

PLANET STORIES



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Spring Issue
Dec.-Feb.
1947-1948



Vol. III, No. 10
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.



PLANET IN REVERSE

By HENRY GUTH

On that insanely jumbled world, their love was a solid fact. Yet he could only stare helplessly as she sobbed out on his shoulder, "Dieif emit desrever senutpen morf em evas!"

COMMUNICATION WITH Earth was out. Completely. Radio deader than a vacuum.

Darrel Bond allowed himself a grin. The fleet admiral had warned him against straying off the freight lanes. Had, in fact, threatened to break him down to a button-pusher if he did it again. That was a laugh! Button-pusher! What was he now, if not a button-pusher?

In the old days, space piloting had been something—a thrill and a challenge. But now—buttons! Ships so automatic that he

seemed to just go along for the ride. One man controlling a million-ton ship where it used to require a crew of fifteen or twenty. A lonely, boring business.

That's why he had taken over the ship and swung outside Uranus' orbit. Mostly to break up the monotonous routine. And then there was Neptune . . . The planet had been out of bounds ever since those geodetic expeditions had set out for Neptune over two centuries ago—and never come back. Early space patrols and search parties had been sent into that part of the

celestial sphere—only to disappear forever. The planet had become a symbol of the terrifying unknown. Eventually it was forbidden by interplanetary law to stray beyond the orbit of Uranus.

But why? There must be reasons for those disappearances. Who could resist an invitation like that?

"Some day," they said. "Some day. All in good time."

Now was as good a time as any.

But the radio was dead. It shouldn't be. It had a hell of a long range! And the gravity plates. Acting up. He should land somewhere and do a repair job.

Darrel looked at Neptune growing on the screen. He was getting close.

It stood to reason.

Neptune right handy . . . and he needed seventy hours or so to repair the plates.

Simple.

Funny about that radio though. All of a sudden, without warning or reason, it had gone dead. And the gravity plates, too. Then that strange, rending sensation when he was approximately halfway of the mean distance between the orbits of Uranus and Neptune. A strong force had seemed to grip the ship and wrestle with it for a few frenzied seconds.

Then the dead radio and the fouled-up plates.

But here was Neptune, bulging on the screen.

Darrel concentrated on his instruments—and began to check the ship's speed.

BEFORE venturing out the airlock, he made a superficial check of the gravity plates. Not too bad. He could probably repair them in less than the seventy hours he'd thought he would need. The radio was in flawless condition. He switched on the transmitter, and sent signals crashing powerfully out into space. But the receiver received nothing. Not a spark, not a gasp.

Might as well look around outside.

Outside, unexpectedly, there was a girl. So beautiful it was a physical shock. Raven-black hair, cream skin and a small, sharply-outlined figure clothed in a strangely translucent yellow tunic. An incarnation of delicate loveliness. Fragile. Unbelievable.

She stood about twenty feet from the

ship—waving. Waving listlessly and with an expression of infinite sadness on her face.

Darrel watched, dumbfounded, as the girl walked toward him hesitantly. Tears were glistening on her cheeks. Real human tears!

She kissed him. Soundly.

Darrel tottered and leaned against the airlock as the girl smiled at him sadly, wistfully, and then went off slowly, walking—backwards!

Darrel shook his head. Backwards! The girl strode along with uncanny confidence, not looking where she was going, until she stopped about twenty yards away and sat down on the ground facing him.

Darrel sat down too.

Hallucinations! He was space-happy! It had finally happened. Caroming around in space did things to people, mostly psychological things. The system's sanitariums were full of old space dogs who had cracked under the strain. They had seen and endured too much. But Darrel Bond . . . he was still young. He couldn't be cracking up now! Why he . . . hell!

This was no hallucination! The fragrance of the black-haired girl's lips was still on his mouth. It was heady.

He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

There! A thin streak of violet across the veins of his hand. Lipstick! It was unmistakable. A violet shade of lipstick. He put his tongue to the streak tentatively.

It was lipstick all right.

He rose to his feet and stared across the intervening space at the girl. She seemed to blend with the pale and rolling surreal landscape of Neptune. His brain was reeling. This sort of thing just didn't happen. You land on an unexplored planet and, wham! a girl kisses you! No; despite the lipstick, it must be a dream.

