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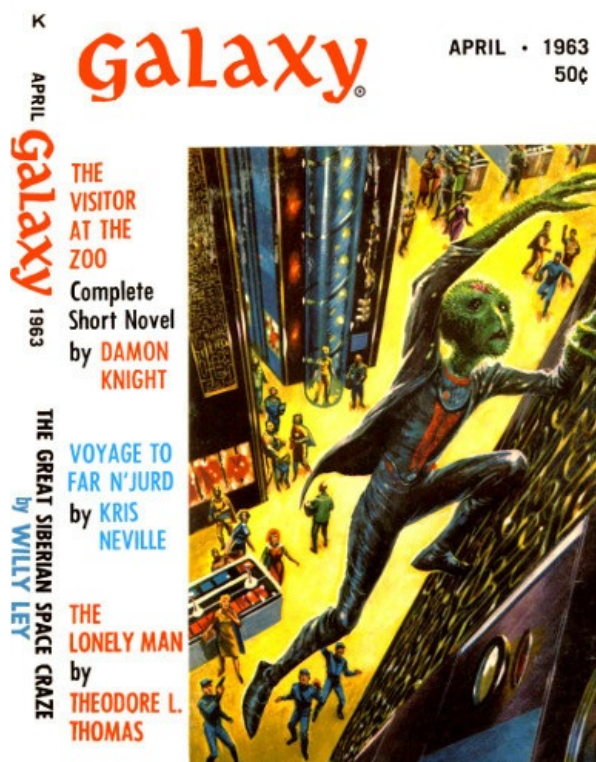
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My Lady Selene

By MAGNUS LUDENS

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***Everyone knows the Moon is dead.
Everyone is quite correct—now!***

On impact he'd had time to see Hatter's head jerk loose from the carefully weakened strap. As Hatter slumped unconscious he touched the hidden switch.

A shock, then darkness.

What first came to him out of the humming blackout mist was his own name: Marcusson. Al Marcusson, just turned sixteen that Saturday in June, that green-leafed day his father had called him out to the back yard. They had sat on discount-house furniture under the heavy maple, Al who wore jeans and sneakers and a resigned expression, his father who wore glasses, a sport shirt, slacks, eyelet shoes and a curious reckless smile, a smile that didn't belong in the picture.

"Now you're sixteen, Al, there's something I have to tell you," his father had begun. "My father told me when I turned sixteen, and his father told him. First, the name of our family isn't Marcusson. It's Marcopoulos. Your name's Alexander Marcopoulos."

"What? Dad, you must be kidding! Look, all the records...."

"The records don't go back far enough. Our name was changed four generations back, but the legal records disappeared in the usual convenient courthouse fire. As far as anyone knows, our family's name's always been Marcusson. My grandfather went to Minnesota and settled among the Swedes there. Unlike most foreigners he'd taken pains to learn good English beforehand. And Swedish. He was good at languages." For a moment the out-of-place smile came back. "All our family is. Languages, math, getting along with people, seldom getting lost or confused. You better pay attention, Al. This is the only time I'm going to speak of our family, like my father. We never bothered much, by the way, about how our name was written. You can believe me or think I sat in the sun too long, but I'll tell you how our most famous relatives spelled it: Marco Polo."

"Oh, now...."

"Never mind what you think now. Besides, I won't answer any questions, anyway. My father didn't and he was right. I found out some things by myself later; you'll probably find out more. For example, the best job for us is still exploring. That's why I became an oil geologist, and it paid off. Another thing: learning the legends of the place you're in, if you take up exploring, can mean the difference between success and a broken neck. That's all, boy. Guess I'll get your mother some peonies for the supper table."

Al Marcusson had gone up quietly to his room. Later, his special gift for languages and math got him through college and engineering school; his sense of direction and lack of inner-ear trouble helped to get him chosen for Astronaut training while he was in the Air Force.

While in training at the Cape he had met and married a luscious brunette librarian in one of the sponge-fishing towns, a brunette with a rather complicated last name that became forgotten as she turned into Mrs. Marcusson, and unbeatable recipes for the most bewitching cocktails since Circe held the shaker for Ulysses.

Marcusson's hobbies included scuba diving, electronic tinkering and reading. His psychiatrists noted a tendency to reserve, even secrecy, which was not entirely bad in a man who worked with classified material and had to face long periods of time alone. Besides, his ability to get along with people largely compensated.

With slowly returning consciousness the last months of training swam in Al Marcusson's mind. The orbital flight—the only part of it he'd really enjoyed was the quarter-hour alone with SARAH, the electronic beacon, cut off from Control and even from the rescue team just over the horizon, alone with the music of wind and sea.

