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Universe

SCIENCE FICTION

*Issue #3***EDITORS**

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Published bi-monthly by PALMER PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1144 Ashland Avenue, Evanston, Illinois. Second-class entry applied for at the Post Office, Chicago, Illinois. Additional entry applied for at Evanston, Illinois. All reasonable care will be taken but we assume no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts and artwork.

Nightsong



Full of resentment the song of the slave has rung down through the ages. For how else can a captive race register its defiance without actual violence? But song on Venus is strange.



By W. T. POWERS

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay

VENUS is a dark world, a steaming world of jungle and swamp; or, if you go up two miles, Venus is a dustbowl, a hot dry hell. The tops of the See-trees mat together to make a single half-mile-thick filter that sucks the oxygen and the moisture out of the air before it can escape higher, passing both back down to the ground where the water makes swamp and the oxygen bubbles slowly into the air to make life. Two miles up the hot sun makes shrieking hurricanes; near the ground there is only the cool of the evening breeze that passes in a never-ending wave around the planet, driven by the almost-imperceptible lowering of the See-tree mat overhead.

For five hellish years, earthmen had tried to make their homes in the great filter-mat of the See-trees, battling dust, living in

bubbles built to withstand the tearing winds, dying in the sun and the drought, carried off by the wind, choked and trapped by the eager vines that had been thought to be the floor of this flat, strange world. Only after five long years, when Venus was going to be abandoned to its broiling sun and greedy plants, did a man named Cruette drive a tunnel down into the See-trees, lining it with copper screen that made the slow tendrils pause and then stop. Cruette had come back to the surface, laughing and wild, with the incredible news that the desert houses were tree-houses, and that far below lay a dim world soaked with the dear water and bathed in oxygen. How else, the afterthinkers then said, could anything live on a planet too close to its sun, where too much water was whirled high into the



saturated air by the wet winds, where the sun could blister living tissue in twenty minutes, where free oxygen was made by the radiations of the sun into lethal quantities of ozone? The colonists laughed knowingly at the explanations, and burrowed deep, and became swamp-dwellers.

Then there followed from Earth the Others, the men who tasted with drooling mouths the *kvand* weed that grew everywhere in the swamps, who sent their ships and their men to the swamps, marked off the face of the planet into zones and territories and protectorates, who bought the land with money and guns and began to make the men of Venus into mud-eaters, indenturing the new and terrorizing the old, forming great crews that raked up *kvand* with the jollystick, scraped it into barges with bull-buggies, hauled it back to the domes of Venus Town and Hammersburg and Croyden and Jennyville. Crews of sweating men, hopeless men who could look forward to nothing more than tuberculosis and foot-rot and a body burned out from too much oxygen — for the domes of Venus were not like those on Mars; they were made to keep the air out, not in, made to keep an over-abundant Nature from killing with excess blessings. But there were no domes in the fields.

Men cannot be made to accept

their lot under conditions like these unless there is Hope — some shining goal, some vision of a future of peace and content and comfort, some task to be considered finished. Take away this Hope, and you have either men in deepest apathy, who do not have any will to work, or men who are angry, who have no desire but to destroy. Therefore, give them Hope — it does not matter if you have no intention of ever doing anything to fulfill it, or even if it is possible to do (although desperate men are sometimes very clever in making their illusions come true). Just make a Goal, and substitute for attainment a periodic expansion of the beautiful picture, a regular face-listing of the imaginary landscape that will quell discontent and replace it with fantasies of ever-greater fulfillment.

Homer Jasro, who owned Venus Town and ten thousand square miles of swamp all around it, knew well about Goals and promises, and he knew their effect on the men who were indentured to him or who were blind enough to work for him. He was not a cruel man in the sense that he was not a sadist — he obtained no pleasure from the sight of bodies being carried in from the fields. On the other hand, his expression of concern and his internal disturbance was on the same order as that felt by a

farmer when he finds his tractor or his combine out of order. Within that limit, his concern was quite sincere. He was quite conscious that others would interpret it as sorrow and grief, and never hesitated to encourage the idea among his workers, the muckers in the fields. Not being able to cry, he contented himself with the measure, perhaps more effective, of looking as if he was trying not to.

