

# MARVEL

## STORIES

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW WRITTEN ESPECIALLY FOR THIS MAGAZINE

Vol. 2, No. 3

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April, 1941

★ ★ THRILLING BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL ★ ★

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by Polton Cross

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The simplest and yet the most brilliant invention of all time, the secret weapon to end all secret weapons—this was the diabolic device that Val Turner knew foreign dictators would finally use to wipe out his beloved America, this was the fiendish instrument that only a new super-science could smash!

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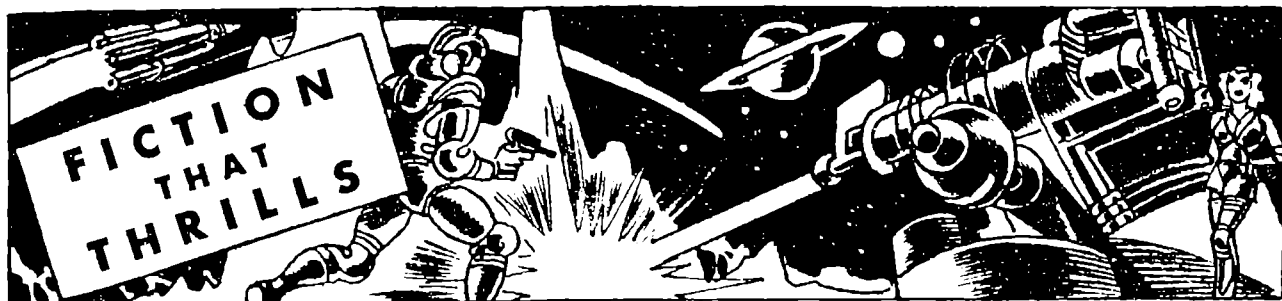
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Marvel Stories published every other month by Western Fiction Publishing Co., Inc., at 4600 Diversey Ave., Chicago, Ill. Entered as second class matter May 4th, 1940, at the Post Office at Chicago, Ill., under act of March 3, 1879. Editorial and executive offices, 339 West 42nd St., N. Y. Contents copyright, 1941, by Western Fiction Publishing Co., Inc. Yearly subscription, 20 cents. Single copies, 15c. Not responsible for unsolicited scripts. Printed in U. S. A. Vol. 2. No. 3.

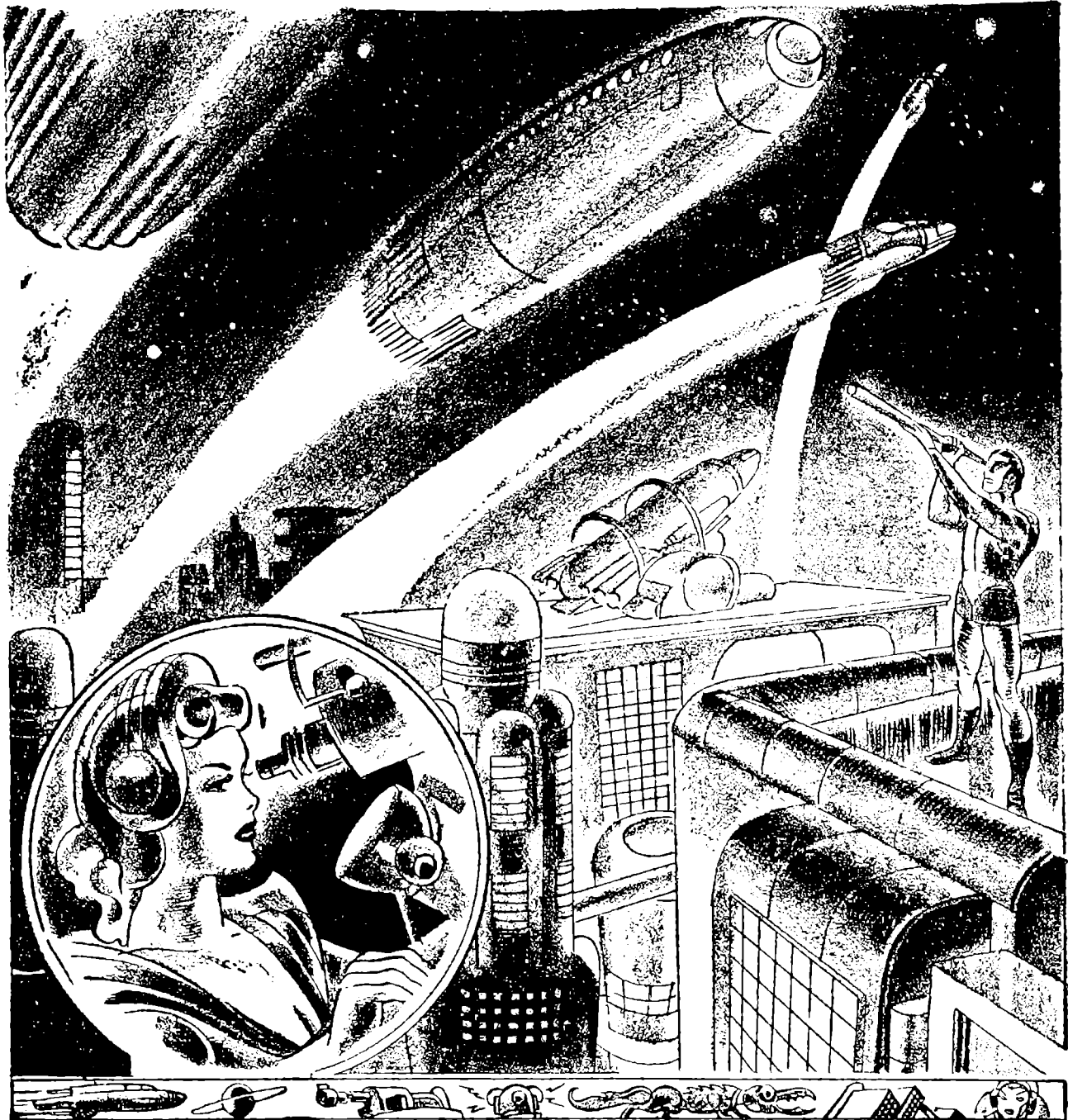
OFF-TRAIL SUPER-SCIENCE NOVELETTE OF INTERPLANETARY ROMANCE!

