

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 4, NO. 10

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JAN., 1951

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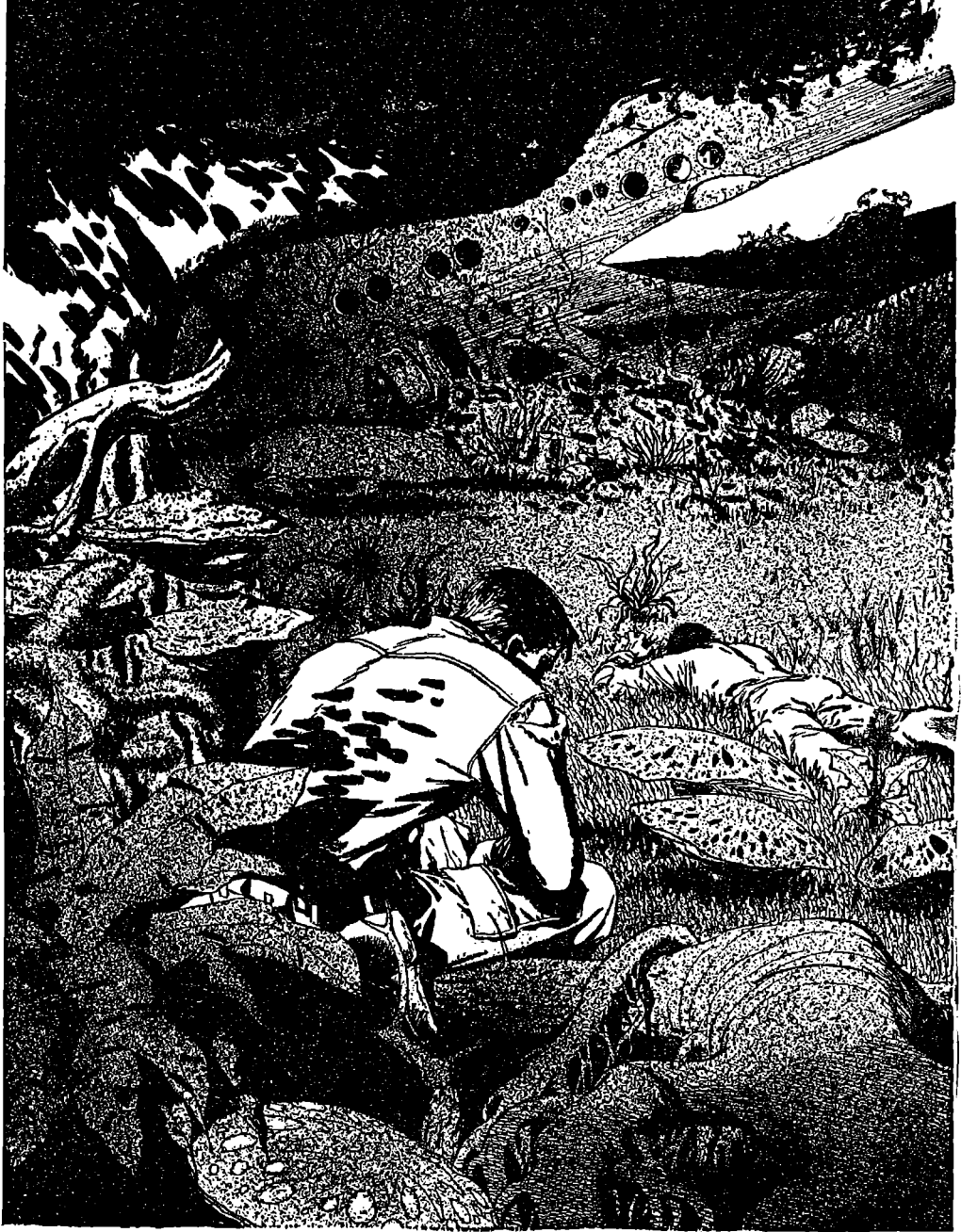
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POISON PLANET

... It was only a muffled gun-shot, deep in the rank, fetid jungles of Venus—a single bullet from the gun of the gaunt, blazing-eyed man called Heinie. But it plunged the crew of the VENUS I into a Hell from which there was no return.



by WILLIAM
OBERFIELD



CAPTAIN JAMES McBRIDE didn't know exactly what to make of it at first. The first Earthmen ever to set foot on Venus, he and his crew had come armed to the teeth, fully prepared to fight wild elephants, giant tigers, prehistoric monsters or anything an imaginative mind might dream up.

