

PLANET STORIES



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Fall Issue
 June-Aug.
 1947



Vol. III, No. 8
 20c per copy



PLANET STORIES: Published quarterly by Love Romances Pub. Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1947, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Entered as second-class matter, October 2, 1944, at the Post Office, at New York 1, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. While due care is always exercised, the publishers will not be responsible for the return of unsolicited manuscripts. Yearly subscription rate 80¢ in advance. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 670 Fifth Ave., New York 19, N. Y. Printed in U. S. A.



Ilon's mind reeled. He felt resistance crumbling.

Girl of the Silver Sphere

By J. Harvey Haggard

Beautiful, impossibly savage, Prince Ilon loved her madly. For her he would almost dare the blackest secret of the cosmos. Almost—but not quite . . .

A SILVER SPHERE SWAM IN vague depths. The surrounding frame of intricate mechanism gave off a soft phosphorescence that strengthened and faded by turns. A young man, robed in gossamer *vitri* of richest hue, leaned over, watching keenly.

His fingers moved controls at the bottom of the machine. The silver sphere leaped upward in the vision plate, swelling like a balloon. Continents and seas were now visible. Then one area swelled over

the visor-plate. Gradually a small spot became a city, a strange sprawling city. He found a certain street, a certain house, a certain room.

She was walking around on the floor of the room, dressed in the scant costume of the period of that silver sphere. She never left the floor. Her body was singularly graceful, her face angelic. Strangely, it seemed, she had no control over gravity, and was forced to *walk* or be *conveyed* across the surface of her planet.

"Oh beautiful, primitive girl!" he whispered chokingly, gripping his fingers tight on the control board before him. "Savage girl of lost ages!"

The girl smiled. She seemed to turn directly toward him, and her blue eyes were filled with a dreamy, half-yearning promise, as if she had heard his words and had answered.

Yet she had never seen him. She didn't even know he existed. She couldn't even imagine the wonders of flashing through interstellar worlds by use of thought-force, nor picture a means of existing entirely on basic radiation, sucked from the atoms themselves. This young man, slender and well-proportioned, was a product of endless evolution and progression. She was a retrograde current of atavism that had persisted somehow on one outlaw world.

Savage, yes! But there was no mistaking the light in Ilon Karth's eyes as he followed every movement of her little graceful body.

Suddenly an awareness of someone approaching burst into his mentality. He wheeled, an expression of annoyance on his face. With an abrupt movement of his hand he struck a switch that caused the glowing of the machine to die. The sphere, and the lovely girl of that alien globe, vanished utterly.

NOW the surrounding walls, glowing with light of their own, flickered. An ovoid opening in solidity appeared, forced by the mental-push of the approaching person. The figure of an old man, venerable of appearance, stooped and robed in the gold-mesh-cloth of the Galax-Mentor, floated into the room. The wisdom of ages lay imprinted on the face that was like wrinkled parchment beneath the blue emerald set in a forehead band, denoting his rank in the Supreme Council of Seven. The face lost its strain of menta-portionation, and the old man landed gently at his side.

"Greeting, Ilon," greeted Nyo Karth, his eyes darting intellimently about the room.

"Er—Greeting, dad," said Ilon Karth, hiding his irritation. As the opening had been menta-forced into the room, his hand had darted instinctively toward a hidden compartment in the machine. Now he tried to hide the movement of his hand and what

it contained as it sped toward the secret pocket again. But the keen eyes of his father saw and grew narrow and steely with surprise and suspicion. The older man reached out and grabbed his wrist. In Ilon's open palm lay a needle-ray weapon of defense.

"What is it you fear, son?" he demanded sternly. "What can you, a princeling of your own people, fear here in our own galaxy?"

Ilon Karth averted his eyes. "Has enough tonnage of *ithilyn* been removed from the mines lately?" he asked, ignoring the other's question.

