

THRILLING

# wonder

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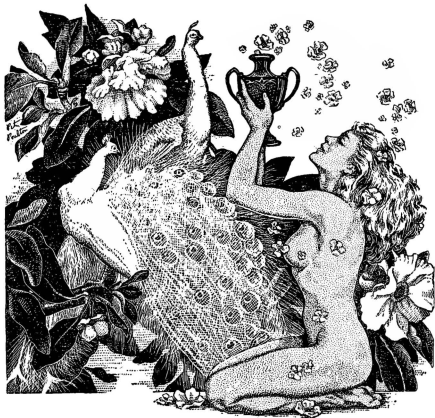
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*It started with Martian perfume . . . but it turned into a stinking mess!*



# The Unreliable Perfumist

By MARGARET ST. CLAIR

**D**USK had come down, thin, blue and bitter cold, over the Martian desert; but under Marsport dome ten thousand bobbing lights mocked the evening, and the air was thick and warm. From end to end of Ares Avenue the little abrotanon-cars swirled in corruscating

clusters before pleasure spots, danced up and down or floated motionless. And every car that flitted past left behind it a trail of fabulous Martian perfume.

A luxury capital, a pleasure city par excellence, Dirk Innes thought as he

watched the abrotanon-cars circling. There was nothing like this on Terra. Beside the pageant of Marsport at night, anything on his home planet seemed provincial and crude. He was glad he'd tossed up his job and come, glad he'd been hot-headed and imprudent. It was worth while. The perfumes alone. . .

No wonder they called Marsport "the city of perfumes," or, quoting Chou Kleor, the long-dead poet of the red planet, spoke of "scented Mars." The scents in the air were smooth and heavy and sweet, bitter and passionate, cool and withdrawn as the smooth petals of pink peronia petals against the lips. There was musk and ambrette, the sharp ecstasy of kileis buds. There were perfumes in the air, Dirk knew, that would come back to him hauntingly, as a strain of music troubles the mind; there were scents which seemed able to create, by themselves, a whole fantastic world.

Meantime, he ought to leave Ares Avenue and go around the corner to register at the Labor Exchange. He squared his shoulders and sighed. The trip from Terra had left him only a few dollars, but there would be no difficulty about getting something to do: the system was always short-handed.

It was going to be hard to be sensible. Cold-blooded calculation had never been Dirk's long suit. The sweet-scented dusk ought to have something better for him than filling out a meter-long application and standing for a vibragraph. The swarm of abrotanon-cars danced past him; and every one of them, Dirk felt, held the promise of some heady, dangerous encounter, some situation, delightful and ambiguous, outside the ordinary pale. Marsport, tonight, seemed the very pattern of adventure and romance.

It might have been an hour later when Dirk, regretful, turned to go. Traffic was lighter and he was hungry; it would have to be the labor exchange after all.

An abrotanon-car passed by him, paused, hovered, and returned. From the cushioned interior a woman—a Hartiap,

certainly, with the faint golden glow of the skin showing through her veil—leaned toward him and said in a rippling voice, "Get in, young man."

Adventure . . . romance. Dirk felt his heart thump pleasingly. A little unsteady from excitement, he got into the car and seated himself among the cushions near the unknown. The tiny chariot rose swiftly in the air, hesitated, then began to go quickly toward the east.

There was a silence. The lights of the city were below them now, and Dirk could make out his companion's face but dimly. She was beautiful, certainly, and her perfume was a unique marvel, a golden phoenix of a scent. It made him feel a little drunk. Once the lady turned her dark eyes toward his face, and he could have sworn she was laughing at him.

She would think he was a fool. He must do something, say something, break his boorish silence. She had, no doubt, thought him a man of the world, and now . . .

With desperate resolution, Dirk slid toward her and slipped his arm around her waist.

**F**OR a moment the unknown endured the caress; then she pulled back from him and began to laugh, trill after trill of the most delightful mirth. Abashed, his ears growing hot, Dirk moved back to his former place.

"Young man," she said, still between peals of merriment, "I suppose you are not to blame for your mistake. Natural enough. However . . ."

She turned the fluor on in the car and at the same time threw back her veil. In the warm light Dirk saw the traces of crows' feet around the eyes, the light etching of parallels over the forehead, and realized that his lady, though beautiful still, must be on the edge of sixty years.

"Come, no sulks," she said in her golden voice. "I think none the worse of you for your display of enterprise. I hope that you will take dinner with me,

and afterward . . . I may have something to say to you." She settled back. —

Dirk nodded. He could have said nothing at the moment had his life depended on it. The car, which all this time had been going east, began to sink softly and came to rest on the roof of a mansion.

