

New Worlds

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WHITE MOUSE

By

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Thornton Ayre

First published *New Worlds*, July 1946.

*The girl from Venus—the man from Earth. Would such a mixed marriage be a success?
—Even though they were both humans?*

To those of you who wonder why the laws concerning interplanetary marriages are so strict, and to those others among you who have found yourselves captivated by the amazing music, writing and paintings of Lucia Veltique, let me tell a story.

For my own part, it is only because the memory of Lucia Veltique is still so fragrant that I feel inclined to dwell again on the events of twenty years ago, for, in recounting them, I can derive a sense of pleasure, in much the same way as one can detect the aroma of an exquisite perfume long after the bottle has been drained.

In those days I was a young man—twenty-seven to be exact—and space travel had been in being for many years. There had been blunders, of course, the inseparable accidents of enterprise and exploration, but gradually the inner ring of planets had been reached, investigated and either conquered or amalgamated with Earth.

With a thirst for adventure and no more sense of caution than one usually has at twenty-seven, I became Space-Engineer Jeffrey Haslam. My wanderings took me to every planet—to impossible Mercury, arid Mars and lastly to exotic Venus. And it was here where I first met Lucia.

The Venusians, perhaps because of their planet being similar to ours in size, are very like us, only frailer—as you will know for yourself these days. The perpetual absence of direct sunshine has deprived them of the tougher qualities which we, accustomed to the sun, have developed. It was this criminal lack of knowledge in those early days which brought about my own unhappiness. But I was saying—about Lucia. I first saw her at the trading station near Venus' Half-Way Mountains—that titanic range which sprawls across the wild planet's terminator and reaches to nearly five miles in the eternal clouds.

Lucia was small, slender and in the diaphanous draperies which most Venusian women wear, she seemed more like the popular conception of a fairy queen than anything else. Everything about her was tiny, yet perfectly developed. She was no more than five feet tall, her well shaped head crowned with a wind-swept mass of light flaxen hair. This, with the delicate ivory white skin which all Venusians have, and the big yellow eyes with abysmal pupils, made her the most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

We came to know each other. I saw to that. Her father and mother were as delightful as she was, jointly controlling the trading station. Lucia and I learned each other's language. For two years we met, every time my journeying took me to Venus.

We used to go for long walks in the dense, torrid jungles; we journeyed over the mud-flats together; we climbed the mountains. She was a carefree, happy soul, simple as a child in some things, mature as a middle-aged woman in others. And in bestowing talents upon her Nature

had been generous. I discovered that she was a brilliant artist, that she could write prose either exquisitely funny or profoundly moving, according to her mood. Also she could play with a magic which held me spell-bound—either on a Venusian instrument or upon the piano we had in the spaceship—and at times she composed pieces which for grandeur defeated anything I, or any of we Earth men, had ever heard before.

Can you wonder that I wanted to marry her? So much so that at the end of two and a half years' association with her I came to a decision, and the first person to whom I told it was old Henry Baythorp, our ship's physician. He was a gnarled, serious little man with wispy grey hair and an evil-smelling briar pipe. That is how I always remember him. To the stranger he probably appeared churlish, but to an intimate like myself I knew him to be a man of frank opinions and, when necessary, immense courage.

He sat coiled up in his bunk while I told him what I intended to do. With the energy of youth I raced through the details while he sat looking at me steadily with smoke coiling out of the crackling bowl of his pipe.

"Lad, you won't like this," he said finally, considering, "but my advice is, *don't!* Yes, yes, I know Lucia is a lovely girl," he went on, as I started to interrupt. "As fair a picture as any man could wish to see—even at my age; but that's only the outside of the parcel, as it were. I think that if you marry that girl and take her back to Earth with you you'll regret it—and so will she. Besides, marriage between people of different planets hasn't yet been made legal. The eugenists haven't yet examined the possibilities of such unions."