# THE GIRL FROM VENUS

by D. D. SHARP

Author of "Faster Than Light," etc.

*Yes, atomic disintegration and argonite would give me the girl from Venus as my bride, and it would give us both health, wealth and complete happiness. . . . What it must also finally do, alas, was make Leatha indistinguishable from any other girl on the planet!*



*Giant passenger tubes went bellowing into space!*

## CHAPTER ONE

### A STRANGE ESCAPE

"LEATHA!"

I write her name, then stare at my idle fingers in wistful reminiscence. From beyond my window a giant passenger tube goes bel-

lowing into space, eclipsing for a moment that beautiful planet, our evening star.

As the ruddy wake of it fades from the sky, and glowing Venus struggles from under its fiery exhaust, I sit oppressed, pondering how far away that cloud-swaddled world must swing to

be completely swallowed in the shadow of a ship.

Is she, who came so startlingly unto my rocket-ship that strange night more than twenty years ago, there on that far off world, still remembering me? Or is she on earth? I am never entirely sure. And I will never know. Twenty years ago I closed deliberately the only chance there was to make certain, and though I wonder many, many times, I have never regretted the decision.

I was a space pilot then. No man with my love of the void could have chosen differently. The feel of a rocket under me was as natural as my own legs. But I wonder, at times, why I was not strong enough to cut with Kirsh Malakon years before I did.

He was some five years older than I, a heavy-set, black bearded man, with a fatalistic view of life, as we know it here on earth. He shocked me many times with overbold ideas, and he took love and peril with the unconcern he had for the cherished traditions that had come down to us from the experience of other eras.

There were times when, perforce, I admired that trait in him, and times when I despised him for his philosophies as well as his acts.

Kirsh and I had been out to Luna searching for argonite. He had aroused my avarice for the metal with samples he said he had once picked from the pumice strewn crater of Tycho, and he offered to put up half the capital and his knowledge of its location, against the use of my ship and the other half of the expense.

We came back to earth exhausted, broke, and disillusioned. Two days after we had taken our position along the loading trams of the rocket field, a ship named the Wock, which had become known throughout the connected planets because of its attempt at landing on Venus, berthed just across the

trams.

Kirsh was not interested, but I went down to the freight locks of the Zest (my own ship) to watch debarkation. If the Wock had actually touched the surface of the forbidden planet, I hoped to catch close up glimpses of queer biological specimens an atmosphere so suffocatingly heavy with carbon dioxide, could be expected to produce.

In the shadow of my ship, and out of the glare of the port lights, I leaned against a handrail that guarded the loading conveyors. They were now idle, for loading would not start again until dawn.

There was something in the activity aboard the newcomer that soon aroused unusual curiosity. Every man who came out the airlocks seemed charged with excitement. From one I learned the Wock would resupply at once. She was going back almost immediately, and what was more every man aboard was eager to return with her.

This indeed was unusual. Most men home from the void wanted a long rest before taking ship again.

So I watched with growing interest, picking up stray bits of talk from those who passed below me in the shadow of the trams.

Then capping all this a girl came out of the air locks. She carried herself with an air. Never had I seen her like aboard a freighter, not an exploring ship, anyway.

My eyes involuntarily followed her all the way to a trim, blue gyro that appeared to be waiting for her. She had a wild sort of grace in her carriage and a halo in her hair that promised something. Her features, though, were blurred by the floodlights.

A PASSING crew member turned to stare at her. When he discovered that I was watching him, he grimaced at me, then at the girl. There was

distaste in his gesture (not a pantomime to be resented) but rather a warning. It gave me the impression of distrust, even of fear.

"What's all the excitement?" I demanded.

"Ask Cap. Blumendolt," he growled, and melted into the shadows.

I resumed my interest in the ship. Yielding to a magnetic feel that somebody was watching from above, I peered up the bulging hulk of the Wock. There was indeed someone above me, but hardly the type I had expected to see. A lithe, agile form was being lowered down the slick metal hull. Spider-like it tumbled, swinging, balancing, halting, then dropping again. It seemed to be merely a boy. It did not occur to me it was a girl.

That was my first glimpse of Leatha, and I waited idly, never dreaming what romantic adventure she was bringing with her.

At tram level she loosened herself, and the rope was drawn up quickly by an accomplice who had opened the sealed port-hole.

She shook down her skirts, tossed back her hair, then tripped daintily into the open light as graceful every whit as the girl who had come out by the legitimate lock. Indeed, silhouetted against the floodlights, she was very, very much like that other girl, even to the wild grace in her movements.

If they had not been so evidently ladies from civilization I should have suspected they were girls from Venus, courageously journeying to a world neither could have known anything about.

Venus was still unknown to earth, except as an astronomical unit. Now and then in the long history of space explorations, men had probed a few hundred miles into the suffocating CO<sub>2</sub> with which the planet was heavily blanketed. For this reason I had not taken

seriously Blumendolt's vacuuo message in which he had claimed to have touched the surface. CO<sub>2</sub> while breathable and much used in oxygen suits for ocean depths, on Venus the proportion of the suffocating gas is far out of proportion for life as evolved on the earth. Plant life yes. It should flourish supertropically, especially under the hot-house blanket of eternal cloud, but not man.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### THE GIRL FROM VENUS

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MY mind played with imaginative blooms whose delicate colors were fostered in veiled sunlight and stilled breezes. It toyed also with the thought of a girl there among such flowers, a girl with exquisite complexion that would hardly dare the kiss of an unclouded sun.

So, half suspended between fancy and reality, I observed the girl, growing more and more intrigued with her grace and manifest personality.

She saw me. Perhaps I wasn't shadowed as darkly as I thought. Perhaps she was alien to my earth and her eyes were adjusted to denser shadows than those we knew.

She immediately came across the tram, to flatten against the shadow of a piling, then assuring herself that no one else was watching, hurried forward again.

Below a fluttery blouse of material dainty as silk, she wore a short whipcord skirt, which was smeared by the yellow dust that the Wock had brought all the way from the moonless planet.

Her face was pretty and pleasing, yet even in the dusky light I sensed that character was master of her features. She was, I guessed, rather desperate.

At the platform where I waited, she squared her slender shoulders, took a

deep breath, then as though plunging into cold water, came straight up the skeleton stair.

Hers could have been deep, quiet eyes in other circumstances. Now they were wide with bewilderment and certainly alarm. Yet, despite her evident guilty apprehension, she had a way about her that at once caught and held one's confidence.

