

The Magazine of Prophetic Fiction

WONDER stories

NEXT MONTH

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OCTOBER, 1932

"The Venus Germ"

by R. F. STARZL

Mr. Starzl returns to our pages with this powerful and gripping story of an interplanetary intrigue, with the fate of worlds as pawns.

Just as today powerful interests use nations as pawns for their lust for power, so in the future their ambitions will extend to a wide sphere. Suppose for example that it were necessary for the life and happiness of all the people of the earth, that a few powerful interests give up their domination of other worlds. Would they be philanthropic and do it; or would there be a merry battle before right and justice had its way?

Mr. Starzl answers in this unusual story of two worlds.

"The Lake of Life"

by ARTHUR G. STANGLAND

One of the unexplored mysteries of the world is central Australia. From what we know of that vast, baking continent, the forces of evolution have played queer tricks, and have produced veritable monsters of animal life.

We must be prepared then to accept what Mr. Stangland tells us in this story, as a real possibility. That forms of life might develop in that untamed desert, different from anything we know, is a possibility. This exciting story shows what might happen when men meet creatures of a bizarre world.

"The Death of Iron"

by S. S. HELD

Slowly we have been watching in this story the decay of a world. Man's civilization, built up painfully over many millennia seems about to vanish. We must expect then that the minds and emotions of men will turn to queer thoughts and queer activities. When men and women are faced by death they no longer operate under the same restraints as when they expect a long life. In this installment we will see further how life slowly ebbs from the 20th century world.

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ON THE COVER THIS MONTH

from Clark Ashton Smith's exciting "Master of the Asteroid," we see the curious worshippers on the lonely asteroid paying homage to the imprisoned terrestrial in the space ship. Though the man is helpless and facing certain death, ironically he will be knelt to as a god by these curious beings.

Published by STELLAR PUBLISHING CORPORATION, H. GERNSBACK, Pres., S. GERNSBACK, Treas., I. S. MANHEIMER, Sec'y.
Publication Office, 404 North Wasley Avenue, Mount Morris, Illinois.
Editorial and General Offices, 98-98 Park Place, New York

WONDER STORIES—Monthly—Entered as second-class matter September 29, 1931, at the post office at Mount Morris, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered U. S. Patent Office. Trademarks and copyrights by permission of Gernsback Publications, Inc., 98 Park Place, New York City, owner of all trademark rights. Copyright, 1932, by Gernsback Publications, Inc. Text and illustrations of this magazine are copyrighted and must not be reproduced without permission of the copyright owners.

WONDER STORIES is published on the 3rd of the preceding month. 12 numbers per year, subscription price is \$2.50 a year in United States and its possessions. In foreign countries, \$3.00 a year. Single copies 25c.

Address all contributions for publication to Editor, WONDER STORIES, 98-98 Park Place, New York. Publishers are not responsible for lost MSS. Contributions cannot be returned unless authors remit full postage.

Chicago Advertising Representative—L. F. McClure, 737 North Michigan Ave.

Western Advertising Representative—Lloyd B. Chappell, 220 No. Catalina St., Los Angeles, Calif.

London Agent: Hachette & Co.,
3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, E. C. 4

Paris Agent: Hachette & Co.,
111 Rue Reaumur

Australian Agents: McGill's Agency,
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Crowds stormed a space port of the Venusian Navigation Company. In one instance the troops themselves rebelled and slew their leaders. They manned space ships and launched them.

THE PLANET OF YOUTH

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

● When the Langley-Audubon Interplanetary Expedition set off for the shores of Venus, few spectators could have foreseen that the results were to constitute a glittering promise and a dagger-edged threat to the succeeding generation.

By the closing decades of the twentieth century, interplanetary navigation had already become as much of an accomplished fact as was aviation in the opening decades of the same century. The Spearhead type of rocket ship, propelled by the successive explosions of a hydrogen-oxygen mixture, had been developed sufficiently to permit successful flights not alone to the moon, but into the great void tenanted only by comets, meteors and asteroids which stretches between the earth and Mars.

But although several successive groups of adventurers had projected themselves ten, fifteen or twenty million miles into the abyss and yet had returned safely to earth, it was not until the advent of the Langley-Audubon Expedition that a serious attempt was made to reach the surface of any planet more remote than our own satellite.

It was little more than a generation ago that Wilbur Langley and his able associates developed their duochambered rocket device, which prodigiously increased the power of space ships by making possible simultaneous hydrogen explosions in two or more compartments; and it was as recently as 1989 that they startled the world by applying to the Pan-American Government for a license to operate between the earth and Venus. Most of my readers, I am sure, will recall the furore of newspaper and radio publicity that accompanied the granting of the license, and the fervor of interest with which "space fans" throughout the world followed the preparations of the pioneer explorers of Venus.

For fear of prolonging my narrative unduly, I shall pass briefly over the preliminaries . . . it is known to all well-informed persons today how the super-spaceship *Astra* was built and equipped, and how, with her gleaming javelin-shaped hull shining beautifully in the sunlight of a July morning, she was launched into outer vacancy with six of the most daring adventurers that ever left this planet.

That the flight was successful seemed at first to be undeniable. Repeated radio reports, received from the wanderers as they winged their way through the vastness between the worlds, told that all things were proceeding according to schedule, and that the travelers were less impressed by the hazards of their voyage than by its monotony . . . Finally, after the passage of thirty-five days, came an exceedingly faint message which the powerful

● All of our readers will remember the "Florida boom" of 1925-26 when hundreds of thousands of people rushed southward to a land supposed to endow everyone with health and riches. The pricking of the bubble, leaving scores of thousands stranded in Florida, is not forgotten either.

The same emotional qualities, the same credulity and the same desire for health and riches may animate the race when other planets are explored. And again it is certain that the race will become victims of unscrupulous and crafty men. Suppose there were a planet of perpetual youth? Who would want to live on earth, and toil away only to meet inevitable old age and death? Who would not sacrifice everything for the boon of living forever?

Here is truly an engrossing theme; and Mr. Coblenz has treated it with his usual skill and with his sharp edge of satire and humor. And it comes to a surprising ending that is a masterpiece of drama and realism.

awaiting amplifiers on earth, magnified into the assurance that Langley and his companions had alighted on Venus!

And then how great was the rejoicing on earth! how many the gay flags that were swung to the breeze! how triumphant the songs and speeches of acclaim that resounded throughout our planet! how intense the wonder, the anticipation of extraordinary revelations still to come!

But had the jubilation been premature? So the more serious-minded began to ask when—following one or two more messages, indicating the specific region of Venus which Langley had reached—no further reports came to any of the radios attuned throughout the earth. Had disaster overtaken the explorers? Had they succumbed to the inimical atmospheric or surface conditions of Venus? Had they fallen a prey to wild beasts or savage men?

"More than likely!" murmured the pessimistic. But the more sanguine only smiled, and waited. And it was not until a year had expired, and no fresh word had come from the missing ones, and the time for their scheduled return was long past, that the last gleam of hope died in the hearts of Langley's waiting admirers on earth.

Even so, a plan was already afoot for a rescuing expedition. Not, indeed, that any one expected actually to save Langley and his fellow heroes! but that there was some thought of solving the mystery of his disappearance.

"A wild vision. A chimera!" cried some, who predicted only that more lives would be uselessly snuffed out; and the opposition was so great that more than five years had passed before the project showed prospects of success, and the consent of the Government was reluctantly given to what was generally considered no more than a forlorn bit of gallantry.

It was in this expedition—the famous Morse-Crandall Rescuing Flight of '95—that I was privileged to play a minor part. The sponsors of the project, who operated with the funds supplied by two of Pan-America's leading millionaires, had no difficulty in finding an abundance of intrepid men willing and even eager to make the voyage; but it happened that, at the eleventh hour, one of the scientists chosen for the honor was taken violently and mysteriously ill; and I, as a young chemical engineer who chanced upon the scene, was drafted to fill the vacancy even though the only merit I could claim was that of availability . . . Being still only in my twenty-seventh year, and full of the animation and vigor of youth, I not unnaturally welcomed the opportunity. None the less, it was with a sinking sensation of my own unworthiness that I entered the little slit-shaped door of the space ship and realized that I was soon to be one of the few representatives of my race in the outer universe.

● I well recall the reassuring attitude of my companions as we strapped ourselves into place in the little cylindrical room that was to be our home for weeks to come; but, by some trick or irony of memory, it is not so much the friendly smiles of the majority that flash to my recollection as the peculiar, almost saturnine demeanor of one member of the group.

—Who can say what subtle, sinister forces, working through the still-unexplored byways of the subconscious, may summon forth an instant antipathy between two men who have never met before? Or is it that the ghosts of future conflicts may cast their shadows before them? At all events, from the moment I met Claude Pendexter, I was as one unwillingly brought face to face with an old enemy.

Like a haunting specter, his thin, wedge-shaped face comes before me as it was when I first stepped aboard the space ship; I see again the small greedy little black eyes which, for some reason that I could never quite explain, have always made me think of a cockroach; I observe the ironic drooping of the thin lips beneath their shreds of moustache, and hear the rasping voice pipe out, "All hands aboard! . . . In just twenty-nine minutes we leave!"

For Pendexter was our captain; and the thought that I should be subject to his orders did nothing to allay the unreasoning antagonism that I felt; while the knowledge that I had been thrust upon him against his will, as the substitute for one much more desirable, may have had something to do with the resentful overbearing attitude he always displayed toward me.

Were it not that I must rush on to more important matters, I would be tempted to dwell upon the dissensions between Pendexter and myself which marked our entire cruise and offered variety and amusement to our fellow adventurers: how he would make me stay on watch at the controls more than my fair number of hours, and how he would always assign me to the distasteful task of oiling and re-fueling the engines, and how he would take care

that I got less than my due share of the stringently limited rations of food and water, and how he would gibe and sneer and make me the butt of outrageous jokes connected with my youth and incapacity.

But I pass over all this, although my blood frequently boiled, and often I would clench my fists and vow future retaliation . . . After a time, more important events were to occupy the attention of us all, and we were temporarily to forget our animosities in the exaltation of a tremendous experience.

