

fantastic

ADVENTURES

OCTOBER 1947

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SOME time back we ran a story by a newcomer to the fantasy field, Margaret St. Clair. Remember her short story, "Rocket to Limbo"? Well, since we bought her first fantasy yarn, Miss St. Clair has been doing all right for herself we understand. And we're certainly glad to hear it. Anyway, this month we're presenting a new story by Miss St. Clair, a short yarn entitled, "Whenever the Sun Shines." It's a clever little yarn about a spinster on board a space liner returning from Venus to Earth. Actually, the little old lady doesn't do much in the story except sit on the passenger deck, knitting and watching people. But the people she watches turn out to be quite interesting, especially one man who it is rumored has in his possession a very valuable crown. There is something quite odd about this man, she decides, after watching him closely during the voyage. But just how odd she never does find out, because— but there we go again, almost spoiling the story for you. We've got a hunch you'll really like this yarn, but then, maybe we're prejudiced because we liked it! Anyway, Miss St. Clair is proving that she can really write top-notch fantasy. And that's what we want!

Whenever the Sun Shines

The man with the crown seemed to be such a nice quiet man. You would not have suspected that—



Sitting there in the sun, knitting, she was perfectly relaxed and peaceful. But it seemed there was someone watching . . .



by
**MARGARET
St. CLAIR**

THE bribes he paid had been terrific. Even now, on the space liner, with the Evagori crown safe in his hand case and no doubt at all in his mind that he would be able to get it through the customs inspection on Terra, Breece felt a sort of haggard irritation at the thought. And the insults, the peculiarly Venusian brand of insults,

he had had to submit to—! Nothing terrestrial could impress a Venusian; their attitude was always that a Earthman was honored to be on the surface of Venus at all. It was as though in every Venusian mind was a constant perception of, a constant awareness of, the existence of Ieradon.

In a way it was justified. As soon as the first space ship from Terra had touched on Venus, Breece knew, Ieradon had become a place of pilgrimage for the men of earth. It had always been one for the Venusians. They spoke of going "up to Ieradon"—Ieradon was a mountain city, set among the first peaks of the lofty Damnaor range—with a peculiar lift and thrill in their lilting tones. The men from Earth—

Even a man as unperceptive as Breece felt the absurdity of calling them tourists. No one tried to capitalize on Ieradon, no money was made from it. It stood on the peak where it had been built four thousand years ago, and had the mountains for its handmaidens. *It was*. And the people came to it from Terra, driven by a passionate hunger, a consciousness of something which had always been unfulfilled; the people from Terra came to Ieradon and were satisfied.

The planes always circled twice above Ieradon before they landed. As they made their long circuit over the city, wheeling like eagles in the dark-blue sky, a sigh, a gasp—Breece had heard it when he went to Ieradon—would always sweep over the ship. Breece had been standing beside a dark-skinned couple (both middle-aged, their bodies thickened with the years, the woman's face a blank, enameled mask) on the first great circuit and had seen the incredulous joy begin to glow in them. The man had turned to his wife, almost babbling, with words

that surely had not been in his mind since the days some teacher had read them aloud, droning over the book, in school.

"The world's great age begins anew, the golden years return—' Why! That's," he gestured toward the city through the ports, "*that's* what he meant!"

"Yes . . . yes . . ." the woman had answered him, her face transfigured, her eyes smiling as if she had seen an angel, while tears of joy poured down her cheeks.

Ieradon.

The woman sitting beside Breece on the observation deck, a Mrs. Hartley-Weems, coughed and cleared her throat. "The captain says we'll be docking on Terra in just under forty-four hours," she said.

"Does he? Well, that's fine."

"Yes, I think so. Of course Venus has its points, but I do feel there's no place like one's home planet." She leaned toward Breece. "By the way," she said in a lower tone, "have you noticed that *extraordinary* man?"

BREECE followed the direction of her gaze to the man who was standing with binoculars by the visiports. He seemed a little taller and slighter than most terrestrials, but Breece found it difficult to make out the details of his appearance because his eyes had begun to water and blur.

"Yes, he is an odd sort of chap," he answered. "Venusian, from his looks."

"I suppose so," Mrs. Hartley-Weems replied. "And yet, he doesn't seem quite like a Venusian. There's something about him I can't quite place, something odd." She was frowning. "He reminds me of—no, it's gone again . . .

"He doesn't have his meals in the dining salon, either. I described him

to the purser, trying to find out who he was and what cabin he had—I think it's pure snobbishness not to know who your neighbors are on a small ship like this—and *he* said there was no such person on the passenger list. He was almost rude about it. The service one gets everywhere nowadays! Really, I don't know what's got into everyone." She sighed and settled back in her deck chair.

