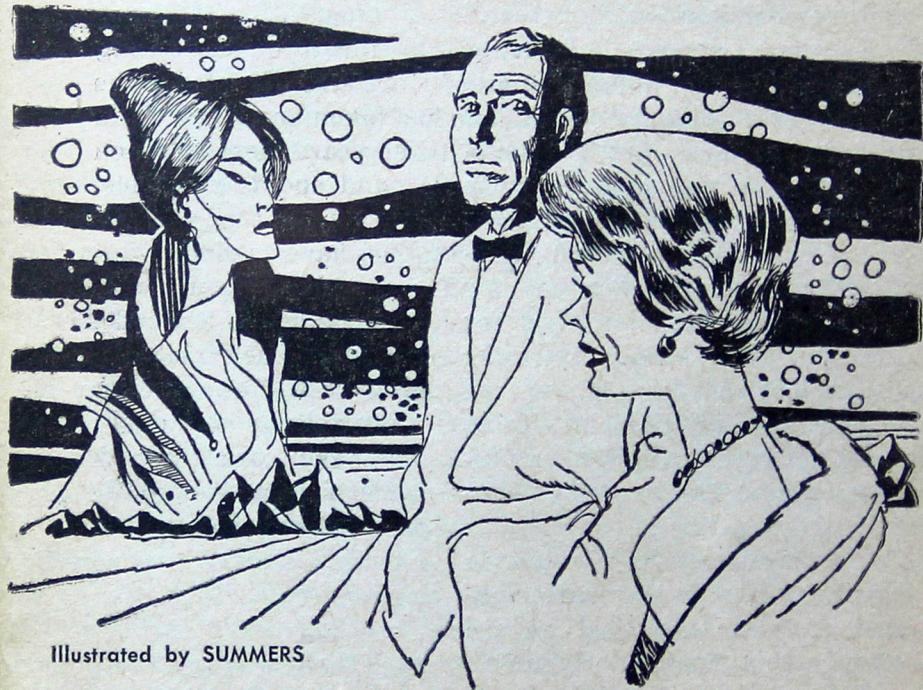


INCONSTANCY

By ROGER DEE



Illustrated by SUMMERS

The trouble with a Martian-Terran romance is that it has to buck things like tradition. Up on Mars, when they sing "If you were the only girl in the world," they really mean it.

HIS first day on Earth promised to be even worse than Mirrh Yahn y Cona had feared when he left Yrml Orise y Yrl, his fiancée, to become Mars' first interplanetary ambassador. The

frenetic bustle of Denver spaceport, his ominous spiriting away through screaming hordes of spectators, left him bewildered and uneasy.

Alone in the first brief privacy

of his Denver Heptagon apartment, he ideographed a facsimile transmission to Yrml at once. "I long for you already," he said. "And for the serenity of home. Earthpeople are as barbarous and mercurial as their weather."

Babelous decades of taped newsreels and video serials should have prepared him for that inconstancy, but the first-hand reality was appalling. He would gladly have returned home at once, before planetary conjunction's end cut him off for two interminable years, but for the inevitable stumbling-block: Earth had sent an exchange of her own, and Mirrh Yahn y Cona could not back down without disgracing his planet as well as himself.

"Write often," he pleaded, in closing. "That I may take comfort in your steadfast regard even in this simian hurlyburly."

The missive finished, he found time remaining before Ellis, of Diplomatic, arrived to switch on the multisensory projection of his last evening with Yrml. The projection had been cubed in a Privileged Couples nook complete with real plants and hermetically sealed fountain, and near its close the two of them had sung the traditional Song of Parting from the ancient *Tchulkione Serafi*.

Ellis arrived all too soon, trailing an aura of Scotch, diplo-

matic enthusiasm and geniality.

"No time to waste," Ellis said briskly. "Little enough of it before you leave us, and you're going to see Earth from pole to pole. The three of us begin this evening with a sample of Denver night life."

"Three?"

"Came early to brief you," Ellis said. "Found a guide for you. Can't run about unescorted, you know."