For we were approaching Venus! After more than a month spent in a bewildering drift through emptiness, we were almost within striking range of the earth's sister planet! We saw the great cloud-covered ball but a few thousand miles beneath us, intolerably brilliant where the sun blazed upon its silvery vapors; black and forbidding where the reflection of the stars made a ghostly radiance on the night-covered side. But our minds, our hands, our eyes were now occupied not so much with this fascinating spectacle as with the terrible problem of a landing. By means of counter-explosions of fuel, precisely timed, we had gradually to overcome our speed of more than ten miles a second; we had to divert our course so as to fly almost parallel to the surface of Venus; and sinking down by calculated degrees through some propitious rift in the clouds, we had to select some advantageous landing place and reach it at a velocity not so great as to destroy either our machine or ourselves.

The plight of an earthly aviator, caught in a storm, blinded by the mists, and forced to descend in an unknown region bristling with crags and glaciers, could be little more precarious than was our own. I shall not linger, however, over the harrowing few hours we spent as we made our way recklessly through the vapors of the upper Venusian atmosphere . . . to come out at length over a region of tremendous rolling plains and green mountains, singularly like some unpopulated wilderness on earth.

"Thank God!" we all cried, in an access of spontaneous joy. "Thank God! We are saved!" And we fell upon each other's necks and shoulders, weeping and shouting in an ecstasy of relief and happiness.

A few moments later there came a shock that knocked us all off our feet; then a few shuddery jerks and tremors—and all was still. Recovering ourselves, we flung open the doors of our little prison for the first time in weeks, and stepped out upon a lush green soil glowing with a faint phosphorescence. And standing in the brilliant torrid sunlight and inhaling an atmosphere that blew in delicious gusts to our impoverished lungs, we fell upon each other's necks once more, and wept in irrepressible delight.

● Our preliminary explorations introduced us to a planet remarkably similar to the earth—and yet strikingly different. It was as though we had returned to our own world, only to find it marvelously brightened and rejuvenated; as though we had found it grown younger by several geologic ages; and had seen it restored to the Jurassic or even the Carboniferous era. We had descended in an opening in a wide forest, at the borders of a sluggish stream fringed with tree-ferns a hundred feet high, and with a palm-like plant whose thick sword-

shaped leaves were succulent as honey.

Amid the verdant confusion of the jungle just to our rear, we observed glowing red and yellow and deep-veined blue and purple flowers in bewildering luxuriance; brilliant scarlet and saffron-hued fruits which, upon testing, we found most tempting to the palate; orange-tinted and lavender berries as large as tomatoes and as delicious as peaches; cucumber-shaped nuts nutritious as meat, and edible young shoots and creepers of a thousand varieties . . .

In short, the district was not only attractive to the eye, but—more important—it offered facilities for the indefinite perpetuation of human life.

Yet, in the limited region within our observation, no human life except our own was to be seen. Even the higher animals, as they are known on earth, appeared to be totally lacking; though some crocodile-like saurians were flapping in the shallows of the rivers, and now and then a bird-like reptile reminding us of the long-extinct pterodactyl went zizagging at our feet and beat against our lamps at night. But, search as we would, we could catch neither sight nor sign of either bird or mammal, and so were led to conclude that Venus today was in a state like that of the earth before the appearance of the first warm-blooded creature.

Yet we ourselves—although a few millions of years premature according to all the rules of evolution—appeared to thrive most gloriously in the atmosphere of our new home. Before we have been in Venus more than a day or two, a glow of rosy health appeared on the cheeks of us all, and, by some process almost miraculous, we had recovered from the rigors and exertions of our long voyage through space.

Although the air was warm (constantly between 70 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit, according to our thermometers), it seemed to invigorate us as men on earth are invigorated only by a cold climate; and even the extreme humidity, occasionally relieved by thunderstorms of a severity unparalleled on earth, seemed to have no power to diminish the sense of well-being and the exhilaration which we all felt. Was it the greater brilliance of the sun on Venus, the greater energizing properties of his rays, which accounted for this enlivening influence which we all felt? So we asked ourselves at first; but in time another explanation—and one with the most wide-reaching consequences—was to present itself to certain members of our party.

In the beginning, we could permit ourselves little time for theories or speculations, or even for an examination of the fascinating flora and fauna and the other features of our environment. Not for one minute could we forget that we had come to Venus with a mission—a mission which, however remote its possibilities of success might appear, was to be pursued with an unswerving devotion.

The members of the Langley-Audubon Expedition, whom we had been sent to rescue, might for all we knew be still alive and in imminent need of help, and therefore all other objects must be subordinated to the search

for them. But would not the proverbial needle in the haystack be easier to find than half a dozen men on a planet virtually as large as the earth? Fortunately, we had several clues: we knew the latitude in which the lost explorers had descended, and were aware that it corresponded roughly with our own; and we had, moreover, the use of the radio, which knows neither latitude nor distance, and might be more effective in a search than a thousand eagle eyes.

Or so, at least, we found it to be in our own case . . .

I shall spare the reader the account of the initial trials we made with our powerful transmitting apparatus; the repeated signals which, though calculated to reach the remotest spot on Venus yet brought us no response. But what are a few weeks of failure in an undertaking so stupendous as ours? After all, it was such a short while before we were crowned with success! True, we had already given up hope, had already persuaded ourselves that we were the only living men on Venus . . . when one evening we observed the listener at the earphones go pale, and then clutch at the radio apparatus with such fervid intensity and stare into vacancy with such fierce eagerness that we wondered if he had parted company with his wits . . .

While we still watched him, in a frenzy of impatience and wonder, the man began acting still more strangely. With the earphones clapped tightly about him, he reached toward the waiting microphone, and began to speak—to speak in jerky, broken accents that ill-concealed his palpitating excitement.

"Langley—Audubon!" he shrilled. "Is it you? Is it you?" . . . Then there followed a silence that seemed to last for minutes, though actually it may have been only a few seconds; then once more the quivering voice rang forth, "No, not from the earth! From Venus! We speak from Venus! We have come to rescue you! . . ."

And once more a long silence intervened, before the speaker, with face by turns flushed and bloodless, put down the earphones, and exclaimed to us, in breathless agitation, "I can't—I can't get another word. It's the static—the accursed static!"

CHAPTER II

The Exile

● But communication had been established—and it was now only a matter of days before the essential information had been exchanged. We learned that all six members of the Langley-Audubon Expedition were alive and well; that they had been stranded upon Venus due to the wrecking of the space-ship *Astra* upon their arrival; that they had been forced to suspend their radio messages to the earth because of the exhaustion of their electrical power, and that during all the intervening years they had been experimenting to find fresh electrical sources . . . with the result that they had only now put a new radio into operation, in a frantic if forlorn effort to reach the



STANTON A. COBLENTZ

earth. It was thanks to this radio that they had caught and returned our message, and that the purpose of our expedition seemed about to be fulfilled.

To determine the precise location of our fellow explorers and to cover the intervening distance was now a question only of routine. By means of precise astronomical observations, we learned that the distance between us was, roughly speaking, about a thousand miles—a mere nothing when traversed in our space ship, which launched itself to a height of several hundred miles, and then slid down in a graceful curve to within a league or two of our attempted destination.

To cover the remaining distance afoot was more inconvenient than difficult, although we tore our clothes repeatedly on the dagger-edged thorns of a cactus-like plant as we made our way slowly along a winding stream. But how well we were repaid when at length we came out into a clearing featured by half a dozen straw-covered huts! How great was our rejoicing when six bearded men, clad only in loin-cloths of some palm-like substance, rushed forth to greet us!

How we exulted to recognize Langley and Audubon and their gallant associates! How profoundly we were touched at the tears that came into their eyes, at the quivering in their voices as they took our hands and clapped us about the shoulders, at the pathetic tightening of their fingers in ours, as though they were loth ever to free us from their clasp!

When the first enthusiasm and clamor of their greetings was over and we had time really to observe these new-found fellows of ours, we received a fresh and by no means unpleasant surprise. Whereas we had expected to find them worn and withered by the hardships of exile, they all appeared to be glowing with health and vigor. More than that! They all had a startling aspect of youth! Langley, the leader, showed a clearness of complexion and a buoyancy of manner that would have proclaimed him to be not a day above thirty, yet I was aware that he must be closer to forty; while his followers all had that unclouded freshness which usually attaches to youths of twenty-two or twenty-three—although it was not to be supposed that they had been but sixteen or seventeen at the time of embarking on the expedition.

"Yes, the Venusian climate agrees with us," they remarked, when we commented upon their unusual vitality; but, beyond this, they had no explanation to give, nor did anything suggest that extraordinary explanation which was later to intrude itself.

The imminent problem now before us was of course that of our return to earth. Due to the stringent limitations of space our ship was equipped for six men, and six only; however, we had hoped that the *Astra*, the vessel of the original expedition, would be able to convey any survivors of the Langley-Audubon party back to earth. But the *Astra* had been battered beyond repair by the shock of its impact with the planet; and, accordingly, six men must still remain on Venus upon the return of our own vessel. Which should they be?

To our surprise, Langley and his companions all expressed themselves as highly pleased with life on Venus, which they described as simpler and much less troublesome than existence on earth; and two of them went so far as to deny any desire to return, while the other four

professed a wish to return only temporarily, for the sake of re-visiting old friends and relatives.

Owing to the duration of their exile on Venus, we all decided, these four should have the opportunity to fly back immediately to earth; for could not a further expedition relieve those now left on Venus? This meant that, of Pendexter and his five assistants, all except two would have to remain. Deplorable as this may appear at first sight, it really gave us little cause for concern, since we were all anxious to see more of Venus; indeed, there was much friendly competition among us to determine who should be the fortunate ones privileged to stay.

● But our own wishes were not to be the deciding factors.

It was Pendexter who, as our captain, had the right to make the decision for us. And, had we only been half-way wise, we would have foreseen his choice. One afternoon, after our space ship had been re-stocked with water and provisions, he called us all about him by the borders of a little pool where fish-like reptiles twisted and sported. The scene comes back to me to the last detail: the red soil faintly, almost indefinitely glowing, in that weird manner noticeable in most parts of the planet; the fish-lizards occasionally picking themselves up on rudimentary legs to waddle at the water's edge; the twenty-foot leaves of the tree-ferns rustling like green lace in the breeze; while between rifts in the heavy clouds an intolerably brilliant sun would now and then look forth, to be lost almost instantly in a blur of vapors.

