

Larson's Luck

Gerald Vance



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LARSON'S LUCK

by **GERALD**
VANCE

Larson couldn't possibly have known what was going on in the engine room, yet he acted....

There would be hell to pay; Larson was stunting again.

"**W**E MOOR in ten minutes," I said.

We were flying at reduced speed because of the heavy fog we had run into at the outer fringe of Earth's atmosphere. But I knew we were within forty or fifty miles of the Trans-Space base. I had counted the miles on this particular trip because of the load of radium we were carrying from the Venusian mines. I wouldn't draw a completely relieved breath until we were down and the stuff was in the hands of the commerce agents.

I eased my position slightly to relieve the pressure on my broken flipper and grinned at the pilot, Lucky Larson, the screwiest, most unpredictable void trotter who had ever flown for dear old Trans-Space.

"You've been too good to be true this trip," I said, "and it's a good thing. The chief told me that if you so much as *thought* about clowning around or stunting he was going to clip your wings for good."

Lucky grinned, an impish, devil-may-care grin that lightened up his freckled face and bunched the tiny wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

Then with characteristic abruptness he scowled.

"That grandmother," he said disgustedly. "Who does he think I am, anyway? Some crazy irresponsible madman who hasn't got enough brains to stay on a space beam?"

"That's just what he does think," I grinned, "and you've given him plenty of reason to think it. You can't bring your crate in to the base without stunting around and showing off and risking your damn neck. That's why he sent me along with you this trip. Just to see that you act like a pilot—instead of circus acrobat."

"A lot of good you'd do," Lucky mumbled. "You got a broken arm. The only reason he sent you is because he didn't want to pay you while you was in the hospital so he cooks up this trip to get his money out of you. And say," he turned to me belligerently, "when did I ever crack up a ship? When did I ever even dent one of the babies?"

"You haven't," I was forced to admit, "but that's just because of that screwy luck of yours. But it won't last forever and one of these days it's going to run out just when you need it. So just remember—no stunting this trip or you'll be out of the strata for the rest of your natural life."

"Aw, that's the trouble with this racket," Lucky grumbled, "a guy can't have no fun no more. Back when I was with the Space circus—"

"Okay, okay," I cut in, "I've heard that before. Just fly your ship, now, and forget about the deep dark plot of the company to take all the joy out of your life. I'm going to take a look-see at the atomic floats and get the passengers bundled together."

I stood up and crawled over him and opened the door leading to the body of the ship. I could still hear him grumbling as I slid the light chrome-alloy door shut. I chuckled to myself and headed up the aisle

to the baggage compartments. Lucky Larson was a legend as space pilots go. An unpredictable, erratic screwball but one of the finest rocket riders who ever flashed through the void.

Company regulations and interplanetary commissions were the bane of his existence. He made his own rules and regulations and got by with it. That is he *had* gotten by with it. Now they were cracking down on him. He had been grounded twice and the chief had threatened to set him down for life if any more infractions were charged to him. I shook my head gloomily. He was a great guy, the last of a great and gallant army of space adventurers, but he was on the way out. The rules were necessary, vital to safe space travel and the Lucky Larsons would have to live up to them, or else.

MY MIND was a long way away from the cabin of the space ship and maybe that's why I got what I did. I didn't see it coming. One minute I was walking through the aisle, thinking about Lucky Larson and the next second something slammed into the back of my head knocking me to my knees.

Through a haze of red and white lights I heard a voice bark, "Toss him into a chair and grab that good arm of his."

I wasn't out. Just damn sick. Something like a cold hand seemed to have closed over my stomach and for an awful moment I gagged and tried to retch. But the moment passed and I forced open my eyes and focused them on two tough-looking, hard-eyed gents who stood in front of me. Another unpleasant-looking little man knelt along side of me, twisting my good arm behind my back.

"Okay," I gritted, "what's the gag?"

The tallest of the three, evidently their leader, smiled at me. "It's no gag," he murmured calmly, "we happen to need the radium you're carrying. We're going to take it. Any objections?"

"You'll never get away with this," I snapped, "your names and descriptions are registered with the passenger office. You'll be tracked down in twenty-four hours."

I was bluffing, of course, and I knew from their contemptuous smiles that they knew it, too. They probably had given fictitious names, and the descriptive information which the bureau required consisted of a few generalities, such as height, weight and the like. I cursed myself for a stupid, careless fool. The three men had been the only passengers from Venus and they had kept to themselves the entire trip. Once or twice I had wondered at their reticence and quietness but I had not been suspicious enough to make a check-up.

One of the men laughed shortly. "Let us worry about that. We've covered every angle that could possibly come up. With the help of your friend up front, this ship will be flown to a certain deserted asteroid where a few friends of *ours* are to meet us with another ship. How you come out afterward will depend on how you co-operate now. Clear enough?"