"But there's no law against it, either," I pointed out. "That is why I want to marry Lucia before some committee or other thinks up the notion of banning interplanetary marriages. . . . Anyway, Lucia is quite willing."

"Mmmm. What do you plan to do when you get to Earth?"

"I'll give up space-roving. It won't interest me any more, and I'm getting to the age that doesn't make for a good spaceman. I've made a good deal of money in these last few years, so I propose to buy a decent home for Lucia and myself—somewhere in the country if I can—and then I'll take up an executive position. My papers qualify me for that."

He sighed, knocked the ashes out of his pipe on the bunk rail.

"Well, lad, if your mind is made up that's all there is to be said. I gave up trying to reason with youth—or love—long ago. It can't be done. . . . All I can suggest is that you think very carefully, because I'm convinced that it won't turn out as you expect. Nature, my boy," he added solemnly, wagging a finger at me. "You can't get behind the old lady. Lucia is a Venusian, born to this world: you are an Earth man, born to that world. Not much difference, you say? Well, we'll see. You'd be better off preserving a friendship with Lucia than marrying her."

I shook my head stubbornly. "I can't do that. I've promised her—and her people. The marriage is expected. It's the only logical outcome after our long acquaintance."

Baythorp shrugged and reached for his tobacco pouch.

"All right, lad. And if you can't find a best man and will take one thirty years older than yourself, remember me. . . ."

I will not say I forgot Dr. Baythorp's advice. In fact, I couldn't really; all I could do was push it in the back of my mind and try and pretend I hadn't heard it. At twenty-seven, deeply in love, you are guided by your heart, not your head, and such things as differing birthplaces just don't enter into your calculations.

So Lucia and I made all arrangements and it was decided that she should come back with me to Earth on our return journey, and when we arrived we could be married. Her parents would come for the ceremony only and then, tied to business at the trading post, they would have to leave for Venus again almost immediately.

On the day before we left Venus, Lucia and I found the time for one of our walks to the foothills of Half-Way Mountains. As usual, it was steaming hot, for during the 720-hour Venusian day the planet swelters in a hundred and twenty-five Fahrenheit degrees under its eternal clouds—and for me, anyway, it was too exhausting for much effort. So we selected a gigantic rock in the path of the hot mountain winds and sprawled ourselves upon it. Lucia, lithe and graceful, lay with her hands behind her head staring up at the creamy scum of clouds writhing far above.

Just for a moment an odd thought crossed my mind. She was a part of this hot world, with its sweeping winds and exotic jungle: she thrived and blossomed and lived with the sheer joy of living amidst this grey daylight. She fitted into the pattern with the exactness Nature had intended. Was I, a man of Earth—a man from a world of harsh contrasts—something of an interloper, a thief in a beautiful garden itching to snatch away the most perfect of all flowers?

“Jeff, is Earth very beautiful?” she asked me presently, in that gentle, pleading voice of hers.

“Depends,” I answered. “Some parts of it are very much like this world of yours—jungles, heat and sunshine. . . .”

“I’ve never seen the sun,” she reminded me, turning her face so that I saw her smile.

It was an odd reflection to think that she had never looked upon the orb which gives life to the Solar System, and yet her planet is twice as close to it as Earth.

“You will,” I said. “It’s a treat in store. You’ll see it in space, and on Earth. . . . You’ll like Earth, Lucia. There will be real scope for your talents—your music, your art, your writing. The people I live amongst will acclaim you. Especially in the big cities.”

“I’ve often wondered about cities,” she mused. “I’ve seen photographs of them and read about them. Everything about them is so different to anything I have ever known here. We only have the mountains and jungles, and the trading station and space-port. In fact, I suppose we’re—backward?”

“Certainly Venus is a long way behind Earth in development,” I agreed. “You have no radio, television, or atomic energy. You will wonder after a year on Earth how you ever managed to exist at all. It’s surprising how environment changes one’s outlook.”

