

Variable Star

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A never-before-published masterpiece from science fiction's greatest writer, rediscovered after more than half a century.

When Joel Johnston first met Jinny Hamilton, it seemed like a dream come true. And when she finally agreed to marry him, he felt like the luckiest man in the universe.

There was just one small problem. He was broke. His only goal in life was to become a composer, and he knew it would take years before he was earning enough to support a family.

But Jinny wasn't willing to wait. And when Joel asked her what they were going to do for money, she gave him a most unexpected answer. She told him that her name wasn't really Jinny Hamilton---it was Jinny Conrad, and she was the granddaughter of Richard Conrad, the wealthiest man in the solar system.

And now that she was sure that Joel loved her for herself, not for her wealth, she revealed her family's plans for him---he would be groomed for a place in the vast Conrad empire and sire a dynasty to carry on the family business.

Most men would have jumped at the opportunity. But Joel Johnston wasn't most men. To Jinny's surprise, and even his own, he turned down her generous offer and then set off on the mother of all benders. And woke up on a colony ship heading out into space, torn between regret over his rash decision and his determination to forget Jinny and make a life for himself among the stars.

He was on his way to succeeding when his plans--and the plans of billions of others--were shattered by a cosmic cataclysm so devastating it would take all of humanity's strength and ingenuity just to survive.

Robert A. Heinlein is universally acknowledged as modern science fiction's greatest author. At his death, in 1987, he left a legacy of books and stories that has profoundly influenced the course of the field for generations.

But one of Heinlein's most ambitious works was never finished. In 1955, he began work on a novel to be titled *Variable Star*, completing a detailed outline and making extensive notes for the book, only to set it aside to focus on other novels, including *Tunnel in the Sky* and the Hugo Award-winning *Double Star*. For more than half a century, the work lay forgotten among Heinlein's papers. Then, on its rediscovery a few years ago, the Robert A. Heinlein Trust selected an author to finish the work.

The author chosen for the project was, appropriately enough, a writer *The New York Times* has hailed as "the New Robert Heinlein"--Spider Robinson, the Hugo and Nebula Award--winning author of such modern SF classics as *Stardance* and "Melancholy Elephants." Faithful to the spirit of Heinlein's original vision, and laced with contemporary touches that will appeal to modern readers, *Variable Star* is a rare treat for the Grand Master's many fans.

Profits from the book will help fund the annual \$500,000 Heinlein Prize for innovation in commercial manned spaceflight, a goal Mr. Heinlein considered crucial to humanity's long-term survival.

Chapter One

For it was in the golden prime
Of good Harun Alrashid . . .

-Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Recollections of the Arabian Nights

I thought I wanted to get married in the worst way. Then that's pretty much what I was offered, so I ended up going trillions of kilometers out of my way instead. A great many trillions of kilometers, and quite a few years-which turns out to be much the greater distance.

It began this way:

Jinny Hamilton and I were dancing.

This was something of an accomplishment for me, in and of itself-I was born on Ganymede, and I had only been Earthside a few years, then. If you've never experienced three times the gravity you consider normal, imagine doing your favorite dance . . . with somebody your own weight sitting on each of your shoulders, on a pedestal a few meters above concrete. Broken bones, torn ligaments, and concussions are hazards you simply learn to accept.

But some people play water polo, voluntarily. Jinny and I had been going out together for most of a year, and dancing was one of her favorite recreations, so by now I had not only made myself learn how to dance, I'd actually become halfway decent at it. Enough to dimly understand how someone with muscles of steel and infinite wind might consider it fun, anyway.

But that night was something else.

Part of it was the setting, I guess. Your prom is supposed to be a magical time. It was still quite early in the evening, but the Hotel Vancouver ballroom was appropriately decorated and lit, and the band was excellent, especially the singer. Jinny was both the most beautiful and the most interesting person I had ever met. She and I were both finally done with Fermi Junior College, in Surrey, British Columbia. Class of 2286 (Restored Gregorian), huzzah-go, Leptons! In the fall we'd be going off to university together at Stony Brook, on the opposite coast of North America-if my scholarship came through, anyway-and in the meantime we were young, healthy, and hetero. The song being played was one I liked a lot, an ancient old ballad called "On the Road to the Stars," that always brought a lump to my throat because it was one of my father's favorites.

It's the reason we came from the mud, don't you know
'cause we wanted to climb to the stars.

In our flesh and our bone and our blood we all know
we were meant to return to the stars.

Ask anyone which way is God, and you know
he will probably point to the stars . . .