She seemed aloof to the smears upon her skirt, nor did she make apology for stowing aboard a ship that was manned by rowdies who had doubtless pillaged all the sacred temples on Earth's sister planet, if there were any such edifices on Venus.

"Please," she began, "I want to see the owner. I have a message for the Zest."

"I am the Captain," I replied, setting down my heels and drawing on a conscious dignity. "Come inside."

She slid past me silent and smooth as a shadow. Her hair brushed my cheek as she passed, laying upon me the intimate allure of contact. Her hands were small and smooth, and very firm in mine as I boosted her over the supply conveyors rather than risk taking her around to the front airlocks under the floodlights of the port.

The bowels of a space ship are somewhat forbidding to the uninitiated, but she seemed quite composed as we threaded aisles between racks of barrels and boxes piled to the proximity of the ceiling.

She ducked under braces and protruding angle irons, and through mazes of steel gray machinery that were lighted dimly by ceiling bulbs with grace that was delightful to follow.

Finally we came to a small steel door that opened out of the smelly oil and merchandise to the first deck.

"Just a little way now," I announced as I switched on lights and pressed the door shut behind her.

There I had my first good look at her. The delicacy of her complexion amazed me. It seemed to confirm my fancy of beautiful Venusian ladies in a landscape of hot house flowers. There was such strangeness in her beauty I stared, wholly insensible to my own rudeness. She held my eyes with the force of persistent gravitation from which those two satellites could not escape. There were little golden flecks in the blue of hers, until her pupils widened to almost swallow the iris.

It struck me suddenly it might be a mistake to take her up to the office. There came an unreasonable dislike of showing her to Kirsh, though I knew well that Kirsh was anything but a woman's man. He would be critical of the smeared skirt, cynical as to her motives, unmoved by her beauty, and unbearably sarcastic when she was gone.

"We needn't go further," I began when she did not speak, "what is the message? It might be well my partner does not find you here. He—well you see this is a man's ship. You're about the first lady ever to board it."

"I must see the owner," she insisted.

"I am also the owner. What do you wish?"

"Then you *are* Mauri Bronson?" She smiled as though she had guessed it all along. "I would have recognized your voice anywhere." She stopped as though at a command, and looked sharply past my shoulder.

**B**EHIND me I heard the heavy, deliberative steps of my partner. Involuntarily I put my bulk to shield her, and turned about to find Kirsh scowling so superiorly I wanted to smash his big, blistered nose.

But the girl was undisturbed. "You're Kirsh," she asserted, taking a step forward—an expectant inflection in her voice.

Kirsh glared, suspicious as a sphinx.

"Please," she begged, "are you trying to scare me?"

"What are you wanting here?"

"I have an important message for Captain Bronson."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Leatha. I stowed aboard the Wock. I am a native of Venus. I want your help, and will pay for it."

"Venus!" I exclaimed, "But that is impossible!"

"Stowaway," said Kirsh, his heavy underlip awry.

"I shouldn't have told you that," she answered coldly.

"Come on to the office," I invited.

She gave me a look of gratitude. I was surprised that Kirsh followed, and it annoyed me more to discover his eyes running up and down the girl as though she were on the block.

"You want help," he rumbled at her as we entered the office, "What kind of help?"

I shook my head at her, but she either disdained or did not understand my warning, for she opened a metal case that was strapped against one wrist. From it she took an indigo stone.

"I heard your lectures asking for money to search for this. I know where there is much of it."

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### CHAPTER THREE

#### SHIPLOADS OF WEALTH

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THE moment my eyes caught the blue glint of the metal I knew what the sight of such stuff would do to Kirsh. He and I had endured the rigors of powdery, airless deserts of the moon hoping for a strike not half so pure. The lump in her hand was wholly unoxidized, the highest possible quality, and from first glance there was no mistaking it for anything than the rare and

precious element it turned out to be.

Argonite! The most eagerly demanded mineral in the civilized universe. Argonite in those years was the only element available for an alloy that would insulate the block metal of atomic engines. Argonite protected the contact parts from the contagion of progressive disintegration. For the lack of sufficient argonite to hold atomic disintegration in check, this type of power was but cooled throughout the earth, though its cost of production was ridiculously cheap and the fuel widespread.

That lump between Leatha's fingers was sufficient to provide insulation for an engine that would light a city at the cost of a few dollars a year. Yet she offered it as carelessly as had it been a lump of coal. She became startled though, when Kirsh's eyes began to bug out for once in their lethargic existence. She certainly had had no idea of human nature, not as engendered on earth.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded hoarsely and reached after it.

"No. No." She retreated until she was against the office door. "I make a trade."

"Hold on there!" I bellowed as he began to bully her. "Give the girl chance to state her terms." One word more and I would have closed his mouth with my fist. Leatha had certainly taken hold of me. I wanted to defend her, to do any reasonable thing she might ask.

"What kind of a trade?" Kirsh demanded less bullishly.

"He is a plunderer. A thief!" she nodded toward the Wock. "To him a secret has been betrayed by one of my own people. He will come again, and again, and ships will follow when they know what he has found."

She turned on me as though understanding that dealing with Kirsh was like bargaining with cold, thrusting steel. Then she turned to Kirsh again, as though wondering if steel were not,

after all, that which might serve her best.

"How much of this would satisfy you? How much of it do you want to stop the master of the Wock before he leads all earth to overrun my people?"

How little she understood Kirsh, or myself, or any other man of earth. What amount indeed would satisfy any one of us, less than all? And how, did she think, Kirsh could halt Blumendolt and his crew of rowdies from looting her planet? Or indeed, the fever that would start a thousand ships to trail him?

"Little girl, you and me can trade," said Kirsh, with a velvety purr. He dragged his eyes from hers and thrust one hand into a drawer from which he pulled an old fashioned coin purse. From it he shook a pair of keys, then stowed away the argonite and snapped the catch. "It will be safe with me, young woman. And I'll take on the old buzzard."

She put both her palms upon the table to steady herself. She was completely exhausted, that was plain. I pushed forward a chair. She sat down, burying her face in her arms. "You are fine and good," she thanked him with great relief.

