

Old pilots like Pop Gillette weren't needed any more to run the big ships. Nowadays you were boosted and roosted by the grace of Gimmick. Sooner or later, Pop predicted, something was gonna louse up . . .



The heavy ship shuddered to a stop five feet above the ramp...

PATCH

BY WILLIAM SHEDENHELM

THE WALL SPEAKER IN THE control tower was crackling softly with space static when the voice first cut in. "Lorelei calling Venusport for landing. Over."

Even across ten thousand miles of space the sharp New England twang clearly showed the origin of its owner. Joe flicked the transmitting stud and winked at the radar man.

"Venusport to Lorelei. Come on in, you old space pirate. Use Ramp Four. Out."

He glanced at the green spot on the radar sweep screen that was the Lorelei, entered a set of figures in the tower log, then leaned back in the chair in front of the control panels and lit a cigarette.

"That Pop," he said, nodding vaguely at the radar screen and the log book, "must be damn near two hundred years old, and he's still the best pilot in the System. Used to have the All-Planetary run back when it was really something. When they put in automatics for cruising it made him so mad he quit and never would go back. Said he wasn't going to let a bunch of machines run his ship, even out in space."

He blew a stream of smoke at the spot that moved slowly toward the center of the radar sweep screen.

"He bought the tub he calls the Lorelei at a surplus sale, and spends all his time batting around the odd corners of space that the Survey Patrol hasn't gotten to yet." Joe puffed his cigarette reminiscently for a minute. "I remember the first time I saw him land the Lorelei. Lord, what a sight. No one else has ever had the nerve to try it the way he does it, or at least lived to tell about it. I wonder if he's gotten too old to do it anymore."

The radar man stared at the faint speck that showed above the horizon, then brought it into magnified focus on the tele-screen.

"He's coming in awfully funny," he said. Joe got up and stood staring out through the sides of the big plastic bubble that formed the walls and roof of the control tower.

"I think he's going to try it. Watch this!"

THE STUBBY OVALOID was angling in towards the Port from a little above horizontal, as though to make a belly landing. Just short of the field, the steering jets gave a tremendous side blast that whipped the ship into a tight upward arc. All the ship's jets winked out, and the ship whistled straight up for over a mile, began to slow, and dropped back in free fall. The ship dropped faster and faster toward the concrete apron, tail first, its jets dead.

Two hundred feet above the ramp Pop Gillette hit the bank of firing buttons and hit it hard. The heavy ship shuddered to a stop five feet above the ramp, cracking the concrete with the fury of its rear jets, spinning like an enormous pin-wheel, its rotator jets gushing fire in hundred-yard sweeps.

Joe wiped the sweat from his forehead and dropped into his chair.

"Brother! Someday his tubes are going to misfire when he tries that, and the Lorelei is going to be spread from here to Marsport!"

The radar man did not answer immediately. He was still standing at the dome, his mouth slightly agape, staring at the stubby ship that now lay silent in Ramp Four. He pulled himself together, closed his mouth with a click, and moved back to the sweep screen.

"Who the hell is that guy?"

"You've heard of Pop Gillette. Everybody in space has. Anytime you want to tell a whopper about space, all you have to say is, 'I remember one time when Pop Gillette and me was out around so-and-so . . .' And whatever nutty place you name, he's probably really been there, and whatever nutty thing you can think of to happen, it probably really did happen to him."

The radar man nodded in recognition, and Joe went on.

"Like the time he got mad at the people at White Sands Port. One night he goosed an asteroid down right in the middle of their main landing strips. The damn thing was a quarter of a mile long, and almost as high. How he got it down through the atmosphere, nobody knows, but he did and he landed it so gently that nobody knew anything about it until they looked out their windows the next morning. They finally got the Patrol on him, and told him the asteroid was legally his, so he had to think of a way to get rid of it. He did. Turned out to be laced with uranium, so he rented the whole darned field for a month, cut the thing up and carted it away. Sold it for a fortune."

The outer door of the ovaloid ship was now open, and as one of the Port's zeeps rolled alongside, a man, miniature in the distance, slid down the ship's sideladder and climbed aboard. Joe swung the directional p.a. at the zEEP.

"Hey Pop . . . come on up!"

