

The Queen of Space

By Joseph Slotkin



Helen LaTour had the best hip wriggle in galactic Burleyque. In fact, it was so good she hipped herself smack into another dimension!...

I was relaxin' with my second Plutonian Stinger in the dignified atmosphere of Charley's Venusian Retreat when there was this strange noise outside the dive, like a flock of hot jets hittin' the atmosphere. Right after a character comes bustin' through the door.

He looks behind him, scared-like, wipin' his forehead with a handkerchief as big as one of Charley's tablecloths, only cleaner. He stops near my table.

"I beg your pardon, would you mind if I joined you?"

"Listen, buster, if you got a ulterior motif, such as a touch, you kin hop a jet, and—" I starts. Then I get a really good look, and hear myself sayin', "Hey, you don't look so good. Maybe you better sit down."

"Thank you, oh thank you very much," he says, floppin' onto one of Charley's flexible plastic stools.

"Well, I guess I kin maybe be a sucker and go fer just one," I says, while he is still mutterin' somethin' to hisself. "Waiter! Hey, mug!" I turns back to the little fella, feelin' real expansive, like they say.

"What'll be your pleasure, buster?"

"Oh, but please allow me."

Well, this is a new angle—a panhandler puttin' hisself on the pan. But far be it from me to refuse a barroom curtsy, so I orders another Jupiter sling.

"I'll have two of those drinks on your tray," the little guy pipes up to the waiter. And the mug, who is also one of Charley's best bouncers, almost drops his load.

"Hey, mister, these here's Plutonian stingers," the waiter yells.

"Y'know what's in them things, fella?" I chimes in. "They get ground vesicantus herbs from Pluto, and—"

"Oh, what difference does it make?" The little guy looked mournful. "He'll get me sooner or later, and then—"

"He?" Maybe I had this little guy all wrong. Maybe he was a nut that had decided to bolt.

"Yes. Perhaps you heard that heat ray gun being discharged, just as I came in."

"Oh. So that's what them noises was."

"Yes. Wherever I go, *he* shoots at me. Waits for me to leave the building, and then shoots at me."

"Well, mister, again it's none a my business, but—if you're carryin' any asteroids around—they kin be cashed anywhere. Lots of guys would take pot shots at ya."

"Oh, Luigi isn't interested in my—money."

"Luigi?" That name sent shudders goin' around my curvature.

"Precisely." He gives with a long sigh. "I've been dodging him for some time now."

"Mister," I says, "everybody knows what a dangerous guy Luigi is. Why, they got his mug on the wanted wall in every space station from here to the outer galaxies."

"Yes, I presume they have."

"I figure one of these days the cops is gonna pin enough on him to make him look like a astronavigator's space map," I adds.

"Oh, I doubt if the space control will ever have the opportunity to apprehend him here on Venus. This is still a wild, mostly unsettled planet, you know. And besides, Luigi is too smart," says this little guy, like he knows Luigi personal.

"Yeh, he sure is. Uh—what's he got on you?"

The little guy reaches over like he doesn't know he's takin' the Plutonian stinger right from under me nose, and says sort of thoughtful-like, "He thinks I stole his girl."

"Yeh. Yeh, sure, that would make *any* fella ma—" I starts, then it seeps through, and I looks at this little, skinny, runty guy, only I can't laugh.

"Oh, I didn't of course. But the fact that she was last seen entering my apartment, and that she never left it, at least not visibly—well, that makes it terribly difficult to convince him—"

"Now wait a minute—"

"Oh, I don't expect anyone to believe me, anymore. Sometimes I find it hard to believe myself."

"D-do you know who Luigi's gal is?" I finally stutters.

"Was," he corrects, mournful-like. This sort of scared me. Either this guy was the kind of crank they never use to wind up a cold jet, or women had changed a lot since the last time I enriched my culture by attending a performance of Flossie's Follies at the Little Venus Circuit Burly-que.

"Mister, I ain't lookin' fer no trouble," I mutters, edgin' back on my stool.

"Oh, but I assure you, I'm telling the truth."