And that walking backward. That settled it. People walked backward only in dreams.

Grumbling thickly, he reentered the open airlock. The thing to do now was repair the ship. Later, he would explore around a little and see what Neptune was like. If he recorded enough valuable information about the planet, maybe the Admiral would be lenient when he hauled him up before the mast for galavanting off with a Corporation ship.

Darrel hauled the wrecked plates outside the ship to work on them in the open. He could get things done faster out where there was more room to move around. The mysterious girl was still there, quietly watching his every action. He hunched deliberately over the delicate gravitation unit that bulged from the base of one plate. A hyper-thin vibrator rod had been cracked. But he could mend it.

He laid down his tools and paused in the work. Lazily, he lighted a Martian cigarette and looked toward the girl.

If she were an hallucination, why didn't she go away?

Instead, she rose and came toward him briskly—her jet-black hair contrasting vividly with her yellow, short-skirted tunic—walking backward.

Darrel scratched his head helplessly and watched as the girl, her back toward him, strode weirdly up to the ship. She turned about and smiled sadly.

"Lerrad, retal nruter liw I," she said. "Noos, on I, gniveel ra ooy."

"What?" Apparently that gibberish was supposed to mean something. But it didn't. The girl looked a little less woebegone now.

"Won trapa la," she said, and looked at the gravity plates spread out on the ground.

"That means nothing to me," Darrel said.

The Neptunian girl had turned and began to weave her way backward through the plates. It was uncanny the way she did it. She must have eyes in the back of her head! The gait was smooth enough, but it looked so strange in reverse. So damned strange!

Darrel followed her with his eyes. His spine was tingling. Like a hawk he watched her. She was a looker. The loveliest creature he had ever seen and . . . blazing comets! . . . she acted as though she were nutty about him, the way she smiled, jabbered and touched him affectionately.

But why the retrogression? Why was she operating like an old film being run off backwards in a projector?

Finally, the girl began to walk away again, her face toward him, placing one foot surely behind the other. She smiled cheerfully, waved, and then went on to disappear over the hill.

Darrel sat down abruptly. He glued his

eyes to the spot where the girl had disappeared.

For ten minutes he watched, but nothing stirred on the hill.

He noticed now that there were dim shapes thrusting up beyond the hill. They looked like the tops of buildings. A group of them. Probably a city.

Why not? The girl had to come from somewhere. But why the devil . . . !

He stared at the gravity plates on the ground. They weren't getting repaired this way. The girl was beginning to get under his skin.

The hell with it! He'd work on the plates now.

He began to whistle, shrilly and off-key. He always whistled when his lust for adventure was about to be satisfied. Neptune, defiance of the fleet admiral, a dead radio and blown gravity plates . . . an impetuous dream-girl . . . these added up to adventure.

Tomorrow he'd go over the hill and see what was on the other side.

A CITY was on the other side. A good-sized city. No more than a mile away. Darrel glanced back at the ship from the hilltop, shrugged and turned toward the city.

When he reached it he found a nightmare world.

These Neptunians were all crazy. Disregarding every natural law, they dashed about the streets backward. Every last one of them. And they stared at him as though *he* were a freak!

He stopped at a corner to collect his senses. Vehicles milled and rushed—backwards. At high velocities they slammed up and down the streets in reverse, a steady stream, in all directions . . . and without a mishap! Not a one of the lunatics had an accident!

He leaned dizzily against a metal post.

To steady himself he shifted his glance to immovable objects, to stationary things, to buildings. They behaved rationally. They didn't do things backwards. They didn't do anything but stand there, solid, substantial and sane.

Except the one across the street. The theater marquee was lit up brilliantly—and it was morning. He glared at it belligerently, as though it were playing a dirty trick on him.

The lights blinked out suddenly.

Darrel moved into the crowd on the sidewalk and went along with it—he was forward and the others backward. It was mad! Everyone stared at him in open astonishment, as though *he* were the one who was going backward!

He came to what seemed to be a restaurant, and went in.