"But there is only one thing to fear," continued his father wonderingly. "That is the minion spies. The guards of the secret galaxy. But what have you done to fear them? Don't tell me, Ilon, that you have been crazy enough to probe through the dark ultra-universes in search for lower life-forms?"

"Look, father," said Ilon, indicating the machines. "I perform my assigned tasks here. Those only. I supervise the *ithilyn* mines, watching their daily output through the scanner."

Suddenly a greenish glowing swam through the open air, like the rays of a fairy elfin, settling around the room.

The older man gasped. "It's the spy-rays of the minions, son! Whatever you've been doing, son, blank your mind as I do. When they're gone, we'll go into this foolish thing you've been doing."

So they stood at the scanner and inspected the scenes of the lower *ithilyn* mines. As Ilon's hands moved the controls, various scenes shifted before them. In the headquarters room, other men such as himself raised their heads, smiled and saluted, or answered direct personal questions.

They came to the digging scenes. Huge giants toiled in a deep hole, like larval bodies in cocoons. Rest-time had come. Food had been shuttled in on a chain of grav-belts. Now the great fingerless hand of the giant reached down, felt around expertly, and picked up the food shuttles. The great eye in his forehead did not waver, for the giant was blind. Yet the hand, misformed now into a digging claw, threw the food expertly into the huge, gaping maw and the jaws began to chew with animal-like gusto.

Then the elfin glowing was gone. Nyo Karth spun accusingly upon his son.

"Ilon—my son, my son," he cried in a softly troubled thought tone. "Have you forgotten, boy, that after all you have a father? And a friend? Have you forgotten the person to whom you took all your troubles to as a lad?"

Ilon Karth frowned, still averting his eyes. "But I'm a man now, father, faced with the problems of a man of the upper Galax."

"True, true, son, but—"

"And if the conventions of an age-old universal society bore me to death, father, then it's—"

"Oh!" cried the older man understandingly, and a smile tugged at his mouth, which relaxed somewhat. "Then it does not please you that the Hygiene Board has decreed a marriage union be officially recorded in a few short star-periods to—"

"It's not that I hate Nyrilla," burst out Ilon. "Not that she isn't as attractive as all women of Corallinth. It's simply that I don't have anything to say about it. There's no demand for agreement from either party. It just happens that her gene-patterns match up and supplement mine. Our children would be benefited by the mating. At a given time, some official moves a hand across a sheet. Two names are written down and whether or no—it's happened. Besides, I don't *love* Nyrilla. Don't you understand, father?"

"You don't—" began the older man, and suddenly his astonishment melted into a sunshine of laughter. "Love—eh—you say, boy? Love."

HE repeated the word softly, as if testing the sound and depth of a meaning almost forgotten. "Yes, I remember the term now. So it's that." Then a growing concern replaced his merriment. "But that's a thing of bygone ages, son. You *are* having a trend. Why not take it to a psych-treater, son? Have it removed from your mind. You'd be surprised what a beautiful and understanding girl Nyrilla of Corallinth is, once—"

"Psych-treater! Psych-treater! That's all you hear! If you have something that bothers you, you forget it in a psych-treater! If you have an original thought that tantalizes you—go to a psych-treater!

Is that sensible, father, to forget the problems that may affect the entire future of your life? Besides, the girl of the silver sphere—"

The words had leaped out impatiently. Now Ilon stopped suddenly, clapping his hand to his temple from where the mental words had burst. But too late. Old Nyo was looking intently at him and then was moving toward him with sudden wrath on his high brow, his hand upraised as if to strike him.

Ilon ducked, fearing the blow, but his eyes did not leave the angrily pulsing blood vessels that throbbed on his father's forehead.

"Fool!" spat out Nyo Karth in horrified anger. "Then you have been breaking the laws of the Mentors. Plumbing the universe, seeking contact with life in lesser forms. Don't you realize the gravity of this offense? Don't you realize you may lose your princesship, be banished from the Galax, or even executed?"