"Helen LaTour, the terrific blonde," I says, meaningful-like.

"The same!"

"The queen of the burly circuit," I goes on, without realizin' that I am stretched halfway across the table, shoutin' into his ear because of a slight argument going on down the bar. "The most luscious hunk of stuff that ever shook a notion to go on the stage," I enlarges. "Right out of this world," I finishes up. "Right?"

"Precisely. Right out of this world."

"In your apartment?"

"In my apartment."

Now, I figures that maybe he was one of these here not-so-juvenile delinquents what believes that if they can't have it, they can at least kill it, so I starts edgin' away, but then I gets a sudden thought.

"You sure the cops ain't on your trail, bud?"

"No, but if Luigi doesn't get me, it's only a matter of time until they will be. After all, anyone such as her, disappearing—"

"I thought she was out of town."

"No. Just out of this world."

Them words take on a sinister-like significance, the way he says them. Then he gets up, sober-lookin' in spite of them Plutonian stingers that would of disintegrated even a Martian.

"If you wouldn't mind running the risk, I'd appreciate your company. I'm going back to my place now. The—ah—refreshments here lack the needed stimulation. I have a much better supply home."

Now, maybe it was that stinger and the Uranus delight, because under ordinary circumstances I would turn down such a invite from a guy who is no doubt a no-orbit meteorite. But then I realize—he's invitin' me to his apartment where, accordin' to *his* story, the luscious LaTour, queen of the strip world, has not been seen since. So I gives in.

When we reaches his apartment, he snaps on the lights, like he was nervous somebody might be hidin' inside, and locks the door tight. I watch close. He leaves the key in the lock, which makes me feel some easier.

He has quite a nice little joint. Not gaudy, but nice. He goes to one bookshelf, presses a button, and a shelf slides back. Inside, he's got enough wiggle-water to fill all the Martian canals and irrigate the Moon.

Well, we're heisting a couple, and then he starts talkin' like we was never interrupted.

"Please forgive me for not introducing myself sooner, but under the circumstances—My name is Timothy J. Brown, M.D., Ph.D., M.A. and A.B."

"Oh. Well, me monicker is Benjamin Spelvin, but you kin call me Benny."

"Very well—uh—Benny. I am, you see, a psychiatrist."

"Oh, yeh. But you'd never be able to figure *me* out, Doc. I got so many bumps on my head from hittin' th' anti-gravitational screens on the jets during free fall—"

He laughs. "No, that would be a phrenologist you're thinking of, Benny. I'm concerned mainly with psychological abnormalities and mal-adjustments of the psyche. I'm also known as something of an expert in the more physical science of phenomenology," he adds modest-like.

Now all this adds up to minus zero to me, but I'm sittin' in a comfortable apartment in the better section of Venus, I got me a glass of Uranus Number Eight, Vintage 2480, so I lets the little fellow ramble on. Finally I says, "Uh, Mister—uh, Doc, you was sayin' somethin' about Helen LaTour, the strip—"

"Oh, oh yes, I was coming to that. Well, now—uh, where was I? Oh, yes ... Benny, these were the events that brought me, a modest scientist, into contact with this Luigi and that—uh—delectable creature, Miss Helen LaTour. And I'll leave it to you to decide for yourself that I am telling the truth."

Not so long ago (the Professor starts out) I was visited here by a rather attractive young woman who told me her name was Helen LaTour.

It is true, she had called me first on the telescreen, and at the sight of that lovely—um—face, obviously mirroring distress, I assumed that, having heard of my reputation she had sought me out for—um—treatment.

Still, it was rather—um—disturbing to me to be interrupted by this beautiful young woman while I was in the midst of my studies.

"I'm grateful to you fer seein' me, P'fessor, honest I am," she began, seating herself immediately, and crossing her—um—quite shapely legs ... er, limbs, that is.

"Well, Miss—uh—LaTour, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. Helen LaTour. You heard of me 'way up here on Venusian Heights?"

"The—ah—name has a familiar ring. But I must remind you, I have restricted my practice to native Venusians."