She couldn't have had an idea of what she had done to us, to me as well as Kirsh. She had shown to us actual, concrete proof of stuff that would buy anything a man desired. Such a fabulous vein as she described would pay the interplanetary debt, or buy a moon for an island resort. It meant power, prestige, affluence to match all dreams.

**T**HE sleepy, muddy eyes of my partner across the table, were already glowing like live coals aroused by a stirring bellows.

She sat so still I thought her asleep. Her hair was finely spun but thickly curled where it caressed her shoulders like sunlit spray. She was so good to

look at I wondered how Kirsh could remove his gaze to the argonite, which he had taken from the purse and was turning under the light.

He got up, dragged down a pair of troy scales—and she had spoken of loading ships! He weighed the lump, stared a moment at the weight in the balance pan as though to assure himself of its measure, then cautiously he stowed the piece and pocketed the purse. Then without explanation, he left the room.

"Thief!" I thought, "You're planning to rob both her and me of every dime it will bring. Of all men I could have taken on, it had to be a guy like you!"

As Leatha reclined I became worried. The color had bleached from her cheeks. I leaned a little. She did not seem to be breathing. That frightened me. I aroused her and ran for brandy. She drank it and the color slowly returned.

"The last few days I have had no food," she explained.

"You poor kid," I sympathized, and rang for sandwiches.

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## CHAPTER IV

### AN EDEN UNCURED

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**A**S we talked she gradually sketched for me a misty conception of her own world and its customs. If it measured half the picture she gave, I did not wonder that it was so important to her to leave it unmolested by the dissensions and aggressions of earthly ideologies.

Here was a planet in which individual aggrandizement was unknown. Here there were no rulers, no priests, no monopolies, no national boundaries and of course no conception of war. "We are too much alike," she explained, "to be subject one to the other."

I tried to imagine what such a place would be like as I sat watching her, gathering her enthusiasm and even a bit of her nostalgia for being exiled from such a perfectly adjusted social and political economy.

There had been an ideology slightly akin to it in a far and isolated section of the North American continent, so archaeologists had concluded from the lore they had pieced together from the legends of those pueblos which had survived until historic times.

There was, however, among those isolated villages, priests and governors and a matriarchal domination of clan possessions. Venus, I gathered, was a much higher tableland of aggregate effort, and the result had been peace unbroken for so long a time, there was on the planet no residue of aggression or despotism. I could understand why the civilization of a planet so conducted and so unhampered, would work rapidly toward its own ideals of perfection.

Somehow as I listened, the old history of the pueblo seemed on the eve of repeating itself. Blumendolt, like Coronado the Conquistador, was in search of Gold Cities.

One of the Venusians, named Trita, had fallen to the blandishments of the earthman who had so much power over his fellows, and she had discovered his weakness. He wanted argonite, so she spoke glowingly of argonite like Estevan the Moor had spoken to the Conquistador, though unlike the tale of Estevan, Trita's story was true.

As the pueblos were in peace and tranquility until men in iron shirts came astride strange beasts to overrun and conquer, so would helmeted men pour from the airlocks of the Wock when Blumendolt returned.

At least that is the way I imagined it as she told of the friendly Venusians opening their hearts and their homes to these men of their sister planet, until

they began to be emboldened to seize and pry.

But there were no hordes of gold, no jeweled idols, no encrusted temples, and Blumendolt was about to leave Venus forever, when Trita had told him of the blue jewel that lay like a strata of sparkling shale beyond the dense forests of the outlands. To afford proof she had taken a handful from the sacred pool where no one had dipped before.

Blumendolt would have travelled at once to the pool and laid open the ledge, but his oxygen tanks were low, so he took Trita along and made off for earth to resupply.

Leatha had stowed aboard, hoping to open a valve and thereby destroy both crew and herself, and thereby also, become the first murderer of her race. But she had failed. Blumendolt's crew had discovered her at the valves, though she escaped them by the help of a Venusian in Blumendolt's pay, who had mistaken her for Trita.

She smiled wryly, and went on, "You see I have a rather unhappy contact with those of your race. Still, I shall not think too evil of them because one was bad. I am sure you nor Kirsh will be like him."

"I'll never let you down," I vowed. I did not like to warn her of Kirsh. I felt it would belittle me in her eyes and I wanted her to think well of me. But I did know she had done about the worst thing she could in showing that metal to him. It was exactly like Trita had tempted Blumendolt. It would be a race between those two men now, of that I felt sure.

I did though give her a hint. She must have guessed more than I put into words for she clutched my sleeve, "Please, he isn't like that other? You are not all?"

"Not all," I assured her, "There is one man of earth who will never let you down, and he is Mauri Bronson."



"But Kirsh? He said he would help?"

"You poor kid," I groaned, "You're in the wrong world. Earth men are dirty mean, and a promise means nothing when they want to be rich. On Terra—be careful."

With that bit of advice I called a big, salmon colored Martian and told him to show her to Thirty Two, which was the nicest cabin I had.

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## CHAPTER V

### A KISS IN THE DARK

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IT was long after midnight when Kirsh came back to the office. He focused his muddy eyes upon me. "Where is the girl?"

My impulse was to tell him to go to hell. Instead I nodded down the corridor toward her room. I suppose down deep I didn't want him to suspect how she had hit me, as no other girl had ever so upset me before.

"Tell me," he said suddenly, "Did you ever hear anything peculiar about the women on Venus?"

"I never even knew there were women on Venus."

"Then let me tell you something that might save you trouble. I've been talking to Blumendolt. He was close mouthed about argonite, but spread it rather thick when he talked of the planet. Yet somehow it hit me he wasn't just trying to scare me off."

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," I burst out, "Don't you know he'll guess the girl came here?"

"What of it?" he barked, "I want a showdown. Besides he's ripe for a bargain. Isn't at all crazy about going back, but he wants the stuff. Wants it bad."

He lighted a black panetela from my box, and with it tilted skyward, blew thin, bluish smoke from his nostrils. He

threw a leg over my desk, lowered his heavy eyelids to squint through the view glass as though trying to penetrate the fifty million miles of void that curtained the planet which hid such valuable ore.

"But our bargain with the girl," I reminded.

"Don't be a damned fool," he growled harshly, "she's Venusian." There was an ugly insinuation I didn't like.

"One can never be sure of a Venusian," he added after a moment. "So keep your eyes and your imagination strictly on this!" He emphasized his remark with an oath and flipped the thousand dollar chunk of mineral on the desk.