But more clearly even than that vivid scene the face of Pendexter flashes back to my mind. I see the malicious leer on his thin face, the venom in his snapping black eyes as he cast me a glance none too reassuring and cleared his throat to speak. "We all, naturally, wish to stay here," he rasped—and he spoke with a deliberate, an ominous slowness—"but our ship must have its required crew of six, and so two of us must fly back. It goes without saying that I, as captain, must remain with my vessel; and so of the five of you, only one need be chosen!"

He paused, and the glitter in his black eyes seemed malignant; and my heart sank until it seemed to go down into my stomach as his hand swung out in my direction, and he resumed in the screeching tones I always found so repugnant:

"Naturally, the least experienced, the least capable of us must go back to earth! Forsythe, you will make ready to accompany me!"

Even amid the writhing pain of that moment, I did not miss the low sighs of relief uttered by my companions, nor fail to note the joy in their eyes at being permitted to remain on Venus.

It was to be expected that the return of Pendexter and myself, along with four members of the Langley-Audubon expedition, should create a sensation on earth. It was to be expected that, for some days or weeks, the news from Venus should outrank all other news in the pages of the press and from the mouth of the radio.

"Langley rescued!" rang forth the tidings that for the moment overshadowed the reports of boxing matches, and football games, and political contests and international conferences and all those other sporting events with which the minds of men are apt to be regaled. And, for the moment, there was no schoolboy so obtuse, no housewife

so unenlightened as not to be able to discuss interplanetary travel . . .

With public enthusiasm at fever pitch, and public curiosity genuinely stirred as to conditions of life on Venus, it was inevitable that other expeditions should follow. It was a matter only of days, indeed, before several philanthropists had subscribed the sums necessary to equip a giant space ship capable of reaching Venus in a minimum of time, and of bringing back, if need be, all the men now marooned there.

Yet much more than a year had passed before the flight could actually be undertaken, for by the time the new vessel was ready, Venus was approaching its point of opposition to the earth (at a distance of about 150,000,000 miles, with the sun offering an impassable obstacle between); and it was therefore necessary to wait for the favorable conditions of our conjunction with Venus, when a mere 25,000,000 miles would intervene.

Had it not been for the long unavoidable interval, I should unquestionably have been a member of the new exploring party. Although Pendexter (much to my chagrin) had been selected to lead the expedition, I too had secured a certain measure of public recognition; and while he did everything possible to belittle my claims, it is hardly likely that he would have been able to exclude me from consideration.

But he was not one to hesitate at craft when open action would not avail. It was thanks to his machinations, as I subsequently learned, that the Pan-American Government dispatched a group of chemists and engineers to investigate the mineral deposits of a remote Alaskan range; and it was owing to him, likewise, that I was appointed to a subordinate position in this party. Since a Government appointment, in the late twentieth century, was tantamount to a command, I had no choice but to pack my baggage and set off for Alaska; and since there was no possibility of returning by the date set for launching the new interplanetary expedition, I was automatically excluded from the personnel of the space ship . . .

● As I trudged, with a pack on my back, along the ice-trails of the Far North, I could picture the grimace of sly satisfaction that appeared on Pendexter's Machiavellian face as he contrived to exile me from everything my heart most desired. I could picture the smirk of gleeful triumph with which he stepped into the waiting space ship, the self-important air of command with which he gave orders to the crew; and I followed him in fancy through all the days of the weird, rocket-like flight . . .

And standing at evening on the shoulder of a flint-ridged mountain, and gazing to the west where a bright planet shone in solitary splendor above the jagged horizon, I clenched my fist and remained long in reverie, vowing that I should again cross the abyss to that other world, and that neither Pendexter nor a host of Pendexters should deter me . . .

But it was to be long before I could act upon my determination. More than a year went by uneventually for me; more than a year in which, even in my Arctic wilderness, I heard much of the doings of Pendexter, who had reported by radio his safe arrival in Venus and was promising an early return. Nor did my sense of injury diminish when I learned that he was rapidly becoming the world's idol; nor could I suppress the cold

and jealous rage I felt at the knowledge that his reappearance on earth was to be the occasion of a triumphal ceremony presided over by no less a personage than the Pan-American Dictator, and attended by ambassadors, statesmen from half the earth.

Only one consolation I had at this exaltation of my enemy. My own term of exile was approaching its end; and, as a member of the previous interplanetary expedition, I was to have a position of honor at the ceremonies, and was to be one of the delegation which was to receive the returning adventurers. Here at least was salve for my wounds! Yet how I shuddered at the irony of having to extend an official welcome to Pendexter! It seemed that, even in the honors I enjoyed with him, there was a sting of humiliation!

At length came that day of nerve-racking excitement when Pendexter was due back on earth. Radio messages, on the previous evening, had reported him as not more than some seven or eight thousand miles away; and it was officially stated that he would descend precisely at noon on a great field prepared on the outskirts of Washington.

I shall not pause to describe the tumultuous crowds, numbering deep into the scores of thousands; the banners, the drums, the bugles, the noise and the acclaim; rather, let me plunge forward to but a minute before the space ship's scheduled re-appearance. Suddenly, through the deep sun-obscuring clouds directly above us, there burst an object that might well be from another world. Fish-shaped and tapering gracefully below, it looked like a projectile fired from some Brobdingnagian gun, except for the hissing spurts of vapor that erupted in continual explosions from valves along its sides. As it descended, falling with a rapidity that alarmed us, huge tenuous wings flashed out along its silvery flanks, steadying it and lending it balance . . . Meanwhile the explosions of vapor continued and even grew in violence; until all at once, with a suddenness that seemed miraculous, the space ship came almost to a halt, bobbing up and down a hundred feet in air, and then slowly, very slowly sank to earth, while the marvelling spectators wondered through what expert technical adjustment the explosions have been regulated so as almost exactly to counterbalance the attraction of the earth.

Now, after several minutes of breath-taking silence, the doors of the vessel were flung open, and the ten occupants one by one stepped into view. As a member of the waiting committee of reception, I gasped in amazement—how well the men all looked! First there was Pendexter who, despite his long confinement in the space ship, walked as spryly as a stripling, and displayed a glow of superabundant vitality on his usually pallid cheeks. Then there were several members of his crew, all of them abounding in youthful vigor; and, finally, there were the four companions of my own interplanetary flight, all of them radiant with health and more youthful-looking than when I left them nearly two years before!

CHAPTER III

The Great Idea!

● Even amid the joy of our meeting and the distractions of the subsequent reception, a stirring idea was taking

form in my mind. I cannot recall the exact moment of its inception, although it is probable that it had long been latent in my subconsciousness. Now it seemed to burst upon me almost full-born, with a shock, a revelation so startling that for a while I felt like one reeling in mid-space.

All at once, as I gazed at my strangely virile and rejuvenated comrades, I understood much that had mystified me regarding Venus. I understood the exhilarating effects of its atmosphere; I understood why Langley and his companions had not appeared to grow older during their exile; I understood why life to our neighbor planet seemed not to add years to life but to subtract them. And I was in possession, it occurred to me, of the most priceless secret ever conferred upon any member of my race!

As one trained in chemistry, I had not failed to recognize the meaning of that faint phosphorescence which permeated the Venusian soil. Venus, being a younger world than ours, had not yet lost all of her original radioactivity; even today, radioactive substances cast their healing emanations about them with prodigal luxuriance. This I had realized even while visiting the planet; but what had not occurred to me then was that the emanations might have the effect of checking the processes of death and decay in the human system—the effect, in other words, of producing a perpetual rejuvenation in the individual exposed to their influence.

What an alluring, what an unbelievable vista this presented! If the processes of decay were checked—or if, to be precise, the growth of fresh cells was stimulated to such a degree that no organ could waste away—then there could be no such thing as death from disease or old age. Old age, in fact, would be an impossibility; while any man who could escape death by accident or violence would live forever!

So revolutionary, so all-significant did these conclusions seem that I was reluctant to accept them without compelling proof. Although it already appeared to me that there was little reasonable room for doubt, I hesitated to credit the testimony of my own senses; but, wishing to put the matter to a fuller test, spent several days of painstaking research in digging out old copies of magazines containing photographs of Langley, Audubon and the various other explorers. And in every case the results confirmed my surmises! In no case did the man today look older than when photographed eight or ten years before; and in at least half the instances the subject looked younger, having overcome facial linings and wrinkles and other distortions plainly revealed by the camera! In fact, the degree of rejuvenation seemed exactly proportionate to the time the person had sojourned on Venus!

The last shred of doubt having been dissipated, I began to conceive a breath-taking project. If all that one had to do in order to become immortal was to migrate to Venus, who would wish to remain on earth? Why should not a great Venusian colonizing company be organized?—a syndicate that would undertake to build and operate a fleet of interplanetary liners, and to transport settlers at regular intervals to our neighbor in space? Thus, apart from the opportunities for gain—which, great though they might be, would prove of secondary interest to any lover of humanity—one might bestow the boon of immortal life upon myriads of our race and might pro-

vide the chance for men to develop a richer and more satisfying civilization than was ever possible on earth.

Aglow with enthusiasm for this idea, I resolved to seek the backing of some powerful financial group and to request a charter from the Pan-American Government for the operation of a squadron of space-ships. But alas! although I well realized that I must keep my plans from all but the most friendly ears, my very eagerness and fervor were to betray me. Hardly had I completed my plan of action when I dashed off to the Interplanetary Club to seek my old friend Dunmore,—one of my companions on the flight to Venus, who had recently returned with Pendexter.

As ill luck would have it, I found Dunmore in the reading room, absorbed in a copy of the "Astro-Physical Digest;" and as my enthusiasm prevailed over my discretion, I did not trouble myself to lead him off to some secret nook, but, observing that we were alone together, launched at once into an announcement of my discovery and a discussion of my plans, and solicited his enlistment in a project which, I felt, should appeal to him profoundly.

I had just completed the preliminaries, and had gotten to the point of proclaiming, "I tell you, Dunmore, if we form a secret syndicate, it cannot help succeeding!" when some warning instinct cut me short and turned my gaze behind me. There on an easy chair, grinning with amusement, sat my friend Pendexter! How he had gotten in without our knowledge I cannot say; but doubtless my incautiously lifted voice accounted for his presence, while I had been too preoccupied to notice him as he slipped stealthily into the room.

"What in the devil's name do you want here?" I growled, as he still stared at me. And my heart was as though turned to ice within me, for I wondered how much of our conversation he had overheard.