Among his supervisors, however, he maintained no unnecessary illusions. His straw bosses and top muckers, who rode the fields in plastic-bubbled comfort or sat in cool, dry control-towers, were paid well enough that they had no need of vague future goals. Their working conditions were good, they had money enough for women and gambling and even saving; their hours were short — two men split the ten-hour workday in each position. They could quit when they liked, with recommendations, and would be received back on Earth with warmth as the men who brought manna to a starving world. The once-starving Earthmen, now fat and content, overlooked and disbelieved the stories of hardship on Venus as they filled their bellies half with Earth-grown food and half with the delectable, incredibly nourishing kvand. Indentured men who fled their jollysticks and stole rides home

in chilly freighters found the atmosphere even chillier at home, as Terrans listened to their resentful tales of death and disillusionment, and reached for a telephone to call the immigration authorities. The memory of the Hungry Years was still too vivid for any unpleasant connotations about kvand to be brooked. The lines of men signing up for indenture were still to be seen around the offices of the trading companies.

As a matter of fact, Homer Jasro not only maintained no illusions with his overseers; he went rather far out of his way to see to it that the foremen had none of their own, so that they would not find themselves in the position of Harry Blake, a two-month veteran who stood before Jasro in Control-Tower Ten, one morning in early winter, his face red and the radiophone mike dangling from one numb hand.

“But the rumor wasn’t true!” Blake protested. “All I did was pass the word!”

“Who gave you the authority to pass along top-level information?” Jasro rasped, his stocky body standing taut, his black eyes angry. “When I want a rumor squelched, I’ll pass the word to you by personal messenger. What did you say, exactly, in your inspired little speech this morning?”

“All I said was that I was

sorry, fellows, the rumor about the dike having been started for the big park at Hammersburg wasn't true — it was still held up for lack of funds."

"Very straightforward, very frank. *Who told you that?*"

"Jesse Ehrenberg, the Super for this area."

"I know who Ehrenberg is. Who told you that anything he told you was to be broadcast to the muckers?"

"Why — I just assumed . . ."

"That's what I thought," Jasro said cuttingly. "You're not paid to assume things, Blake. You don't go around deciding on matters of propaganda. You're a section foreman, and your duties are quite simple — don't try to handle matters above your authority, or you'll be a section foreman for ten years, if you don't end up mucking. If you don't want to stick to your job and follow your orders — they're really not very complicated — you can quit any time you want to. The next time I hear of you interfering with the morale program, or in any other way overstepping your authority I'll assume that you want your passage earthside."

"Oh, no, sir, I like it here . . . you mean, there's no punishment?"

"A man who needs to be punished into a being a good foreman," Jasro said, a touch of

expansiveness in his tone, "never gets hired for anything but hauling on jollysticks." He turned abruptly and left the tower. In a moment, Blake saw Jasro climb through the hatch of his private buggy, which shortly lurched into motion and began gliding off through the aisles of giant tree-boles. In relief Blake sat down, and with a sudden thought reached for the loudspeaker-system microphone. He paused, then changed his mind and flipped the "talk" switch on the radiophone.

"Control Ten to Command One."

"Go ahead, Control Ten." Jasro's voice answered with startling immediacy.

"Sir, this is Blake. Shall I tell the men that the source denying that rumor was unreliable?"

There was a chuckle from the speaker. "Blake, you catch on fast. I need men with initiative, who will check with their superiors before carrying out their ideas. Yes, by all means do that. If you hadn't asked me that question before my buggy made Venus Town, you would have been the first section foreman I have ever fired. Keep your nose clean, and you can count on getting on the waiting-list for promotions within a month. You have a good record, Blake, one of the best of the new men, as a matter of fact. I'd hate to lose you over a little mis-

understanding."

"Thank you very much, sir!" Blake gushed. "Thank you *very* much. It won't happen again."