"We are at the very edge of Marsport," his companion said as she opened the door, "and high up, as you can see. I like to have the city at my feet. . ."

They began to float gently down the shaft of the mini-grav.

They dined on golden trout from Lake Denon, on breast of marsh-hen baked under vacuum bells with scarlet poly-pore and asparagus, and on a salad of young akkar shoots (imported from Aphrodition, his hostess said) dressed with twenty subtle Martian condiments. With every dish the robot-servant—not humanoid, like those on Terra, but a sort of pyramid with five flexible arms—offered the complement of dreamy, stormy-hearted Martian wine. There could be no question, Dirk reflected, but that the cookery of the red planet deserved its fame as much as did its art of perfume. He said as much to his hostess.

"Ah?" she replied. "—the strawberries, by the way, are for you. I think them the finest of your Terra's fruits, but I no longer care for sweets."

Then she sat silent, seeming to think, until Dirk started to light a cigarillo. "Mah ton!" she said, taking it from his hand. "Not here! Why, I should be unable to work for days. Young man, do you know who I am?"

The wine had oiled Dirk's rusty tongue. "A lovely woman," he said.

She threw back her head and laughed, and her throat was as firm as a young girl's. "You are a rascal! I knew that when I picked you up. Young man, my name is Alexandra Kordenay, and I am head perfumist for the Marsport prefecture. No doubt you have heard of me."

Dirk had not, but he nodded. Head perfumist—perfectly reasonable.

"In other words," Mme. Kordenay

went on, "I am an artist, a creator, and as such am in need of leisure and quiet to create. All I have asked of life is that creative quiet. Yet, through no fault of my own, I have been embroiled in disturbances and dissensions enough to have broken a stronger spirit than mine.

"The ingratitude, the back-biting, the selfishness which I have met in my life would fill volumes. From my husband, from my child, from my fellow-workers—that ingratitude which, as one of your earth poets says, is sharper than a serpent's tooth. Sometimes I wonder how I have stood it all."

"Bad thing, ingratitude," Dirk said gravely.

For a moment Alexandra Kordenay's wonderful dark eyes flashed. "You are insolent!"

"Oh, no," Dirk replied, shocked. No. Certainly not. Meant no harm—ingratitude is a bad thing."

MME. KORDENAY'S frown slowly diminished. She looked at Dirk thoughtfully. The wine, no doubt," she observed. "Well, I spoke of ingratitude. In personal relations I have endured it somehow; but in my life as an artist I cannot tolerate, I cannot connive at ingratitude and dishonesty.

"Among us-perfumists there is an old tradition, a usage having almost the force of law, which dictates equal access to perfume sources and materials. Even our formulae are generally not kept secret for more than two years.

"Judge, therefore, my chagrin when I discovered last month that the head perfumist of Babranton—it's in the South Canal district—had, managed, somehow, to monopolize the entire supply of alaphronine and was refusing to give me a single c.c. with which to experiment. (I shall be betraying no secrets in telling you that alaphronine is a fixative which is just coming into use in perfumery and which seems likely to change our whole conception of the nature of scent. Its possibilities appear

to be endless.)

"I humbled myself. I wrote to the perfumist in the most conciliatory terms, asking for some alaphronine. As I might have expected from such an upstart, a person completely lacking in the artistic temperament, I received no answer. I was wounded to the heart!"

Mme. Kordenay was looking both pathetic and heroic. Dirk wanted to reach out and pat her hand, but it seemed like a lot of work just now. He compromised on clicking his tongue in commiseration.

"I decided," the perfumist went on, playing with the stem of her wineglass while the jewels at her fingers and wrists flashed out colored fire, "that I must look about for a champion, someone who would help me right this injury. Tonight, when I saw you standing on Ares Avenue, I knew that I had found my man. I feel sure that I am not mistaken in you."

A certain amount of caution stirred in Dirk's mind. Mme. Kordenay was certainly womanhood at its most alluring, but something seemed to hint that she was also womanhood at its most reliable. "Um-hum," he said.

"Oh, I knew I could depend on you," Mme. Kordenay cried delightedly. "Now what I want you to do for me is to go to Babranton, get some of the alaphronine, and bring it back to me. It's quite simple, really. I have a little 'copter you may use."

"Wha—but—"

"I knew when I saw you that you were a daredevil, a man who enjoyed risks," she went on quickly. "I am never mistaken in a man."