It was clear enough all right. Lucky and I wouldn't last long after we served our purpose.

The tall man turned from me and nodded significantly to the man standing next to him and then pointed to the closed door to the pilot's chambers.

"Take care of the pilot," he murmured, "and tell him if he isn't obliging we'll take the cast off his friend's arm and—" he smiled at me, "massage it a bit."

I felt a cold sweat break out on my forehead.

The thug grinned wolfishly at me and then winked at his leader. "I'll tell him, boss." He dug his hand into his pocket and drew out a stubby atomic pistol. "If he won't listen to me maybe this'll persuade him."

Still grinning he turned and headed up the aisle, the gun clenched in his huge fist.

I GLANCED at the tall figure standing in front of me and saw that he was watching the retreating figure of his henchman with a saturnine smile on his face. I thought swiftly. If I could yell a warning to Lucky, he could bolt the door of the pilot's chamber and then set the ship down at the Trans-Space base. It was the only way to save Lucky and the radium. I wasn't very optimistic about my own chances. I knew they were zero.

I opened my mouth, took a deep breath and then, before I could scream the words that would warn Lucky, it happened. The ship shuddered for an instant and then zoomed upward, the smooth hum of the rocket motors crescendoing to a roaring song of power and speed.

The sudden jolting acceleration hurled me to the tail of the ship and I saw, like an image in a kaleidoscope, the tangled thrashing figures of the space bandits as they were tossed to the floor, a dazedly struggling mass of arms and legs.

The ship was lying over on its back in a few seconds, and before I could catch a breath it suddenly whipped over and blasted toward Earth in a screeching, hissing power-dive.

It was terrific punishment even for this type of space crate but it was

worse for human beings. The three bandits were clutching at their stomachs as if they were afraid of losing them. Their faces were mottled and blotchy and their eyes were rolling beseechingly.

I didn't mind the erratic convolutions the ship was making but my arm was burning as if it were on fire. Numbing waves of pain were coursing up and down my entire body.

I tried to crawl to my knees but the floor rolled under me as the ship whipped over in a twisting spiral and I crashed forward on my face. Then everything dissolved into inky blackness....

WHEN I came to, I heard a great commotion, then a sudden shot and then a babble of voices booming around me. I remember thinking fleetingly of crooks, Lucky Larson and a mountain of radium and then—because nothing made sense—I passed out again.

THE NEXT time I opened my eyes I found myself stretched out on a cot in the chief's office. I turned my head slightly and saw Lucky Larson, the chief and a half dozen other guys staring down at me.

"It's not very original," I said, "but where the hell am I?" That was silly of me because I knew where I was, so I said: "Never mind that but please tell me what the hell happened?"

The chief laughed and Lucky Larson laughed and then they slapped each other on the back. "Don't worry about a thing," the chief said,

"those crooks are under lock and key and there's not a thing to worry about."

"But how—I mean what...?" My voice trailed off. Nothing made sense.

"Well," the chief broke in, "Lucky here really deserves the credit for catching them. And I'm not forgetting your good work either. Both of you will receive more tangible evidence of my appreciation. But Lucky really did the brainwork."

"Awww," Lucky mumbled, "it wasn't much. Just a little common sense and, uh, a little luck."

"It was damn fast thinking," the chief cut in belligerently, "you knew your stunting over the base would drive me crazy. You knew I'd get so mad I'd call out the base police and have you thrown in when you moored. And when you did moor and the crooks toppled out we were right on hand to receive them. They were so weak from the shaking up you gave them that they didn't have a chance."

Lucky rolled innocent eyes to the ceiling. "Sometimes," he remarked piously, "stunting has its uses."

"Congratulations," I said weakly. "You certainly used your head. Caught the chief's attention with your stunting and almost knocked the crooks out with it too. That's killing two birds with one stone, all right." Then another thought occurred to me.

"How did you know I was in trouble?" I asked curiously. "How did you know we had those crooks on board?"

"Why—why," Lucky sputtered, "that was simple. I just happened to look behind me and I saw those boys piling into you. So I did a little fast thinking and then I whipped the ship into a few maneuvers and, like the chief says, they caught his eye all right."

The chief was beaming fondly and I turned my head to hide the smile on my lips. "So you just looked behind you," I muttered. "Well, Lucky, you certainly are—and were."

He grinned down at me and winked. "You said it, kid."

I wanted to ask him a question then, but I decided to wait until we were alone. I closed my eyes and smiled again, thinking of his expression when I would ask him how he had been able to look behind him and see me struggling with those crooks, *when the door of the pilot's chamber was closed all the time....*

THE END

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