"Oh, Blake — I heard yesterday that they're not going to finish that dike at Hammersburg just yet — they've decided to enlarge the park and make it a whole town — the first open-air town on Venus!"

"But sir — that must mean . . ."

"It does, my boy. *Three white rats have lived their full active lifespan in Venus' atmosphere!* The drug works on rats, and it won't be long — only a few years — until it's extended to human beings."

"Shall . . . shall I tell the muckers?"

"Tell *one* of them. Just *one*."

"Sir . . ."

"Yes?"

"Is — is any of that true?"

"Why, Blake! You don't think I'd sink to starting *rumors*, do you?" There was a guffaw from the loudspeaker and the buggy's carrier went off the air.

Blake chuckled uncertainly, then threw back his head and forced himself to belly-laugh. When he got through convincing himself that it was funny, he sat back, a smile stretching his stiff lips, and began trying to think of which mucker would be the most likely to spread the rumor verbatim — or perhaps amplify on it a little. His stomach felt funny.

Lots of men in the supervisory

squads seemed to develop ulcers.

Jasro paused at the gate of Venus Town that evening, listening over the roar of the trucks streaming out of the gates to pick up the men. From far to the east the sound came swiftly down the wind, a rhythmic beat and a half-song, half-chant, the words lost in the forests, but the feeling strongly there. He knew what it was, and did not know whether to be angered or pleased.

A long time ago, several years at least, a wandering entertainer had come to Venus (at least Jasro assumed that this was how it happened) and had started the men singing songs. The trading companies were looking for ways to keep the muckers less discontent, and so the man was allowed to travel from town to town, even given free transportation. He sang in bars, and he went out to the fields with the trucks in the evening and sang, and led singing. He taught the men how to slap out catchy rhythms on the handles of their jollysticks as they sang, and he gave them verse after verse after verse in the manner of the old-time New Orleans Blues of seventy-five years ago. The men loved it. They shouted the songs back and forth from the trucks, not all of the verses being printable. And when it had become a sad,

someone else had started a special kind of song going, and this song was different. The trading companies had kicked the man off Venus and he had died in space in an accident. But they knew it was someone else who had started the new words to the old, bawdy songs, because the new verses came even faster after the travelling singer died.

The rush of the nightsong grew and veered around Venus Town and faded to the west, following the night breeze and avoiding the Jasro trucks and overseers.

For a time, after Jasro began hearing his own name in the nightsongs, he had tried to clamp down and shut the muckers up, but the men accosted by his squads were silent and innocent, while the nightsong rumbled all around in the darkness. After Jasro shot two men the nightsong faded for a few nights, and then came back again more strongly than ever, the men apparently having decided "What the hell". And Jasro, knowing that death was a meagre threat to his employees, tried to find a reason for accepting the situation. It was seldom that he came across a situation that he could not control, and when he did, he was forced to rationalize. But this time he was having his difficulties, because the men were shouting abuse of the trading companies in their songs, and calling down

the evening winds what they were going to do with Venus. If you listened closely to the songs, it might seem that the men had fallen for the big illusions, for the rumors and hints of good fortune passed out by the careful companies, because they sang of their attachment for the dusky world, and their hope for the future, and for the changing of the face of the planet.

Old Man Jasro, bought a hunk
of ground,
Came up to Venus, bought a
great big hunk of ground.
But Jasro can't go where the
Freemen walk around.

Gonna build a house, with a
big back yard
When the dikes go up and the
ground is hard,
And Jasro's gonna build my
swimmin' pool.
You can fool a Freeman, but a
Freeman ain't no fool.

That last line left Homer Jasro poised on the dividing-line between amusement and alarm.

Sometimes the songs were nostalgic, sometimes maudlin or crude, but as they passed from field to field across the face of the planet they dropped the crudities and banalities, and came back the next night, or a week later, or a month, with the words changed and the sense of the words sharpened, with subtle

barbs in the place of sledge-hammers, with genuine feeling replacing overstrained reaching for effect. For instance, Jasro heard this one night, and curled his lip:

California's what I called my home,
California's what I called my home,
The traders made me leave my wife alone.