None of that explained the way Jinny danced that night. I knew her as a good dancer, but that night it was almost as if she were possessed by the ghost of Gillis. It wasn't even just her own dancing, though that was inspired. She did some moves that startled me, phrases so impressive she started to draw attention even on a crowded dance floor. Couples around us kept dancing, but began watching her. Her long red hair swirled through the room like the cape of an inspired toreador, and for a while I could only follow like a mesmerized bull. But then her eyes met mine, and flashed, and the next thing I knew I was attempting a combination I had never even thought of before; one that I knew as I began, was way beyond my abilities-and I nailed it. She sent me a grin that felt like it started a sunburn, and offered me an intriguing move, and I thought of something to do with it, and she lobbed it back with a twist, and we got through five fairly complex phrases without a train wreck and out the other side as smoothly as if we'd been rehearsing for weeks. Some people had stopped dancing to watch, now.

On the way to the stars-
every molecule in you was born in the heart of a star.
On the way to the stars-
in the dead of the night they're the light that'll show
where you are
yes they are
from so far . . .

In the back of my head were a few half-formed, half-baked layman's ideas for dance steps that I wasn't even sure were physically possible in a one-gee field. I'd never had the nerve to actually try any of them with a partner, in any gravity; I really hate looking ridiculous. But Jinny lifted an eyebrow-what have you got?-and before I knew it I was trying one, even though there was no way she could know what her response was supposed to be. Only she did, somehow, and made it-or rather, an improved variation of what I'd thought of-and not only was the result successful enough to draw applause, by luck it happened to offer a perfect lead-in to another of my ideas, which also turned out to work, and suggested something to her-

We flew.

We'll be through if the day ever comes when we no
longer yearn to return to the stars.

I can't prove it's so, but I'm certain: I know
that our ancestors came from the stars.

It would not be so lonely to die if I knew
I had died on the way to the stars.

Talking about dance is as silly as dancing about architecture. I don't know how to convey exactly how we danced that night, or what was so remarkable about it. I can barely manage to believe we did it. Just let it stand that we deserved the applause we received when the music finally ended and we went into our closing clinch. It was probably the first time since I'd come to Terra that I didn't feel heavy and weak and fragile. I felt strong . . . graceful . . . manly . . .

"After dancing like that, Stinky, a couple really ought to get married," Jinny said about two hundred millimeters below my ear.

I felt fourteen. "Damn it, Jinny-" I said, and pulled away from her. I reached down for her hands, trying to make it into a dance move, but she eluded me. Instead she curtsied, blew me a kiss, turned on her heel, and left at high speed, to spirited applause.

It increased when I ran after her.

Jinny was 178 centimeters tall, not especially tall for a Terran, and I was a Ganymedean beanpole two full meters high, so her legs were considerably shorter than mine. But they were also adapted from birth to a one-gee field-to sports in a one-gee field. I didn't catch up with her until we'd reached the parking lot, and then only because she decided to let me.

So we'd each had time to work on our lines.

Ginny went with, "Joel Johnston, if you don't want to marry me-"

"Jinny, you know perfectly well I'm going to marry you-"

"In five more frimpin' years! My God, Stinky, I'll be an old, old woman by then-"

"Skinny, you'll never be an old woman," I said, and that shut her up for a second. Every so often a good one comes to me like that. Not often enough. "Look, don't be like this. I can't marry you right now. You know I can't."

"I don't know anything of the sort. I know you won't. But I see nothing preventing you. You don't even have to worry about parental consent."

"What does that have to do with it? Neither do you. And we wouldn't let parental disapproval stand in our way if we did want to get married."

"You see? I was right-you don't want to!"

I was becoming alarmed. I had always thought of Jinny as unusually rational, for a girl. Could this be one of those hormonal storms I had read about? I hoped not—all authorities seemed to agree the only thing a man could do in such weather was lash himself to the mast and pray. I made a last stubborn attempt to pour logic on the troubled waters. "Jinny, please-be reasonable! I am not going to let you marry a dole bludger. Not even if he's me."

"But—"

"I intend to be a composer. You know that. That means it's going to take me at least a few years to even start to get established. You knew that when we started dating. If, I say 'if,' all those bullocks I sacrificed to Zeus pay off and I actually win a Kallikanzaros Scholarship, it will be my great privilege to spend the next four years living on dishrag soup and scraped fridge, too poor to support a cat. If, and I say 'if,' I am as smart as I think I am, and luckier than I usually am, I'll come out the other end with credentials that might, in only another year or two, leave me in a position to offer you something more than half of a motel cubicle. Meanwhile, you have your own scholarships and your law degree to worry about, so that once my music starts making serious money, nobody will weasel it away from us."

"Stinky, do you think I care about money?" She said that last word as if it were a synonym for stale excrement.

I sighed. Definitely a hormonal storm. "Reboot and start over. What is the purpose of getting married?"

"What a romantic question!" She turned away and quested for her car. I didn't move.

"Quit dodging, I'm serious. Why don't we just live together if we want to be romantic? What is marriage for?"

The car told her she was heading the wrong way; she reversed direction and came back past me toward its voice and pulsing beacon. "Babies, obviously."

I followed her. "Bingo. Marriage is for making jolly babies, raising them up into successful predators, and then admiring them until they're old enough to reward you with grandchildren to spoil."