"Oh, I just thought I'd do a little reading," he drawled, tauntingly, as he slowly rose and went slouching over to the magazine shelves. "Hope you don't mind, Forsythe?"

● And when I, stricken speechless, could only glower back at him in helpless indignation, he turned around so as halfway to face me, and mumbled, "Wonderful idea that about the syndicate, Forsythe! Yes, a wonderful wonderful idea!"

And, secretly chuckling, he began to finger a magazine; while I, red-faced and with fists clenched, leaped to my feet and sputtered, "But, Pendexter, you—you don't mean to say you—"

He turned toward me with a look of infinite scorn. "I don't mean to say anything at all," he muttered. "Only thank you for your suggestions. Thank you most kindly. Luckily there's no copyright on ideas."

And, chuckling once more, he went rambling on his way, leaving me to sink back into my chair with a moan, for now my project could succeed only in the face of a most powerful and unscrupulous opposition.

Regardless of the shadow which Pendexter had flung across my path, I had no choice but to proceed as though he did not exist. Stimulated to more intense efforts by the certainty that he would attempt some obstruction, I paid hasty visits to several leading capitalists, and had little trouble in enlisting their sympathies—and, more im-

portant, in securing their subscriptions—for an interplanetary ship line to be known as the Venusian Navigation Company.

True, so deeply were my backers sunken in the grasping philosophy of the age that they had little thought of bestowing any benefit upon mankind, but looked only to the enlargement of their already-swollen fortunes, on the view that an interplanetary freight and passenger service would provide a fruitful new channel for business enterprise. None the less, the fact remains that they were not slow about their guarantees of assistance . . . so that, within a few weeks, my dream seemed about to be converted into reality.

It was with a heart violently throbbing that I rushed away one morning to the office of the Ministry of Transportation, bearing a portfolio with the documents and affidavits outlining the plans and prospects of my proposed undertaking. My enthusiasm still undimmed by the ordeal of standing in line for several hours, and of filling out numerous blanks to be filed away by a machine especially invented for the purpose, I found myself at last in the office of the Head Clerk, who glanced at me formally, turned a perfunctory eye upon the application sheet I held in my hand, and then announced, in a manner as impersonal as a rubber stamp:

"Number 4554 GX! Petition refused! Next!"

For a moment I could only stare at him speechlessly. "Petition refused?" I at length managed to gasp. "Why, there must be some mistake! On what grounds do you refuse me?"

"Number 4555 GX, you will step forward!" the Head Clerk was calling in his most mechanical voice to the next in line. And after another futile effort to gain his attention, I realized the uselessness of remaining to argue with an automaton, and went staggering out of the room like one in a daze . . .

But, even amid the stabbing pain and disappointment of that moment, my mind was not so utterly bewildered that I had no intimations as to the cause of my failure. For I had a vision of the grinning wedge-face of Pendexter, and saw the unholy glee of triumph in his beetle-black eyes and, surely, I was doing no injustice to my rival to suppose that he had outmaneuvered me.

Only a few days later after my appeal to the Director had been dismissed without comment telltale rumors began to reach my ears. "Say, what do you know about Pendexter?" my friend Bellaman, also of Venusian fame, startled me by inquiring one day as we lunched together at the Interplanetary Club. "I understand he has a tremendous project afoot."

"Tremendous project?" I demanded, while a chill went down my spine and it seemed to me that I could surmise all that Bellaman had to say.

"I don't exactly know the details," he continued, in a leisurely way, between puffs at a cigar. "But there's been a good deal of talk among the boys that he's taken out a charter for an interplanetary ship line to be known as the Venusian Navigation Company . . ."

Amazed as Bellaman was at the look of mingled rage, horror and astonishment that convulsed my face, and at the way my whole frame shook, he was probably not less mystified at the muttered exclamation that escaped my lips, "The hound! The brigand! He's stolen my idea!"

It was now fully evident why the Ministry of Trans-

portation had refused my application. Pendexter, acting upon the plan I had unwittingly suggested to him, had been able to secure the necessary guaranty of funds even more rapidly than I, by reason of his world-wide reputation as an interplanetary explorer; and, anticipating me in his application for a charter, he had brought sufficient influence to bear to be granted a monopoly on Venusian navigation!

● Suppressing as best I could my wrath that any government should be arrogant enough to offer a monopoly of the skies, I resolved to take the sole course still open to me to go abroad, and try to induce the great Euro-Britannican Government or the equally great Russo-Asian Government or even the Government of Pan-Africa to bestow the privilege denied me by my own country.

Accordingly I hastily packed my suitcase and dashed off to the nearest airport, where I boarded the first trans-Atlantic plane I could catch—to arrive twelve hours later in London, and arrange for an interview with the Minister of Foreign Affairs (the official who, in Euro-Britannica, had charge of interplanetary matters.)

Even before the hour set for my reception by this dignitary, I was to receive another shock. Picking up a Pan-American newspaper as I left the airport, I observed with a gasp the following headlines:

"FAMOUS SPACE-VOYAGER FORMS GREAT SYNDICATE

"To Put World-to-World Travel on a Paying Basis."

Although the paper trembled in my hand like a leaf in an autumn gust, I managed to retain sufficient presence of mind to read:

"Claude Pendexter, celebrated space-man and leader of the Morse-Crandall Rescue Flight to Venus, announced today a scheme which he believes will revolutionize space travel.

"Backed by numbers of our leading financiers, whose names he has not divulged, he has taken out papers of incorporation and received a Government charter for a company which plans to build a fleet of space-liners and to operate them at established intervals between the earth and Venus. The concern, however, will be more than a navigation company, for it aims to colonize Venus, and each person securing a passage to that planet will be given the title to a considerable strip of land there . . . The price of a passage, it is said, has been tentatively fixed at \$50,000.

"Aside from the manifest advantages of settling in a new and less crowded planet, Pendexter maintains that the emigrant to Venus will gain a boon more priceless than gold. His own observations, he declares, have taught him that the soil of the planet abounds in radioactive substances capable of prolonging human life indefinitely, so that the settler there need have no fear of ever growing old or dying. For this reason, he himself intends to take up his abode there as soon as the affairs of the company are in such a state as to permit his departure."

I could almost have wept in my impotent fury as I perused this article,—this article which made so much more emphatic the treachery and theft by which Pendexter was profiting from my ideas. Nor was my anger in any degree abated when, upon visiting the Euro-Britannican minister, I was told that Pendexter's company had already presented its application and secured the mon-

oply of interplanetary rights in Euro-Britannica as well!

Speaking to me in a friendly unofficial manner (for, it seems, he had taken a personal liking to me, and wished to spare me much trouble), the Minister went so far as to state that Pendexter, by virtue of his international reputation, had been able to obtain the support of leading citizens in every important country, and was certain of being granted monopoly rights wherever he applied. Hence I was merely wasting my time and efforts in seeking a charter on my own account.

I wonder whether the reader has ever had the experience of striving desperately to find an outlet from some enclosed space, and of seeing new walls confront him in every new direction in which he turned. Only one who has had this experience will be able to appreciate my feelings as I dragged my way from the office of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. It seemed to me that, no matter where I looked, impassable iron barriers obstructed my view; Pendexter, with a diabolical skill, had barred and circumvented me to the point of helplessness, and nowhere in this world, it appeared, could I obtain relief against him.

Upon sober reflection I concluded that, since I could expect to have no share in the affairs of the Venusian Navigation Company, the most I could still hope to gain was to be among the emigrants to Venus. My record as one of the pioneer explorers of that planet should have entitled me to return; but alas! I might have expected that no such consideration would weigh with Pendexter who, as President of the Company, played true to form when he rejected my application to be enlisted as a member of the crew of one of the space ships.

● My only remaining recourse, it appeared to me, was to embark as a passenger. But I am not a rich man, and \$50,000 was a vastly greater sum than I had ever possessed or hoped to possess. Certainly, on my salary of \$2,500 as a Government chemist, I could never expect to save the required amount! Or even if, by being economical to the point of niggardliness, I could scrape together the passage sum in the course of thirty-five or forty years, would I not be already too old to be rejuvenated even on Venus?

It was when I had reached the lowest pit of despair that most unexpectedly, thanks to the efforts of my friends, a well known philanthropist overwhelmed me with the offer of a free passage to Venus—which, he declared, he felt to be but my due owing to my services in the cause of interplanetary exploration.

Need it be remarked that I accepted most gratefully? Need it be stated that my heart beat with fresh hope as the prospect of immortal life on Venus opened out before me and that my head fairly whirled with joy as I rushed to the office of the Venusian Navigation Company and entered my name as a prospective passenger upon the next flight?

But, as on every past occasion, my enthusiasm was to be slowly snuffed out. One month, two months, three months went by, while I eagerly awaited word as to my assignment of quarters on a space ship—and in the interval many important movements and events, which I shall describe in the next chapter, were already under way. All my protests and appeals for haste brought no result, and I have no doubt that the Company's delay was deliberate,

not to say malicious, and owed itself to orders from above; for when finally, at the end of the fourteenth week, I received the notification I had been awaiting so long, it was merely an official form that had been filled in to read as follows:

"Mr. Arthur Forsythe,
Dear Sir;

"We thank you for your application for a berth in one of our space ships, and are pleased to inform you that we shall hasten to act upon your request at the first available moment. For the present, we have listed you as No. 69,842 on our waiting list.

"With appreciation of your interest, believe us

"Faithfully yours,

"THE VENUSIAN NAVIGATION COMPANY."

CHAPTER IV

The Dawn of a New Era

● The organization of the Venusian Navigation Company marked the dawn of a new era not only for Venus but for the earth.

Yet neither Pendexter nor any of his associates could have foreseen the results of their undertaking, any more than Columbus could have foreseen the consequences of his attempt to reach the East by going West. The new epoch of history, variously known as "The Romantic Upheaval," "The Period of the Great Disturbance," and "The Modern Age of Mania," was so startling and so fantastic in its various phases and expressions that no mind not gifted with omniscience could have anticipated its course. Whereas Pendexter and his backers were seeking no more than their own advantage, they were soon to find that the whole world considered itself a partner in their schemes—and that the whole world was becoming as feverishly excited as the prisoner who sees his dungeon door suddenly ajar.