And the next night it came back like this, after following the twilight around the equator of Venus; sweeping in from Kellar's holdings far to the east.

I seen it rain in Cali-for-ni-aye,
It rains on Venus all the live-long day.

Don't mind the rain if the traders go away.

Mr. Kellar said, your wife can stay alone,

Mr. Kellar said, you can leave your wife alone,

But Mr. Kellar brought seven of his own.

And Jasro, knowing the truth, had to chuckle.

Tonight, however, he did not chuckle, for there was anger in the snatches of the nightsong that rose now and then above the growl of the trucks. A deeper note, a little less of the bantering,

good-natured tone. Or if it was not really anger, it was something else that Jasro did not like to think about.

He climbed to the high tower built in the center of Venus town, up past the level where the top of the town's dome was sealed around the tower, into the circular control-room from which the whole vast, albeit simple, operation was conducted. The night operator was already on duty, an old employee who had worked for Jasro for fifteen years.

"You look riled, Homer," Skeeter Morrow said. "Been listening to the muckers tonight?"

Jasro turned a swivel-chair around and grunted into it. "Damn fools," he said.

"You can fool a Freeman" Skeeter said.

"Bravado." Jasro snapped. "They're kidding themselves, and I say they're fools."

"Don't like seein' something bigger than you goin' on, eh, Homer?"

Jasro checked his hot reply, and merely looked narrowly at Skeeter. Skeeter smoothed his forehead and turned to the check-board for the incoming trucks. There was silence for a while, as Skeeter noted the lights with check-marks on the chart in his lap. Below, the wash of sound from the truck motors thrummed steadily, and patient lines of headlights made their way to the

sealed and segregated bubbles outside the main town where the muckers were quartered.

"How many trucks do you think will be missing tonight, Skeeter?" Jasro asked, finally.

"Couple," Skeeter said. "We getting any new ones this week? The boys are getting a little overloaded."

"Let 'em!" Jasro said. "Those trucks didn't go down in the bogs. They're being stolen. Why do you work for me, Skeeter? You're the best man I have, and you hate my guts."

"I don't hate your guts, now, Homer." Skeeter said reprovingly. "I just want to stick around and see how a man like you takes defeat. I gave up hating you years ago."

"Then you'll stick around a good many more years. Venus is a big beautiful gold-mine, Skeeter, and it's a challenge. I'm rich enough now so I don't give much of a damn about money — money's just a way of adding up the score. Nothing ever licked me before, and nothing will, not until I'm too old to ride out in the fields and slap down a back-talking mucker with my own hands. This is my life, this is what my brain likes to do. They can't take that away from me."

"Peanuts," Skeeter said. "Those muckers got more up their sleeves than you ever dreamed of. Homer. You know what they think? They

think *you* work for *them*."

Jasro grinned. "That's what they're supposed to think."

"More'n that." Skeeter shook off Jasro's complacent look. "They figger you'll do the organizing, and the big planning for 'em, and get things all set for the day when the muckers own their own land and start prettifyin' Venus. You buy all the stuff, they steal it and cart it away. Did you know they got a university set up?"

"Where?" The question was an explosion, and Jasro leaned forward, vibrating.

"No idea."

"Skeeter, you know a damned sight more than you tell. You know what the deserters are doing. You know where they're going, where they're planning their revolution."

"Now, Jasro, you're getting scared of your own shadow. Who says there'll be a revolution?"

"Why, damn it . . ." Jasro paused, consternation on his face.

Skeeter laughed loudly down at the trucks. "Venus is a great big place, Homer, and lots of things go on in places nobody's ever been. That is, no trader. But sometimes little rumors get started that ain't exactly so . . ."

Finally Jasro was able to see the humor of it. Caught on his own hook! He did not, however, laugh.

"All right, then what are they planning?"

"Couldn't say."

Exasperation reddened Jasro's face. "Damn it, Skeeter, you'll tell me what you know, or I'll burn it out of you!"

"Don't think you will, Homer. I remember Detroit."

