

# **TROUBLE ON TITAN**

**A COMPLETE TONY QUADE NOVELET**

**By HENRY KUTTNER**

# CHAPTER I

## Von Zorn Is Perturbed

Whenever Von Zorn, chief of Nine Planets Films, ran into trouble he automatically started the televisors humming with calls for Anthony Quade. The televisors were humming now. In fact they were shrieking hysterically. Quade's code number bellowed out through a startled and partially deafened Hollywood on the Moon.

Von Zorn, teetering on the edge of his chair behind the great glass-brick desk, was throwing a fit.

"You can't do this to me!" he yelled into the transmitter, his scrubby mustache bristling with outrage. "I know you can hear me, Quade! It's a matter of life and death! *Quade!*"

A covey of anxious secretaries winced involuntarily as he swung the chair around.

"*Get Quade!*" he screamed. "Bring me Quade! All you do is stand around with your mouths open. I—" He paused, the light of an unpleasant idea dawning across his face. He was grinning disagreeably as he switched the televisor to a private wavelength.

"I'll fix *him!*" he muttered. "I'll—oh, hello." This to the face that flashed onto the screen before him. Rapidly Von Zorn spoke to the face. It nodded, smiling grimly.

Afterward Von Zorn leaned back and called for a drink.

“Nine Planets on the brink of ruin,” he growled into the tilted glass, “and Quade runs out on me. I’ll fire him! I’ll blackball him all over the System! But not till he does this job.”

Meanwhile Tony Quade, relaxing comfortably in a seat at the Lunar Bowl, listened to a distant orchestra in the depths of the crater crash into the opening strains of the *Star Symphony*. Under his coat a pocket televisor was buzzing shrill commands.

Quade chuckled and shifted his big-boned body more comfortably in the padded chair. Kathleen Gregg, beside him, smiled in the dimness and he told himself that she was prettier than ever.

It was to her credit that she loathed the title of “The System’s Sweetheart” which an enthusiastic publicity department had bestowed upon her. She was one of Nine Planets’ brightest stars and Tony Quade was in love with her.

“Hello, stupid,” he said lazily. “You look worried. Anything wrong?”

“I suppose you know what you’re doing,” Kathleen murmured. “Of course, Von Zorn’s only been calling you half an hour.”

The cries from the pocket televisor had been all too audible, Quade realized. He grinned largely and laid an arm along the back of her chair.

“Let him yell.”

“It must be important, Tony.”

“I,” said Quade, “am resting. Shooting *Star Parade* was hard work. I need a rest. Anyhow, it’s much too nice a night to listen to Von Zorn.”

“It is nice,” the girl agreed. She glanced around them. This was the topmost tier of the Lunar Bowl. At their feet the long rows of seats swept down endlessly to the central platform far below, where an orchestra sat in the changing play of varicolored searchlights.

Behind these uppermost seats stretched Hollywood on the Moon, the strangest city in the Solar System. The wonder of Hollywood on the Moon does not quickly fade, even to eyes that have seen it often. It is a garden metropolis on the far side of Earth’s satellite, in a gigantic valley bounded by the Great Rim.

Here the film studios had built their city, washed by an artificially created, germ-free atmosphere, anchored in the crater by electro-magnetic gravity fields maintained in the caverns below. Far distant, the Silver Spacesuit glowed with pale radiance, the broad, white-lit expanse of Lunar Boulevard stretching past it toward the Rim.

From somewhere above a beam of light shot suddenly downward full upon them. Blinded, Quade and Kathleen looked up, seeing nothing at all. Then, without any warning, Quade arose and floated starward.

Kathleen made a quick, involuntary snatch at his vanishing heels, missed, and cried distractedly.

“Tony!”

From somewhere above his voice spoke with annoyance.

“They’ve got a gravity beam on me. I could get loose, but I’d break my neck.” The sound trailed off into a distant murmur. “I’ll murder Von Zorn for this....”

Quade felt solid metal beneath his feet. The beam faded. Blinking, he looked around. This was the lower lock of a police ship. Black-clad officers were wheeling away the great anti-gravity lens. A man with a captain’s bars took his finger off the button that had closed the lock and looked at Quade speculatively.

“What’s the idea?” Quade demanded crossly.

