and then would go drifting forever in a solar orbit, a frozen, airless tomb at last. That even now the Spirit of Terra was headed for a disaster that would likely destroy the planet Venus along with themselves. "And you make trouble for me," he concluded glumly.

"I'm sorry." The girl's voice was truly contrite. She stared at the captain as the full purport of his words sank in. "Then we'll all die, anyway?" she asked. "And--Tommy'll be killed, too?"

Brand nodded. "Unless maintenance wins out with their new cutting rig," he admitted.

The girl pursed her luscious lips and frowned prettily. "It seems," she said, "that something might be done with the lifeboats."

That was all, but it set Brand thinking. Suddenly he was a madly whirling tornado. He hugged Zona Phillips in his enthusiasm and she didn't seem to mind.

"Girl, you've got it!" he exulted. "With the lifeboats we'll do it." He began bawling into the audio frame.

"But you said--" began the girl.

"Never mind what I said." Brand's broad face was alight. "We'll do it with the lifeboats. Watch!"

He talked swiftly in clipped words to the frame when Rosso came in.

"Neutral Vessel" by Harl Vincent, part 5 This is the fifth and final installment of "Neutral Vessel", a story by pioneering science fiction writer Harl Vincent that first appeared in the January 1940 issue of Astounding Science-Fiction magazine. The first four installments can be found [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

As we join our story, Martian agents have sabotaged the interplanetary passenger liner Spirit of Terra so it will drive itself into the planet Venus at high speed, wrecking that world and ending the Martian-Venus War. With less than an hour left before impact, Captain Jeffery Brand sees a way to avert catastrophe, suggested to him by a beautiful passenger named Zona Phillips...

V.

"Rosso!" he chirped. "And you, too, Worthman"--two voices having come in by now--"listen closely. Man lifeboats eleven to twenty and fifty-one to sixty. And don't ask any questions till I'm finished. That's ten above and ten below on the port side astern. Plug in an audio connection to each. Close all inner seals when manned. Seal boats themselves. Open outer seals of air locks. At my orders, we'll blast forward rockets."

"Of the lifeboats?" inquired Worthman incredulously.

"Certainly. They've weak jets, to be sure. But with twenty of them blasting, we may be able to get out of the lane."

"Will the air-lock seals hold?"

"We'll chance that. Put a watch on each. I'll stand by the audio."

"Now," he said to Carlin when they reached the bridge controls, "this is going to work like a full-crew ship. Give me visuals down stern lifeboat corridors on the port side. We're going to pull out of the magnetic lane."

"You mean--"

"With the lifeboats."

A slow red suffused the mate's cheeks as he watched the smile that wreathed Zona Phillips' lips. He'd be willing to bet she had something to do with this. And he hadn't thought of it himself. Of course the lifeboats would do it--if--

Signs of activity showed in the corridors as soon as the viewplates lighted. Lock hatches were being opened one by one. One by one the individual audio connections plugged in.

"Blast forward jets gently," Brand told them, watching the cross lines of the course indicator. They blasted gently. "Inner seals holding all right?" he asked. The boats had driven back solidly by now.

One by one the men in the corridor reported them O. K.

"Increase blasts slowly," Brand ordered. The glowing, rapidly enlarging orb of Venus had not budged from the cross-line centering.

Carefully, as he would have done on a full-crew ship, Brand had them

increase the power of their jets until the inner lock seals had all he thought they could stand of the reaction of the small lifeboats pushing to get through them and inside the ship. Then he added boat after boat to the number until all twenty he had designated were blasting, shoving mightily against the inner seals. There were no automatic relays to take care of things; Brand was jockeying to get a balance of energies the way you would jockey a horse. And he loved it.

But Venus still swooped in toward them. They hadn't budged the tiniest fraction of an inch from the magnetic course. Traveling 720 miles a second and only half a million miles to go. Brand dripped perspiration.

"Quick, Rosso," he called. "Same thing on boats twenty-one to thirty and sixty-one to seventy forward, starboard." He'd twist the Spirit of Terra off this lane if it was his last act. And trying would be his last act if he didn't.

The men responded swiftly. All knew the importance of speed. In another minute two lifeboats were blasting on the opposite side of the liner, up near the nose, trying desperately to turn her vast bulk like a pinwheel. But only a fraction of an inch from her present line, just the slightest angularity would do. In fact, more than this would be as disastrous as the collision toward which they were heading. But only for themselves.

Twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, sixty-two, sixty-three and sixty-four lifeboats blasting. Still Venus came in ever larger, rushing madly. Still centered precisely on the crosshairs. Twenty-five and sixty-five boats reported blasting. No one moved on the bridge. No one seemed to breath. Brand choked on the remains of his cigar and threw it away. Twenty-six and sixty-six in. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight. The crosshairs began a slow march eastward across Venus.

"Hold it there!" Brand yelled. "No more." The crosshairs kept on in their slow march. Venus was out of line. "Enough," called the captain. "Cut everything off." He slumped back weakly in his chair.

Brand didn't even hear the thunderous explosion as Brinkerhof finally cut the mad flow of current to the jets--quite safely and easily when he, almost simultaneously with Brand's inspiration, saw the answer. From spares, he got a series of the heavy emergency fuses, rigged a short by-pass line around a section of the main bus bars to a steering jet, and inserted the fuses in the by-pass. Then a hand power saw readily sliced out a two-foot section of the bypassed, and hence unloaded, bus bar. One of the heavy fuses paralleled in the by-pass circuit was then pulled out of the socket with the insulated pole, and the other promptly blew from the overload, and a roar of triumph interrupting and killing the jet circuit! Nor did Brand hear Jarvis reporting that one of the generators was again in commission and the radio operative. Ahead of time.

* * *

G. H. Q. was even more stubborn than Tommy Blake had anticipated. He did manage to get Major Verejo excited, though, and he promised to take it up with the colonel. The colonel would go to the general.

Blake groaned. In his radioscope screen the Spirit of Terra now was visible as a tiny speeding dot with a ten-mile trail of incandescent gases astern. He thought he saw faint illumination off to one side.

"See that, Masters?" he demanded. "Doesn't it look as if they were blasting a steering jet or something?"

"It does, Tommy, it does! But, Lord, they're only four hundred thousand miles off. And 730 miles a second. It's too late."

Blake tore into the radio room as the call came in. It was General Fulsen. He had to tell his story all over again. He was nearly sobbing as he finished. "Can't you see, sir?" he pleaded. "The major checked with the other sphere. He knows it's the truth. We've only a few minutes and it won't make any difference to any of us!"

"I'll see what I can do with the space line, young man." The G. H. Q. carrier was off and Tommy Blake tore his hair.

"He'll see what he can do!" he raved at nobody at all. "See what he can do. Masters, if we live to tell the tale, I'm getting out of this damn service."

Masters grinned in spite of the impending catastrophe. Two closely cropped heads came together before the radioscope screen.

"They are!" exulted Blake. "They are blasting off the side. And say! Masters! They're off line line. They'll miss us. To hell with G. H. Q. and their song of 'see what I can do'."

The two OBS men did a war dance of their own as a trail of penciled flame swept across the viewplate and off into space. Venus was safe and so was the Spirit of Terra.

* * *

In Captain Brand's lounge there was great rejoicing. A few minutes ago they had passed Venus with a thousand miles to spare, scarcely even feeling her gravity pull as they swept by at 800 miles per second and left her far astern.

Everyone was talking all at once in the captain's lounge. The ship's entire staff of officers was here. And an auburn-haired girl.

Captain Brand had shooed off all her other admirers and had her sitting beside him on one of the comfortable divans. She looked brightly up at the big man over the rim of her glass.

"You," he was telling her, "will see your Tommy boy. And you'll be able to marry him, if I have anything to say about it. That is, if I think he's good enough for you when I look him over."

The girl laughed throatily, happily. "How can you arrange that?" she demanded.

"How would you like to be my daughter, Miss Zona?" The captain looked down at his big red hands and blushed as if this were a proposal of marriage.

The girl's eyes misted. "Why?" she asked softly.

"Because," Brand told her solemnly, "that way you could have your Tommy Blake. Look: I'm the law and everything else on this ship. I can marry people or divorce them. I'm the judge and the jury and the preacher, if necessary. I can adopt you, have the papers attested and all, right here. Then, with my permission as your father, you can marry anybody you please on Venus. Passport be d-darned. Besides--" Brand searched the girl's wondrous and wondering eyes--"I like you, Miss Zona. I sort of think I'd like to have you for a daughter."

Brand looked away. The chatter of the crowded lounge was a meaningless background for his leaping thoughts.

"Why, you old dear," a soft voice was saying. "I've lost a father and found a new one. I... I think I'd like what you propose, D-daddy Brand. I'm sure I would."

THE END

(borrowed from Johnny Pez blog <http://johnnypez9.blogspot.com/>)