So did Jasro. In Detroit he had actually carried out his threat of torture to the extent of one cigarette-burn before the man had started dictating figures, and afterward had spent two sweating, trembling hours with Skeeter trying to get drunk and failing completely. The man had been nearly insane with fear — and so had Jasro.

"You'll go too far, Skeeter," Jasro said at length, his face a shade pale. "I'm harder when I'm closer to desperate."

"You desperate already, Homer?" Skeeter's tone was disappointed.

"I'm going to find that university, Skeeter."

"O.K. Where shall we look first?"

Jasro clenched his fists at his sides, picturing in his mind the vastness of the universal forest, the millions of square miles of virgin territory. And the muckers — the deserters — had trucks that could go anywhere, trucks that he had to replace, that he had to *provide* for them. Without the trucks, he would be ruined. Without the men, he would be ruined. In the back of his mind lay the

impossible notion that without the permission of the muckers, he would not be in business now. With an angry shake of his head he dispelled the dangerous thoughts.

"What's your part in it, Skeeter? I think I deserve an answer to that."

"None. Think I'd talk if I were working with 'em? I don't give anything away to anybody, Homer. I'm just lookin'." He added, after a pause, "In my own way, I'm an honest man, Homer."

"All right," Jasro sighed. "Don't know why I trust *you*, but I seem to. Need any money?"

"Nope. Thanks. Mebby one favor."

"Name it."

"You're too generous. When everything around Venus Town goes flop, let me know where you're going. The boys just might want to hire you in earnest."

Jasro stared for a long, unbelieving moment at Skeeter, and then the look was replaced by a more thoughtful expression. "I don't think you mean that as an insult. But I think I'll take it as one, Skeeter. You may not know how my mind works, but I do. I don't think a man can succeed once he agrees that there's any way out but success." His expression changed again. "Thank you, Skeeter." He stood abruptly, and strode to the circular stair-

case, and clattered out of sight.

Skeeter looked after him thoughtfully. "That's a big load you're carrying, Homer Jasro," he murmured. "Maybe the dropping of it will make a man of you yet." Homer Jasro's only friend turned back to his check-lists.

A couple of the men sniggered as Danny Hoppey came dashing into the mess-hall ahead of the bunch from his truck.

"Hey, Pete, Jo-Jo," he shrilled. "Guess what? *It wasn't a rumor after all!*"

Pete and Jo-Jo, who had the misfortune of bunking respectively above and below Danny, looked at each other. *It's your turn*, Pete's look said, so the burly Jo-Jo swung around to face the breathless Danny. "What's d' cream, Danny?"

"There's going to be an open-air town!" Danny said, his eyes shining. "I got it from Blake in section Ten. They stopped the dike because they have to replan everything, it's going to be ten times as big as we thought!"

"And take ten times as long?" Jo-Jo sneered. "Where they gonna get the pumps? Where they gonna get the earth-moving machinery? Who's doing the work, how many men will it take?"

"Well, Jeez, Jo-Jo, I don't know! All I'm telling you is what I heard, they didn't tell me

no more."

Pete said kindly, "Danny, you've got to check up on stories like that. Find out some of the details, or nobody's going to believe you. You've brought back a thousand wild tales, and you know nobody pays any attention to 'em unless you got some facts, some logic, to back it up. Now, that business about the white rats wasn't so bad, because you got some facts on *how they're doing it*. There's enough brains in amongst the muckers to be able to see good sense when they hear it, even if they ain't got much of an education."

"I'm sorry, Pete," Danny said, crestfallen. "I'll see if I can find out any more about it."

And all over the holdings of the trading companies, a thousand Dannys were saying sheepishly to secretly-grinning muckers, "I'm sorry . . . I'll see if I can find out any more about it."

Three thousand miles away, three men sat in a crude control-tower built from parts stolen off a hundred different control-towers of fifteen different makes. They looked down at a wet ooze of mud, and watched with disgust as the wet ooze got wetter. The dike around the mile-square area was still leaking somewhere under the mud, and the pumps weren't getting the water out so they could find the holes and

plug them. One of the men scribbled something on a sheet of waterproof paper, rolled up the sheet and shoved it into an aluminum capsule. "The trouble is," he complained as the messenger below caught the capsule and climbed into his stolen truck with it, "they screen out all the goddam engineers so we never get any."