"I don't get you," I said with enough ice to chill him.

"You simply haven't kept up," he drawled. "Venus would suffocate a red blooded man, and I don't mean CO<sub>2</sub>. A planet without money, without initiative. No private wealth, no variety anywhere, and everybody alike. But Blumendolt swears the moist climate and cloud blanket does grow dangerously beautiful girls, like our little Leatha in there."

"Kirsh," my tone should have warned him I was in no mood for banter, "take your own good advice. Keep your eyes and imagination strictly on this!" I picked up the argonite and flipped it back into his lap.

He allowed the piece to lie as it had fallen while he eyed me narrowly. Then he took up the piece, got off the desk, went over to the office safe and locked the argonite within. As he left the office he turned in the door. "Don't be a sap," he growled, and strode down the corridor.

What was he up to, I wondered. Why had he gone to the enemy. Was he about to trade Leatha down the river?

The more I studied, the more disturbed I became. There seemed but one thing to do, waken Leatha and find out all I could which might throw light on

the thinly veiled warnings Kirsh had let loose.

At her door I knocked lightly. Almost immediately it was opened.

"You weren't asleep?"

"You know little of Venus," she said with a twisted little smile as she took my fingers between her two palms. "What will you think of me when you learn I never sleep. We of Venus have no need of the queer half death all earth creatures seem to require."

Her palms were warm and intimate. They drained my speech and awakened me to a sense of incompleteness except when I was near her. The tough fabric which had grown about my heart during bleak hard years among the outer places of the system, thawed and flexed, and warm, young blood moved more violently as I leaned above her. My pulse seemed running away, I leaned nearer and she did not draw away.

Yet even as I leaned, she seemed remotely far off, reminding me of Polaris, steadfast and beautiful, yet fixed infinitely distant from the affairs of men. The difference in our native worlds lay like a chasm to keep us apart, with no possible bridge between our natures and our peoples.

THE soft perfume of her hair was alluring, but oh so alien, like a delicious incense around a pagan priestess, but as I looked down into her brilliant eyes I saw the soul of a woman looking back at me.

It struck me suddenly that all this was ridiculous. That she was no more Venusian than I, though I had to admit the texture of her complexion seemed hardly likely to survive open sunlight or raw wind. "How did you learn English?" I demanded, sure I had caught up with her.

She laughed right into my eyes. It made me feel rather dumb, but the laugh was pleasant, teasing rather than taunt-

ing, delighted rather than superior.

"Radio!" she exclaimed as though drawing a curtain. "We listen in to all your broadcasts. Long ago I learned your tongue. We Venusians have a gift that way, like earth men have for putting together machines."

"That then is why our manners are quite familiar to you?"

"No—o," she hesitated, "I would never say any of us are half smart enough for that, but we do know the words you use. Sometimes a voice catches one's fancy. That is why I came directly to you. I felt I knew you well. You know. The way most everyone feels about a voice that comes into the room day after day. I believe I have followed every one of your Wayside Talks on strange places you have explored."

She was too sincere to tolerate any suspicion of playing up to me, yet I must confess she could have hardly chosen a more direct and effective way to fairly hypnotize me. Here I had a loyal little fan I had not even dreamed could have been interested in those weekly talks I gave to defray part of the expenses of exploration. She swept me off my feet. For the moment I forgot the argonite, the chasm of alien generation that I had felt would lie so impassably between us.

Cloistered there in the dead of night with her alone, while the halo of her hair fell like a golden hood against her cheeks, and her body so supple and slender, and so very near I could have encircled it with my arm, the confession that I was far from a stranger quite completely took me off my feet.

There was an electric moment while she stood with parted mouth and widening eyes, first recognizing what she had done to me, then suddenly her hand sealed my mouth.

Her ears too must have been very sensitive to sound, for I stood several moments completely puzzled by her ac-

tion, before I heard cautious footfall stealing along the corridor outside.

We waited close to each other, her hand softly pressing. The warm scent of the perfume that hid in her hair flowed into me like opium smoke, or rather some unknown narcotic far more fantastic and exciting.

Came a rap on the door. We waited tensely silent.

Then there were words in an unknown tongue muffled by a mouth pressed against the keyhole.

Leatha breathed back a tumult of speech with ka-tuh and che-ak caught queerly under her tongue and the rest of it clicks and hisses.

"Who?" I demanded in a whisper.

The night light from a wall fell dimly upon her flushed face. There was no panic, no quickened breath, the soft blue panels of her bolero lay quietly upon her breasts.

She is brave, I thought.

The steps retreated. She caught both my hands as though for strength or help. "The Wock has orders to leave by daylight. The master is afraid of your friend. They will resupply on Luna, and thereby give him, how you say, the slip? For me, I must go back, quickly."

"Let me handle him," I said with sudden determination. "You wait here. If Kirsh asks, not a word of where I have gone."

"That is not the way," she objected. "He will call the police. Tomorrow the whole earth will know. Never will my people again have peace. Better let him go. We will be aboard, you and I."

"You stay here," I objected. "There will be nothing gained with you aboard. Let me handle this alone."

"I am not afraid with you," she said warmly and handed me a key. "I must be there. That is my mission. Wait anywhere you can hide until he is off, then come to one two third deck. I will be waiting for you."

I took the key, and an involuntary oath slid from my teeth. Her sleeve had slipped down the upraised arm. Down it coursed a fresh, red wound, as from the lash of a whip.

SHE saw my look fixed upon it and quickly shook down her sleeve, shook her head in mock rebuke. "Don't look for imperfections," she teased, "girls from Venus do not wish their ugly marks uncovered."

"Such a wound!" I protested, my heart going out to her and suffocating anger quickening my blood. "Did he?"

"The rope," she hastily corrected, "I slipped."

"You poor kid," I mumbled.

Her hair brushed my cheeks, her eyes lifted and there was wonder in them. As I leaned nearer her eyes grew deep. Her fingers tightened upon mine.

What other invitation would any man need to fold her into his embrace? Her chin raised, letting the cascade of her bright hair fall like moonlit mist around my arms, imprinting my memory with beauty neither time nor circumstance can ever erase. I, who had bludgeoned my way through hordes of black toothed rock eaters of Luna, trembled as I bent my head.

"Leatha," I whispered, breathless at her loveliness, and only then, when she raised her lips, I kissed her.