He answered the door buzzer and admitted a young woman in evening dress. Rushed from the spaceport in what amounted to cloak-and-dagger secrecy, Mirrh Yahn y Cona had until now seen Earthwomen only on video and at indistinguishable distance, and the sudden appearance of this one in the flesh unnerved him completely.

THE girl was small and slender, well under Mirrh Yahn y Cona's athletic six-foot height. She was warmly and roundly vital with a stunning abundance of life at which the two-dimensional simulacra of recorded soap-opera could only hint.

"Miss Leila Anderson," Ellis introduced her. "Member of Diplomatic, so it's all in the family."

She took the hand that Mirrh Yahn y Cona raised as if to defend himself.

"I'm to see that you aren't bored to death here among stran-

gers," she said. "All work and no play isn't good for anyone. Especially," she said to Ellis, "for one so handsome. I didn't dream he'd look so—

"So Terran," Ellis finished before she could say *so human*. "And why not? We're from the same original stock, separated ages before our history begins. Martian annals run back for millenia, did you know? Gold mine of information, settle problems our experts have puzzled over for centuries."

"I am not truly representative of my people," Mirrh Yahn y Cona said with some bitterness. "A special case, reared from birth for this assignment."

The multisensory projector swung into the *Tchulkione Serafi's* Song of Parting. Mirrh Yahn y Cona's resonant baritone, operatically assertive above Yrml's reedy soprano, filled the room. He shut off the machine abruptly, feeling a sense of desecration that the tender scene had been bared to alien eyes.

Still he felt a puzzling premonitory twinge of guilt when the projection collapsed. Yrml had been infinitely desirable when the sequence was cubed; why should she now seem so sallow and angular, so suddenly and subtly distant?

"Remarkable voice," Ellis said. "You could make a fortune with it here."

"It was lovely," Leila Anderson said. "Could I hear the rest of it some time?"

"No." He realized his curtness and added, "It is the Song of Parting for lovers. Very personal."

He found that he was still holding Leila's hand, and dropped it hastily. Ellis, who had risen high in Diplomatic for good reasons, stepped competently into the breach.

"Night duty calls," Ellis said. "Let's be off."

A DIPLOMATIC limousine without insignia took them to a nightclub large enough, and dim enough, to promise anonymity. On the way a quick summer shower left the streets wet and glistening and turned the night into a many-scented freshness that was sheer fantasy to one accustomed to the sterile air of sealed underground ways.

The rain had ended when they left the car, but the brief moment outside, under a vast openness of night sky empty except for dispersing clouds and speeding white moon, struck Mirrh Yahn y Cona suddenly cold with too-familiar panic.

They had found their table before anyone spoke.

"Agoraphobia?" Ellis said, in frowning concern. "I should think you'd be conditioned against that, with all the time

they've had to prepare you."

Leila Anderson put an impulsive hand on the Martian's.

"I'm a touch claustrophobic, so I know how it must be." She shivered. "To be buried under all those tons and tons of—"

"Immurement is security," Mirrh Yahn y Cona said. "The ultimate stability."

"You'll get acclimatized," Ellis said. "It takes time."

He broke off to peer through the gloom beyond the dance floor. "Good Lord, there's Ryerson of the *Post*, camera and all. If he recognizes me he'll know who Mirrh is and—"

"Yahn," Mirrh Yahn y Cona corrected automatically. "With us the second name is impersonal. First is used only by loved ones."

"Yahn, then," Ellis said. "If Ryerson tumbles, he'll want pictures and an interview. Yahn will be lionized before he's ready. Can't publicize him until he knows the ropes."

"You'd better skip," Leila said. "If we all go, he'll spot us for sure."

"Right." Ellis shoved some money at Leila. "Call me at my office when it's safe."

When Ellis had gone and their waiter had brought drinks, they faced each other across the table, Yahn visibly on guard and Leila with the beginning of speculation in her eyes.

"Maybe it's better like this, without protocol," she said. "Yahn, can you—do you dance in our gravity?"

He was bitter again. "Remember my training. I am taller, stronger and more freakishly agile than any Martian—including my fiancée—has been for thousands of years."