Breece made a commiserative noise and went on with his thoughts.

He had first heard of Liparinthi some six years ago, from a very drunk, very unhappy Venusian in a wretched little saloon on the outer edge of Aphrodition. The Venusian had been telling Breece a circumstantial narrative about his relations with a woman named Maera. Maera had rebuffed him painfully, repeatedly, and over a long period of time.

"Finally I said to her, 'Maera, you are the most beautiful girl I have ever seen. Do you want to be like Liparinthi, too high to be thought of, too sacred to be touched?' And she said—"

"Liparinthi?" Breece had interrupted the drunk.

"Yes, Liparinthi. *You* know; the place we never talk about. The place that is not on any map." He was extremely drunk; he must have thought Breece was a Venusian like himself.

They had been talking in low tones; how could the men at the other tables have heard them? But a Venusian sitting over by the wall pushed back his chair and came over to the two men with a swift, cat-like tread. He had tilted back the drunk's head with the fingers of one hand and stared into his face. "Keep with your own kind, brother," he had said. "You are drunk." And then, to Breece: "What has he been telling you? Earthman, what did he say?"

"He's so drunk I could hardly understand him. Something about a woman, some girl of his."

"Ah." The Venusian frowned at him. Suddenly a sliver-gun appeared in his hand, the tiny, deadly weapon the police of three planets had not been able to repress. He had hesitated, his finger touching the lever on the end. "He spoke of nothing else?"

"Why, no. Only about how cold she was and how much he wanted her."

". . . You must go, though."

Out of the corner of his eye Breece had seen that the other Venusians in the room had their guns on him. He had shrugged a little and left the saloon. That was his first clue, six years ago.

IT WAS interesting, in a way, to follow the links in the chain forward from that indiscretion in the saloon to the time, two months ago, when Breece had stood in the citadel, the heart of Liparinthi, the Evagori crown in his right hand.

The secret decree of the supreme council of Venus, for instance—that had been a vital link. He had bribed an archivist in the National Library to let him see it for fifteen minutes or so; it had cost him thirty thousand dollars. But it had been worth it, for the decree had narrowed his search from the entire surface of a planet to an area the size of Spain and France combined.

"How had it run?—"Certain portions of the planet Venus, as hereinafter described, are to be sacred, inviolate and arcane" (that was the nearest Breece could translate the Venusian word) "in perpetuum . . ." There had been an enacting section and a list of penalties, most of which Breece had not been able to translate, and the law had ended with a formula which Breece had not understood at all: "By the

three globes and the sun." But whether he had understood the quasi-religious injunction at the end or not, one thing had been clear—that between certain degrees of latitude and longitude Liparinthi was to be found, though it was not referred to, even indirectly, in the law itself.

Mrs. Hartley-Weems leaned toward him again. "You know that man I was speaking about?"

"Yes?"

"Well, it's the strangest thing, but every time I see him, a word comes into my mind. . . I simply don't understand it. It's completely inappropriate."

Breece looked around the observation deck. The object of Mrs. Hartley-Weem's curiosity had vanished, probably to get cleaned up before lunch.

"What is the word?" he asked.

"Well, really, I—it's so ridiculous! *Radiant.*"

"Radiant?"

"Yes. . . I told you it was ridiculous." Mrs. Hartley-Weems nodded at him twice, got out a vibra-needle, and began working on the sleeve of the sweater she was making for her grandson.

There had been set-backs, difficulties, Breece thought, even in the places he had imagined would be reliable. Krotalis, in the department of the interior, for example. It was less than five months ago that Breece had handed eighty thousand dollars in bearer bonds across the table to him. Krotalis had looked them over carefully, checked the denominations, and slipped them into his pocket. He had stood up: "Good day, Mr. Breece."

Flabbergasted, Breece had protested, tried to cajole him into giving the information he had been paid for. Krotalis had listened for a moment in silence. Then he had leaned forward

across the table to Breece, resting his weight on the palms of his hands.

"Mr. Breece. Do you know what would happen to you if I were to go into the next room where the clerks are working, and say, 'An Earthman in my office has been asking me about Liparinthi?' *Do you know?* You are luckier than you realize, Mr. Breece, that I merely take your money, and do not betray you as my duty is."

THE insolence, the bitterness, the scorn in his voice! Only a Venusian could have combined moral indignation with taking a bribe. Breece had nodded stiffly once, and left the office. It was some consolation to him now, when he remembered the insolence and the bribes, to know that he had the Evagori crown in his hand-case; a thing so sacred that to say it was the Holy of Holies in a Venusian's eyes was as inadequate as it would have been to express the crown's enormous intrinsic worth by saying it was valuable.