"Mauri," she said after my lips would allow her words again. "There is something I must tell you now. A warning."

"God you are beautiful," I ignored her words, entranced by the golden flecks that danced in her eyes.

"There is something you must know," she said so practically it irked me that she also had not been swept wild with romance. Now it was my turn to put fingers upon her mouth. "This is what I want to know more than anything else. Do you Venusians believe in love at first sight?"

"I do," she answered very seriously, "when one has heard a voice so long it has become the echo of one's heart. But there is something I must tell you, for your protection, for mine."

She was not to tell me then. There were steps in the corridor again. "Ko-ko is impatient," she kissed me quickly, "I will tell you so soon as you come aboard the Wock. Now I must go."

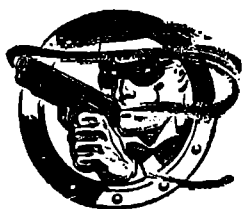
"Does the argonite mean so much to you then," I asked reproachfully.

"Not the argonite, Mauri, but peace, the peace and safety of my own lovely world. Those men would bring to it the bacillus of personal domination. Your story tellers write of invasions from Venus, Mauri. They over-rate their Earth. No part of Venus is likewise infested with germs and parasites. You see, Mauri, I have more practical reasons than pure idealism, for desiring to keep earth's ships away.

"I believe I begin to understand," I admitted, but wondered what she found in me to overcome such a monstrous handicap. "I'll get my gun, and we will go together."

"No, Ko-ko would be suspicious. It might spoil everything. Meet me aboard after take off."

"Depend on me," I vowed and waited while she slipped through the door and joined the Venusian who waited. As I stood in the dim silence of the room that had shared her, a great foreboding seeped into my courage. I didn't like at all for her to go alone. She had come so unexpectedly out of the night and now had gone back into it again. I wondered if I might not find myself unable to draw the curtain that hid her, that perhaps I might never see her again.



## CHAPTER VI

## DUPED

SOBER consideration raised many problems that must be met if we were to have a fair chance of checkmating Blumendolt. On my way back to the office I began to reproach myself for so precipitously falling into a scheme so likely to fail. No argument should have persuaded me to risk Leatha again to Blumendolt's power. Yet, even as better judgment overruled my earlier self-confidence, it did not dampen the exciting prospect of being off on romantic adventure with Leatha.

Such a strange night, I thought, as I rang for Kirsh. Why call on Kirsh? I asked myself. Partly, I suppose because it was an old habit having him along when looking for trouble, and partly because I did not feel quite justified in taking chances alone with the crew of the Wock where there would be neither law nor mercy once she cleared from earth.

Still I had not forgotten the way Kirsh had looked at Leatha. Not that I could blame him, nor any man, for being stirred by her. But I had thought Kirsh above the second look at any woman, however attractive. I had looked on him as a man with an asbestos lining in that respect, and I had heard that when a strong man breaks he goes to pieces.

So I stood with thumb on buzzer, debating whether to persist in calling him or refuse to ask him, if he answered. My recollection was vivid as I stood there in the darkness, his muddy brown eyes taking fire. Had he thought to fool me by his reference to the argonite? Wasn't he, after all, as much in love with her as I?

Through the view-glass there was Venus, a little nugget of liquid radiance low against the black horizon of earth—

a great world swaddled in white fleece, tugging at my imagination.

Yet far more disturbing than the mystery of that great world rolling down an endless bowl of space, was the recollection of Leatha's kiss, of her soft warm lips clinging, and the supple curve of her sweet young body without a slightest will to resist the impulse of my arms.

I pressed my hot forehead against the cold quartzite to marvel at her tender beauty, but more at her courage. Far indeed had she come from those she loved, those she understood, and the tranquility she prized so much, to battle new environment where she was well aware abounded pestilence against which her blood was in no way prepared by inoculation nor inheritance.

And because she was indeed so brave, because she had quickened to my kiss, because I had already begun to love her passionately, I newly resolved that Blumendolt should never threaten her nor her world again, nor lay his void burned fingers upon a single other fragment of the treasure that was none of his.

I turned to find Kirsh at the door observing me narrowly. He had on a black felt hat instead of his official cap. He looked quite villainous. The kind of villainy I wondered if a woman might not admire if she was romantically inclined.

"There's dirty work aboard," I said, jerking my thumb toward the Wock. "The girl and I are going to board her tonight. If I do not vaccuo from Luna, pick a crew for the Zest. You should be able to effect our rescue from Venus."

Kirsh's white teeth gleamed wickedly under his moustache. "Keep your attention on argonite," he reminded.

"And yours," I snapped back.

"Let's get this straight," said Kirsh. "If Blumendolt's planning to skip, why not beat his game. Shanghai him aboard some ship for Luna, then dump him

down a volcanic crack. He hasn't taken that crew into his confidence, I'll wager."

"Sounds OK. But don't make the mistake of trying to dump two instead of one."

The line of glistening teeth extended at the lip corners, otherwise he made no acknowledgment of understanding what I meant.

"Better take a flame gun," he cautioned. "Bullets miss. Don't imagine Blumendolt will have scruples."

Without reply I buckled on an automatic pistol. Burning a man was not my method.

WE took a manlift down into the hold, Kirsh going first. At the freight airlocks, almost in the spot where I had stood when I first saw Leatha, Kirsh stopped. Wait until I'm in. If all's clear, I'll signal."

He went down the loading chute and crossed the tramway. It wasn't nerve, going first like that. He and Blumendolt had been trying to trade. Even then I was not sure which Kirsh planned to sell out, Blumendolt or myself.

I was back in the shadow. He mounted the tram, sauntered casually into the freight lock. A guard halted him. He said a few words and the guard let him pass. Kirsh took but a step, wheeled, and felled the guard, ran into the darkness. Soon he was back again, gave me all clear, and again disappeared.

As I hurried across the alley-way I heard a tapping against the deck glass of my own ship. From the third deck it came, quick and insistent. I looked up.

Leatha had not left the ship. She was up there beckoning frantically. I hesitated only a moment. Kirsh would wait to make any attack until I joined him. Leatha certainly had some urgent message for me.

I hurried back to the manlift and

reached the third deck which was now in semi-darkness, but Leatha was standing so that the light from the corridor fell full upon her face.

I hurried along with a queer feeling that something was wrong with her. Something had happened to her eyes, her mouth, her posture.