For the moon shot he'd been responsible for communications, recording and sensing systems inside the capsule, as Hatter had for the life-support systems and their two back-up men for propulsion and ground systems coordination respectively. He relived the maddening, risky business of the master switch to be secretly connected with the capsule's several brains and camouflaged. The strap to be weakened. Then the blind terror of launch when his pulse had topped 120; blurred vision, clenched teeth, the suit digging into him, the brief relief of weightlessness erased by the cramped, terrifying ride filled with new sensations and endless petty tasks. The camera eye pitilessly trained on his helmet. The way things had of staying there when you'd put them away. On Earth—already it was "On Earth," as if Earth was a port he'd sailed from—you put things out of your mind, but here they bobbed before you still, like the good luck charm in its little leather bag, for instance, the charm his wife had tied to one of his fastener tabs and that kept dancing in the air like a puppet, jerking every time he breathed.

Every time he breathed in the familiar sweat-plastic-chemicals smell, familiar because he'd been smelling it in training, in the transfer truck, in the capsule mock-up for months. All that should be

new and adventurous had become stale and automatic through relentless training. His eyes rested on the color-coded meters and switches that were associated with nausea in the centrifuge tumbler-trainer. The couch made him think of long hours in the chlorinated pool—he always used to come out with his stomach rumbling and wrinkled white fingers, despite the tablets and the silicone creams. His skin itched beneath the adhesive pads that held the prying electrodes to his body, itched like the salt and sand itch he felt after swimming between training bouts. It was still Florida air he breathed, but filters had taken out its oil-fouled hot smell, its whiffs of canteen cooking, fish, seaweed and raw concrete in the sun. Hatter's and his own sing-song bit talk, so deliciously new to television audiences, rang trite in his own ears: a makeshift vocabulary, primer sentences chosen for maximum transmission efficiency to Control.

The Control center he remembered from having watched orbital flights himself. Machines that patiently followed pulse rate, breathing, temperature. Squiggly lines, awkward computer handwriting, screens where dots jumped, screens that showed instrument panels, screens where his own helmet showed, and inside it the squirming blob that was his own face, rendered as a kind of rubberized black-and-white tragic mask. He felt the metal ears turning, questing for signals, the little black boxes, miniaturized colossi tracking, listening, spewing tape. On the capsule itself—all folded in like Japanese water flowers—sensors, cameras, listeners, analyzers should have burgeoned on impact, shot up, reached out, grasped, retracted, analyzed, counted, transmitted.

But he'd cut the switch.

Al Marcusson blinked awake.

He set about freeing himself, a task comparable to getting a butterfly alive out of a spider web. Every creak of his suit and of the moulded couch sounded loud and flat in the newly silent capsule. His breathing souged about him. But no signal went out from the electrodes taped to his chest to say that his heart beat had again topped a hundred, that he sweated, that his stomach contracted—even though he was under no gravity strain, the emergency cooling worked, and his latest no-crumbs, low-residue meal had been welcomed by the same stomach an hour earlier.

He sat up. The port gave off a pale creamy glow. He leaned forward and could see nothing except for a cream- or eggshell-colored mist, even and opaque.

He undid his glove-rings and took off his gloves. By the gleam of his wrist-light he checked whether Hatter was breathing correctly from his suit, visor down, and not the capsule's air, then put his gloves on again and bled the air slowly out. They were not supposed to leave the capsule, of course. Still the possibility of having to check or repair something had had to be considered and it was theoretically possible. He began the nerve-rasping egress procedure, through the narrow igloo-lock that seemed to extend painful claws and knobs to catch at every loop and fold of his suit. At last he gave a frantic wiggle and rolled free.

Because of the dead switch, turning antennae circled in vain, pens stopped reeling out ink, screens stayed blank. The men in the control room activated emergency signals but got no triggered responses. Meanwhile, television reporters sent frantic requests for background material fillers, their "and now back to's" falling thick and fast.

Al Marcusson bounced on a kind of lumpy featherbed two or three times before coming to rest in the same eggshell soup. Dust. Moon dust that had no particular reason for dropping back now cocooned the ship. He stood up with great care and staggered straight out, putting his feet down slowly to minimize dust puffs. The mist thinned and he rubbed the gloves against his visor and goggled.

Cliffs, craters, spines, crests and jags stood there as in the photographs except for a curious staginess he realized came from the harsh footlights effect of the twilight zone they'd landed in and from the shorter horizon with its backdrop of old black velvet dusty with stars. But the colors!

Ruby cliffs, surfaces meteor-pitted in places to a rosy bloom, rose to pinnacles of dull jade that fell again in raw emerald slopes; saffron splashes of small craters punctuated the violet sponge of scattered lava, topaz stalagmites reared against sapphire crests, amethyst spines pierced agate ridges ... and on every ledge, in every hollow, pale moondust lay like a blessing.