Looking back I can see now how prophetic I was when I said that—but just then nothing mattered. Lucia was mine. She loved me with all her heart and soul, and I her. I recall how much like a child she looked when, her big tawny eyes upon me, she asked slowly:

“Jeff, you will look after me well, won’t you?”

“Look after you!” I echoed. “With my life if need be, dearest. You know that!”

She nodded as if satisfied, then looked about her at the wild landscape.

“I wonder if I shall ever see this again?” she murmured, sighing—and she said it in such a peculiar tone I cannot quite describe it. It had somehow a fatalistic resignation, as though she were giving up everything that meant happiness to her—as though she had felt a presentiment cross her sensitive, happy mind.

So we returned to Earth, and for two weeks Lucia had time in which to orientate herself. During these two weeks she had had but few comments to make upon my native planet.

Rather, she seemed a little stunned by the enormity and power of a modern city after the wastes of Venus. But with her usual bright intelligence she spent a lot of her time examining the hundred and one new things which appealed to her, making friends readily by her happy laughter and total lack of guile.

As a man of some social position—for Space-Engineer was a high rank in those days—I attracted the newshounds. Lucia, the first woman of Venus—indeed, the first inhabitant—to ever come to Earth, became the target for photographers, magazine cover artists, dress designers, and all the usual avenues of publicity. I don't think she quite liked being the star attraction, but there was no way of avoiding it. Even her wedding gown was presented as a gift by New Creations, with earnest wishes for her happiness. Later on, of course, New Creations hoped to cash in on being the first designers in the world to gown a Venusian woman for her wedding. Somehow this cheapening of our romance rather sickened me.

So we were married, and to please her we honeymooned in the blazing heat of Teheran, on the Persian Gulf. We were away a month and then returned to the home I had had prepared in the meantime. It stood some ten miles out of the city. For the first time it seemed as if we might be able to shake off the fetters of those people who meant well and yet were actually a damned nuisance.

I began to assess matters. Our lives together had really begun now. My executive position in the city was assured: I had seen to that. We had two servants in the house to attend to our every want. Lucia would not need to soil her fingers with any drudgery; instead, she could expand her talents and do whatever she wanted. As far as I could see, I had done all any husband could do. Yet she seemed to smile less frequently now. Inwardly, I was trouble at the strange, half-frightened expression I sometimes glimpsed on her face.

"Lucia," I asked her quietly as we sat in the garden one evening in the mellow summer twilight, "is there something wrong? Is it that you're not happy?"

Her big tawny eyes turned to me and she smiled faintly.

"With you, Jeff, I could always be happy. It's just that—that I feel so utterly . . . lost!"

For a moment she was silent, staring into the sky. Her lips were parted in eager excitement and I followed her line of vision in some surprise. Far out to the west over the amber of the sunset was a solitary, gleaming planet.

"Yes," I told her quietly, "it's Venus."

She smiled—a wistful smile that had the quality of intolerable longing. I could almost see into her mind's eye and picture her wandering mentally through the torrid jungles or across the wind-swept foothills of Half-Way Mountains. . . . The evening deepened into night as she sat gazing at that solitary glowing point of her homeland. Then at last she shivered, though the air was warm.

"I think I'll go inside," she said. "It's cold out here." She left me, ghostlike in the gloom, making no sounds. I said no word and was left alone, staring up into the night sky. For some reason I kept thinking of what Dr. Baythorp had said. When I went into the house Lucia was nowhere to be seen and I learned from the maid that she had gone to bed. It was only a little after ten, so I spent an hour reading and smoking before I followed Lucia upstairs. When I got into the bedroom I found her lying fully clothed on the bed, her slim shoulders quivering with the effort of sobbing.

"Lucia!" I sat down beside her immediately, drew her into my arms. "Lucia, sweetheart, whatever's wrong? What did I do to you? What did anybody do?"

The tears were wet on her lashes as she looked at me. Her lips were quivering.

