

**She was everybody's sweetheart
— but not every man's at once!**

LORELEI

By CHARLES V. DeVET

SEVEN days stranded on Europa. Seven days without hope. The courage that had sustained me, like the numbness after a fatal blow, was beginning to slip away. All that seventh day my nerves balanced on a thin jagged edge. And that night the anamorph visited me in my bubble cubicle.

I caught the sheathed rustle of a crinoline skirt and a scent of Peri fragrance, and I knew she had come. Stubbornly I kept my face averted, and tried my best not to think of her. If I did I was lost. My fingers dug into the sponge fabric beneath me until they ached. I sucked breath deep into my lungs and held it.

I wanted no visitors. But

that of course was why she had come. She had a way of divining who needed her most, the one whose morale was nearest breaking.

"Poor Bill," she murmured. She knelt beside me. I felt her forehead press against my temple and a tear—from eyes which I knew would now be a clear candid blue, deep in the shadows, appearing almost black—traced a salty path down my cheek.

The wall of my resistance broke. I reached up impulsively and pulled her to me. She was all soft, yielding femininity, live and warm and vibrant, the antidote to the raw need that was like a bleeding wound deep within.

Still I tried to resist. I sum-

moned my last dregs of resistance and pushed her roughly from me. I opened my eyes, deliberately keeping my mind locked against her.

She swayed back at my shove.

I saw that her features had not yet set into the mold she had probed from my mind. Her head was round and shapeless, with doughy white skin and the characterless face of a baby. The auburn mat on her head was loose and coarse, with a consistency that was hair and yet not hair; her body was too thin, too rigid, too stringy.

Yet she was Lois. Sweet, gentle, loving Lois, the bride I had left behind on Earth, the girl I would never see again. Lois.

My breath came out in a ragged sigh of surrender, and my mind opened to her unconditionally.

She altered visibly as I watched. It was too late to go back now. Lois stood before me, full-fleshed and delicately tall, with her rich brown hair curling inward at the ends, and her shapely shoulders all honeyed-gold from the sun. Her supple body was straight, poised and proud, her head back and her breasts pressing against her blouse. Just as I remembered her.

I could have sent her away no more than I could have stopped the beat of my heart. "Hi, hon," I whispered.

She laughed happily, and sat on the mat beside me and rumbled my hair. We kissed gently, tentatively. I pulled her closer. As we kissed again she kept her eyes open, looking at me sideways in her fondly teasing way. "It's good to be back, dear," she breathed against my cheek...

Long she lay at my side, regarding me with eyes that were filled with her love, her only movement the throb of a pulse beneath my fingers as they fondled her arched throat. I sighed contentedly. At the moment I was filled with a warm serenity that had quite effectively subdued my anxiety.

Once a man let himself go, there was no companion, male or female, who could compare with the anamorph. She caught his every thought, crested the tides of his every mood. She became the idealization of woman, without flaws, formed and molded into a perfection beyond possible actuality, her beauty and desirability greater than any real woman's could ever be.

When full rapport had been achieved she was able to keep mentally ahead of a man. She could gauge his every reflex, and match her speech and actions to every subtle anticipation.

I felt almost happy then. The tragedy of being stranded here was something apart, and the reality was the delightful woman-creature warm against

me...until at last my passions grew sated with the luxuriance of her charms and I slept.

IN the morning the anamorph was gone.

Eight other men had fears that must be eased. She might have spent parts of the night with any one or all of them. The thought would have been distasteful, except that absence made the sense of her less all-pervading. I even experienced a kind of grateful relief. I was able to regard her now, not as the real Lois I wanted, but as merely a source of solace I had badly needed.

The anamorph's presence during the night had drained all my pent-up frustrations. I was not happy, but I no longer felt the desperate loneliness and need that had goaded me before. I dressed leisurely and went out into the main compartment of the bubble.

Except in the sleeping rooms the plastic walls were transparent. I looked outside at the surface of Europa, covered with a white material I had been told was solid carbon dioxide.

A mild storm was brewing. The hydrogen, helium and methane in the atmosphere were colorless, and the argon and krypton too minute to be detected without instruments. But I could see and hear small particles of liquid ammonia as they pattered against the plastic wall. The bubble sagged in several places. But there

was no danger of it collapsing.

In the space ship galley (to which the bubble had been attached) I found the captain, Mark Burgess, and the anamorph having coffee.

She was no longer Lois. Now she was an older woman, with a bit of added weight and thickness. She was still beautiful, but more matronly than she had been as Lois. About her was none of the warm-blooded ardor she had displayed the night before. And no remembrance of it in her eyes.

I poured a cup of coffee.

"Just how long do you figure we've got?" I asked Burgess

"Mr. Lutscher—" he addressed me by my last name, as was his custom with junior officers—"I will not equivocate. We have fuel enough to furnish us with heat and electricity for well over a year. But our food will last less than two months, even with strict rationing."