Over there. A waiter seemed to be beckoning. At least, he was pointing at him. Darrel walked over, his eyes on the astonished face of the waiter, and sat down to the table, already spread with food.

It was piping hot, very strange to the palate, but good. Darrel's appetite quickened. He ate hungrily.

Munching a piece of pastry, he looked up. He stopped chewing. The group at the next table was gazing at him with wide, incredulous eyes. He felt uncomfortable, and moved his glance around the room.

He stopped eating and stared. Not only backward but . . . blazing comets!

Fascinated, he watched a man come in the entrance backwards, seat himself at a table littered with dirty dishes and crumpled napkins and—regurgitate food back into the dishes! The food reappeared in chunks. The man manipulated knife and fork, and the chunks became one whole.

When the entire meal had been regurgitated into the dishes, and they seemed hot and ready to serve, a waiter came up and carried them all away. Moving backward, always backward.

Darrel felt nauseated by the unnatural process. He got up and left the restaurant abruptly. Wide eyes followed his progress to the door.

He moved with the crazy crowd that went back-side first. Ahead was a parkway that had normal, stationary benches. He would sit on one.

HE HAD BEEN sitting on the bench, watching this incredible world of retropulsion a half hour when he caught sight of the girl in the yellow tunic.

She came walking toward him backwards, stopped, turned, and smiled radiantly. She spoke, and her talk was the same nonsensical chattering.

Darrel blinked.

The girl had just been standing there, standing still, when a crumpled-up piece of

paper flew up from the ground and into her hand — magically. With a rustling sound, the paper opened in her hand like a flower unfolding. She held it out to him. There was writing on it.

It was intelligible. Darrel grasped the paper. Stunned, he read it again.

"I love you, Darrel," it said. "You have lost your memory of me by this time, I know. We understood this yesterday, you and I, perfectly. Now, as we are drawn further apart from each other, I remember and you do not yet know. Ours is a strang and sad union, Darrel."

It made no sense. None whatever. Darrel rubbed his ear vigorously. Dammit! There was intimacy in this note. It seemed to suggest that they had a mutual past and that he had forgotten it or—did not yet know. What did it all mean? He looked helplessly at the girl.

She was sitting beside him now, on the bench, writing, it seemed, on the sheet of paper he had just read.

He twisted his head to watch . . . and found himself staring in fascination.

The pen in the girl's hand glided rapidly over the page. Everything normal except that it began at the bottom of the page, moving from end to the beginning of the message, *erasing* as it went! One by one the letters and words disappeared under the swift strokes of the pen until the sheet was clean and unblemished. Then the girl placed it in her bag.

Darrel relaxed. "What the devil . . ." There! It happened again. A ball of paper, defying all familiar physical laws, leaped from the ground beside the bench and flew into the girl's outstretched hand. It unfolded as her hand opened, and she held it out, smiling sadly all the while.

"It is true then," the note said. "You have forgotten. I am Leyloon."

Leyloon? Leyloon? Her name, of course. Darrel strained to remember a Leyloon. There was no such name in his memory tract. He looked hard at the girl, at Leyloon. She was ethereal. He would *like* to have memories of her. He didn't though.

But he was *supposed* to remember her. Leyloon, Leyloon. No . . . his brain held no recollections of this girl except that yesterday she came up to the ship and . . . but *yesterday*, the first note had said, he had understood perfectly.

He scratched his head furiously.

Yesterday he had been more completely at a loss than he was today! He hadn't known of this city, where everything went in reverse, he hadn't known the girl's name . . . he hadn't known anything!

The girl erased the note with reverse writing strokes of the pen. She smiled strangely, said, "Noolyel," and nodded.

Driven by inexplicable impulse, Darrel drew a pad from his shirt pocket and wrote on it, "Who are you?" and showed it to the girl, Leyloon. It was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous! Asking a question after it had been answered. But the inner compulsion had been irresistible.

He was silent for a long time. An hour . . . two hours. Leyloon chatted gaily, even affectionately, in her strange tongue. She wrote incomprehensible things on pieces of paper that flew up from where they lay on the ground and from the waste receptacle beside the bench. She bewildered him, and yet . . . Her every action was in reverse, but, despite the weirdness of the effect, hers were graceful and lovely actions.