Ilon recoiled. "But, father, you wouldn't reveal—"

"Reveal!" exploded Nyo Karth angrily. "Reveal! Yes, that's what I will do. I will take it to the council. You are as insane as the poor blind mastodons who work like maggots in the mines, whose eyes would be blasted by a mere ray of the very light for which they were originally intended. I will demand this madness be erased from your brain. I will demand punishment, as your misdemeanor calls for. I will show them that I stand for justice, even to a son."

Suddenly he paused. Again a strange glowing of spy-rays pulsed through the room. And then a furious clangor sounded from without. A mental-wave beat through the barrier.

"Open up! Open up!" It demanded in strident mental tones. "In the name of the Council of Seven!"

Ilon felt beaten. His father leaped toward him. His eyes blazed into his own, and a command leaped out.

"Resist them! Resist them!"

"But father—"

"Resist them, fool, before they open a way into the room. After all, I can't turn you over to them!"

"But father—if they should discover you, a Galax-Mentor—"

Then a wave of relief swept Ilon. Gladly he built up a mental force that was thrust around them like a shell. He felt it weaving a network of resistance, felt it clash with outer forces demanding entrance. The outer mental cries weakened and vanished momentarily. It would not be for long, Ilon knew. The spies, realizing something was amiss, would go for help. When they returned, the bombardment would be strengthened to the point where resistance would be futile.

"Quick!" commanded old Nyo. "Get the silver sphere, Ilon."

Ilon grasped his father's arm for an instant, saying nothing. Mental gratitude flowed from his being into old Nyo's. His father shook him off impatiently.

"The girl!" he spoke again hurriedly. "No time to waste."

"Then you'll take me to her!"

"More than that, son! I'll break all the laws of the Galax. I'll bring *her* here to you."

"But I can't allow that!" cried Ilon, aghast. "I can't allow you—"

BUT to disobey the order in the older man's eyes was impossible. Again he manipulated the machine deftly. Again the pulsation of light swam from the depths, and the silver sphere emerged, swinging upward. Again he found the city, the room—and again the beautiful savage moved in its depths, humming a song on corraline lips that made Ilon's head swim. Even to look at her made his heart thump and race madly.

Nyo looked, noting the symmetrical trim of a supple body, the barbarian grace of her. He nodded in reluctant approval.

"They'll be back, Ilon," he said. "You'll have to stand them off while I work. Think you can do it?"

Ilon nodded grimly. Nyo had withdrawn from his robe a tiny cylindrical object that was like a rod of sheer light. He held the filament before him. Now he looked directly at the girl's image, distant across star-worlds, and his eyes narrowed to mere slits. The muscles of his body knotted with exertion. Lamber light leaped from the white sliver in his hand, darted like lightning to his temple, splayed out again toward the distant barbarian world.

Inside the room—the spy-ray danced.

It leaped and throbbed, a living thing, moving quickly here and there, and Ilon built up his desperate force of mental resistance. He felt an outer demand for entrance, but denied it. Then overwhelming power blossomed from all sides, cascading down upon him.

It was a white heat applied to his brain fibre, a furnace of unknown forces fanned to utmost intensity. His mind reeled from the impact. Shock raced through his being. He shuddered, feeling the forces breaking into the barrier of the room. Hopelessness against greater powers overwhelmed him.

The sight of old Nyo, kneeling now, brought a vibration of despair from Ilon's inner being. If they discovered his father, the Galax-Mentor, breaking the law . . .

Energy came back out of nothingness. Again he flung himself into the struggle with forces interlocked in the ethereal strains of matter. For a long moment he tensed, denying them any thought entrance. And he held! He held! And the lightning forces that had leaped from Nyo's brain across the universe were creating a white nimbus entirely around the girl—the girl of the silver sphere.

And suddenly—

Suddenly she was no longer in that distant barbaric world. She was here—standing before them. No longer light-years away, but swung across a space-warp created by the mind pulsations of old Nyo.

And as abruptly—

Crimson lips lost their curve of happiness. A scream burst from her lips and went shuddering through the air. Her eyes opened—but blindly. Unseeing. Her hands reached up to clutch at—blindness!