This somewhat flattering characterization had an element of truth in it. Dirk could only mumble and nod his head.

Mme. Kordenay went over to a book chest and came back with a large stereo map. Here's Babranton," she said, pointing. "Near the south polar cap. And right here is the head perfumist's house. Do you see this marsh along the west side? They've got a force field all around

the place except just there, so you'll have to land the 'copter on one of the solid spots and go in through the swamp.

"I'm afraid it won't be very pleasant, but it can't be helped. The mud has a perfectly dreadful smell, and there are leeches. Those are merely temporary discomforts, but there is a venomous little snake in the swamp which you really must be careful about. If you see a sort of whirring under the surface of the mud, get back. Don't take chances with them.

"Now, there won't be any trouble getting inside the house once you're up to it. They depend on the force field to keep intruders out. Here's a map of the house." She produced a little sketch and clipped it onto the top of the stereo map. "This is the laboratory. The alaphronine will be in it, of course, and you won't have any trouble locating it, because of two properties it has. Despite its use in perfumery, it has a dreadful smell, like a decaying glue manufactory, and it has a definitely reddish phosphorescence in the dark."

Mme. Kordenay paused. Dirk had the impression that she was just a little embarrassed. "Alaphronine has been used by some people as a nerve stimulant—a drug, in fact—and the Martian government has made its possession, except by qualified people, illegal," she said rather quickly. "So you must be careful not to be stopped while you have it with you."

Dirk's grin was twisted. Venomous snakes and a touch of drug smuggling. Mme. Kordenay certainly wasn't modest in her demands. But she was an excellent psychologist. She had picked the right man to steal the alaphronine for her; wild horses would not have been able to hold him back. Despite her years and the general impression of untrustworthiness she gave, he thought she was the most attractive woman he had ever seen. "O. K." he said.

"You dear boy!" she responded, beaming at him. Quickly she leaned across the table and kissed him on the mouth. Dirk blinked. "What are you thinking of, you

rascal?" she asked teasingly when she had settled back in her place.

He couldn't be in love with her; she was old enough to be his mother. But—"Just wishing you were twenty years younger or I were forty years older," Dirk replied.

Alexandra Kordenay laughed so delightedly that dimples appeared in her cheeks. "I can see that I have been too pessimistic about this generation," she observed at last. "When it produces young men like you, there is still hope. Now, about details. . . ."

AS HE struggled through the stinking yellow mud toward the perfumist's house at Babranton, Dirk decided that Mme. Kordenay had been far from frank with him. She'd spoken of two kilometers of swamp, but he'd already come five at least, and the house was still distant. (A swamp on Mars was an anomaly anyhow; the water must come from the polar ice cap, and the warmth from some sort of vulcanism.) From what she'd said, he had visualized the mud as being ankle-deep, but it nearly reached his chest. And it was alive with snakes.

Just before he had left Mme. Kordenay's house in the 'copter, she'd told him, looking faintly maternal, to be *careful*; there was no known antidote to their bite. Well, he was doing his best. The mud in front of him whirred ominously, and Dirk floundered hastily to the right.

Whenever he hoisted a portion of himself above the mud, it was festooned with brownish leeches clinging to the surface of his impervi-suit, looking for a place to start sucking his blood. He'd already pulled two or three away from the weak spots of his suit. Adventure h'm.

He made the terrace of the perfumist's house at last. There had been nearly half a kilometer of well-kept garden between the edge of the swamp and the house, but Dirk was still so plastered with mud that he stopped to scrape as much of the stuff from himself as he could before slipping the lumisurd louver out of its

frame and entering the house. The light was still thin and grey; it would have been impossible to cross the swamp at night, and Mme. Kordenay had told him over and over that no one in the perfumist's household would be up until late in the day.

According to the map, the laboratory should be to the right of the room Dirk had entered by. He padded down the corridor, noting absently that the lumigraphs on the walls were originals and showed the perfumist to be a chap with excellent taste, until he came to the door. Mme. Kordenay had told him that if it was locked he'd have to go up to the second floor and let himself down to the laboratory windows. Fortunately, it was unlocked.

The laboratory was a room as big as a pharrar rink, the walls lined from ceiling to floor with bottles of essential oils and fixatives. A little stepladder on wheels stood by the side to help the perfumist get down whatever he might want.

Dirk looked over the bottles which had been left sitting out on the various working surfaces of the room. No alaphronine. He got the stepladder and began a systematic survey of the shelves.