Finally she left, rising to her feet and setting off down the parkway—walking backwards. She waved near a bend of the walk, then backed rapidly around it and out of sight.

Darrel returned to the ship. He weaved his way slowly and drunkely through the crowds of this crazy world going in reverse.

The ship was a lifesaver. It sat there as solidly as a rock. He rubbed his hand over the smooth metal hull and began to regain his sense of reality.

Over twenty-four hours already and none of the gravity plates was repaired. At this rate he would never get off Neptune . . . that is, if he wanted to.

He attacked the job with more energy than enthusiasm.

THE third day began with two realizations. The first realization was that he was very definitely in love with Leyloon.

The second, that time here was moving in the opposite direction from the time-stream in which he existed. It was the only way to explain all these strange happenings. He had thought about it half the night.

It was urgent that he find Leyloon and

explain both these things. But he shouldn't go off half cocked. He was too excited to permit rational behavior, and might only confuse the problems which already were confused almost beyond comprehension.

With an effort of will, he lit a cigarette and dragged at it with deliberate slowness. When the cigarette was finished he threw it away and picked up his tools to begin work on the gravity plates.

He worked until he was calm.

Only then did he leave the ship, squatting in the hollow below the hill, and set out for the fantastic Neptunian city. How could he find Leyloon? The city was labyrinthine. It would be impossible.

But on the other side of the hill he met her. She was coming slowly up the gentle slope, backing up as usual.

Obeying an impulsive thought, Darrel moved twenty yards off the path and waited.

As though he were a magnet, Leyloon left the path and backed up to him. She turned then and exposed a face that was radiantly happy.

Before Darrel could collect himself to explain what was on his mind, the weird things began again.

The broken, shredded end of a slender cigarette soared up from the ground and settled in Leyloon's hand. A stream of smoke formed in the air, and flowed into her mouth. She put the cigarette to her lips. It glowed. She smiled and chattered gaily, nonsensically. Little clouds of blue-gray smoke kept forming unnaturally in the open air and flowing into Leyloon's mouth and nostrils. The cigarette grew in length with each inhalation.

Darrel stared. It was really incredible!

When the cigarette was whole again, the girl put a flaring lighter to it, and the tip went out. She placed lighter and cigarette in her bag.

"Whew!" said Darrel. "This is beginning to give me the creeps." He tried his best to grin. "What happens now, Leyloon? If my theory is right, we're going to back-track into your time."

As if in answer to his question, Leyloon began to back off rapidly down the hill.

"Whoa!" Darrel ran after her.

He felt all kinds of a fool walking that way. They faced each other, about a foot apart, she striding backward like some-

thing out of last year's nightmare, and he striding forward following her. It was the damndest sensation!

He wondered how she felt about it. If his theory was correct, then Leyloon thought *she* was following *him* the way he was following her.

To anyone watching, they must have looked like a pair of lunatics.

Here they were, existing simultaneously on the same planet, Neptune, but existing in time-streams diametrically opposed. While Neptune and all things of and on it were moving in time toward their youth and beginnings, *he* was moving in time toward maturity and death. But, paradoxically, each to himself was growing toward age in a normal manner. From either viewpoint, the other was growing or becoming younger with every minute. His yesterday was Leyloon's tomorrow, but Leyloon's yesterday was *his* tomorrow. The situation seemed hopelessly absurd.

Absurd or not, he would have to make the best of it. But it all seemed so senseless! Why in blazes was he going off on this wild-goose chase?

Leyloon was backing up briskly, only a foot or so ahead of him.

Maybe that was why. She was exquisite. It was a satisfaction to have her near, even though her world was all out of whack. And she was getting under his skin more and more every minute. A Neptunian nymph, possibly a figment of his erratic imagination, and he was falling for her. Like a meteor. He, Darrel Bond, cool, level-headed astronaut falling for a Neptunian myth with serene face and fouled-up metabolism!

Yes. He was. He had to admit it.

He followed Leyloon's tantalizing figure through the bewildering city. The swarm and rush of reverse traffic and activity made his head spin dizzily.