THE LITTLE FIGURE waved, and the zEEP headed for the control tower. As it drew nearer they could begin to see Pop Gillette more clearly. He was a thin little man, deeply space tanned. He could have been anyplace from fifty to three hundred and fifty. He rode sitting on the rear edge of the speeding zEEP, balanced precariously, calmly puffing a Venusian cigarote.

He came through the outer control rooms like a Martian whirlwind, spraying greetings and minor presents in all directions.

"Hi there, Tom. Saw your uncle out near Ganymede. Living with a Phobian Bat Woman..."

"Hi there. Here's that gooloo bird's tail feather you asked for five or six years ago!" (It had been near twenty years ago, when the recipient was four years old.)

"Hello, Honey. You know that Neptunian Rock Egg you wanted? Got a couple in my ship as big as your head. Come up to the hotel for supper tonight and I'll give them to you!" He winked roguishly at Honey and whirled into the control room.

"Hi Joe, you landlocked lard-bottom. What have you been doing?" And before Joe could start to answer, he went on. "Had an unusual thing happen to me out on Pluto. I was out prospecting for liquid hydrogen wells when I sprung a leak in my oxygen tank. I got it fixed, but most of my oxy had leaked out. Had enough for fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, and the ship was two hours away. Thought I'd never make it. Finally started back with a load of icicles under my arm. Every few minutes I'd stop, break off a piece, and drop it into my tank. Turned out to be pure oxygen, frozen stiff!"

When Joe had regained his composure, he tossed a wink at the radar man, who was again standing with his mouth ajar.

"Say, Pop," Joe said with careful casualness. "All-Planetary's Mercury-Venus liner is coming in about oh-four-four."

Pop choked on a lungful of cigarote smoke, and, turning crimson through his space tan, glared at Joe.

"You better clear out of this tower, son. When that bunch of gears comes in, it's apt to take this whole side off the planet!"

Joe kept his face serious.

"I hear this is one of the new models," he said. "They only use the pilot for landings. Take-offs and cruising are all automatic."

Pop Gillette tossed his cigarote into the disposall in disgust.

"I wouldn't put it past that bunch of pants-brains to just point the things and light a fuse. Those young punks they have for pilots couldn't belly on the moon."

"But Pop," Joe said. "You're too old to work a liner, even if they did go back to manuals."

Pop Gillette flashed red and purple, and glared at Joe.

"Too old! Do you know what I hit when I brought the Lorelei in just now? Fourteen damn G's! If she wasn't an old meteor patrol ship she'd crack open like an egg the way I handle her. Too old my spacewarped rear!"

"But ships are bigger these days, pop. When you were shoving them they couldn't have weighed over half a million tons. The one that's due this afternoon tops two million. That's a lot of ship."

Pop Gillette shook his head derisively at such ignorance, which was, after all, to be expected from a ground crew man.

"They're all the same. Once you have the feel of it," he rippled his fingers as though working a bank of firing keys, "it works anyplace. I run the Lorelei just like I used to run my liners. I can cut it a bit finer than I could a big ship, but otherwise it doesn't make any difference how big they come. I could stand that liner on her butt and write my name clean across that field." He jerked his head at the four-mile-wide Venusport, and glared at Joe and the radar man. "And cross the 't's' and dot the 'I'!"

IT WAS AN HOUR LATER, while they were sitting around drinking Venusian wine, that the call came through. You always expect a distress call to be weak and difficult to understand, but this one wasn't. It was as clear as though the transmitter were in the next room.

"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! All-Planetary Liner Twelve calling Venusport! Over!"

At the first sound of the universal distress call, Joe and the radar man went into action. Joe hit a red stud that alerted all the units at the Port, and cut in the speakers in the other control sections, while the radar man got a rough bearing on the liner, and switched up the amplification until he had the ship located within a foot, and its speed and course plotted to five decimal places.

All this in the time it took the first call to come through. Joe flipped the transmitting stud.

"Venusport to All-Planetary Twelve. All other units clear the air immediately. Come in."

The voice cut in sharply through the space static again, sounding a little frightened and tense.