In order to understand the alarming turn of world events, we must consider precisely what the Pendexter group were planning. According to information which came to me from reliable sources, they were guided by two motives: first, to emigrate to Venus and there attain immortality; secondly, to make themselves fabulously wealthy by reserving to themselves the choicest lands on Venus, and by reaping the profits of an interplanetary commerce not only in passengers but in various articles of trade. Their chief source of gain was to be from the exportation of Venusian radium, of which they had located valuable mines; for this priceless metal, after being extracted from the pitchblende that contained it, occupied such a small amount of space that it could easily be accommodated even in the limited storage rooms of the space ships.

True, the Company encountered some difficulties from the high tariffs against interplanetary imports which were declared by the Congresses of all nations, on the ground that earthly industries must be protected; nevertheless, the profits from radium were such that the stock of the Venusian Navigation Company soared to mountainous altitudes despite all the levies that the ingenuity of statesmen could devise. And financiers throughout the world, observing the wealth that came to investors in the Venus-

ian project, began to be overwhelmed with the desire to risk their all in interplanetary securities.

At the same time as the monetary success of the Company was appealing to the cupidity of millions, the cunningly worded advertisements circulated throughout the earth were addressed to an older and even more fundamental impulse. The following is only typical:

"WHY BE LIKE DUMB DRIVEN CATTLE?

"YOU HAVE TWO CHOICES:

"TO STAY ON EARTH AND PERISH

or

"TO PURCHASE A FARM OR TOWN LOT ON VENUS

"AND BE YOUNG AND HAPPY FOREVER

"See your local agent of the Venusian Navigation Company"

Had the rulers of the nations been wise enough to realize where such appeals were leading, they would surely have stifled every one of the Company's advertisements—even if they had not stifled the Company itself. For Pendexter and his collaborators—perhaps without fully understanding the fact—were trifling with the most profound of human instincts: with the very life-urge, the lust of self-preservation, the force that lured Ponce de Leon long ago to search for a fabulous Fountain of Youth, the force that has flung millions of men into Crusades, and Holy Wars, and massacres, and persecutions, and self-tortures, and lonely pilgrimages after a promised salvation.

What the hope of a paradise of date-palms and fair women was to the warrior of Islam a thousand years ago, what the frenzy to avoid the torments of Inferno was to the Christian warrior of the same age—all this and more the allurements of Venus became to a world that had ceased to believe in personal immortality, all at once made possible. And when, moreover, the prospects were for an immortality of the most delightful kind—an eternity spent on a "planet of milk and honey," amid never-cloying enjoyments in a body that could never wither—then how was it humanly possible to resist the temptation?

And so, when by degrees the representations of the Venusian Navigation Company had seeped through the public mind; and had been verified by scores of independent observers, the whole human race began to be moved by one powerful desire. Wherever I went, I heard only one word on the lips of the people; mothers would whisper to their babes, "When you get to Venus, my dear . . ."; schoolboys would build their games around the theme, "When we get to Venus"; old eyes that had been glossed with listlessness would show a gleam of hope, and old tongues would murmur, "If we could only get to Venus!"; Young wooers would murmur deliciously to their maids, "On Venus, my love, on Venus . . ." while youths of ambition, and battle-scarred men in whom ambition had long been dead, the disappointed along with the sanguine, the world-weary along with the virile and the energetic, all joined in that tremendous chorus which echoed and re-echoed around the world, "Venus! Venus! Venus!"

● Many months to be sure, had passed before public enthusiasm had reached this heated pitch. But countless signs gave evidence of the rapidity with which the interplanetary fever was spreading. I need only cite a little experience of my own as an indication of the tides of insanity that were beginning to sweep our planet. After

receiving the letter, reported in the last chapter, informing me that I was 69,842 on the waiting list of the Venusian Navigation Company, I naturally suspected that my ill fortune was to be accounted for solely by the malice of Pendexter. And so, wishing to throw him off the track, I sent in a fresh application for an interplanetary berth, signing myself by the first name that came into my head: Morton Williams, I think it was, or William Mortons. And after two weeks I received the formally worded reply: this time I was No. 146,877 on the waiting list!

In other words, even the deterrent of the \$50,000 passage fee had not prevented more people from applying than the Company would be able to accommodate ~~for~~ years to come! During the past two weeks alone, more than 77,000 applicants had filed their names!

It is not to be supposed that the Company did not make Herculean efforts to meet the unexpected demands for its services. But space liners are expensive bits of machinery, and cannot be built in a day; while even after being constructed and made ready for flight, they can be safely navigated only by trained experts of whom there are not too many in the world, and moreover can be launched only during those comparatively limited periods when Venus is not more than forty or fifty millions miles away.

And thus it happened that when, after a year of intensive activity, the Company had a fleet of fifty super space ships waiting and ready, it was found that only thirty-five could be released within the succeeding twelve months, and that the total number of passengers to Venus would not be much in excess of fifteen thousand.

But after another year, it was promised, five hundred additional space liners would be ready, and scores of young men now undergoing training in space-navigation would be qualified to captain the vessels.

It was during the second year that alarmed observers began to see clearly the signs of the social and moral disintegration of the world. Already workers, disgruntled at the routine of labor that led but toward old age and death, were abandoning their jobs in all parts of the earth . . . unwilling to strive again until after their transportation to Venus. Already profiteers were preying upon the hopes of the credulous, selling them shares of stock in Venusian enterprises that existed only on paper, or soliciting their money on fraudulent promises to convey them across space.

Already these scoundrels whose deeds on earth had entitled them only to opprobrium and contempt were finding a fruitful field for activities on Venus; and already the Venusian Navigation Company had served as a tool for every species of large-scale miscreant.

It is a curious fact that, among the first migrants to Venus, were many who were being vigilantly sought by the police on earth . . . Here, for example, was a bank cashier whose books failed to balance by a matter of half a million or more, and who, after being vainly hunted by detectives in several countries, was reported to be establishing himself in a large estate on Venus. Or here was the Mayor of a city, a Governor or a Congressman who was being investigated for the misappropriation of public funds . . . and who, when the investigation had unearthed some facts he could not satisfactorily explain, was next definitely located on our fellow planet.

Or, again, there was the millionaire's son who, after

being imprisoned on a charge of murder, mysteriously escaped into a convenient space ship; and the leader of gangsters who, finding life becoming precarious on this planet, silently made his exit in favor of the world of radium and youth; and the bigamist who, not unjustifiably fearing that the fury of the law might pursue him on earth, disappeared one fine day with his second bride . . . to resume housekeeping on Venus.

When by degrees it became evident that so many of the passengers of the Venusian Navigation Company were persons of questionable character, suspicion was not unnaturally aroused; and rumors began to circulate that officials of the Company had accepted bribes from various refugees from justice, who thus gained the preference over more deserving applicants. But although some public action upon these charges was attempted, nothing ever came of it; for the individual under gravest suspicion, who chanced to be one of Pendexter's personal aides, was not to be found when an effort was made to deliver the summons; and no convincing denial was ever issued to the report that he had gone to Venus for an indefinite stay.

While the criminal elements in many countries were rejoicing at the unexpected enlargement of their sphere of activities and detectives and sergeants of police were waxing profane at the very mention of Venus, the mood of the population as a whole was one of perilous impatience. Goaded by the desire to reach Venus, and maddened by the thought of that planet's inaccessibility to the masses, thousands of men in every land were displaying a mutinous temper that boded ill for the future.

Had they only halted at a refusal to work, their resistance might not have seemed ominous; but they went so far in one case as to storm the space port of the Venusian Navigation Company, in the effort to capture one of the vessels . . . and not until several scores had been killed and injured and the State militia had been called out was the uprising suppressed. In other cases, when no open encounter occurred, an outbreak was averted only by the intervention of the Government, which placed large contingents of troops on guard at all the offices and factories of the Company; while in one instance the troops themselves, finding not even military discipline proof against the enticement of Venus, rebelled and slew their leaders, manned one of the space-ships and launched it in the direction of "the planet of perpetual youth"—only to be drawn out of their course owing to their inexperience in celestial navigation and dashed to death amid the peaks and craters of the moon.

Yet all these events were only symptomatic. They were, in a way, like the faint distant rumblings that precede the thunderstorm . . . But before I describe that tempest which was to descend upon our world and threaten the very structure of civilization, let me go back for a while to more personal affairs, and recount my further efforts to secure a passage to Venus.

CHAPTER V

Flight

- The rising public clamor for transportation to Venus did not diminish my own anxiety to reach that planet. On the contrary, my eagerness was only accentuated; my

sense of injury at being barred from Venus was so keen that I decided that indirect methods must serve me where direct had failed. In other words, since I could not walk in boldly by the front door, I would creep in by the back! since I was not accepted as a legitimate passenger, I would travel through space as a stowaway!

Now this idea, I must confess, was not original with me. It was suggested by newspaper reports that would-be stowaways had several times been detected by the police. True, I had never read of any successful attempt, and was aware that the apprehended wretches had been punished with long terms in jail; yet I thought that no risk would be too great with the goal of perpetual youth in sight. Besides, my knowledge of space ships was so complete that I hoped to succeed in finding a hiding-place where men less experienced had failed.

It would be pointless to dwell upon my first attempt, when I secreted myself among the oxygen tanks of a vessel expected soon to leave, and was at the very point of victory . . . only to find that the craft would be indefinitely delayed owing to a leak in one of the hydrogen tanks. Nor shall I pause to describe my second attempt, when the untimely arrival of another would-be stowaway led to my detection, and only the hasty passage of a banknote to the lackey who discovered us saved me from spending some months behind bars. Surely, the fates were against me!—as though, with some dextrous counter-stroke, they wished to vitiate every effort I made! or as though they aimed to warn me against some invisible peril!

Had I been superstitiously disposed, I might have read an omen in my repeated failures and have ceased to challenge destiny; and, indeed, I did for a moment have a queer restraining sensation, and from within me a voice did seem to cry, "Keep away! Keep away! If you value your life, keep away from Venus!"

But being of a sternly rational turn of mind, I merely smiled at what I thought to be an absurd fancy, and straightway began to lay plans for a third attempt at embarkation.