When they found evidence of absolutely no danger at all they stood around with their heavy weapons and felt mighty foolish. The only signs of animal life were the small creatures that scampered right up to the men and chattered at them, unafraid, and birds more evident by sound than by sight. There were no trails made by giant animals, no heavy, frightening sounds in the jungle about them. Only a misty, drowsing calm.

The mist was always there, they were to find out later, steaming up from the wet ground by day and condensing in a blanket of life-giving water by night. Otherwise, Venus resembled mildly tropical Earth without storm and tempest. The lack of these made one think of thunder and lightning as some unseen, unknown entity bound to Earth alone in chains of gravity.

The only really unpleasant note was the condition of the ship in which they had come. The underside was a mass of twisted steel and buckled plates, where it had come down considerably harder than it had ever been intended to come down. It was something that could never take to space again, even if the "H" tanks hadn't been torn loose to gush out their contents.

Communication with Earth was out. A transmitter small enough to fit the ship and yet powerful enough to breach millions of miles of space, as well as penetrate two atmospheres, just wasn't made. The expedition was on its own.

The orders were conditional. If possible, they were to set up an outpost on Venus, as others had done several years before on Mars. Consisting mainly of scientists, the crew was to find out all it could about the new world. In one year the second ship would follow, bringing engineers and laborers. The scientists were to have, by that time, the information required to

form the first colony quickly, wisely, and safely.

If confronted with insurmountable obstacles, they were to return at once to Earth with whatever information they might have as to the nature of the obstacles.

McBride grinned in spite of his regret over the loss of his ship and looked at the wreckage. That sort of made the orders unconditional.

Things could have been worse, he thought. Not one of the ten men in the expedition had been lost or even badly injured. And, Venus being the land of plenty that it had turned out to be, it was beginning to look as if the stay here would be a pleasant one.

He was just starting to get some of his old spunk back when Jeff Flaunders came up to him with a worried frown on his face.

Because of the limited space aboard the ship, Flaunders was a combination of several men, as were most of the others. Specially trained for the expedition, he handled anything that went under the heading of botany, biology or zoology.

Now he was looking worried.

"You look a lot like bad news," McBride said as Flaunders drew near. "Might have known there'd be a catch to this world."

"More than a catch," Flaunders said. "I hope none of the men has eaten anything native to Venus."

McBride shook his head. "They haven't if they've followed orders. I told them not to touch anything until you had made a report." He looked at the other questioningly. "Poison?"

"We brought twelve white rats and two monkeys along for experimental purposes," Flaunders said. "Now we have only six rats. Each of the others we fed a different kind of native fruit or meat. That was about five hours ago. In the past hour they've gone into convulsions one after another. Seemed to go blind, too. Died within minutes."

"You tried it on just the six rats and not the monkeys?" McBride asked, and got a nod from Flaunders. "Then that's just six things tested. Maybe something

edible will turn up yet."

"Small chance." Flaunders was positive. "Thompson used a little of his chemistry and found a substance he couldn't identify, not only in the stuff we fed the rats but in twenty-some other plants. He even found it in the flesh of the animals we caught. That makes it pretty certain that it will be found in everything. When the rats died we pegged that substance as the poison.

"What to do about it is another question. Since it's entirely new to us it would probably take years to find a way to neutralize it, and it plays such an integral part in the structure of everything on Venus that we'd have one sweet time trying to completely draw it out. Anyway, a lot of needed lab equipment was smashed in the wreck. That makes it even more of a problem."

McBride listened, frowned and rubbed his cheek. "In other words, we might as well give up any idea of living off the fat of the land."