"All-Planetary Twelve calling Venusport. Something went wrong with the radar deflectors. We took a meteor through the control room. Luckily it just clipped us, but it put a ten foot hole in the side. The man on duty got out okay, but we lost all the air in that section. We can't bring her in with that hole in her. We have to have air in the control room, or all the switches arc out. Over."

Outside the control tower, ships were being moved out of the way, back into the hangars and into the pits. Blinker lights and radio landing beams were flickering out "Stay Clear!" warnings to all ships in that segment of space. Joe flipped the stud again.

"Is the hole too big for a plastic patch? Over."

"It's a good ten feet across. We haven't got any patches that big, and even if we did have, they wouldn't do any good. Once we pumped the air back in, the pressure would boot the patch out into space. The only thing that will work is a welding job. Over."

Joe shook his head glumly and flipped the stud.

"We've got enough monalloy here to fix it, but we haven't got a portable welding outfit that could handle the job. Down here we could have it fixed in half an hour. Over."

There was a pause before the voice came back.

"That's a lot of help. Over."

POP GILLETTE tugged at Joe's sleeve. Joe started to shake him loose, but stopped when he felt the old man's grip tighten on his arm like a space grapple.

"Let me have that thing," he said. He took the mike from Joe and flipped the stud.

"Hey there! What's your cargo?"

The speaker was silent for a moment, other than for the faint crackle of the space static. Then the voice cut in again, a little more resigned than before, as it rattled off the list of cargo.

"Let's see. We've got twenty tons of unrefined uranium from Titan, fifty thousand gallons of mercury from Gany, and twenty tons of canned wooklah meat from Jupe. At least we can live on wooklah meat on our way to Alpha

Centauri." He laughed nervously. "Boy, is All-Planetary going to be mad, at a hundred bucks a can. Over."

Pop Gillette scratched his chin reflectively. Finally he shook his head in disgust.

"I could have told that bunch of fatheaded clod-lubbers they couldn't trust a bunch of machinery. If they'd of had a pilot watching the screens, instead of some half-baked crewman, this wouldn't have happened. Easiest thing in the world to blast around a meteor, but try to tell that to that bunch." He spat in disgust. "I swore I'd never lift a hand for All-Planetary again as long as I lived, but now I guess I'll have to go up and fix that damned liner. First vacation I've had in five years and I have to play nursemaid to a bunch of half-wits!"

He glared at Joe. "Well, are you coming or aren't you?"

Joe looked at him blankly.

Pop Gillette shook his head sadly at the mental level of Venusport's personnel.

"Somebody's got to bring the Lorelei back down, don't they? Lord, the people they put in responsible positions these days . . . Come on! Get the cadmium out!" And he was halfway down the stairs before Joe was on his feet.

"And bring a roll of scotch tape!" he shouted back.

What happened after that is pretty well a matter of the records. Every telecast carried the report for days. Pop Gillette got aboard the liner by bringing the Lorelei alongside. Then, with Joe holding her steady as she went, Pop jumped across the twenty feet of open space, scotch tape in his space suit pocket, to the liner's open port.

Then he brought the liner down for a tail landing, as pretty as you please.

IT WAS TEN MINUTES later that Pop Gillette and Joe sat drinking their Venusian wine again, watching the ground crews welding a new plate on the liner, a mile away across the Port.

"But how did you do it?" Joe asked. "And why the scotch tape?"

Pop Gillette deftly poured a tumbler of wine down his throat and reached for the bottle.

"Simplest thing in the world. I used the tape to stick a couple of bed sheets over the hole, inside and out."

Joe stared at him in puzzlement.

“Bedsheets? What for?”

Pop Gillette cast his eyes heavenwards as for deliverance. “I’m sure glad I don’t run a liner anymore. I might get somebody like you for a co-pilot. I had to have a mold, didn’t I? You heard the pilot say the patch had to be metal to stand the pressure. Fifteen pounds to the inch over a ten foot patch is a lot of pressure. Well, after I had the sheets over the hole, I turned it towards the sun, filled the mold, and turned it around away from

the sun. The temperature drop in space did the rest.”

Joe put his hand to his brow and glanced at his wine glass suspiciously. “I vaguely get what you’re talking about, but just what did you make the patch out of?”

Pop Gillette chuckled wryly.

“The mercury, of course. Froze hard as steel when I turned her away from the sun. Perfect fit, too.”