Leyloon turned finally, into a house. The noises of the city were suddenly cut off.

Almost immediately the business with paper and pen began. She picked a sheet from a desk and held it out to him.

"It is almost evening," it read. "I will go back to the ship with you now."

Darrel swore. They had just *come* from the ship!

With the pen, Leyloon erased the absurd message and fastened the sheet to the

gummed end of a pad with a rapid reverse tearing motion.

"Blazing comets!" Darrel exploded.

Her face radiant, Leyloon held up another sheet.

"Yes, of course," it said. "Have you forgotten already?"

Darrel stared at the page blankly. Forgotten what? Yes what?

WITHOUT conscious volition he took a part in the grotesque drama. He began to write on the pad he carried in his pocket. Leyloon peered at him strangely as he wrote, her eyes wide open and somewhat incredulous. He watched the words form under his hand, not knowing what they would be.

"Do you live here, Leyloon?" he wrote.

What a stupid question! He knew she lived here. Why would she turn into the place if she didn't? Why in the name of infinite galaxies did he ask a question like that?

Another sheet was being held out to him.

"Yes. You decided it was."

Decided what was what?

Nonplussed, he stood witness to himself in the act of writing, "But is it inevitable, Leyloon?"

Darrel growled angrily. Was *what* inevitable?

He wrote again, and as he wrote he saw an increasing fascination and wonder in the girl's eyes as she watched him. The rite was as strange to her as it was to him.

"Absolutely," his message said. "I do."

Now what? This was all meaningless.

"Do you truly love me, Darrel? Do you think there is a way for us?"

That did it! Now he was committing himself to all sorts of things like...wait a minute—as a matter of fact he *was* in love with this twisted-around Neptunian witch. No. That wasn't the right word. She wasn't a witch. She was more like a...hell! They would get nowhere with this question and answer method. It was too balled up.

Flat statements were what they needed. Statements that were self-evident.

He began to write down his theory about this paradoxical situation in which they were both entangled. It was pure theory, but to Darrel it seemed the only logical explanation of these weird events. That he

and Leyloon were living time-lines running counter to each other, seemed obvious enough. Within infinity there must be infinite possibilities. Since infinity was, in relation to time or anything else, infinite in one direction as well as the opposite direction, it was conceivable that corporeal objects could co-exist but in time-fields diametrically opposed.

Neptune existed in the opposite time-stream. The region occupied by this time-stream undoubtedly continued around in a ring corresponding roughly to the planet's orbit. The disturbance midway from Uranus' orbit would substantiate that. How far into space, away from the sun, the diametrical time existed, was impossible to guess. Its influence might extend beyond the solar system—or not. Who knew?

There was understanding in Leyloon's eyes. And agreement.

They scribbled and exchanged ideas well into the afternoon. Darrel felt an exultation.

Then annoyance, then discouragement. As the hours passed, Leyloon comprehended less until, as evening came on, she was openly incredulous.

When he left the house to return to the ship, Leyloon was watching him almost with astonishment.

WHEN the fourth day began, Darrel inspected the ship with satisfaction. He had worked on into the night and the gravity plates were all repaired. It would take only a few more hours to install them.

He reflected that though today was *today* for him, it would be *yesterday* for Leyloon. She would know nothing, absolutely nothing, of the past three days. They were her future. What would her reactions be on this day?

Not long after the sun had risen, she came walking uncertainly over the hill—backwards as usual—casting quizzical glances over her shoulder as she advanced.

Darrel was absorbed by the spectacle. He understood now—understood that actually, from Leyloon's point of view, she was walking *away* from the ship instead of toward it. This was the end of the day for her, while for him it was the beginning.

Leyloon stopped and turned to face him. She wore a helpless, puzzled expression.

It was disturbing. Darrel sensed—and the knowledge cut like a knife—that the girl was slipping away from him, sliding inexorably into her past. And in her past, he had no place. None whatever. He was moving to the point in her life where he did not exist for her. The idea was appalling.

She was holding out a note for him to see.

It read, "Night is coming on and I must retire, stranger. This has been an extraordinary day."