"That's about the size of it," Flaunders agreed. "Our best bet, the way things stand now, would be to try and have a garden going before our supply of food runs out."

"Check," said McBride. "But the seed was brought along just in case the soil and climate should prove suitable for planting. What do you make of that?"

"Climate ought to be just about perfect," Flaunders grunted. "As to the soil, Thompson and I will check on that right away."

IN ANOTHER DAY a few things had been learned. There was now no doubt about the poisonous nature of Venus. The infuriating thing about it was that the creatures native to Venus thrived about them on food that would put out the lights for good for any Earth-born animal.

But that was not quite so hard to take when they found that the soil was suitable for Earth crops. That left nothing to get excited about.

So they thought, until Venus turned stubborn.

No one knew exactly how stubborn Venus could get until the garden location

was being cleared of weeds. They had gone over about fifty feet of the clearing, working earnestly and not bothering to look back, when one of the men—a lanky individual called Henry Higgins—turned to look back, put one grimy fist on his hip, hunched his shoulders, stuck out his chin and hollered, "Damn!"

The others turned and looked surprised. Not that Higgins' well-known exaggerative ways any longer surprised them, but what Higgins was looking at might surprise anyone, including the botanist in Flaunders.

The eight-or-ten feet of ground directly behind the men was clear of weeds. But at the far edge of this cleared space little green shoots were thrusting inquisitive noses above the ground. Beyond these were one-inch plants, then two-inch, and four and six and eight, on up. They formed a slope up to the edge of the clearing.

"Damn!" Higgins said again, and tossed away his spade.

Someone laughed uncertainly. The others scratched their heads, cast blank stares at one another and forgot how to keep their mouths closed.

"Just what in blazes do you make of that?" McBride asked of Flaunders.

Flaunders could be quite an optimist when he wanted to; he was one of those rare persons who seem to grow stronger with each failure. At least on the surface.

"Only what I see," he replied, not willing to show consternation. "Amazingly rapid growth, but they're still only weeds. It's just going to take a little applied science."

"Maybe." McBride didn't like it. "But I've done a little farming in my time; know what it is to worry a chunk of farmland out of the raw. And the nature of Earth is dead compared to this."

"Bunk!" Flaunders scoffed. "Work, certainly. But we'll be eating fresh corn in two months!"

McBride looked around, seeing little you wouldn't see on Earth. What's wrong with me? he thought. It's my place to keep the spirits of the men up, not to dampen them. Flaunders is right, of course. This stuff is still only vegetation, even if it is styled after Jack's beanstalk. Jack chopped down

the beanstalk and killed the giant. Our giant is the threat of starvation, but killing it is still a matter of stalk-chopping. If Jack could do it so can we.

IT STARTED OUT like that. Two weeks of hacking and digging, of specially prepared weed-killer and the aid of every trick known to science, and there was a strip of dark, rich ground all ready for planting. It looked like things were really beginning to roll. They did roll. Right up against a blank wall.

A few days after the planting, Flaunders was looking at a handful of black spider-things and swearing under his breath. The shriveled spider-things were seeds brought from Earth. They were shot through with hairlike roots, and that was the strange thing. It was strange because the roots were not their own.

It took several more days for Flaunders to understand. When he did he took on an attitude faintly remindful of a cornered rat. In a spot, but frustrated to fighting anger. The ship had contained enough food for only about two months to begin with, and more than two weeks had now come out of that. Starvation was becoming a very real possibility in his mind.

"We're up against something big," he said, peeved with himself for having to admit it. "We're fighting millions of years of evolution."

McBride sensed something disturbing in the other's voice. Maybe a trace of fear. "What do you mean?" he said.

Flaunders enlarged. "A very long time ago a war started here on Venus. It was a war among plants. You find the same thing on Earth, too, but not on this scale. There must have been certain 'aggressive' plants which threatened to force out all others. The others, in order to survive, had to evolve into something even more deadly to other plants. Once started, it had to keep going. Now, after millions of years, they've evolved into things capable of vicious little tricks you'd never be able to count.