When you were a kid, did you ever wake up at night in a Pullman berth and hear the snoring and looked at the moonwashed countryside knowing you only were awake and hugging the knowledge to yourself? Did you ever set off alone at dawn to fish or hunt and watch the slow awakening of trees? Did you ever climb the wall into an abandoned estate and explore the park and suddenly come upon a statue half-hidden in honeysuckle, a statue with a secret smile?

Al Marcusson sat by himself on the twilight zone of the Moon and watched the sun shining through cloudy glass arches and throwing on moondust the same colored shadows that it throws through the great stained-glass windows on the flagstones of Chartres cathedral. He looked up at Earth, now in "New Earth" position, a majestic ring of blue fire flushed with violet, red and gold at the crescent where clouds flashed white iridescence. He jerked free the little bag that held his good luck charm and waited.

They came.

He could see them silhouetted against Earth, the long undulating V of them. Now he could discern their wings beating in the vacuum that couldn't support them and heard the wild lonely honking through the vacuum that couldn't transmit sound. White wings surged steadily nearer. Soon there was a tempest of white, a tempest that stirred no dust, and the swans settled about him.

Al Marcusson stood up.

"My Lady Selene," he began, speaking carefully although he knew that the sound could not be heard outside his helmet. "My Lady Luna, my Lady of the Swans, I greet you. I know of you through legends: I know you are Aphrodite the Swan-Rider, goddess of love that drives to suicide. I know you are the White Goddess, the Three-Women-in-One, who changes your slaves into swans. I know of your twin daughters, Helen the fair, bane of Troy, and dark Clytemnestra, Mycenae's destroyer. I know of your flight as the Wyrd of death who took great Beowulf of the Geats, of your quests as Diana of the cruel moonlit hunts; I remember your swan-wings shadowing the hosts of Prince Igor on the steppes, I have seen the rings of your sacred Hansa swans decorating the moon-shaped steps of temples in Ceylon, your flights of swans and geese on painted tombs beyond the Nile. The witches of my own Thessaly called upon you to work their spells. On the feast of Beltane, on the first of May, with hawthorn branches blooming white as your swans, the Celts did you honor. The folk on the Rhine brought you figurines of white clay and long remembered your wild Walpurgisnacht. But as other beliefs drove out the old, you went from the minds of men to those of children. Only in Andersen's tales do you still change your slaves into swans, only children understand the spells held in the foolish rhymes of Mother Goose. Children know of the lady who flies on goose's back, her cape dark behind her, and each generation in turn still listens to your spells, my Lady of the Swans. And sometimes poets, and sometimes hunters, and sometimes lovers look up at the moon and are afraid and acknowledge your power."

Al Marcusson stopped. The birds ringed him in. He held up his good luck charm, a small, carved rock-crystal swan, such as are found in the very ancient tombs of the bronze-age sea kings of the Aegean.

"My Lady Selene," he cried, "I bring an offering! I came alone, before the others, to tell you the new beliefs now come to your dwelling. I came to warn you, my Lady of the Swans, to beg you not to be wrathful against us, unwilling intruders, to ask you to take up your dwelling in another place, but not to deprive us of poetry, of witching spells and dreams, and all that the Moon has meant to us." He threw the crystal swan before him.

The plumes about him foamed and a snowy form emerged, a moonstone with black opal eyes who smiled and began to sing. Marcusson's knees gave and his eyes closed. Then she spread great swan wings and soared, circling far lest her shadow fall on the crumpled spacesuited figure. She rose. And her swans—her thousand myriad swans—rose after her out of cracks, caves and craters, from beneath overhangs, from ledges, hollows and rock-falls, their plumes at first stained with the colors of the stone. They winged away, V after sinuous V, across Earth and into space. When the last swan had left the Moon became just another piece of colored rock.

Al Marcusson opened his eyes and made his way dully back into the dust cloud now shot with flashes of red-orange as Earth's laser beams searched for the capsule's nerve centers. He bumped against a strut and forced his way in.

A hum filled the capsule. Ungainly jointed limbs, paddles, calyxes, sprouted from its outside walls. On Earth pens jiggled, tapes were punched, rows of figures in five columns appeared on blank pages, pulses jumped and two groggy, worn-out faces appeared on the control room screens. Hatter's eyes flickered over the boards and he opened his mouth. Some time later his disembodied voice came out of the monitor, reading dials, reporting on systems. Then the screens showed Al Marcusson's eyes opening in turn. Control could see him leaning forward towards the port, his face drawn in haggard lines and shadows, then letting his head fall back. "Hey," he said, "didn't Doc tell you guys dust gives me hay fever?"

On Earth the men about the screens slapped each other's backs and grinned and wiped their eyes. Good old bellyaching Marcusson! Good old Al! The Moon was just another piece of rock, after all.

But a star went nova in Cygnus, and lovers wished on it that night.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MY LADY SELENE ***

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