"Yeah, sure, Doc. Still, I figured you, bein' an Earth man, and me a Earth woman, well—patriotism...."

Her eyes were indeed lovely, gazing at me so appealingly, and I must confess she aroused my—um—sense of Earthy—that is, Earthy—um—patriotism.

"Uh—just what can I do for you, Miss LaTour?"

"I dunno yet, doc. I'm happy in my work. I got a swell boy friend, name of Luigi, maybe you heard of him? No? Well, I got no reason to be unhappy, and yet—"

"Just a moment, please. What is your work?"

"Doc, I been known in the strip tease game as the Queen of the Solid Shake."

"You are—er—a night club dancer?"

"Night clubs? Nah, I never leave the boards, Doc. I got my own circuit, my agent takes good care of my bookings, and my wardrobe is the envy of ingenues from Mercury to Pluto."

"You—act?"

"Yeah. Plenty of action, Doc."

"Just what type of—er—roles do you play?"

"I'm a tease artist, Doc. I take it off. Strip."

Every word this remarkable young lady uttered was punctuated by the most fluid and expressive movements of her—um—agile—um—body, but I must confess I was becoming more and more—er—confused.

"Want a demonstration?"

By now, I had begun to gather what she meant, and hastily asserted that such a procedure would be unnecessary.

"Well, Doc, I'm solid sender, see? Hep with the jet.... Right out of this world."

"Yes?"

"That's just the trouble. I *been* right out of this world."

"You have dreams?"

"I dunno. Lemme explain. I'm opening next week after a layoff on Earth, see? Them Earthmen are gettin' sorta tame, but we figure these Venusians will appreciate what I got to offer when they come in after a long, muggy day at them cold uranium mines, see?"

I commented that I had made some notations about the working conditions of the native Venusians comparing them, especially atmospherically, to the phenomenon of what is known on Earth as ACM—ancient, California smog.

"Yeah, sure, sure, Doc. Well, they got the whole show at the Little Venus Theater built around my number. I got my whole new wardrobe, with the special anti-gravity zippers, some classy plastic bubbles, and a special arrangement cooked up by Ziggy, the trumpeter from Mercury. They're billing me tops, and I figured out a routine that's a sure sensation. I been practicing it all during my vacation.

"I even been holding off Luigi so I could practice," Miss LaTour said.

"Luigi—that's your boy friend's name?"

"Yeah," she laughed, and added, "I been practicin' by myself so much he thinks I been cheatin' on him." She winked her lovely eye at me.

"Well, you should see this number," she said. "It begins with me wigglin' like this."

She began to swing about the room. I had to confess to myself that, standing there, her dark eyes flashing, her long, rather—uh—shapely legs, and—um—well, it was obvious that if anyone were

better qualified to interpret love, I had never seen it. But as I observed her closely, she seemed truly agitated.

"Why, I even learned a couple of new languages, so I could sing a part of my song in each language—one from each planet."

"Er—I believe we can dispense with that."

"But that's just it, Doc. I gotta tell you about it. It's all sort of symbolic, see? A sort of United Planets number. The idea is that all of the planets are held together by love, real, solid love, the kind that grips you."

It was most apparent to me at that juncture that her—um—talents *were* of the—um—gripping variety.

I begged her, however, to come to the source of her difficulty.

"Well, the number's comin' along terrific. I got it down perfect, every movement, every swing and every sway. I feel I reached a new peak in my art, when—just a couple of days ago—it happens."

I begged her to be explicit.

"Well, I'm doing the routine in my dressing-room, see? First the singing as a tease, see? Then the bubbles, then I start playin' with the anti-gravity zippers, see? Well, I get my skirt off, and then my blouse, and I've got panties and a brassiere, of course, using the skirt as a kind of screen, see? Well, there I am—"

"Yes?"

"In my panties and bra, of course."

"Of course."

"Usin' the skirt as a sort of a fan, see? Then I get to the part where I suddenly lift the skirt over my head, and I give a sort of wiggle—well, it ain't a wiggle, exactly, with my hips, and then—"

"Yes, yes, and then, Miss LaTour?"