Stranger! So he was nothing more than that now! And only yesterday... or tomorrow... there had been complete understanding between them. They had been in love then, had told each other so! And now... stranger!

But there was evidence of a shy, hesitant affection in the girl's face and actions.

Darrel stifled a sudden impulse to swear and smash things. Every minute, every second they were moving toward Leyloon's childhood and her complete ignorance of his existence. It was horrible and it was inevitable. Frustrating. Infuriating! The minutes were precious, priceless, and they clicked by with the ruthless precision of a machine. They were going... gone, irretrievably.

It was almost noon—noon for both! Here was mutual ground. It was not one time of day for him and another for her... it was noon for both. They moved toward the moment from opposite directions, Leyloon from afternoon and he from morning. Exactly at noon, when time coincided for them... he would kiss her.

Smack!

His face stung from the reverse-motion blow. She had slapped him. But he hadn't done anything yet.

Then, he kissed her.

Now, when a slap might be expected, nothing happened. Because now she hadn't been kissed yet. She was watching him with bewitching, innocent eyes, utterly unaware that within a minute she would be kissed—or *had* been kissed.

She stared at him with a strange look, as though he were mad.

Darrel dug for a pencil and wrote desperately. He had to explain that kiss.

But it was hopeless. Of course it would be. Naturally she would think he was crazy

for writing notes explaining who he had kissed her when he *hadn't* kissed her yet.

He looked up, and Leyloon was gone. She was disappearing over the crest of the hill.

Darrel swore freely—eloquently!

THE morning of the fifth day—or was it evening?—Darrel riveted the last gravity plate into position in the bulkhead. The ship was ready. He could leave any time. There was a valuable cargo in the hold awaiting delivery to Uranus. So why the hell didn't he leave?

Because Leyloon was standing, obviously confused, on the slope of the hill outside.

They stared at each other a long time. Darrel's forehead wrinkled in a worried frown. Today Leyloon knew even less about him than she had yesterday. He must be a *complete* stranger to her now. This might easily be the first time she had ever seen him. Probably she had been out on a quiet evening stroll—it was Neptune's evening—and had seen the ship, and stopped to look at it.

Standing on the hill, half-silhouetted against the dusky sky, she seemed wonderfully desirable. So small, fragile and alone.

Making up his mind suddenly, he left the ship and approached the girl. Her eyes never left him. Undoubtedly she was dumbfounded at his backward behavior.

He leaned toward her. A stinging slap creased his cheek. It hurt.

"Don't tell me I'm going to kiss her again!" he thought, prepared to defy that possibility.

He kissed her.

Leyloon's eyes were big and full of fear. He hadn't kissed her yet but she must have been frightened by his menacing attitude. He scrutinized her face. It was thrillingly beautiful. But it showed no comprehension. No recognition. No faintest glimmer of affection. She did not know him.

Cursing all the planets, and asteroids in the universe, Darrel swung around and threw himself back into the ship.

He sat with his back against the cold metal hull of the ship smoking Martian cigarettes nervously, lighting a new one from the butt of the one he had just smoked.

She had escaped him. Slipped into the past. He had ceased to exist for her. Five

short days ago he had stepped out of his ship and been kissed by Leyloon. Biff! Like that. She had gushed over him. His arrival must have been a departure in her eyes. She had been sad to see him leaving. Heartbroken perhaps.

But now she didn't know him from Adam. He hadn't even entered her life yet. It was all over unless...

Unless he could take her to Earth? No. Impossible! It would be the same farce all over again. Absolutely preposterous!

Maybe not. Why was it *he* hadn't succumbed to the time forces in which Neptune existed? He *should* have. Others had. Those lost expeditions, they accounted for the language and civilization here on Neptune.

Darrel lit another cigarette nervously, clumsily.

Maybe it was because of the speed with which he had approached Neptune. He must have ripped through the—through the point of time transition with so great a velocity that neither he nor his ship were gripped by the opposing time flow. If he had come at a lesser rate of speed, the change might have been effected. Even as it was, the ship had almost been gripped.

He threw the cigarette away and paced back and forth in front of the ship.

