

The Gently Orbiting Blonde

by JOHN VICTOR PETERSON

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*Anti-gravity may be hard
to handle—but a woman
scorned is still harder!*

Maybe Helene's right in saying that I shouldn't tell exactly how our living room became the training station for Space Satellite One. If I don't, though, I'm afraid she'll let it slip out as a deep dark secret to one of her tri-dielectronic bridge friends and it'll be all over the Project as quickly as a pile past critical mass. It certainly wouldn't help my reputation at the labs, especially if in the retelling the facts should become distorted about Gladys, the gently orbiting blonde.

Some of it was accidental, certainly, but didn't Wilhelm Roentgen get brushed by the breeze of chance?

I must have been on the right track, anyhow!

I'll leave it to you....

It's true, I *do* get absorbed in things. So it happened on the night I was married. But I did, after all, carry Helene across the threshold. Can I help it that, as I was fetching her a toast, I just happened to glance up at the sun-chandelier in our cathedral-ceilinged living room and got reminded of the Project and decided I just had to go down into my lab in the basement and change one little bit of circuitry? When you're working on something as elusive as anti-gravity, you've got to seize upon every minute of inspiration.

I told her I'd be right back and dashed downstairs. I guess I should have kissed her first. I forgot. I'm sorry now. In a way. If I had, maybe—But, let's face it, I forgot.

You could ask old Ruocco, my psych prof. He always says I've supernatural powers of concentration.

There I was in the basement. One thing led to another. I rearranged the circuitry on the psionic machine and found then that changes in the gyrorotors were indicated.

Something intruded vaguely on my mind but I ignored it, enmeshed as I was in magnetostriction lines. This just might work!

It didn't. My concentration was disrupted. I glanced at my watch. *Oi!* I thought, *Helene!*

And my subconscious told me with sickening certainty that the near disturbance I had had, had been the slamming of a door—of the front door by someone on the way out.

I went upstairs. Helene was gone, complete with pocketbook. Her valises had been in the car and I saw from the living room window that she'd taken that.

She'd gone home to Mom, I guessed. She'd have no trouble getting off the reservation; she had a nonsensitive job on the Project. Not like me; I couldn't get pried out of White Sands by less than Presidential order.

It'd be hours before I could try visioing her. Mom's way up in Connecticut, quite a hop even by jetliner.

I sat on the chitchat bench, felt sorry for myself for a second and then got concentrating on the starchart on the ceiling above the

sun-chandelier and decided that if man was to start exploring upward I'd better continue my exploring downstairs.

But I couldn't concentrate. I fiddled around rewiring the psionic machine just to have something to do.

The front door banged again with the loveliest, most satisfying solid bang—and I dropped my soldering iron on a printed circuit and something went *whoosh* which wasn't just me going up the stairs. Simultaneously a feminine scream came to meet me.

I went up the stairs but when I got to the top I didn't—couldn't—stop. I kept going up, making climbing motions and touching nothing at all until my head ricocheted off the curving ceiling and I bounced down upon my contour chair. I didn't stop there but bounced right back up again, vaguely aware that the recoiling chair was slowly following me.

During this time I was seeing considerably more stars than you'd see from Palomar on a good clear night.

The stars began to blink out of focus, and me in. And then, in the midst of marveling over the undeniable fact that I'd discovered—well, what about Roentgen?—*discovered* anti- or at least *null-gravity*, I remembered (a) the door slamming and (b) the scream.

I bounced off the ceiling, cartwheeled a bit, glanced off a picture of a Viking rocket on the wall which took off on a trajectory of its own, and then spun in my orbit and got a look at the blonde.

Now, anyone under normal conditions would have taken a good look at the blonde. I was, however, performing what is known in aeronautics as a barrel-roll, and my viewing of the blonde was the sweeping scan of a surveillance radar.

Not that I hadn't seen the blonde before. I knew her well. Her name is Gladys. She's the most gorgeously put-together creature at the Sands. Most of the boys would ride bareback on a Nike if she gave them the smile she was giving me then.

Gladys was in a gentle orbit as nearly circular as that of Venus. Her primary was the sun-chandelier.

I thought then of another Venus. Only Gladys has arms. Her arms were bare. In fact, a lot of Gladys was bare and there's a lot of Gladys, all nicely proportioned, of course. The sunsuit's designer had indubitably been inspired by a Bikini.

I bounced off a sofa, which absorbed some of my inertia, and through some frictional freak stopped my axial rotation. I went then into an elliptical orbit grazing the chitchat bench at aphelion and the chandelier at perihelion.