Within a few weeks the greatest of all the space-liners, christened *The Evening Star* after the planet of its destination, was to be launched upon its maiden voyage. A long, spear-shaped craft, more than five hundred feet from end to end and over forty feet across, it had been made possible by a new multiple-chambered hydrogen engine capable of generating several times as much power as any of its predecessors. On the day before this vessel was to be hurled into space, a public reception was held, at which visitors were permitted to pace about its decks and survey its luxurious cabins and furnishings. This gave me my opportunity: mingling with the swarms that gathered at the space-port, where the huge silvery gray ship was pointed heavenward like a windowless skyscraper, I managed after several hours to worm my way into one of the narrow doors of the craft and to wander with the multitude along the neatly polished aisles from deck to deck. Never was a trans-Atlantic steamer more gorgeously outfitted!

Space travel, it seemed to me, had reached the stage of luxury now that the passengers might enjoy cabins with beds, and observation rooms and reading rooms equipped with elegant lounges and divans (all, of course, fixed to the floors), and a gymnasium, and radio amplifiers to bear them concerts from earth, and electric lights,

and every other accommodation I could imagine except bath-tubs and swimming pools. But interesting as all this was, my mind was fastened upon a more important object.

Making my way downward in the direction of the storerooms, I at length found myself before a closed door marked with a peculiar red X.

"Ah!" I exclaimed to myself. "This is what I have been looking for!"

To the uninitiated, the door would have been impassable; but, thanks to my acquaintance with space ships, I knew how it could be unbarred by the pressure of the foot against a little catch on the floor. And so I deftly flung it open and slipped into the black recesses beyond; while my fellow visitors, if they noticed my disappearance at all, must have mistaken me for an employee of the company.

Yet do not imagine that my position during the next few hours was in any way enviable. Groping in utter darkness among steel packing cases laden with pemmican, chocolate, lime juice, dried prunes and the various other articles of an interplanetary diet, I crept to a point as remote as possible from the door; and then, in a cramped and hunched position about as roomy as that of an infant in the womb, I came to a halt in the fetid atmosphere at the end of a long passageway, and silently waited for my voyage to begin.

● But all at once, with terrifying suddenness, it came to me that there were worse dangers to fear than discovery. If the packing cases had not been lashed securely into place, they would be so flung about by the shock of our start that I would be mashed to a jelly. Or if I myself were not firmly bound, I could hardly reach Venus alive. Accordingly, I set to work once more, despite the handicap of the darkness, and, by means of ropes and straps that I had brought with me for the purpose, tied myself as tightly as possible to one of the bulkheads, meanwhile praying fervently that my efforts would suffice, and that I would not be dashed to death the instant our flight began.

The interval that followed was more harrowing than I should care to endure again. The minutes seemed like hours, and the hours like days, and meanwhile the silence and darkness of my self-imposed prison was so nerve-racking that even the sound of approaching footsteps—even the footsteps of my foes—might have had a welcome ring in my ear.

But not the faintest stir, not so much of a trembling as a leaf makes when it falls on a hushed day, disturbed the absolute solitude of my retreat . . . until eventually, after eternities of torment, there came such a shock that my head whirled and the whole earth tottered about me. It seemed to me that I was being shot skyward with explosive speed, only to be checked by the straps about my wrists and ankles, which cut cruelly into the flesh; then, while the steel cases all about me creaked and groaned and clattered as though in agony, realization flashed over me in a triumphant burst and I could have shouted in my exultation. Once more I had set sail for Venus!

* * * *

It was a rather sick and dizzy stowaway that was discovered an hour or two later by one of the cook's assistants, who had been sent into the hold for provisions. But,

after being removed to the purer air of the upper decks and treated to food and drink, I found the fumes clearing from my head, and felt an audacious confidence taking possession of me. One thing I was now certain of; it was impossible for the vessel to reverse its course or return me to earth! therefore, no matter how the Captain might storm and rave, I was certain to reach Venus!

And storm and rave the Captain assuredly did when I was brought before him. I can still see him shaking his hairy red fist at me with many an oath and reproach, to the effect that "Rascals like you are the ruin of spatial navigation!" After an interminable lecture, he assigned me to the task of scrubbing the decks and oiling the engines for the remainder of our flight; while as I stood smilingly receiving this sentence, not at all intimidated by the prospect of a few weeks of drudgery with immortal life in store, he ended with a roaring threat:

"But wait till you reach Venus, my friend! Just wait till you reach Venus! Do you know what they do with stowaways on that planet? The last one to be caught was condemned to ten years' hard labor!"

But even this threat was not sufficient to wipe the smile of triumph from my face. What though I should have to endure ten years of hard labor? Was this not a small price to pay for everlasting youth?

During the remainder of the voyage I was so cheerful, even when mopping the decks or bending over my oil-can, that I became known as "The singing stowaway." And my optimistic mood had not left me even after our arrival, although now I was put in handcuffs and told that I was forthwith to be brought before "The Governor." My enthusiasm did receive a slight jolt, it is true, when I learned that the Governor was none other than my old shipmate Pendexter—but I rapidly recovered even from this shock, for what could Pendexter do to harm me now that I was on Venus?

It was not more than an hour after our arrival when I was led away from the space-port toward the Governor's mansion. Walking manacled between two pistol-wielding guards of the Venusian Navigation Company, I did have a feeling that my return to the planet might have occurred under more dignified circumstances; but on the other hand, I was already enjoying something of that invigoration I had always experienced on Venus; while the sights I observed during our tramp of several miles were such as to take my mind wholly away from personal affairs.

During the several years since my previous visit, what a transformation had occurred! "VENUSIAN IMPROVEMENT CORPORATION: EASIEST TERMS TO HOME SEEKERS" ran a sign that confronted me along a strip of newly built highway across the space-port; but whether there had been any actual improvement seemed to me a matter of one's point of view. Where a tall forest had reached, blooming with brilliant flowers, luxuriant with palms and tree-ferns, there was only a waste of broken stumps and of distorted, skeleton-like severed branches, above which loomed a huge advertisement in glaring red letters: "Home Sites at Lowest Rates!" In very few places did I observe that any actual homes had been built, though the strip of forest devastated by the Improvement Corporation was enormous, and finely-paved roads reached out for miles where no foot or vehicle was seen to go!

"Why is this?" I was wondering, when one of the

guards, being of a talkative nature, answered my unspoken question.

"You see that ghastly tract of land over there, where the forest has been cut down?" he asked. "That has all been sold as home lots to people on earth by agents of the Improvement Corporation, which is a branch of the Venus-Navigation Company. It is said that some people have paid as much as \$30,000 or \$40,000 for choice lots on Venus. But when they get here they never use them."

"Why not?" I inquired.

"Because there are not enough workers to go around. It is next to impossible to get men to labor willingly at building anything. 'Why work?' they ask. 'The woods give us all the food we need, and no matter what we do we will live forever. So let us take things easy and enjoy ourselves.'"

● "But if no one works," I persisted, "who is it that has cut down the trees and built the roads and houses? And who—"

"Oh, you will soon find out that some people work," interrupted the guard, casting me a twinkling glance that I did not exactly like. "But not because they want to. Thieves, lawbreakers, and stowaways are made to do all the drudgery. I will even tell you a secret." Here he leaned close and whispered into my ear, while fondling his revolver playfully. "There is such an acute shortage of labor that the Navigation Company has had to take matters into its own hands. So its agents on earth have been sent out into the jungle of Africa and of South America to capture the natives—I won't say against their will, but without asking them whether they want to go. Only the other day, several labor transports arrived from the earth with a thousand black men."

"But by the love of Venus!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean to say they've revived the slave trade?"

"Call it that, if you like," returned the guard, with a shrug. "But the officials of the Company give it a simpler name. They speak of it as business enterprise."

Even as my informer was speaking, I had a chance to judge for myself of the truth of his words. A little back from the road, I observed about twenty colored men who, stripped to the waist, were groaning and perspiring as they swung heavy axes against the trunks of the tree-ferns. To their ankles were attached thick chains joined to great steel balls, while on their brows and arms were hideous scars newly seared by the branding iron—scars made roughly in the shape of an S, the symbol of servitude. And at a distance of about fifty yards from these toilers, in the shade of a russet-hued tree with umbrella-shaped leaves, two white men lounged with rifles in their hands, while smoking and chatting and occasionally quaffing long draughts from a bottle filled with some inky fluid.

It may be that I wrinkled up my lips with repugnance at this sight, for the guard saw fit to chide me:

"Say, friend, you'll soon find those superior airs don't go on Venus. We're all equal here, only we've got to make some one do the work, haven't we? So the unfit must serve the fit. Otherwise, how would civilization be possible?"

The sort of civilization made possible by this system was soon to become further evident. First I was astonished to observe that, of the men and women whom we passed from time to time along the roadside, not one

seemed able to walk steadily, while some were reeling and sputtering in the last stages of intoxication. But my amazement grew by leaps and bounds when I saw one or two crudely constructed hovels along our path, heard the sounds of riotous music and of drunken laughter from within, and noticed that the occupants were all whirling about and staggering like men in delirium.

Not far from these amusement houses was an open-air dancing pavillion where men and women, clad as if for a swimming contest, were circling about and falling over one another, with the silly giggling mirth of the inebriated; while from every clump and cluster of bushes within eye-range I could see pairs of arms twining about each other . . . and sometimes not even a clump of bushes screened the arms from my view.

"What is the meaning of all this?" I gasped to the guard. "Has the whole planet gone mad?"

"No—the whole planet has gone drunk," he drawled, laconically.

"Is it then some special celebration?" I demanded. "Some festal day? Some occasion when every one feels the right to throw off all restraint?"

"Not at all—just an everyday affair," was the indifferent reply. "Didn't I tell you that people here take things easy and enjoy themselves? Why shouldn't they? They're going to live forever no matter what they do!"

For the first time, a doubt flashed across my mind as to whether immortal life was after all an undiluted advantage.

But I swiftly cast aside this misgiving, even though the thought did recur that, with all eternity before one, it might seem a little monotonous to remain sober too much of the time.

Nevertheless, my own ardor for Venus was but little dimmed; and a few minutes later, when we came to the end of our walk, I was feeling as self-congratulatory as ever at having returned to "the planet of perpetual youth."

We now found ourselves entering a fairly large building, constructed of palm logs with the bark still clinging to them, and roofed becomingly with the sun-reflecting silvery green leaves of some rubber-like plant. Several sentries, red-cheeked and red-nosed and a little unstable on their feet, met us at the door, and informed us obligingly that "The Governor's in—he'll be glad to see you"—and so, before many minutes, I had had the pleasure of seeing my dear friend Pendexter once more.

CHAPTER VI

Chaos!