“You—you didn’t do anything.” She shook her head slowly. “Everybody’s so kind to me—that’s why it’s so awful! I don’t know why I’m unhappy, but I am. Oh, Jeff, I’m so dreadfully frightened—so alone—and I don’t know *why!*”

For a long time she sat with her head buried on my shoulder, crying and talking by turns. I held her to me, frowning and wondering. At last I spoke.

“You’re simply suffering from the transition to this life from your old one. Nothing more. It happens sometimes even when only moving from one town to another. . . . We call it nostalgia. That means home-sickness, a longing for one’s own people and birthplace.”

“Yes, perhaps that’s it,” she whispered, looking at me again. “I do so want to be happy with you, Jeff, because I love you so, and your world, terrifying though it is sometimes. . . . I’ll try to like it, to understand it—somehow. I am your wife and you’ve the right to expect me to behave as such, instead of like a spoilt baby—I’ll try! I really will!”

“Of course you will. . . .” I stroked her silvery hair gently. “And the best way to forget yourself is to use those gifts you have. You must write and paint and play. . . . That will bring you in contact with others. There’ll be no more loneliness, no more longings. In time you’ll settle down.”

“Yes,” she said, low voice. “In time, dear one. . . .”

Certainly Lucia made a tremendous effort after her attack of nostalgia. She apparently became happier and immersed herself in the three arts over which she had such complete command. When I returned home from the city in the evenings I would either find her painting a genuine masterpiece on a giant canvas in the quiet room she had taken over for a studio, or else she would be sitting writing. At other times I encountered the crashing chords of the grand piano, rolling out some fantastic, breath-taking diapason of melody. *How* she could play!

To a great extent these pursuits seemed to calm her. Her talents soon brought her into constant demand among friends and public alike. Her paintings attracted the notice of wealthy buyers and netted her a small fortune. On the other hand, her writing was so startlingly arresting that, without any effort, she wrote three best sellers in a row in the space of two months!

Yet the money she made, making my own finances seem like a child’s savings by comparison, failed to interest her in the least. She smiled, she was lovable, ethereal—fascinating, yet somehow her eyes were always looking far away.

Then Miranti, the great Italian impresario, chanced to be at a gathering to which Lucia and I had been invited. He heard her play and went into ecstasies. Almost without realising it, she was launched on a musical career. Naturally, my business tying me, I saw less of her than hitherto, but on those occasions when she did come home I found her unspoiled by success—still like a fairy, a gossamer-being, becoming, I felt sure, even more fragile than when she had first attracted my notice in the wastes of Venus. Her eyes seemed larger and her face smaller. There was a touch of the languid in her movements, too, which I couldn’t altogether understand.

Then one evening, when she was away on a concert tour at the other end of the country, old Dr. Baythorp turned up. He was just back from a Mars-Venus trip, as taciturn and solid as ever, with his evil-smelling pipe more aggressive than usual.

Over the drinks in the lounge he looked at me critically.

“You married a brilliant woman, Jeff,” he commented. “Seems to have made herself famous.”

“How can she help but do so?” I smiled with the pride natural to a husband who has a clever wife. “She’s a genius, Doc—a genius with the heart of a child. It’s odd, really, to think of a girl with so fantastic and wild a soul having such lavish gifts.”

“Fantastic and wild is right,” he said, studying his drink. “I wonder if you have noticed something—well, *odd*, about her three gifts?”

“Odd?”

“I heard her most recent concert—made a point of it. She played her own compositions. They’re astounding, soul-moving, but they are reflections of spirit and heart. She’s a prisoner, lad, a soul drowning in a constricting world! Into her music she pours all the longing and futility she feels herself. Her fingers bring into magic actuality the Half-Way Mountains, the overpowering jungles, the hot winds of Venus. They are in her mind all the time. She’s on Earth, I know, and she’s your wife, but—her real being is on the world where she was born. Remember . . . I warned you of that.”