Her clear look made him ashamed and he added, "With us the dance is an art form only. Here the intent seems different."

"It is," Leila said almost grimly. "Finish your drink, Buster. You're going to need it."

HE NEEDED several before the evening was finished. The Terran dance in its limited variations offered small challenge; Yahn mastered it with an ease that delighted Leila and brought tacit envy from other couples. The cocktails may have contributed to his own mixed reactions, lending primitive tactility to Leila's pliant response.

Neither of them, when Ryerson of the *Post* went away with his camera, considered calling Ellis.

"I don't often enjoy my work so much," Leila said. "Let's not spoil the evening with diplomacy, shall we?"

They left the Diplomatic vehicle for Ellis, rented an agency car and drove through the charged serenity of the night into the

mountains. They talked the Moon down and the Sun up. Nothing took place that might have shocked a reasonably tolerant duenna, but by dawn they had reached the sort of understanding that comes spontaneously or not at all.

"The biologists who tailored me to Terrestrial standards," Yahn said, "did their work too well. I find myself more Terran than Martian."

The immovable obstacle, of course, was Yahn's obligation to Yrml, who would be waiting with enduring Martian patience for his return. Leila went into that matter later with Ellis, not so much to enlist his dubious sympathies as to clarify the bristly problem in her own troubled mind.

"Martians use our broadcasts as a standard of judgment," Leila said. "And you know where *that* leads. The more prominent the people in the newscasts, the higher the divorce rate. The more popular a video serial, the greater its emotional shilly-shallying. To Martians we're the last word in fickleness."

"I know," Ellis agreed. "Our cultural geometry was always triangular."

"Exactly. So how can Mirrh-Yahn break the news to his dry little fiancee back home? We're accustomed to inconstancy and to incontinence. We sing corny

songs about girls who write jilting letters to their men in service. Our opera flaunts Perkinses and Mesdames Butterfly, and the fact that we enjoy them shocks the ascetic pants off the Martians. Did you know that their population control quota demands a strictly equal sex-ratio, so that there's never more than one boy for one girl from the beginning? Mirrh-Yahn simply hasn't it in him to leave Yrml dangling. He'd feel a renegade for the rest of his life."

"Mirrh-Yahn," Ellis noted. "Obviously he's willing enough, if you're on a first-name footing."

"I can't call him Yahn any longer, like a stranger. Mirrh-Yahn is a compromise."

Ellis rummaged in his desk and brought out a personnel folder. "Dossier on J. Frederic Thomas, our young man on Mars. Maybe we can turn up an angle through him."

The exchange ambassador's folder was neither interesting nor helpful. J. Frederic Thomas stood revealed as a dwarfish scholastic type, complete with massive glasses and receding hairline.

"He looks more Martian than Terran," Leila said. "Is that deliberate?"

"Mars sent us a man specially bred to fit into our culture, didn't they? Simple job here to turn up a Martian type. Matter of fact,

J. F.'s reports show he fits in up there like a native."

"Check with him, then," Leila said. "Though I can't imagine what help we can expect from a wizened little stick like that."

LEILA was wrong. J. Frederic Thomas—who quite predictably, being paired off with the only unattached female on Mars as his cicerone, had immediately found himself caught in the same thorny dilemma that gouged his opposite number on Earth—was eager to help. The result of Ellis' inquiry was a swift letter from Yrml Orise y Yrl to Mirrh Yahn y Cona; a letter which Ellis turned over in duplicate, one in Martian ideograph, the other a translation, to Leila.

It broke Yrml's engagement to Yahn for the excellent reasons that J. Frederic Thomas was not only more Martian in physique and deportment, but also possessed a fine reedy tenor which blended ever so better with Yrml's soprano in the less poignant duets from the *Tchulkone Serafi*.

"The man never lived," Ellis pointed out, "Martian or Terran, no matter how relieved he might be, whose ego wouldn't need attention after a letter beginning *Dear Yahn*. Shall I let it go on through the mails, or will you —"

Leila answered him on her way out. "Don't bother," she said.

THE END

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Sworn to and subscribed before me this 19th day of September, 1961.

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