Yes, the Evagori crown. How much would Moreen give him for it? Three million, four million dollars? Nonsense. He would begin by asking much more than that. Moreen had encouraged him, it was true, when he first got on the trail of Liparinthi, he had helped him with money, but Breece was under no obligation to him. There were at least two other collectors on Terra who were fully as enthusiastic and fanatical as he.

The best of it was that there was no real danger anywhere. Rhymor, who had supplied most of the last stage information and had even piloted the plane in which Breece had gone to Liparinthi (he had been desperately in need of money, and Breece had tightened the screw on him without mercy), had taken his payment, nodded politely to Breece, and gone home and killed

himself. Elpenor, who had been almost as useful to Breece a little earlier, had met with a fatal accident; Breece had paid rather heavily (bribery again—it was disgusting) to make sure the accident would be fatal. Krotalis was in prison with a ten-year sentence for defalcation, and the others Breece had had contacts with had no idea who he was. As to Liparinthi itself, it had been completely unguarded. Breece was the first man who had set foot in its streets for five thousand years. Things had worked out beautifully.

The gong in the dining salon rang. Mrs. Hartley-Weems sat up alertly. "Lunch" she said to Breece. "There's nothing like being in space to give one an appetite. Now, notice if I'm not right; that *extraordinary* man won't be in to this meal, either."

* * *

After lunch, with the door of his stateroom locked, Breece got out the Evagori crown. It was very well concealed in his hand case, and it took him nearly fifteen minutes of continuous manipulation to get it out. Finally he opened the chamois-lined case in which he had put it and laid it on his berth. He stepped back and looked at it.

It was beautiful, yes. The Evagori crown must be the most beautiful thing in the solar system. He needed a more beautiful word than beautiful to describe it; it was—it was more beautiful than Ieradon.

It had power. There was about it an almost tangible, an almost palpable aura of majesty. Looking at it, Breece could understand again something that seemed inconceivable otherwise; that, when he had first opened the temenos and seen the crown lying on the altar, as the Evagori had left it five thousand years ago, he had been within an inch of turning away again and leaving it

laying there.

Only the thought of all the bribes he had given, of all the insolence he had endured, had restrained him. And when he had lifted the crown up and had opened his case to put it away, he had felt something he had not felt since the time he was eleven years old and his mother had died, a bitter, heart-grinding sense of loneliness and rejection. There was the same awful sense that something he had taken for granted all his life had gone, that hereafter he would be alone. Standing there by the altar, the crown in his hand, he had felt that he had divorced himself from humanity. He had felt he was no longer a member of the human race.

He had come out from the temenos feeling pale and sick and had said to Rhymor, standing by the plane, "Let's get out of here."

THERE was a rap at the cabin door.

It must be the steward, come to ask him at what time he would like his bath. He began to put the crown away. Fortunately, replacing it in his hand case was a much quicker process than getting it out had been. He finished with the last fastening and thrust the case under his berth. He opened the door.

It was not until the man was inside that he saw it was not the steward, and then it was too late. The terrible, consuming glow had begun to shine on him; it was brighter than the sun. He tried to push it away and could not, he tried to scream and felt his tongue baking in his mouth. There was pain, horrible, long-lasting pain . . .

* * *

"And did you have a nice trip, mother?" Mrs. Hartley-Weems' daughter asked as she tucked the lap robe around her mother's knees.

"No, I did not," Mrs. Hartley-Weems

replied with decision. "The most awful thing—give grandmother a nice kiss, Bobby—happened. Just before we landed they found one of the passengers—such a nice man, I'd talked to him quite a bit—in his cabin, burned to death.

"Goodness! Did he kill himself?"

"Oh, no. Nothing else in the cabin was touched at all. When I say burned, I mean—well, he was reduced to a *cinder*, that's all. He must have suffered a great deal. The first mate told me they were absolutely at a loss to imagine what had happened. That's why we were so late docking; they were examining our baggage and so on."

"You mean somebody killed him? How?"

"Dolla, they simply don't know—at least, that's what the first mate told me. Personally, I feel sure that extraordi-

nary man the purser said wasn't on the passenger list had something to do with it. In fact, I told them so, but they all laughed at me. And then afterwards I saw him parading around with the most outlandish crown on his head. It was positively a weird thing—and you should have seen those Venusians cringe away before him! Guilty consciences if you ask me!"

"But what about that man, grandmother, where did he go?"

Mrs. Hartley-Weems sniffed disdainfully. "I don't know. I was sitting in my deck chair getting some sunshine the last time I saw him. He passed right in front of me—and that's strange now that I think of it—he didn't cut the sunlight off. No, yes—it actually seemed to grow brighter . . .

"Anyway, he was gone when I tried to find him."