She smiled encouragingly, yet I halted, puzzled and disconcerted. My bewilderment was slowly changing into distressing unbelief.

She had Leatha's rich hair, her gold flecked eyes, her delicate bloom of cheek, her impudent upturned nose, Leatha's every feature, every line and curve of her form, but she was as repulsive as a snake, and she stood as quivering rigid as a cobra that is about to strike.

She seemed then like a devil, or a vampire, that had stolen the body which had shown so much delightful allure. However much she looked like Leatha she could not be.

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## CHAPTER VII

### LOST IN THE SKY

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ALMOST immediately I recalled Leatha's interrupted warning. This was Trita, no doubt, the woman who had caused all Leatha's distress. It was this cold and beautiful serpent who had betrayed the argonite to Blumendolt, who was doubtless in love with him in her brittle way. Ko-ko too had probably mistaken her for Leatha and ignorantly betrayed to the enemy our plans, and she had trapped me.

There was no opportunity, however, to dwell upon past mistakes. From without the Zest came the muffled purr of warming engines. The Wock was losing no time, and Leatha was aboard at the mercy of Blumendolt, and Kirsh. On the in trip she had been compara-

tively free to move about because of her similarity to the girl before me. Since Blumendolt knew Trita was not aboard, she must be doubly imperiled.

Wheeling about I ran for the manlift, and after me, like a streak of pale fire along a fuse, came Trita.

She caught me in the corridor, her soft arms throttling my neck, drawing me back to her, my cheek against her hair.

I tore away, but she was on me again, "Mauri, Mauri, it is I, Leatha. Mauri, are you mad?"

But I knew that she lied, though her flesh was the flesh of Leatha with a fragrance so exotic never to be forgot.

I tore her arms apart, but could not bring myself to fight her as I would a man, though the growling below told me the engines were revving up and there was no moment to spare.

She was quick as a panther and her strength was surprising. Her arms entangled me again and again. "Mauri," she begged, even as she choked me, as she tripped me and blinded my eyes with her hair.

She was a devil, coiling, twining, constricting like a facile and powerful reptile, taking new holds so soon as her arms or legs were pried away.

I heard the Wock gunning up, moving down the rails to the take off. I slapped her face, but she held on, making little sobs between her begging. Then I let go, lay panting in her arms, with a lump swelling up in my throat. I was already too late to recover the Wock. No power of mine could return me to Leatha were I to lay out the girl atop me. For suddenly I remembered the airlocks would be sealed if I could catch the ship, and Blumendolt certainly would not be fool enough to open up and allow me aboard.

Her arms released me. She arose. I got up also, hurriedly.

"You were tough, all right," said the

girl. "I thought you would break in my face."

I glared, and in spite of myself my heart softened. She looked so like Leatha as I would always remember her, except of course for the hardness at the corners of her lips and the cold steel in her eyes.

"You're whipped," she went on. "Now be reasonable."

"You just think I'm whipped," I belated. "I'll vacuuo Luna and be there on his tail."

"That's all changed now," she taunted. "He'll not touch Luna."

"Then I'll hound him to Venus!"

"Sure and for what?"

"Leatha!"

"You poor fellow!" she mocked. "How little you know of us. You have blindly expected our planet to be as yours."

"I don't get you," I mumbled, preoccupied with a plan. If this girl loved Blumendolt, they must have arranged a meeting. Whatever planet they had agreed upon I could shadow her. But that was slow. Too slow. No telling what might happen to Leatha while I delayed.

"Venus has the blue mineral argonite, but it lacks one that has played a most important part in the history of your earth. Our land is very deficient in potassium salts."

"I still don't get you," I repeated.

"Sure," she agreed. "You are only a pilot. Had you been a chemist, or a biologist, at once you would have guessed. In my world there are no mutations—none whatever. Generations of Venus have not felt the effect of potassium salts."

"Don't you understand?" she went on as I stared stupidly. "There is no variation in species, nor types, *every woman on Venus is exactly alike!*

Still I stared, jaws hanging.

"You will find a thousand Leathas,

and never be sure of any one of them."

"I would know her," I vowed. "Whatever may be true about the effect of potassium radiations, there is a difference in individuality. She's no more like you than Catherine the Terrible!"

"No?" she sneered. "Maybe you think of Venus as a little ball in the sky that a man might sweep his hand over. Suppose she was lost here on your earth? Would it be easy to find her? And there are lean and fat, tall and short, dark and fair. On Venus?" she raised her eyebrows hopelessly.

"Then what of him?" I taunted becoming cunning. "Do you think he will come back?"

She gave me a queer look, then tumbled to what I was trying to do. "You really don't know us," she exclaimed. "A Venusian, you fool, never feels about the one she loves like that."

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## CHAPTER VIII

### RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX

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I NEVER saw Trita again though there was no device I did not try to discover where she had gone. None of the passenger lanes had taken her to Luna, nor had any of the freighters booked her. My ultimate conclusion was that she had taken a leaf from Leatha and stowed on some outbound rocket. It was only after long months of tracking and searching that I discovered she had taken a Salo Rocket for Mars, almost the opposite course to Venus at that position of the planets. And by then I had no need of looking to her further. Blumendolt never kept his promise to meet her.

All the while I had private agencies tracing the girl I fitted the Zest for the perilous attempt at landing on Venus. as later developed.

Trita at that time was surely on earth,

A picked crew for my purpose was a mean job, and besides the regular provisions and oxygen supplies, I prepared extra oxygen, tools, and explosives to blast the argonite. After all, if we landed successfully, Leatha should have a shipload of wealth for her sufferings.

That was the most trying, the most distressing, and the most determined month of my life. Finally all was set and with airlocks sealed I warmed up and drifted the ship out to the runway.

As I opened the guns the whole ship buckled as though heaving apart. Immediately I cut power, dropped down the manlift and ran out into the night, followed by members of the crew.

When I reached the stern of the ship I began to understand how loyal to a man a Venusian could be. The spotlight fell into a gaping hole. Part of the hull was peeled open. Flues were blown to bits. Anywhere I moved I stumbled over fragments of the powerful and costly combustion engines and chambers.

Bitter with furious hatred and frustration, I cursed Blumendolt, but could not help admire the courage of the minx who had risked all to carry out her pledge to the man she loved, though only God could know what she found in him.