So there it was. In two months we'd probably all be dead.

SOMEONE back on Earth had erred badly. In their calculations every item had been gauged closely, as was necessary. But they should have allowed safety margin.

The take-off had been calculated nicely. Ships had already been sent to the moon and to Mars. But this was the first trip this far out. We had

not intercepted Europa quite as plotted. We had to chase it halfway around Jupiter, and land with the satellite going away, rather than meeting us. After we landed and new calibrations been made, we made a discovery. Our fuel was too short for the return trip.

Kohnke was our lone hope. A metallurgist, he knew the properties of the ship's pile.

But Kohnke was insane.

I had not liked the man from the first. With his nervous, subservient personality, he had been a constant irritant in the confining quarters of the ship. And during the early weeks of the flight I observed the slow dawning of an awful awareness in our weak-charactered member. He was realizing for the first time the prodigious and unpredictable forces to which he had exposed himself. Soon he was convinced of the certainty of death.

He did not have the mental stamina to cope with that certainty. When we missed Europa on the first pass, Kohnke's mind cracked.

My attention returned to the anamorph. She was staring at me now, her features white and strained. She must have read what I had been thinking of Kohnke.

What was there about the crazed man that frightened her so? I wondered again.

I went out into the bubble. The rocket man, Andrews and

I spent the next several hours adding another compartment to the main room. Andrews fed dirt into the hopper of the converter while I operated the nozzle.

This was more difficult than the original bubble had been. Normal air pressure was enough to keep that expanded; but here we had to make supports and rig up an auxiliary vent. Also it was cold near the walls, a cold that sucked at the heat in our bodies; Europa has a mean temperature of -140° Centigrade.

When our job was finished I left Andrews at the door of his cubicle. I glanced back and saw that he hadn't gone in. He was standing with his head down and his shoulders slumped.

Andrews I had always regarded as an extrovert, and a good man. He was big, active and almost always cheerful. Even his bald head seemed to add to his masculine virility. He had a vast fund of stories. Everyone liked him.

I suspected, however, that his bland acceptance of our predicament was not all it seemed. He was an instinctive psychologist. He was doing his part to keep up the spirits of the rest of us. In my judgment Andrews was quite a man.

But now his capacity for dissimulating had apparently reached its limit.

At that moment a woman-

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form drifted past me from the ship. The anamorph had come to perform her self-appointed duty.

She was a robust woman now with a body designed for love-making, the wide-hipped form made to propagate the race with healthy offspring. Her dress was cut low at the neck, innocently immodest.

Andrews looked up, still brooding.

It was he who had discovered the anamorph, the second day after our landing. Where she had come from, or how she had gotten through the plastic wall without rupturing it, we never did learn. She had had this identical form when Andrews found her.

The anamorph began to dance. A slow, languid pirouetting. The sound of a wordless crooning song reached me. The tempo of her dance heightened and her wide green skirt came up around her waist, exposing fair thighs.

Andrews grunted and shifted position. Abruptly he reached out and grasped her wrist. "Come here, baby," he said hoarsely.

The anamorph kicked and squealed in mock protest as Andrews swept her off her feet and into his arms, but she made no real effort to free herself as he strode with her into his compartment.

THE next morning when I stopped in with Kohnke's breakfast I found him wearing a gold crown.

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With strictly amateur knowledge, I had diagnosed his illness as schizophrenia, and this latest display seemed to confirm the diagnosis. Now he had escaped harsh reality into a world of his own, a world where he was obviously a personage of considerable eminence.

Kohnke smiled at me and greeted me condescendingly. I went along with his delusion. If I were to help him it was good that he accepted me as part of his world. I sat at his feet and made as one of the unseen audience he was addressing. I was wryly amused a few minutes later when I understood who he thought he was.

However, it was the gold crown that fascinated me. Where had he gotten it? There could be only one answer. And if what I suspected was true, there were startling implications.

I had to speak again soon with the anamorph...

She did not keep me waiting.

I returned to my compartment. The pseudo-Lois entered soon after and stretched out indolently on my cot. "You wanted to see me, Bill?"

Incongruously I found myself staring at her low-heeled shoes, the ones she always wore when we danced at the Prom. I restrained the impulse to take her in my arms. "I saw the crown you made for Kohnke," I said carefully,

making a special effort to keep my inner thoughts hidden. "It's beautiful."

"Thank you."

Those simple words meant much to me. I had succeeded in getting her to admit that she had made the crown.

Which meant we still had a chance!

"Then you'll be able to make the fuel we need," I said casually.

Her expression became wary, shifting instantly to petulance. She reached over and put one hand on my arm. "Why do you want to leave me, Bill?"

I TRIED to explain, but she couldn't or wouldn't understand.

I tried another tack. "Why are you afraid of Kohnke?" I asked. My theory was that she did not understand insanity, and so her inability to follow the illogical thought processes of the demented man frightened her.