One moment—of utter fantastic horror. One moment when her body swayed and fell and writhed and twisted in unutterable pain. One moment when her beauty was crushed by a sledge-hammer of unspeakable anguish.

And as suddenly she was gone. As suddenly, she was back again in the room of the distant world, and the silver sphere was hurtling back into the remote depths.

Ilon's mind reeled. He felt resistance crumbling. The solid barriers of the room were melting. He staggered. Solidity vanished. Figures—grim and demanding—leaped in. He was helpless before them.

But old Nyo's mind flashed out, indignant and hot.

"What is this!" his father was thundering. "Spies intruding upon a Galax-Mentor! What would you have?"

ILON saw the suddenly startled faces of the many spies, saw their bewilderment, their wonder and fear. They retreated hurriedly, sheepishly. In a moment the room was whole again. Ilon felt stunned.

Memory of the girl's unseeing pain crushed him. His father's arm was about his shoulders now.

"Come, Ilon," said Nyo. "The variable-star Necktor has changed three times. Another moment, and your union with Nyrilla will have been recorded. You must go to meet her. It is the time-old custom of the Galax."

"But the girl, father, the girl of the silver sphere . . ."

"I disobeyed the laws of the Galax, son, and brought her here for an instant, so that you might understand. Our race of beings is a glorious race, son. It has come across vast universes, across unthinkable aeons of time, and across unmeasurable dimensions of space. Somewhere along the paths, seeds have been lost, and life remained in retrograde places—like this little planet you have just witnessed.

"This silver sphere has floated forever in several surrounding seas of—force—shall we say, son. Gravity—atmosphere—and several other energies of which we will not speak.

"But several faculties—such as we know them—menta-portation, radiance-life—are impossible under the layers of atmospheric molecules. Though the power for menta-portation lies dormant in their bodies, as in our own, their atmosphere prevented its use.

"So—as the mastodons in the mines are blind because they have not seen light—so are the people of the silver sphere without true powers of the mind, because they have never been able to use them.

"When I transported her here, the sudden comprehension of these powers would have killed her in another instant. So I sent her back, Ilon, back to her own true world. Have I done rightly, son? Will you go now to Nyrilla?"

Ilon reached out for the strength of his father's arm. Memory of the girl, her pliant erectness, her sheer beauty, was like a racing livid fire in his mind.

He would have to forget her—and go on loving her. He would have to leave her unnamed, unknown, a savage creature in her own primitive world. And though her memory never quite went from his mind, well, that was something to be faced. For her own sake he would never dare again to think of bridging the space that separated them.

"Let us go, father," he said.

Softly their bodies arose. As lightly as feathers they floated through an opening in the barrier that came at their mere wishing . . .

CHERYL RAMSDEN, torch singer for the *Midnight Club*, screamed just once in her apartment. They found her prostrate and writhing, as though from the after-effects of a seizure.

"Nerves!" the physician pronounced it. "Better take it easy, girl!"

"Look, doc," cried Cheryl. "I ain't going nuts, am I? For an instant it was like swimming through space. Suddenly it was like being inside a flame, with every part of me going up in ashes and . . ."

The doctor looked very serious, as if he felt the surge of forces that had swept her up. Then he shrugged his shoulders as though to say some things were better to be left unnamed and guessed at.

"That's what comes of too much torch singing," he said lightly, and being young and not immune to beauty, he smiled encouragingly and with depth. "Maybe you've been burning the torch at both ends, Cheryl."

"What would you suggest, Doctor—"

"Mudd! Phineas Axelton Mudd!—mildly!"

"How horrible! Did your parents actually tack that onto you or was it invented to torture your patients?"

"A little of both, but I'd recommend a long drive into the country, maybe a swim at the seashore—"

"In the company of a young doctor, red-haired, by the name of Mudd?"

"Well, I didn't say that, Cheryl, but could be, gal, could be."