● We found him reclining on the only easy chair on

Venus, which he had transported from the earth especially for his convenience. A thick cigar dangled from one hand, while with the other he dawdled with a glass filled with some sparkling red liquid. His wedge-shaped face had grown somewhat more fleshy since I had last seen him; and there was an unhealthy flush to his cheeks; but otherwise he was precisely the same Pendexter as always, and I recoiled from him with that same instinctive aversion I never failed to feel in his presence.

As we entered, he was expressing himself in a sharp snapping voice to a Negro lackey who nodded deferentially across the room from him:

"What's the matter with recent importations from the earth? Can't they send us any wine fit for a white man? And as for this Venusian home-brew—it's worse than poison!"

"Yes, sir, yes, sir," the servant was replying mechanically, while a frightened look flitted across his face.

It was at this point that Pendexter chanced to set eyes upon us. He gave a start; then sat up straight in his seat, and regarded me with a hard stare, with a surprised expression as of one who has suddenly confronted a burglar.

"Well! My old chum Forsythe!" he at length ejaculated. "And how in the name of Venus did you ever get here?"

"Just thought I'd drop around and visit my old friends," I returned simply, while he glared at me in a way implying that he could have done without the visit.

"Beg pardon, sir," stated one of the guards, bowing to the Governor with every sign of respect. "He was a stowaway on *The Evening Star*. Caught red-handed in the act."

Pendexter shot an accusing glance at me. "Do you deny this?" he demanded.

"Why deny the obvious?" I flung back. "I couldn't have gotten to Venus by walking."

"But don't you know it's against the law to be a stow-away?" he shrilled at me. "I'm surprised at you, Forsythe! It will be my sad duty, as your judge, to inflict the full penalty!"

"Oh, I'm willing to face the full penalty," I declared, with a confident smile. "What will it be? Ten years at hard labor?"

A moment passed in silence, while he sat staring at me as if to probe me to the depths; then, in slow tones, he challenged:

"Oh, so that's your game! So that's your game! You speak as if now that you're here, nothing else can matter much!"

And suddenly, with a sinking heart, I realized that my eagerness had betrayed me!

With the air of an inquisitor addressing a writhing victim, Pendexter resumed:

"So you think, Forsythe, it's as simple as all that! After sneaking your way into this world, you're ready to risk a little hard work, are you, for the privilege of living forever? Well, my friend, I'm Governor here, and intend to remain Governor, and you're not the sort of man I'm anxious to have hanging around my back door. Do you understand me?"

And then, turning to the guards, he continued, contemptuously, "Take this prisoner back to the space-port! There's a ship leaving for earth this evening. See that he goes with it as laborer. And tell the Captain to turn him over to the police the instant he reaches the earth."

With a low derisive laugh, Pendexter returned to the red liquid at his side, and began sipping it with an air of evident enjoyment; while I, led out between the two guards, felt myself sinking and tottering as though the whole weight of a world lay upon my head!

Back, back, back through the interminable emptiness between Venus and the earth! Back, back, back for weary week after week, while I scrubbed decks and polished railings and cursed fate that I had made this long, monotonous pilgrimage only to be sent back from Venus

after a few hours! Never had the triumph of Pendexter appeared so complete before, never had my own dejection been so absolute. For now it seemed as if the last door had been slammed in my face, and as if Venus henceforth was to be as inaccessible as the great nebula in Orion.

Little could I have anticipated those extraordinary adventures which awaited me upon my return, and those slow, sardonic manipulations of fate which were to turn apparent defeat into actual good fortune!

Upon reaching my own planet, after the forty-nine days of the return trip, I was to notice some startling changes. Even as our vessel slid down out of the clouds toward the space-port, I became aware that not all was as it should be. Glancing down through one of the heavy slitted windows in the floor of our ship, I observed a multitude of men on the plains just beneath. Those to the right were all drawn up in serried military formation, and were advancing amid a flashing of guns and shells upon the swarms to the left, who were in precipitate flight and were partially hidden from view by the bluish and yellow-green clouds of poison gas.

"What is this? A civil war?" I asked myself, with a gasp; but I could do little more than put that question, for we were descending so rapidly that after a moment the embattled myriads were blurred from my sight.

● A few minutes later, after we were safely back on earth, the door of our ship was flung open not by the welcoming officials of the company, but by a grim, unsmiling captain of the National Police, who rushed in followed by a score of bayonet-wielding followers.

And while the commander of our craft and the mate and all the deckhands stood staring at him in consternation, the Police Captain waved a long, red-lettered document, and proclaimed:

"By order of our Dictator, I declare you all drafted in the cause of the national emergency! This way, all of you! We will provide you with arms and train you! You are henceforth subject to our orders!"

We still stood gaping at him in amazement.

"But what does all this mean?" I demanded. "What order of the Dictator? What national emergency do you refer to?"

"You will see!" he snapped as, surrounded by sabres, we filed solemnly out into the open air.

And, indeed, we were not long in seeing. Even amid the subjection of a military training camp, where we were virtual slaves and where every breath and current of information was liable to censorship, the essential facts one by one filtered to our knowledge. We learned that widespread insurrections had occurred, not only in Pan-America but in most other countries; that the breakdown of the economic system, caused by the revolt of millions of men frantic to reach Venus, had been reducing whole populations to starvation.

Hungry multitudes, in many states and provinces, had risen against their rulers and battered down the edifice of government, so producing a condition of anarchy, in which vast predatory bands roamed the country, looting, burning and killing, while each man was a law unto himself and the life or property of no person was safe. Moreover, the confusion was only enhanced by the appearance of a new form of exploitation, the frenzy to reach

Venus had risen to such a pitch that, in defiance of the monopoly rights which the Venusian Navigation Company had enjoyed, enterprising individuals throughout the earth reaped huge profits from "bootleg" transportation lines, which sent up hastily constructed, flimsy and poorly-manned interplanetary vessels, many of which disappeared in space without ever being heard of again, while some were wrecked even before leaving our own world.

Yet in the beginning, it was claimed, much of the world-wide violence and strife might have been averted had Pendexter's Company relinquished its exclusive rights and permitted competitors to enter the field. But when the Company, maintaining that it must guarantee its stockholders a "fair" return on their investment, refused to make any concessions, and was supported in this position by the legislators and courts, popular impatience and fury was unwilling to stop short at any barrier, even at the overthrow of all law and order . . .

And so civil war had broken out, with the Venus-crazed masses on one side, while on the other were those powerful financial interests which revolved about Pendexter and which controlled what remained of the State. The situation was complicated by the fact that the political leaders, with that lack of courage characteristic of the so-called representatives of the people, could not be relied upon not to desert in the thick of the contest; and after the Dictator of Pan-America and the Prime Minister of Euro-Britannica had absented themselves without warning on a specially commissioned liner bound for Venus, and the high officials of other nations had followed their example, how were their remaining adherents to continue unassisted the struggle against chaos?

All too clearly it seemed, in those days of the Great Disintegration, that civilization was doomed and that the world would sink back into the barbarism of the Dark Ages. Such was the boon that the possibility of immortal life on Venus appeared about to confer upon the dwellers on our planet!

As time went by, I began to observe for myself the effects of the Venusian mania. And how bitter were my self-reproaches that I had unwittingly set the forces of destruction into action! Having completed my preliminary training, I was marched about the country in company with thousands of other conscripts, being compelled to engage in many a skirmish with the lawless plundering bands. And the sights I saw were like nightmares—the nightmares of a wrecked world.

I tramped through once-fruitful regions that had been torn and blasted till scarcely a green thing remained; through orchards uprooted, and fields of grain laid waste, and towns and villages blackened, and cities whose only tenants were the stray famished dogs that prowled and fought like wolves. Here would be a great factory standing like a ruin, with broken windows and smokeless battered chimneys; yonder would be an airport, once the scene of vehement activity, but now still and silent as the thoroughfares of Babylon; a little beyond, one would cross the twisted tracks of a railroad, and observe the freight cars ransacked and derailed.

But all these sights, melancholy as they were, had a less desolating effect upon my mind than the swarms of refugees that now and then crossed our road, begging pitifully for the food and raiment we could not give them.

How willingly would I erase from mind the memory of those pinched and haggard faces, those cheeks blue from privation, and drawn as the cheeks of a corpse! Those emaciated forms from which the bones protruded, and which seemed barely able to drag themselves along the dusty roads! Men, women and children!—and the children the most heartrending of all with their joyless features, their mutely pleading eyes out of which all the suffering of an afflicted planet seemed to look!

Living in the woods like beasts, seeking their shelter in caves or in trees or improvised hovels, clad only in wasted rags and sometimes scarcely clad at all, they roamed from place to place in fear-driven hordes, while starvation, hardship and disease daily took toll from among them.

● And yet, not many months before, most of them had been sober, respected citizens, dwelling in orderly communities amid the apparent security of civilized life! To such a level had they been reduced by the spread of an insidious germ, of a sinister idea!

One would naturally have thought that, seeing to what depths the world had been driven by the madness of the Venus-seeking, the survivors would have turned their minds away from that treacherous planet. Yet, by some perversity of human nature, the very inaccessibility of the goal seemed to make it more desirable; the very agonies which men endured on its account made them crave for it the more passionately. Even amid the swarms of homeless wretches, one often heard the word Venus, repeated wistfully with an echo of the old cry, "If only we could get there! If only we could! If only—" And many a poor sufferer, by a tragic irony, died with fevered eyes upturned hopefully at the thought of immortal life on Venus.

Among my own companions of the march, practically the sole topic of conversation was Venus. Though most of them were penniless wretches without a prospect in the world, all seemed confident that they would some day reach our neighboring planet; and meanwhile, since the date of that glorious consummation was still indefinite, they consoled themselves by pictures of what awaited them upon their arrival.

There was, for example, a red-faced, bewhiskered little fellow named Sanders, who was always asserting (on the basis of information not without an element of truth) that the reason he wished to reach Venus was that no one there had anything to do but eat, drink and carouse from morning till night. Then there was a dreamy chap by the name of McFarlane, who thought of Venus as a sort of magnified Garden of Eden; while some of his fellows held that on Venus one could never grow tired, and never grow hungry, and never feel pain or disease, but would always feel fit as a Hercules. Then again there was the belief (by no means uncommon) that Venus was a Utopia where there could be no injustice, no inequality, no strife, but where at last man could live with his brother in perfect kindness and benevolence.