Twenty minutes passed, and he hadn't found the alaphronine. He was beginning to get nervous when it occurred to him that, by now, the room was too light for the phosphorescence of the alaphronine to show up. Hastily he darkened the laboratory and was relieved, after his eyes had grown used to the dark, to find the alaphronine in a small bottle about two-thirds of the way down on the south wall of the room.

He pulled out the stopper to make sure. Dead fish, rotting flesh, manure in the sun—how could they use stuff like this in perfumery? Anyhow, he had indubitably found what he was after. He shoved the stopper in solidly and began looking about for something to carry the bottle in. It—

"Mama sent you, I suppose," a voice behind him said.

DIRK spun about. A girl, dark-haired and stormy-eyed, was facing him. She was wearing night attire so transparent that he could have counted her pores had the light been a little better, and he saw, ever at first glance, that she markedly resembled Mme. Kordenay.

"You came through the swamp, I suppose," she went on. "Yes, there's one of those disgusting leeches on your elbow. You'd better pull it off; their bites infect."

"Mechanically Dirk obeyed. "What—" he said.

"It was clever of her to think of sending you in by the swamp," she continued. "The chap before you smashed up his 'copter against the force field, trying to get in. I might have known mama would find another volunteer—even at her age, she has an effect like catnip on most males."

"I thought this was the head perfumist's house," Dirk said. He still felt dazed.

"It is. I'm the head perfumist—Lalage Kordenay. Why? Didn't she even tell you it was her daughter she was trying to rob?"

"No. I—" Dirk swallowed. He felt both defensive and confused. "She said you wouldn't let her have any alaphronine, and it was unethical."

"I wouldn't, and it is," Lalage agreed. "But I don't suppose she told you about what she did to me with the kaligenool three years ago, did she? She let the other members of the perfumists' guild have small quantities, but I couldn't get even half a gram. I nearly drove the chemists crazy nagging them before they got it synthesized, and then it cost fifty-six times as much to produce as the natural oil did. I resolved then that I'd pay her back if I got the chance. . . I ought to turn you over to the police."

"Unh—" Dirk said.

"They'd probably send you to Pluto for life," Lalage said sardonically. "Alaphronine—its name means 'mind-maddening'—is just about the most dangerous drug in the pharmacopoeia. The

courts always hand out the maximum sentences in connection with it."

"Listen—" Dirk protested.

"She didn't tell you that either, did she? Oh, well. . . let's have some light." Lalage pressed a button. In the increased illumination, Dirk could see that her figure was, so to speak, solid gold, and twenty-four carat at that.

For a moment she stood by the window, tapping her naked foot against the floor. "I tell you what I'll do," she said finally. "I'll let you have about two centimeters, with a warranty, pass, and so on, so you'll be in the clear legally, and you can take it back to her. On the whole, I've paid her back for that kaligenool business—that letter she wrote asking for some alaphronine did my heart good—and I might as well be polite." She yawned. "This is hours before I usually get up," she said plaintively. "The smell of the alaphronine awakened me when you took the stopper out. How about having a cup of tea with me before you start back?"

"Fine. I mean, *fine*."

OVER the steaming beverage, never more welcome than in this early morning hour, Lalage confided to Dirk some of the difficulties and disappointments of a perfumist. She had, it seemed, been trying for the last eighteen months to get hold of a tuber, reputed to be found somewhere in the great Central desert, which one or two anthropologists said was used as a perfume and intoxicant by the scattered desert tribes. Since the tuber grew underground, it was difficult to locate, and there were some eight thousand square kilometers in which to look for it. What she really needed was a resourceful man, one who wasn't afraid of hardship, to look for it. If—

"You're centered, gesell," a voice behind Dirk said. It was a high, mean voice, with a chuckle in it somewhere. Dirk felt a tiny cold circle at the back of his neck. "You and the wheena both."

"What do you want?" Lalage asked

sharply. She did not sound especially afraid.

"Oh, that." The unknown snickered. "The groot. The meema. The—what you call it—alaphro stuff."

"It's on the table in front of us," Lalage replied.

"Thanks. Don't move—I got two sliver guns, and you're centered to hell. Ever see a guy shot by a sliver gun? Sure is fun to watch." The unknown appeared in front of them, sidling delicately, his eyes fixed on their faces. His skin was deeply fretted and yellowish, his eyes inhumanly blank.