If he could take Leyloon out there... take her across the zone, very slowly, a crawling two or three thousand miles per hour... it might work. Her entire metabolism system might be reversed. She might exist *properly* in *his* time.

Blazing comets!

On the other hand, it might kill her. Tear her apart or something. How many members of the old expeditions survived the transition was unknown. The outcome was impossible to foresee.

It might kill her.

Darrel fumbled for another cigarette. And yet, he had to do *something*! She was receding into her past every minute. Time was desperately short.

The sun was setting—or was it rising?—and the night was coming on swiftly. The day was short on Neptune. Little more than half of an Earth day. He crumpled up the empty cigarette pack and threw it to the ground.

Kidnapping!

But it was the only way.

It should be relatively simple. Neptunians were a systematic race. They slept at night. All of them. When night came, all activity ceased. He would be unmolested as he went through the city...unless the girl raised a commotion.

Darrel rubbed his jaw. It couldn't be avoided.

When the night was black, he walked behind the beam of his torch over the crest of the hill and into the city.

TWO HOURS later he came up to the ship from out of the dark, carrying a limp form across his shoulders. His face was pale. It had wrenched his soul to knock the girl out. He felt like a murderer. Creeping into the house that way in the dead of night, finding the bedroom, the quietly slumbering girl, then...sock! It was the toughest thing he had ever done.

He strapped Leyloon's unconscious body onto the bunk in the cabin, sealed the airlock, and dropped wearily into the bucket-seat before the maze of manual controls. Beads of sweat oozed from his skin. He wiped them away.

The magnetic space-drive wooshed powerfully at an almost sub-audio level. Darrel glanced apprehensively at the girl. Her beauty and helplessness and the thought of what he might be doing to her, tore at him.

"If I'm wrong, I'll make it up to you in hell!" he swore, and declined the trip-lever beneath his hand.

The dark landscape dropped away rapidly. Within minutes, Neptune was a great mass on the screen, diminishing in size...diminishing, diminishing.

He wiped his damp forehead and stared at the instrument panel.

If she came out of it with a memory of the five days, she would be in love with him. Maybe enough in love with him to condone his socking and kidnapping her. If that happened, he would give up this fool freight-hauling. It was nothing but pushing buttons anyhow. He would spit in the fleet admiral's eye. Tell him to fly his own ships. Leyloon and he...

But what if she came out of it *without* a memory of the five days? He was taking her away before they happened, wasn't he? He was kidnapping a Neptunian girl who

had, in fact, never set eyes on him! How would he explain *that*?

Yes, how! She would probably hate his guts...and he couldn't blame her if she did. She would probably demand to be taken back. She...

The sweat glistened on his forehead. If that happened, it would be the end. There would be no point to existence now if...

He glued his eyes to the instruments. They were hours away from Neptune now. Nearing the zone. It was time to slow the ship.

There were vibrations. Clawing, clutching vibrations that began to insinuate themselves into the ship, into every cell and atom within that bubble of metal. Vibrations. They were ghastly.

But they couldn't be doing to him what they were doing to Leyloon. She might be undergoing a complete reverse in time. Every particle of her being constricted, twisted and battled over.

If she lived through it, would she know him? Would she know that...

His hands were slick with sweat. They slipped on the controls. Vibrations thrilled every cell of his body.

Then it stopped.

They were across, into the time-stream of the inner planets. Darrel set the controls with feverish haste for full speed, and switched them over to automatic.

He wanted to look at the girl, but couldn't. The possible consequences of what he had done appalled him. How could he dare such a crazy stunt? What if she hadn't made it? What if she didn't know him? What if...

"Where am I?" The voice was feeble.

Darrel heard it. An exultant grin began to creep up his face. They were the most beautiful words he had ever heard. They were in a logical sensible sequence. He could *understand* them!

His pulse hammering in his head, he willed himself to turn and see whether...

Leyloon was unbuckling the straps and sitting up. Struggling off the bunk.

Leyloon's face came up. There was a faint, tremulous smile on it. A *smile*.

Darrel whooped! He leaped across the cabin space toward the girl, slipped, and fell ignominiously to the deck.

Leyloon laughed.