A little saddened that men should pine away beneath such illusions, I undertook to describe actual conditions and my companions listened open-mouthed; and then, with the assurance of the totally ignorant, proceeded to disagree with me, clinging to their own unfounded views.

Nevertheless, I was elevated in their esteem by my claim to have been to Venus—so much so that they would seek me out over and over again to hear the stories which they still refused to credit. It was thanks to my Venusian reputation, I am sure, that I was promoted to the coveted post of Commissioner of Supplies—which meant that I was to have charge of the provisions, and was not required to participate in the engagements that were to cost the lives of so many of my comrades.

But I was not to hold this new position for many months. After a period of fruitless skirmishing and guerilla warfare, the chains of our army organization began to relax, and the army began to fade away. So long as there was sufficient food (our supplies thus far had come from the ravage of what remained of the country), the men could be held together; but when the impoverished land could no longer feed us, the conscripts deserted by whole troops and squadrons. Sometimes it was not so much the dread of starvation that took them from us as the wild hope of finding a vessel to transport them to Venus; but at all events the fact remains that the last bulwark of order against anarchy was rapidly dissolving, and that no power on earth seemed able to check that descent into chaos.

There came an evening, when, seated in the tent of the Commissioner of Supplies, surrounded by several cadaverous-looking wretches who had not had a square meal in weeks, I was startled to hear the sharp summons of our Commander-in-Chief, who stood outside my door, hunched up in a most unmilitary attitude. I could almost have sworn that, despite the usual martial inflexibility of the man, he had been weeping; and, certainly, there was cause for tears in what I saw as I darted out of the tent!

Where thousands of men had been encamped that morning, the plains rolled around us vacant and bare. Here and there a horse was browsing; while half a dozen sentries stood motionless above a ridge of grass. But that was all. The army was gone!

"It is the end," muttered our Commander, bowing his head despondently. "Henceforth the wolves will rule."

"Henceforth the wolves!" I bleakly echoed, as he returned my mechanical salute.

And facing toward the west, where a beautiful star-like luminary stood out above the darkening horizon, I clenched my fists and cursed as though thus to challenge the gods that had spread a pall of gloom across our planet.

CHAPTER VII

The Turning of the Tide

● There is undoubtedly much truth in the old proverb that it is darkest before the dawn, for only after the most optimistic observers had given up hope was there any sign of reviving light in the world.

Now that the Venusian frenzy is all over and men are once more able to face the facts with undistorted vision, it seems singular that the desirability of reaching Venus had been accepted by the masses with such unbounded faith. After all, why did few pause to inquire whether life on Venus was all that had been claimed for it? Whether the rejuvenation that men underwent there really was proof that they would live forever? No doubt it was only a contagious hysteria that had precluded a saner point of view—just as hysteria may make the rabble in-

capable of seeing the unrighteousness or stupidity of wars, persecutions, or crusades. And it was to require the argument of visible facts to persuade the world of its stupendous, its incredible folly . . .

The first seeds of doubt were spread by a case that came within my personal knowledge. Making my way back home as best I could after the disorganization of the army, I reached my native town only to find it half depopulated, with the surviving inhabitants eking out a precarious existence on stolen and plundered supplies. Naturally, I inquired for my old friends, and among them Dunmore, a companion on my first interplanetary flight, who had passed two years on Venus and recently returned. What was my surprise and grief to learn that he was dead! No, not slain by accident, or killed in warfare, or overcome by starvation, like so many millions of late! But the victim of some mysterious disease that had come with startling suddenness, wasting away his tissues for no known cause and taking him off while the bewildered doctors vainly conferred! Evidently, then, the rejuvenation he had undergone on Venus had not sufficed to prolong his life!

But the death of Dunmore, unexpected as it was, might not have had any special significance had it not been linked to other reports more astonishing still. Rumors were circulating that Langley, one of the original explorers, had returned from Venus for a brief visit, only to fall dead in the arms of his friends. And the symptoms of his malady, curiously enough, were as vague and mysterious as in the case of Dunmore! Except that his flesh had withered as though from a blight, there was little that any one knew about the disease!

While I was still wondering at Langley's fate, dreading to draw the logical conclusion, fresh tidings came flocking to my ears as if to dissipate the last wisp of doubt. First it was bruited abroad that radio messages had been received from Venus, reporting the death of Langley's colleague, Audubon, who had perished in the same startling manner; then Wilbertson, another of the pioneer explorers, was said to have succumbed, after passing three or four years on Venus; then Cunningsby, also one of the original Venusian group, was declared to have joined the melancholy company which now claimed all but two of the six, rescued by the Morse-Crandall Expedition.

And as if the fates had woven an inescapable net about that whole heroic band, the two survivors were shortly afterwards listed among the dead.

Had it not been for the world disorganization, which prevented the rapid spread of information and mingled whole crops of false rumors with every shred of truth, men would not have been slow about recognizing the self-evident . . . and the anti-Venusian Revolution would have occurred immediately. As it was, however, many months went by before our planet had awakened to realization. And meanwhile the reports from Venus though doubtless exaggerated, were not encouraging.

It was said that scores of persons—mostly old settlers on "the planet of perpetual youth"—had fallen a prey to the same nameless, irresistible malady that had smitten Langley and his comrades. And after a while it became known that a space ship, returning from Venus with a badly frightened party of celestial immigrants, had reached the earth only to report the death of three passengers.

(Concluded on page 471)

THE PLANET OF YOUTH

(Continued from page 405)

Long before this time, I had been convinced of the dismal truth. Alas for dreams of eternal youthfulness! and for visions of immortality! Even Ponce de Leon, roaming the wilds of Florida in quest of his mythical Fountain, was not pursuing more of a chimera than were we who looked to Venus to grant us a shield against old age and dissolution! To seek perennial youth on our neighbor planet was not merely vain! It was foolhardy! It was to forfeit even the chance of long life that earth-dwellers might otherwise have!

All too clearly now I understood that Venus, with a diabolical snare, rejuvenated temporarily only in order to kill! Her radioactive elements did indeed increase the vigor of the sojourner there—but at what a cost! Now all at once I remembered how our ancestors, nearly a century ago, had thought to cure various ailments by the use of radium waters, finding at first that the waters seemed to effect the desired end, but that after a time the patient died. In the same way—but to a much more deadly extent—the radium on Venus served at first as a stimulus, but after repeated action became converted into a death-dealing poison.

● Now how thankful I was that I had not remained longer on Venus! How fortunate I felt to have inspired the malice of Pendexter! How blessed to have been frustrated in all my attempts to become a Venusian resident!

Grieved as I was at the fate awaiting all the migrants to Venus, I did not find the turning of the tide to be anything but an advantage to our own world. Had it not been for the unexpected effects of life on Venus, human life on this planet would probably have disappeared. But the knowledge that Venus was not the abode of perpetual youth—knowledge that could not help seeping by degrees into the public consciousness—acted as a much needed tonic to our sick and tottering planet. So deeply, it is true, were the minds of men set upon the notion of Venusian immortality, that at first they would not or could not believe themselves deluded; but after a time there came evidence after evidence that not even the most stubborn could deny, and then began the life-giving Era of Recreation . . .

It was that phenomenon known as the Great Venusian Panic which marked the beginning of the upward swing. All at once—by one of those emotional contagions which travel faster than lightning and which psychologists have yet to explain adequately—the residents of Venus were swept with a maddening, overwhelming fear. Doubtless it was the death of many of their number which caused this sudden access of terror, though why it began precisely when it did is more than any one can say . . .

At all events, a frenzy like that of stampeding cattle overcame the Venus-dwellers; they grew frantic to escape, frantic to get back to earth; and, as the mounting mania to return dominated the planet, men went to every crazed extreme, fighting with each other, trampling upon each other, slaying each other in the competition for space on the earth-bound liners . . . with the result that thousands were destroyed without being able to leave Venus, while

other thousands, in the insane rage to depart, boarded vessels so hastily and unskillfully manned that they were lost in space or went to a withering doom in the sun.

While disaster was laying its hands upon the planet, I not unnaturally wondered what had happened to my old enemy and persecutor, Pendexter. But let us not speak of him too harshly—he has gone to a land where there is neither youth nor age. Reports differ as to how he met his fate: according to one account, he was slain in the riots of Venus, while a second story has it that he entered a spaceship which was never heard of again. But a third—and a more probable version—is that he was one of the multitudes stranded on Venus, to perish there of radium poisoning after all the space-vessels had been stolen by the panic-stricken rabble.

Yet although neither he nor the great majority of the settlers on Venus ever returned to our planet, a few cowed and white-faced wretches did succeed, by rare good fortune, in getting back to earth. And these spread such pathetic and ghastly stories that men could not help listening; and could not help recovering their senses.

And the wave of reaction, once fairly started, gained power with the speed of a cyclone, till millions came to shudder at the name of Venus, and the very mention of the word aroused loathing and revulsion; while the thought of immortal youth was cast aside as many a dream before it has been discarded in the history of our race, and even those who had been most ardent in their desire for Venus would mutter, resignedly, "Alas! We knew it could never be! We knew it! We knew it . . ."

And now, since men no longer had the illusion of Venus to mislead them, they were willing to think once more of the affairs of earth. And workers came flocking back to their jobs, and the wheels of factories began once more to turn, and farmers put their spades again to the abandoned soil, and legislators and judges resumed their forsaken seats, and the whole mechanism of civilization began to function anew . . . To be sure, it would require many years for the world to recover from its wounds; but, by way of compensation, men had learned a salutary lesson, and probably not for generations to come would they be lured to seek a will-o'-the-wisp on another planet.

Ten years have now passed since the pricking of the bubble. Today the word Venus is used only as an execration, a term of reproach never uttered in polite society . . . and those of us who have been to that planet are trying our best to live down the dishonor. Personally, I take care never to mention that I have voyaged across space, and am hopeful that by a life of arduous work and good deeds I may atone in some way for that misfortune which I unknowingly precipitated upon the world.

Space-navigation, I believe, is bound still to progress despite the fearful setback it has received; but when some adventurer next puts forth across the gulf between the worlds it will be toward Mars, Jupiter or Saturn; while Venus—the sepulchre of so many hopes and men—will forever remain a "No Man's Land" that astronomers will follow with their telescopes but travelers will shudder at and avoid.

THE END.