The messenger stole at evening to the belts where the nightsong rose, and under cover of the slapping of the jollysticks, got close enough to pass the capsule on to a mucker in the outer reaches of the Jennyville holdings. The mucker screwed up his face in thought, and pummelled his brains and those of others, and the next night a new song was caught up in the twilight and swept to all of Venus:

Venus is a mud-hole in the sky,
Gonna pump ol' Venus, 'til
the ground runs dry,
But you can't pump mud, and
the traders don't know why.

A little devious, but certain muckers here and there, several tens of thousands of them, figured it out and the next time their Dannys brought good tidings of a mythical dike being built by a mythical trader, they piled him with sneering questions. The Danny went in chagrin back to his source, and his source bit

his lip and went to *his* source; and sometimes it was answered by somebody up in the engineering buildings and sometimes it went all the way to the top, where a Jasro pursed his lips, put his keen and agile, if somewhat misguided, mind to work, and tossed off a plausible answer, which went back down through the channels to the muckers, to the hungry messenger, to the makeshift control-tower, where a hundred men listened, then went to rouse ten thousand more to tell them the new idea.

And a week later the ooze was oozing no more, and the holes were plugged, and the boles of the giant See-trees were dry for the first time in twenty thousand years.

And somebody asked, "How much water do the See-trees need to live?" and the messenger went off again, and a new song was heard, an urgent demand for information among the folk-songs of Venus.

The man Jasro came in from his fields smiling, and went over his books smiling. A good day, eighteen thousand tons of kvand, which would ship nearly four thousand dry at today's price of eighty dollars a ton. The mucker who had given him a raucous raspberry today would be treating his sore ribs and bruised face with tenderness tonight, and the

other muckers would grin.

The broad band of twilight slid quietly over Venus Town, and the men in the swamps stretched their tired backs and turned their faces to the rising night wind. Off the fat-tired buggies climbed the weary drivers, standing beside their machines. The muckers leaned on their long broad jolly-sticks, their heads low, their eyes on the knee-deep sludge and the floating tendrils of *kvand* that they reaped all day. Evening and dark coming, and the men were no more use to their masters until the sun-glow rose again.

And on the sweep of the first cool dark wind rose the voice of a man standing somewhere by his machine in the dark forests to the east.

"Veeeeeeeeeee — nus!" The tired eyes lifted, and there were the embers of fire in them.

"Veeenus . . . is a long way from home."

"Uh!" The grunt of assent rumbled through the darkening fields.

"Lean on your jollystick, Venus is a long way from home!"

Slap, slap, slap . . . the sound of hands thumping on the handles of the jollysticks.

"Heaven help you muckers, you'll die in a Venus dome!" *Slap slap.*

Slap SLAP slap-a-slap slap

SLAP slap-a-slap :: :

"VeNUS!"

"VENUS!" fifty voices echoed
slap SLAP slap-a-slap.

"Venus water in your blood!" they wailed.

And the SLAP went rolling through the trees toward the west, SLAP!

"Venus water!" More voices.

"In your blood!" and for miles came the echo of the SLAP.

"My daddy died last week, in a Venus-water flood!"

The rumble of the distant *slap* underlined the near SLAP.

"I work for Mr. Jasro, muckin' in his fields all day."

Slap BOOM as the drivers thumped their big machines.

"Work for Mr. Jasro, workin' in his fields all day!"

Slap BOOM slap-a-slap, slap SLAP slap-a-slap . . .

"Jasro's finished, you can take the dead men away!"

"Veeeeeenus . . ."

As the twilight swept onward toward the west, the sound of the nightsong followed it, the Free-men of Venus waiting for the big trucks to pick them up, calling to each other along the wind, weaving the rhythm and the chant of the nightsong that bound them together, the nightsong that was always where twilight dimmed the vast forests, and never died from the face of Venus.

The Free-men waited.