“Sorry, sir. We’re looking for a Moonship stowaway. You answer his description.”

“My name’s Quade. I don’t suppose you’d even look at my credentials.”

The captain looked blank.

“Might be forged, you know. We can’t afford to take chances. If you’re Tony Quade, Mr. Von Zorn can identify you.”

“He will,” Quade said between his teeth. “Yeah—he will!”

Five minutes later they stood in Von Zorn’s office. The film executive looked up from a script and nodded coldly.

“Tell him who I am,” Quade said in a weary voice. “I’ve got a date.”

"It's not as easy as that. You're either Quade or a Moonship stowaway. If you're Quade I've got to talk to you."

"I've got a date. Also, I quit."

Von Zorn ignored this.

"If you're not Quade it means jail, doesn't it?" He glanced at the captain, who nodded.

Quade thought it over. Of course he could get out of jail without much trouble, but not perhaps for some hours. Besides, he was beginning to wonder what mishap had occurred. It must be pretty serious.

"Okay," he said. "I'm Quade. Now tell your stooge to rocket out of here."

Von Zorn nodded with satisfaction, waved the captain away and pushed toward Quade a box of greenish, aromatic Lunar cigars. Quade pointedly lit one of his own cigarettes and sat down in a glass-and-leather chair.

"Shoot."

But Von Zorn wasn't anxious to begin. He took a cigar, bit the end off savagely, and applied flame. Finally he spoke.

"Udell's dead."

Quade was startled. He put down his cigarette.

"Poor old chap. How did it happen?"

“In the Asteroid Belt. A meteor smashed his ship. He was coming back here from Titan. A patrol ship just towed his boat in.”

Quade nodded. He had met Jacques Udell only a few times, but he'd liked the eccentric old fellow, who was somewhat of a genius in his own fashion. A scientist who had turned to film-making, he had once or twice created pictures that had amazed the System—like *Dust*, the saga of the nomad Martian tribes.

“All right.” Von Zorn punctuated his sentences with jabs of the cigar. “Get this, Tony. Last month Udell sent me a package and a letter. In the package was a can of film. I ran it off. He'd filmed the Zonals.”

“That's been done before—for what it's worth. They're sub-humans, aren't they? Not much story-value there.”

“They're the queerest race in the system. Ever see one? Wait till you do—you won't believe it! Udell worked some sort of miracle—he really got a story. The Zonals acted in it for him. Intelligently!”

“That doesn't seem possible.”

“It isn't. But Udell did it. He shot one reel and sent it to me with the scenario. It's a good story. It'll be a smash hit. I bought the pic on the strength of the first reel. Paid plenty for it. I've sent out advance blurbs and it's too late to call them all back now.”

“Udell didn't finish?”

Von Zorn shook his head.

“He was on his way back here for some reason or other, with two more reels finished, when a meteor cracked him up. The reels are spoiled, of course. Udell didn’t have sense enough to insulate ’em.”

Von Zorn snapped his cigar in two.

“I own the picture. I paid him for it. But he was the only man who knew how to make the Zonals work for the camera. See the catch, Tony?”

“You want me to finish the pic. A nice easy job. Why not fake the rest of it?”

“I don’t dare,” Von Zorn admitted frankly. “I’ve already blurbed this as the real thing. It’d raise too big a howl if we used robots. I can imagine what that Carlyle dame would do.”

Quade grinned maliciously.

“Catch-’em-Alive” Carlyle, interplanetary explorer extraordinary, was Von Zorn’s vulnerable point, his heel of Achilles.

“She’s suing me,” Von Zorn said, breathing audibly. “For libel. Suing the *Gerri Murri* cartoons are libelous.”

“Well, aren’t they?” Quade asked. This animated cartoon series, depicting Gerry Carlyle as an inquisitive bug-eyed Venusian *Murri*, had proved immensely popular with everybody but Gerry. She had created a fair-sized riot in Froman’s Mercurian Theatre when she first recognized her counterpart on the screen.

“We won’t discuss that—that—” Von Zorn gulped and finished weakly, “that tomato. Do you want to see Udell’s film on the Zonals?”

“Might as well,” Quade agreed, getting up. “I may get some ideas about his method.”

“You’d better get some ideas,” Von Zorn said darkly, “or we’ll all be in the soup.”