"Ah," he exclaimed, picking up the alaphronine with his left hand, still covering them with the sliver guns. "Groot. Good old groot." He drew out the stopper, inhaled with evident enjoyment, and then touched the stopper lightly to the tip of his tongue. He set the bottle down and shivered, transfixed with delight.

Dirk did not hesitate. Lalage had said alaphronine was the most dangerous drug in the pharmacopoeia, and the man had two sliver guns. Dirk threw the pot full of scalding tea at him and then tackled him around the legs.

The man staggered under the impact, but did not fall. There were two soft whooshes as the guns discharged into the carpet. Dirk clutched the stranger to him desperately and applied pressure scientifically to the proper spot on the man's right forearm. The man grunted and ground his teeth, but it seemed a long time before he let the sliver gun drop; Dirk realized that the alaphronine was acting as an insulator on his nerves. And he still had one sliver gun.

They struggled furiously for a moment and then the gunman broke away from Dirk. Saliva was running from the corner of his mouth, and he was shaking with gusts of private merriment. He raised the sliver gun.

Dirk dove for him again. Thank God, he thought, my reflexes are 5.23% quicker than average. That ought to bring me up about even with this lunatic. If I can

get hold of him once more, I'll try to break his spine. No matter what that drug has done to him, it won't keep his spine from breaking when I bend him back.

The sliver gun was murmuring softly beside his right ear. The magazine held about two hundred darts. If one of them—

Dirk began to bend the gunman backward.

The body in his arms grew bonelessly limp, then contracted in a severe tonic spasm. Grimly, Dirk held on.

"I think you might as well let him go," Lalage said in his ear. "I shot him with that little gun, the one you made him drop. Is he dead?"

The gunman had gone limp once more. "No," Dirk answered, "even if you hit him in a vital spot, he'll go on like that for an hour or two, alternating tetany and going limp. Those sliver guns are nasty things."

"It was in the back of the hand," Lalage said, looking at the silently writhing man. His lips were drawn back from his teeth, and the whites showed around his eyes.

"Then he'll live. We'd better tie him up."

**D**IRK was about half-way through the process of trussing up the man when he heard footsteps on the terrace outside. He turned, picking up one of the sliver guns. There was a polite, deprecating cough.

"Why, it's dad!" Lalage exclaimed excitedly. She opened the big helioplex shutter wide. "Come on in. What are you doing here, snorkie?"

Edward Kordenay was dripping yellowly with mud from the swamp, and there were leeches all around the clasps of his shoes, but he had dignity.

"Well, you see I . . . why, that's Willie you've got tied up, isn't it? No wonder he didn't come back to where I was waiting! And who's this strange young man, Lalage?"

"Mama sent him to steal the alaphro-



nine," Lalage replied, "and he's promised to go to the Central desert to hunt those kmna tubers for me." She paused and looked at her father sharply. "Did you send that meema taster here? He had two sliver guns. What were you up to?"

Edward Kordenay looked faintly ashamed. "I suppose you mean Willie," he replied. "Yes, I'm afraid I did. I didn't realize he took drugs, of course. Why? Did he bother you?"

"Well, a little," Lalage answered. "Don't tell me you were after the alaphronine, too."

Mr. Kordenay sighed. "You know how your mother's temper is, dear," he said. "I've been, so to speak, sleeping out in the hexapod house for the last three months. I thought I might be able to conciliate her if I had some alaphronine."

"Why, dad, all you had to do was to ask me for it! You know I'd do anything for you."

"Yes, dear, but how would that have helped? If your mother had thought we were cooperating to placate her, she'd have been angrier than before. I had to steal the stuff." He sneezed.

"You'll take cold in those wet things,"

Lalage said. "You go upstairs and find something dry to put on, and I'll make more tea for all of us. And then we'll call the hospital and have them take Willie away. I understand alaphronine addiction can be cured."

The gunman was securely tied up by now. Dirk looked over to where Lalage was silhouetted against the light from the window.

"Your daughter, sir, he said to Edward Kordenay, "is a remarkably beautiful woman, even though I didn't realize I'd promised to get those tubers for her. By the way, my name's Dirk Innes."

"How do you do," Kordenay replied politely. "Yes, she takes after her mother in more ways than one." He looked down at Dirk, still on his knees, with a faint smile. "Young man," he said, "I don't know exactly what the future—or, more accurately, Lalage—has in store for you, but I've lived with her mother for almost thirty years. On the whole, I've enjoyed it. Women like her take a good deal of handling, but they can be exceptionally rewarding. I don't know exactly what Lalage will do after you get the tubers for her. But I think you're going to enjoy it."

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