“She’s happy enough,” I said, thinking.

“Is she?” Baythorp looked at me frankly. “Have you studied her paintings in the gallery? I have. They’re fantastic—overloaded with tumbled concepts, the expressions once again of a fettered soul. And her books! Stories of people struggling vainly for existence against impossible odds. In every way, lad, she shows that she is fighting a losing battle against herself. . . . For your sake she is trying to prove herself mistress over an intolerable situation. But it won’t work out. It never *can* work out. I believe two people of different worlds can never be entirely one in the sense that is really implied by marriage.”

“Doc, I think you’re off your course,” I said, smiling. “I know that Lucia is—— Pardon me.” I broke off as the visiphone rang.

I went over to it and to my surprise it was the manager of the concert hall on long distance. His voice, reedy with miles, spoke the most incredible words.

“. . . I think it would be as well if you’d come right away, Mr. Haslam. I hardly like to say this, but your wife is—is hopelessly intoxicated! She can’t play. Else she is ill, but I’d say . . . drunk.”

The rest of his words blurred off so that I hardly heard them. I think I said I’d come immediately. Then, as I was putting the visiphone back I saw Doc. Baythorp’s expectant face.

“Lucia is . . . intoxicated,” I managed to say mechanically.

He looked at me, seemed to reflect, then he put down his glass and rose from the chair.

“Where is she? The Avalon Concert Hall?”

“Yes, at the other end of the country. I can get a ‘plane.”

“Then I’ll come with you. Probably I can help.”

So we flew through the night and landed at our destination some time after midnight. A much harassed manager who had awaited our coming showed us into a dressing-room, where we found Lucia stretched full length on a couch, dressed in her concert gown. She was playing with a lace handkerchief and giggling to herself ever and again.

“Lucia, what on earth’s the matter?” I knelt beside her, put an arm behind her shoulders and raised her up.

“Nothin’ in the world,” she shrugged, running her words into one another. “Just that, for the fi’st time I’m really happy. . . .”

Doc. Baythorp leaned forward, studying her keenly.

“They wouldn’t let me play,” she went on, sighing. “An’ jus’ when I felt in the mood too _____”

“She isn’t intoxicated, Jeff,” Baythorp interrupted sharply. “Off hand I’d say she’s—gassed. No smell of drink, either.”

“Gassed!” I stared at him. “But how can she be——?”

“Let’s get her home,” he said.

I nodded and Lucia got to her feet, but almost instantly her knees gave way. She would have fallen full length on the floor had I not caught her. I scooped up her light body in my arms and bore her outside to the waiting taxi.

She still giggled to herself as we were whisked to the airport, and now and again she broke into snatches of song. To me all this was distressing—embarrassing even, but to Doc. Baythorp it seemed to be a matter of profound interest. He kept his eyes on her, his professional instincts aroused. All I noticed was Lucia’s dead white face—as it always was—and the unusual brightness of her yellow eyes. The pupils had dilated so much they had nearly swallowed the irises.

When we got her home Baythorp saw that she went straight to bed. I didn’t stay while he made his examination, preferring instead to walk up and down the lounge and wait for him. When finally he reappeared his face was troubled.

“Well?” I asked him in a hushed voice.

“I was right.” He tapped his fingers restlessly on the table top. “She’s gassed. Atmospheric gas, I mean. Just as an aviator who goes too high suffers from mental black-out and intoxication from lowered air pressure, so your wife has got the same thing. It has taken several weeks in her case to make itself noticeable, because the change is produced by an alteration in the bloodstream, there being less oxygen in it than there normally should be for a Venusian. The result is extreme giddiness and all the symptoms of intoxication. You see, Jeff, the air of Venus is about twelve and a half per cent. denser than Earth’s, and that poor girl is just realising it!”

“Then what happens now?” I asked, my mouth dry.