## CHAPTER II

### Trip to Titan

The next morning Quade went to the spaceport to examine Udell's wrecked ship, which had arrived in tow a few hours before. Von Zorn was with him and at the last moment Kathleen, scenting something interesting, attached herself to Quade's elbow and would not be dislodged.

Quade was not entirely happy about her presence, because of a vague uneasiness he could not name. He had hunches like that occasionally. He felt one strongly now about the wrecked ship and the dangers that might lie dormant there.

"You see, silly, nothing's wrong," Kathleen said impatiently as they stood in the great torn hole that had been the ruined ship's side. The vessel, a small, six-man job, was warped and twisted grotesquely by the impact of the meteor, which had ripped completely through the walls of the control room and emerged into space on the other side. The bodies had been removed, but nothing else was yet touched.

"All the same," Quade told the girl uneasily, "I don't like it. I wish you'd stay outside."

"Ha!" Kathleen said in a sceptical voice and ducked her curly head under the torn wall to peer inside. "Nothing here. Don't be such a sissy, Tony. What could possibly hurt me?"

"How can I tell? All I know is, wherever you go there's trouble. Stand back now and let me take a look."

But he found nothing. Even a careful search of the interior disclosed little to warrant that feeling that something more serious had happened here than a mere chance accident with a meteor. The only thing that puzzled him was the wreckage in the ship.

Bottles, instruments, gauges, seemed smashed more thoroughly than they should be, considering the impact of the meteor. Furniture was splintered, not only in the control room but in every other part of the vessel.

“I don’t get this,” Quade said slowly. “The meteor didn’t cause all this damage. It looks—” He hesitated. “It looks as though Udell and his men had gone on a spree. But there’s no sign of liquor on the ship.”

“Oxygen jag?” Von Zorn suggested.

Quade examined the tanks.

“No, it doesn’t look like it. They didn’t even use oxygen to try to save themselves. Look—they could have blocked off the control room with airtight panels and released oxygen. Or they might at least have got into their spacesuits. There must have been time for that. I’ve got a hunch—”

Von Zorn was examining the cans of film, the casings intact but the film itself spoiled by exposure.

“Eh?” he said. “You have a theory?”

“An idea, that’s all. If Udell and the navigator had been in their right minds, they needn’t have collided with the meteor. Look

here—the automatic repulsors are smashed. That’s what caused the trouble.”

“In their right minds?” Von Zorn echoed slowly. “*Spacecafard?*”

“Hitting all of ’em? Hardly! Is a postmortem being done?”

Von Zorn nodded.

“The report ought to be ready by now if you want to check up.” He chewed his cigar savagely. “If only one man of the crew had lived! We’ve got a smash hit dumped on our laps and goodness knows if we can even film it.”

Kathleen put her head through a wrenched door-frame. She was a little pale.

“Really, Tony, it’s rather horrible. I hadn’t realized—I never saw a space wreck before.”

“Let’s get on the televisor,” Quade said decisively. “I’d like to check on the postmortems.”

He swung out through the half-fused port, and the others followed him into the Patrol office. A few minutes’ conversation with the authorities was all that was necessary when Von Zorn used his name. Then a gaunt face above a white jacket dawned on the screen. There were introductions.

“Did you find anything out of the ordinary?” Quade asked.

The reflected head shook negatively.

“Well, not what you’d expect, anyhow. The crash certainly killed them all, if that’s what you mean. No question of foul play. But—” He hesitated.

“But what?”

“Antibodies,” said the man reluctantly. “Something new. I can’t get any trace of a virus. Apparently some disease attacked the men. Their systems built up antibodies that I never encountered before. Something funny about the neural tissues, too. The cellular structure’s altered a little.”

Von Zorn thrust his head toward the screen.

“But what was it? That’s what we want to know. Were they conscious when they died?”

“I think not. My theory is that Udell and his crew were attacked by some disease native to Titan. Maybe the same disease that turned the Zonals into idiots.”

“I’ve got to go to Titan myself,” Quade said slowly. “Suppose we work there in spacesuits. Could a virus get through metal or glass?”

“I think you’d be safe. Mind you, that’s just my opinion. There’s such a thing as a filterable virus, you know. But, judging by the antibodies, I’d say there’d be no risk if you wore spacesuits constantly, outside your ship.”