She'd acquired the car by now; she safed and unlocked it. "My baby-making equipment is at its peak right now," she said, and got in the car. "It's going to start declining any minute." She closed, but did not slam, the door.

I got in my side and strapped in. "And the decline will take decades to become significant," I pointed out logically. "Your baby-making gear may be at its hypothetical optimum efficiency today—but my baby-raising equipment isn't even operational yet."

"So what?"

"Jinny, are you seriously proposing that we raise a child as extraordinary and gifted as ours on credit?" We both shared a most uncommon aversion to being in debt. Orphans spend too much of their childhood in debt to others—debt that cannot be repaid.

"Nobody seems to be seriously proposing around here," she said bitterly.

Hormonal hurricane, maybe. A long time ago they used to name all hurricanes after women. On Ganymede, we still named all groundquakes after them. "Look—"

She interrupted, "Silver: my home, no hurry." The car said, "Yes, Jinny," and came alive, preparing for takeoff.

I wondered as always why she'd named her car that—if you were going to pick an element, I thought, why not hydrogen? I failed to notice the slight change in address protocol. Despite our low priority, we didn't have to wait long, since nobody else had left the prom yet and the system was between rush hours; Silver rose nearly at once and entered the system with minimal huhu. That early in the evening, most of the traffic was still in the other direction, into Greater Vancouver. Once our speed steadied, Jinny opaqued the windows, swiveled her seat to face me, and folded her arms. I'm sure it was quite coincidental that this drew my attention to the area immediately above them. I believe in the Tooth Fairy, too. "Pardon me for interrupting you," she said.

She looked awfully good. Her prom dress was more of a spell than a garment. The soft warm interior lighting was very good to her. Of course, it was her car.

That was the hell of it. I wanted to marry her at least as much as she wanted to marry me. Just looking at her made my breath catch in my throat. I wished with all my heart, and not for the first time, that we lived back when unmarried people could live together openly. They said a stable society was impossible, back then. But even if they were right, what's so great about a stable society?

My pop used to say, "Joel, never pass up a chance to shut up." Well, some men learn by listening, some read, some observe and analyze—and some of us just have to pee on the electric fence. "Jinny, you know I'm a backward colonial when it comes to debt."

"And you know I feel the same way about it that you do!"

I blinked. "That's true. We've talked about it. I don't care what anybody says; becoming the indentured servant of something as compassionate and merciful as a bank or credit union simply isn't rational."

"Absolutely."

I spread my hands. "What am I missing? Raising a child takes money—packets and crates of the stuff. I haven't got it. I can't earn it. I won't borrow it. And I'm too chicken to steal it."

She broke eye contact. "Those aren't the only ways to get it," she muttered. Silver gave its vector-change warning peep, slowed slightly, and banked left to follow the Second Narrows Bridge across Burrard Inlet.

"So? I suppose I could go to Vegas and turn a two-credit bit into a megasolar at the roulette wheel."

"Blackjack," she said. "The other games are for suckers."

"My tenants back home on the Rock might strike ice. In the next ten minutes I could get an idea for a faster-than-light star drive that can be demonstrated without capital. I can always stand at stud, but that would kick me up a couple of tax brackets. Nothing else comes to mind."

She said nothing, very loudly. Silver peeped, turned left again, and increased speed, heading for the coast.

"Look, Spice," I said, "you know I don't share contemporary Terran prejudices any more than you do-I don't insist that I be the one to support us. But somebody has to. If you can find a part-time job for either of us that pays well enough to support a family, we'll get married tomorrow."

No response. We both knew the suggestion was rhetorical. Two full-time jobs would barely support a growing family in the present economy.

"Come on," I said, "we already had this conversation once. Remember? That night on Luckout Hill?" The official name is Lookout Hill, because it looks out over the ocean, but it's such a romantic spot, many a young man has indeed lucked out there. Not me, unfortunately. "We said-

"I remember what we said!"

Well, then, maybe I didn't. To settle it, I summoned that conversation up in my mind-or at least fast-forwarded through the storyboard version in the master index. And partway through, I began to grow excited. There was indeed one contingency we had discussed that night on Luckout Hill, one that I hadn't really thought of again, since I couldn't really picture Jinny opting for it. I wasn't sure she was suggesting it now . . . but if she wasn't, I would.

"See here, Skinny, you really want to change your name from Hamilton to Johnston right away? Then let's do it tomorrow morning-and ship out on the Sheffield!" Her jaw dropped; I pressed on. "If we're going to start our marriage broke, then let's do it somewhere where being broke isn't a handicap, or even a stigma-out there around a new star, on some new world eighty light-years away, not here on Terra. What do you say? You say you're an old-fashioned girl-will you homestead with me?"

A look passed across her face I'd seen only once before-on Aunt Tula's face, when they told us my father was gone. Sadness unspeakable. "I can't, Joel."

How had I screwed...

Other Books

Observations of variable stars by the American Association of Variable Star Observers.
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