“I’ve given her an injection which will gradually balance the missing oxygen ingredient in her bloodstream. She will then become normal again—but if she is to stay on Earth with you she will have to take an injection without fail every twenty-four hours. If at any time she fails to do so coma and death may result.”

I was silent, stunned by the thought of her being chained for evermore to a preventative against death.

“In the bedroom you’ll find the injector and the stuff itself,” Baythorp said. “It’s up to you to see that my orders are carried out. In case you don’t know it, lad, Lucia is a white mouse—the first inhabitant of another world to come to Earth. From her sufferings we can learn what to avoid in future.”

“She isn’t going to suffer!” I snapped. “She deserves all that is best and beautiful in life, and she’s going to get them. As soon as she’s better I’ll take her back to Venus where she belongs.”

He sighed. “You can try. . . . The chances are that her heart and constitution are weakened a good deal. You see, at a lesser air pressure the heart works more swiftly, as hers must have been doing ever since she arrived here. That may account for her incredible genius, which is far in excess of what it was on Venus. The faster the flow of blood through the brain the more

stimulated the brain is. . . . I really think that space travel on top of her present physical trouble would——”

Baythorp stopped and shrugged. “Don’t think of it yet, anyway. We’ll see how she goes on. I’ll be in the city for a fortnight before I’m due off again. If anything goes wrong send for me right away—the Apex Hotel.”

I hardly heard him leave. All I was conscious of at that moment was my own damnable selfishness and Lucia’s superb courage. For weeks, as Baythorp had said, she must have been battling against impossible odds, trying to fit herself into a foreign environment. And I had kept her beside me. Why? Because I loved her, because I was proud of her, because I liked Earth better than Venus—because I had been too infernally egotistical to realise that, torn from her home planet, she was like a tropical flower trying to acclimatise itself to frost.

I went upstairs and found her lying flat on her back in bed, staring at the ceiling. On the little table were the injector and bottle of fluid Baythorp had made up.

“Lucia . . .” I caught at her limp hand. “Lucia, sweetheart, this is all my fault. I should have realised . . .”

She turned her face slowly towards me, smiling wistfully.

“It isn’t anybody’s fault, Jeff.” Her voice was gentle and unaccusing. “Dr. Baythorp told me everything—why it is that I feel as though everything is whizzing round me like a Half-Way Mountain cyclone. Something to do with atmospheric pressure. . . . Yours is a terrible world, dearest.”

She closed her eyes and I saw the wet glint of tears on her long lashes.

Sitting down on the bed beside her, I didn’t speak again. I remained holding her hand until she fell into a restful sleep—then I moved over to a chair and for the rest of that night I kept on the alert to attend to her slightest wish.

Dr. Baythorp’s antidote did the trick. When she awoke Lucia was normal, as far as her intoxication was concerned anyway—but she seemed spiritless and she remained unsmiling.

Naturally I had my business to attend to, but the only thought in my mind was for her, and I returned home early in the evening. I found her coiled up on the window seat in the lounge, ghostly and silent, her great yellow eyes gazing out across the lawn. As I came in she turned and I could tell her smile was only produced by sheer effort.

“Everything all right?” I asked, trying to sound cheerful.

She shook her head, and with a shock I noticed that the sheen had gone from her silvery hair. It was dull . . . drab.

“Come and look at what I’ve done,” she whispered, taking my hand—and, wonderingly, I followed her into the room she used as a studio. With a tired wave of her arm she indicated one of her giant canvases. I stared at it unbelievably. It was an incredible chaos of flowing paint streaks and eye-wrenching hues.

“I—I tried to paint one of my own home landscapes, just as I have so often done,” she said. “But this is how it came out. . . . *I can’t paint any more, Jeff!*”

“But—why not?” I studied her white face stupidly.

“I don’t know. I’ve forgotten. My power of conception has gone. Besides, I—— Look here, too!”

She picked up a manuscript from the table and I glanced through it. The words were a jumble of meaningless nonsense. I let it fall from my hand to the table again.