The thought of Helene crossed my mind in a peculiarly guilty manner, and I was rather glad at that moment that Gladys and I weren't on a collision orbit.

"Now that you've stopped pingponging," Gladys said, "you might tell me how we're going to get out of this fix. And I don't mind behaving like an electron but you might make like a positron and come a little closer; it's getting cold in here! By the way, where's Helene?"

I don't know why, but I told her. And maybe I did put on an aggrieved husband act a bit, but who could blame me?

"Oh, Bill, I'm sorry," she said throatily. "You're so attractive, so fine. To think you've been snared by someone who doesn't appreciate your worth, your handsomeness, your manly strength.

Oh, why couldn't you just have given poor little me a glance? After all, we've been together in the Project Lab every day. I *know* you, Bill, and I'm *so* sorry!"

And she moved on, lovely, graceful in her gentle orbit, and my heart swelled with recognition of her compassion.

I started to make a self-effacing remark, stammered, and finally changed my mind and asked, "But how did you happen to come here?"

She sighed. "Business, I'm sorry to state. Jim O'Brien wants you at the lab. Thinks he's on the track of anti-grav—and here you have it already! Gee, Bill, it *is* getting cold in here!"

I hadn't noticed.

Just then the thermostat did notice, and the air-conditioning unit cut in. Warm air started to blow from the baseboard outlets.

"Bill—"

"Yeah," I answered, trajecting past the chitchat bench and wondering if by stretching real hard I could reach it on the next trip round and drag myself to it. Then, if it didn't come unplugged I could ground (now *that* was a silly thought!)—I could *stop* myself and maybe work out of the living room along the edge of the tacked-down carpet.

"Bill, if Helene doesn't come back, do you think, maybe—"

I thought, maybe.

Hey, was I imagining things or was my orbit changing? And was Gladys smiling more warmly?

Oh, oh! The air-vents were doing it, the air currents from them pressing me into a more curving trajectory which would probably graze Gladys' orbit.

I was passing the chitchat bench. I flailed out for it, missed, and my movement seemed to twist my trajectory even more. I looked at Gladys and she was smiling warmly, welcomingly. I thought of Helene and felt like a louse. An airborne louse. Without wings, like a louse should be. You need wings to fly. If I'd had them I think I'd have flown. Elsewhere.

Sure, you can let your conscience be your guide but what can you do when you're helplessly warped into a collision orbit with one of the loveliest women in the world, a welcoming planet in a closed system of your own peculiar manufacture?

The visio started buzzing then and I wondered agonizingly if it were Helene. On the other hand, it might be Jim O'Brien wondering why Gladys hadn't come back. With no answer, he might come over, but I doubted it. Jim's a bachelor and somewhat of a hermit.

Ah, missed on this go-round, but it was close. Gladys' smile told me she was paying no heed to the buzzing visio at all.

The sun-chandelier—I could reach it! I caught at one of its sunburst's rays. It promptly snapped off, but the action had changed my orbit.

Changed it—and how! Now I was in precisely the same orbit as Gladys and gaining! She smiled back over her nicely rounded shoulder. It wasn't fair!

I hadn't heard a sound outside, what with the visio buzzing away like mad, but the front door was suddenly opened and there was Helene starting to come in, a big package in her arms.

"Stay out!" I cried. "Don't come in, Helene!"

I was a split second too late; her foot hit the null-grav area and she was suddenly orbiting, her package tumbling off on a trajectory of its own, her pocketbook a satellite beside her.

Helene was startled, certainly, but not beyond speech. "Bill Wright," she cried, "you're a beast! You bring me home on our wedding night and leave me for your silly machine and without a single solitary drop to drink in the servomech and I go out for something and come back to find you flying after that blonde hussy!" She swept up around the chandelier, her orbit grazing it at perihelion but apparently destined to be far remote at aphelion.

"But, dear—" I started.

"Don't dear me!" she cried, and went out of my range of vision just as I overtook Gladys and her outflung arms caught me painfully by the neck.

Which is when Helene's orbit mercifully turned out to be a collision orbit with Gladys'—and she took Gladys away from me like a super-Nike taking out a stratojet-bomber. They bounced against the ceiling. Gladys took the impact. Rearward. Fortunately Mother Nature had been kind.

Helene bounced away from Gladys. Strands of blonde hair went with her.

"Dark roots!" Helene cried triumphantly.

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