“It won’t be easy,” Quade said, “but it’s better than infection.”

“We’ve taken tests of the wrecked ship,” the man in the screen told them. “No trace of any unusual disease-germ or virus.

We've tested samples on protoplasmic cultures and got nothing but the ordinary bugs present everywhere. Sorry I can't tell you more."

"That's okay," Quade said. "Thanks." He clicked off the television. "All right, then. We film *Sons of Titan* in spacesuits."

Kathleen looked worried.

"I—I don't like it, Tony. Do you have to—"

"Can't leave a flicker like that unfinished," Quade said. "I saw the reel Udell sent in. It's magnificent theater. The tragedy of the Zonals—one of the biggest epics the System ever saw. They used to be highly civilized at one time, historians think, but something wrecked their brains.

"They're decadent now, little better than animals. If I can film the rest of *Sons of Titan*, we'll have something really big—*Grass* and *Chang* and *Dust* all rolled into one. If I can figure out how to make the Zonals act.

"They acted for Udell—magnificently. They lived their roles. And that's what's so mysterious, Kathleen. The Zonals aren't really smart enough to come in out of the rain."

"Could it have been faked?" the girl asked.

"No," Von Zorn said decisively. "No question of robots. Udell made ace actors out of—of sub-idiots. The question is how?"

"Same way you did with that new crooner you're starring, maybe," Quade said rather sardonically. He was examining a slip of paper. "I picked this up in Udell's ship—it's a list of

supplies he planned to get in Hollywood on the Moon. That's probably why he came back from Titan—he ran out of some things he needed. Let's see. Why did he want neo-curare?"

"What's that?" Von Zorn asked.

"Derivative of curare. A poison that paralyzes the motor nerves. I didn't know the Zonals had nerves."

"Their neural structure's atrophied, Tony. Mm-m. What else is on that list?"

"Cusconidin, Monsel's Salt, sodium sulphoricinate, a baresthesiometer, lenses, filters, camera stuff—nothing special in the medical supplies Udell wanted. You've got to jazz up the pharmacy when you're in space, anyhow. Your katabolism changes, and so on. Variant drugs—"

Von Zorn spoke abruptly.

"There was something about a degenerate race of Zonals that attacked Udell's party, I think. An outlaw tribe. They had a high resistance to wounds; pretty invulnerable. Neo-curare's a fast-working poison, isn't it?"

"Well—there's your answer. Special ammunition against that particular tribe in case they attacked again. Udell probably intended to smear neo-curare on his ammunition."

"Could be," Quade said. He hesitated, thumbed a button and called Wolfe, his assistant, on the televisor. The youngster's thin face and sharp blue eyes flashed into visibility on the screen.

“Hello, Tony. What’s up?”

“Got the camera-ship ready for the take-off?”

“Sure.”

“Well, here are some more supplies I want you to get. Photostat it.”

Quade pressed Udell’s list face down against the screen. After a moment Wolfe said, “Got it.”

Von Zorn seized the paper and began scanning it. Abruptly he emitted the anguished howl of a disemboweled wolf.

“Wait, Tony!” he cried desperately. “Not that! Venusian cochineal at a hundred dollars a pint, current quotation? Use surrogate red. It’s almost as good, and we don’t need—”

“I want everything—understand?” Quade said to the televisior. “Don’t leave out a thing.”

Stabbed in the budget, Von Zorn spun toward Kathleen Gregg.

“Next he’ll want diamond lenses and radium paint for technicolor effects, I suppose. Thirty-odd concentrated aqueous dyes—and they won’t even show on the celluloid!”

“The Zonals spend a lot of time underwater,” Quade said patiently. “And underwater camera work under alien conditions is tricky. You’ve got to experiment with the right dyes and special filters and lenses before you can get complete submarine clarity.”

“You’ve ordered enough concentrated dye to color the Pacific,” Von Zorn mourned. “Lake Erie at least. Why couldn’t Udell have found the right dye before he broke his contract?”

“Broke his contract?” Kathleen said wonderingly. “He didn’t—”

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” Von Zorn snarled and went off, as Quade rather suspected, to beat a child star—any child star who wasn’t big enough to be dangerous.

Quade got busy preparing for the expedition.

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