“Jeff, what’s the *matter* with me?” Her voice rose in sudden wild terror and her arms went about my neck in a desperate longing for protection. Troubled, I lifted her gently and bore her back into the lounge to the window seat.

“It’ll pass,” I kept on saying to her—without realising why I said it. “It’s a hangover from last night, that’s all.”

She looked at me seriously. “Dearest, do you really think that, or do you know, in your heart of hearts, that——” She stopped, forcing back tears; then she got off the window seat and went over to the piano. “I still have this,” she said, and began playing an unearthly melody which she had herself composed, “Breeze Across the Foothills,” that abandoned, soul-stirring music which epitomised the wild glory of the foothills of Venus where she had been born and raised, until I——

Half way through the piece she stopped, pressed a hand to her forehead and got up from the stool uncertainly. Immediately I was at her side.

“You’re out of bed too soon,” I murmured. “Come along back upstairs. . . .”

She nodded weakly and again she was in my arms. She lay so heavily, so tiredly, I had a hard struggle to stifle back the gnawing fear at my heart. I knew I was watching her slide down the scale of life with diabolical swiftness, and I could do nothing to stop it!

The moment I had her in bed again I sent for Baythorp. He came from the city right away, and this time his examination took half an hour. When we faced each other downstairs he shook his head.

“Jeff, lad, if only you’d listened to me!” His voice was bitter. “This time the sun is the prime cause of the trouble. On Venus the sun never gets through and at least two of its radiations—which we experience all the time and are therefore immune against—are masked. On Earth here Lucia has had them beating down on her for over three months during this hot summer. The result is the same as if we had been exposed to naked cosmic rays. . . . It’s affected her brain, hence her inability to paint or write any more.”

“Doc, you don’t mean she’s going to——”

“You can’t defeat Nature, Jeff,” he said moodily.

“Not die!” I shrieked. “No——!”

I raced out of the room and up the stairs. Lucia turned her head as I came in. I saw it now—the naked cruelty of approaching death on her wan face. Her eyes were wistful, still without reproach.

“I’m an awful nuisance, Jeff, aren’t I?” she murmured.

“Lucia, we can’t be separated like this! Nature can’t *do* that to us! We love each other so. . . .”

I put my arms round her, held her tight. Her slender little body hardly stirred in my arms.

“Jeff. . . .” Her voice was dim and far away. “Jeff, I’m a white mouse, aren’t I? Dr. Baythorp said so. Other Venusian women won’t go through this hell. I’m blazing the trail for them. It’s been worth it—if only to know your love for me. But oh, dearest, how I long for home, for my beloved wild landscape, the great trees, the flowers, the hot winds, the soft daylight and moonless nights. Perhaps I’ll be there again—soon.”

I could not speak. My voice was choked.

“Jeff, open the window, please. I—I can’t breathe properly. . . .”

I stumbled over to it and swung it wide. It was nearing twilight now. A warm breeze set the curtains flowing.

“Play to me. . . .” I could hardly hear Lucia’s voice as she lay with her eyes closed. “Play ‘Breeze Across the Foothills’ please!”

“Yes,” I whispered. “All right.”

I went downstairs blindly and to the piano. Doc. Baythorp stood looking at me morosely. I could hardly see the music score for tears, and I am not a good player either—but for Lucia’s sake I did my best. For ten minutes I sent those wild, unearthly chords crashing through the house. Then I could stand it no longer.

In the dead silence after the last note had echoed away I fled from the room and upstairs.

“Lucia!” I cried, bursting in on her. “Did you hear it——?”

She was silent. A wistful smile was fixed on her small mouth. Her eyes were wide open, unblinking. Stupidly I followed their direction towards the open window, where the curtains stirred restlessly.

Over the sunset was a star, a glowing planet, brilliant and alone.

[The end of *White Mouse* by John Russell Fearn (as Thornton Ayre)]