"That's it, Doc," she said unhappily. "That's when it happened. One minute I was standin' there in my room, practicin', and then—the room wasn't there anymore."

I watched her closely—observing her reactions, of course.

"Where do you suppose the room went?"

"I dunno. It just wasn't there."

"And—uh—where were you?"

"That's the funniest part of it. I didn't seem to be in a room at all. I seemed to be in a large, open space and, Doc, *there was sand under my feet!*"

Her particular hallucination began to take coherent—um—shape in my mind, now.

"You say there was sand under your feet—and you were out-of-doors?"

"Like in some sort of desert, Doc. And Doc—*there was someone coming toward me!*"

"I see. A—man, doubtless."

"Yeah, yeah! And when he saw me standing there, he came rushing at me. Well, I remembered I didn't have much on, so I lowered my skirt."

"I see. And this man. He—chased you?"

"Well—no. When I lowered my skirt, he stopped."

"He—stopped."

"Yeah. Well, I figures here's a man, and I got my new routine, let's try it out. So I raised my skirt again, watching his face, and went on from there."

"On. From there. I see."

"And Doc," she became intensely excited, and I must confess I found it fairly difficult to preserve my own calm, "when I went through that hip-sway, his face became dim, and then sort of cloudy, and then, in a flash, there I was back in my room again just as if it never had happened."

I said, "Miss LaTour, tell me, when you were a child, were you always imagining that men would turn around to look at you: that is, that they were always looking at you?"

"They *were*," she stated flatly. "Hey—you think I'm imagining I was somewhere else? Well, you're wrong, Doc. I was on a desert, I tell you—and what's more, when I got back in my room, there was sand on the bottom of my slippers!"

"Of course," I soothed her. "I'm not arguing with you at all."

"Look—" She became vehement. "I'll do my routine right here, in front of you, and you'll see—"

I pleaded with her that this was entirely unnecessary, but she began to walk enticingly about the room, humming some tune.

I was shocked at first, but in spite of myself, the eternal attraction of the feminine form asserted itself, and I watched the rest of the proceedings with, I must admit, keen interest. Miss LaTour was indeed a—um—skillful young woman, and generously equipped to prove her points.

"You see now?" She was standing before me, holding her skirt over her head, scantily clothed otherwise. "Just about now, I go into my new hip-sway, like this, and—"

And then she was gone.

She had begun an enticing—indeed, fascinating wiggle of as excellently rounded a pair of hips as I had ever seen, and then, without warning of any sort, she had vanished.

Well, you can imagine how perturbed I was. I searched the entire apartment thoroughly. For a moment I was inclined to believe it was merely an hallucination of my own. But there was the evidence of the clothing she had already—um—shed, lying on the floor, to prove my own sanity.

Then I thought of the drinking cabinet I—ah—keep here for my patients, and I turned to it with shaking hands. As I was pouring myself a Uranian Delight, I heard her voice suddenly, and the glass crashed from my hands.

"I'm back, Doc."

Indeed, there she was, standing as she had before, her skirt raised about her head with one hand, and in the other what looked like *some sort of human hand!*

"Guess where I was this time."

I confess I was shaking violently, but she laughed, and approached me coquettishly, showing me what appeared on closer examination to be an artifact of some sort, rather like a metal glove. As I peered at it she sighed deeply.

"What a knight!"

"Extraordinary, but I fancied I heard you say, 'What a night!'"

"That's what I said, Doc."

"But you've only been gone about five minutes. How can you say—?"

"Search me. All I know is, I just spent the last three hours with a knight."

"A night, in a few hours! How—?"

"I said 'knight'. The kind that rides a horse—you know."

I stared at her, but she was coyly putting on her clothes, a half-smile on her lovely face.

"He was so sweet, Doc. Talked a kind of funny French, but I could understand enough to intuition the rest—Anyhow, after awhile I remembered you'd be worried about me, so I sneaked out of his castle, and went through my routine up to the point where I wiggle my hips—and here I am."

"But—where *were* you?"

"Search me. He said his name was Launcelot."

"What?"

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