The more I surveyed the wreckage, the more distressed I became. It would take a year, perhaps more to repair the damage even had I the enormous credit it would require to finish the job. I groaned as I thought of the argonite ledge. There was enough on Venus to buy me a ship, but Blumendolt, not I, would be the first to reach it.

Involuntarily I stared across the breast of the earth to where Venus shone steadily and with such impassive splendor. And amid the ruin I raised my hand and swore, "Leatha, I will not fail you a third time. If you live some day again I will hold you in my arms."

So, biting down my despair, I turned on my heel and went up to the office to start engineers to drafting plans.

That was a desperate year. I exploited every means within the boundary of common sense, and I still lacked a great deal of money. It was then I hit upon the scheme of lecturing on the possibilities of biological consistences on a potassium minus Venus. After each lecture I would raise enough money in the interest of science for the expedition.

Little by little I discovered that my romance with Leatha was creeping into my talks about the planet, its ideology and its perfections. After all it was Leatha, and not science, which drove me on and on, day and night.

Not once did I pass the freight lock, nor the shadowy smells of the hold, but Leatha haunted them again, like a dear mystic flame that my eyes could not quite make out, but which I could perceive intensely in my heart.

Always she seemed to be puzzled, as though unable to understand why I had failed her. Always she seemed defending me to herself, repeating over and over that I was not like Blumendolt. That I had not betrayed her.

Yet I knew how it must seem that I had. Kirsh aboard, and he had been bargaining to sell her out. And I hanging behind. At that point I would put the thoughts of all that concerned her away.

So she was always on my mind, and gradually her story came out in my radio talks. Maybe she would be listening I thought as I told my tale. Perhaps she would come swinging down the gull of some space tramp to slip across the trams into the freight locks again. The public liked the spiel and the subscriptions grew, and I began to watch beside the freights every night, hoping by some wild chance she might come hurrying across the trams.



THEN one night a vacuuo came which exploded my whole scheme even more disasterously than the bomb Trita had placed in the hold.

Kirsh was back on Luna. This was the message. "Stranded. Vacuuo passage money and any excuse you think up for ditching me so completely that night. The girl tried to still believe in you. Really I felt sorry for the kid. It occurred to me to make you out a damned coward. She had seen the last of you. It helped to give me the breaks.

"If this sounds soft you're in for a shock. We were married on Venus. She changed completely soon after we landed.

"There wasn't any argonite, at least we failed to find it. Blumendolt insisted, and wanted to go to Mars for a dame he called Trita. He believed she would know where the stuff was. The crew mutinied. They put him off in a life rocket, me too, but Leatha was too smart for them. So here we are. Passage money and the old job and I don't remember a thing. KIRSH."

"So," I muttered half aloud, "he was too much for her. Funny how women go for his type."

The shock of it came slowly, it seemed so unreal that Leatha should have forgotten so soon. I would go on with the expedition, of course, but without any heart in it.

Kirsh, the bearded pirate of the void, coming home with a wife. It was rather ridiculous. And his note as tame as that of an office clerk coming back to his desk.

Then like a stab that begins to hurt minutes after the numb, deadening shock, I remembered Leatha across the desk there, in that leather upholstered chair, eager with her cause; then in room 32, the golden flecks in her earnest eyes, and finally with a twitch of pain, the touch of her lips, eager, lingering, responsive.

Well I had had my dream, and I was glad that she had survived the peril of being aboard with Blumendolt. As I sat it was difficult to judge which would have hurt less, that she had gone to her death still questioning my failure to keep faith, or coming back as the wife of the man I was beginning to hate, more and more bitterly.

I reached for a vacuuo pad. It was out of the question to give Kirsh his old position. The first month one of us would be killing the other. Perhaps, I wondered, he might like to conclude the expedition. After all Leatha would be invaluable on Venus. If I offered the ship.

But in that despondent state of mind I decided a man should make no decisions. I pushed away the pad and rested my chin in a palm as I stared through the view window at shadowy tramways far below. My thoughts, like those of an old man who lives only in his recollections, were of Leatha.

Behind me came footsteps and a boy in uniform handed me another message. It too was from Luna.

"Mauri. I heard your story on the ship's radio, and again on Venus. I wanted to walk into the freight locks out of nowhere, to surprise you, but I have learned Kirsh has just sent you a message. I should have told you about Trita and how much all girls are alike on Venus. I only excuse myself because it was so necessary to take no delay that night. Kirsh is married to a Venusian girl he calls Leatha. While he was in my country it was funny to watch him, there were so many all around with eyes and hair and noses all alike. I don't know how he can be sure of even his own wife.

"The argonite is safe. Blumendolt was taken from the life rocket but he did not live. So there is nothing that I come to ask of you, except that maybe you tell me again, *Ki ti lami*, which in

my tongue means "I love you."

"No answer," I said to the boy and tossed him a coin.

Then I sat puzzled indeed, swung between hope and disbelief.

Which was Leatha, Kirsh's wife or the other? Soon, of course, I would know. I had no doubt the moment I saw her, or at most, when I took her in my arms again, I should lose all doubt. But until then a thousand little ideas thrust stinging questions at my mind.

She had heard my radio speeches. From them she could have gathered the salient items of my contact with Leatha. Was she Leatha really, or some adventuress of the Trita type after romantic adventure? Or perhaps my story had prompted action on the part of some young thing who was sorry for me?

Looking back on those times, I am not sure, even today, which was Leatha. Whether the woman who all these years has remained loyal, helpful and beloved, is the same dear girl who put up her lips to receive my kiss that eventful night in cabin 32 of my old rocket ship.

**B**OTH proved to be identical in appearance, as of course I expected. But I failed ever to separate their dainty, gentle natures so as to ever say to myself surely, this one is Leatha, or that one can not be.

There was a way, a simple test, but I never had the courage to try it, since one was already married to Kirsh and the other to me. If I discovered Kirsh had married the true Leatha, always my unkept pledge would haunt me, or I might even have found there was yet another who had perished aboard the Wock, who never understood why I had failed her.

For that reason I asked her never to let me look upon the arm the rope had burned until the scar of it was healed.

She never did. Sometimes I believe she would have insisted upon proof, if she had been Leatha indeed. But she is Venusian, and they have queer ideas of loyalty. She might have thought it unfaithful for her not to wish to acquiesce in that which I demanded so fervently.