"He is so intelligent," she startled me by saying.

"He's crazy," I protested.

"What is crazy?"

"His reasoning faculties do not function properly."

She seemed to be reading my thoughts carefully, trying to understand better what I meant. After a minute she smiled and her teeth showed white and even against her tan. "Isn't it possible that his mind works too swiftly for you to follow, and the only

way you can explain your lack of understanding is to say that he is insane?"

So that was why she feared Kohnke. To her he was a brilliant intellect. So great that she could neither understand nor influence him as she did the others of us. His aborted reasoning, his sudden shifts of interest, his small concern with a situation that aroused our distress, were all evidence of that superior intellect. I did not try to disabuse her of the belief. It fitted well with my semi-formed plan.

"He is like the Masters," the anamorph interrupted my thoughts.

I quickly took up the diversion she offered: I did not want her to see what lay in my thoughts. Also she had aroused my curiosity. "Who are the Masters?" I asked.

"I'm not certain. I think..." Her voice trailed off. "I'm never too sure that what I'm thinking are my own thoughts, or what I'm reading in your mind, or have read in others," she said. "Perhaps if I looked away from you..."

"Many years ago the Masters landed on this small world to make repairs on the meteor shield of their space ship," she began again in a low voice. "They were passing through this part of the Galaxy on their way home from a distant planet. I belonged to one of them. For some reason they left me behind when they

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went away." She stopped talking, saddened by the recollection of her desertion.

I saw her in a new light then. She had been a pet, a plaything, who perhaps had strayed just before ship leaving time.

She nodded, smiling brightly. "A pet," she exclaimed, clapping her hands. "That is right." I realized then, with mild astonishment, that she was not very intelligent. Her apparent wit and sharpness before had been only reflections of what she read in our minds.

"Are you all Kohnke's pets?" she caught me unprepared.

I coughed uncomfortably, and shook my head.

HER mood changed. "I've been so lonesome, Bill. When I do not belong to someone I am so unhappy. But I won't be unhappy anymore." For the first time I felt sorry for her.

"Bill?" Her voice was timid. "Do you believe I will be punished for leaving the Masters? I did not mean to."

"Who would punish you now?" I asked.

"The Masters' God. They always told me he would punish me if I were bad. And he is such a terrible God." Her expression became bright with hope. "Is your God terrible, Bill?"

I tried to reassure her, to pacify this naive creature

with her own private terrors, but she must have read in my mind how our Christian God could also be terrible in his wrath and justice, for she gave a small cry and pulled herself close to me.

Several minutes went by while she trembled in my arms and wept disconsolately. Finally she quieted and in a young girl's voice asked, "May I use your hanky, daddy?"

In surprise I held her out from me and saw that now she was my daughter, Joanie, with her newly bobbed hair, and her sweet face still wet with tears.

Of course. While I held her I had been thinking of her as a child. As my child, Joanie.

I wiped away her tears and blew her nose.

I thought swiftly. Perhaps this was my opportunity. Speaking as I would have to Joanie I asked gently, "Won't you help us get the fuel we need, honey?"

"I can't." Her childish wistfulness was replaced by the stubbornness I had encountered before.

I was careful to restrain my impatience. "You could come with us to Earth," I argued, without raising my voice. "You wouldn't be lonesome there."

"I couldn't live that long out of the sun," she answered.

"How did you live on the Master's ship?" I asked.

"They could bring the sunlight inside. You can't."

"Isn't there any way we could keep you alive?" I asked.

She shook her head.

Which left nothing except my desperate plan.

BURGESS made the preparations I requested, without question, and I returned to Kohnke. It took me some time to get him in the frame I wanted. When he began to blubber, "I want to go home, I want to go home," I led him from the ship.

The anamorph was outside, as I knew she would be. The men were all in the ship.

I bowed deeply to Kohnke

and turned to the anamorph. "He would speak with you," I said impressively.

Her eyes widened with apprehension. I was not concerned about her reading my thoughts now. What she read in Kohnke's mind would be more believable to her.

"We must have fuel!" I shouted at Kohnke. "She can give it to us!" I pointed at the anamorph. "Command her!"

Kohnke concentrated his wild gaze on the girl and mouthed something inaudible.

The anamorph drew back. Her features seemed to lose their character, to be melting together.

This was the critical moment. "Tell her about your Father," I commanded.

His lips writhed damply and he began again his inarticulate muttering.

The anamorph cried out plaintively and covered her face with her hands. I shifted my attention to the pile of soil I had asked Burgess to prepare.

It quivered, flattened...and hardened into six fuel ingots!

Twenty minutes later we were in space.

Our last glimpse of the anamorph was the dejected figure of a small girl, standing alone in the middle of the bubble.

She had had to obey Kohnke, of course. For she believed what she read in his mind.

And Kohnke thought he was the Son of God.

END

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