"What happened to our seeds is one of them. Some of the roots extend into microscopic threads hardly more than streaks of single molecules. You can't dig

them out and they escape all the ordinary weed-fighting methods. One of their cute little tricks is to attach themselves to other plants and seeds and absorb them, strangely enough not harming their own species. Add to that the rapid growth, almost comparable to the motion of the minute hand of a clock, and planting anything from Earth among them is something like throwing a housecat into a den of wild lions."

"A very pretty picture," McBride groaned. "We can't go back to Earth for a year, everything on Venus is poison and we have less than two months' supply of food. Now you as much as admit that there will be no garden. I'm suddenly getting a headache."

"I didn't say we had failed," Flaunders said sharply. "I'm never going to. By thunder, we'll beat this hellhole if it takes every minute of our time!"

That was a sane enough statement. They had the seeds and they had the soil. With good health and the will to work, what was to stop them?

Only weeds.

"ONLY WEEDS," McBride said ten weeks later. "They couldn't be responsible for this! Ten weeks of breaking our backs and losing our minds, and you can't even tell that we've done anything. It must be a nightmare!"

Flaunders was a man all washed out, a man badly stung. How hard for an optimist to face defeat!

"Ten years," he said reflectively. "That's what it seems like. Thirteen since we crashed. Lucky number."

"A week since we've had anything to eat," said McBride. "Or has it been two? Anyway, it's too late to think about a garden. And if you and Thompson can't find a way to make this stuff fit to eat—" There was no need to complete that sentence.

Flaunders said nothing, seemingly absorbed in thought.

"Why don't you stop trying?" McBride said suddenly.

Flaunders looked up as if he thought he hadn't heard right. "Why in the world should I do that?"

"Because as long as you try the rest of us have hope." McBride's sunken cheeks burned red. He was somehow ashamed of his thoughts, but still determined to voice them. "Without that hope we wouldn't go on waiting and starving. There wouldn't be anything to wait for. Maybe there isn't anyway. Do you actually think there is any hope?"

Flaunders stared for a moment, considering the suicide tendency behind McBride's words. He turned away, hardly disturbed by the morbid idea. "I don't really know," he replied at last. "I don't even think any more. I just keep going like an automaton, not hoping and not giving up. That's my responsibility. Mine and Thompson's. Maybe we will find a way and maybe not. The only thing to do is to keep dogging it till we drop."

"No need to blame yourself for that," McBride said. "God knows you tried. With all the generators of this and that, the sprayers and fires and wires strung all over, we looked like we were fighting a real war instead of one against plants."

Flaunders snorted. "A hell of a lot of good it did. We destroyed the weeds and the properties of the soil with them. By the time we reactivated the soil the weed seeds had come on the wind. Same thing all over again. How much good did the hothouse do us, even with all the filters? Nearly microscopic seed came in on our clothing, in our hair. I'd rather fight elephants or pre-historic monsters. At least they're big enough to see and slow enough to cope with."

These were two skeletons, speaking of starvation under a tree loaded down with plump, ripe fruit, watching small animals scamper. The easy way out was all around them. They thought about it.

All together there had been ten men. Now ten skeletons. Now ten scarecrows with faces unshaven and dirty, with clothing hanging in tattered strips and extra holes punched in belts. They were slowly starving to death in the Garden of Paradise, in the land of plenty. And nothing, you would think, could be worse than that.

But there was something worse. It came shortly. The real Hell started with a gun.

5-Planet-January

THE GAUNT MEN were sitting around in a circle, pow-wow fashion, pretending to work out an answer and all feeling that there wasn't any, when McBride noticed Heinie, the cook, handling his automatic. It wasn't the mere fact that he was handling the weapon that deserved notice. It was the way he was handling it.

Heinie sat with a faraway look in his eye that was now glistening and now lackluster, fondling the gun in a way that suggested something. Black words not spoken, but safety off, a damp brow and moody reflections.

"Heinie," said McBride. "Anything wrong?"

Heinie's eyes came back from that far place with a start. He laughed bitterly. "Anything wrong! Two weeks without a damned thing to eat, and the man wants to know if anything's wrong!"

No respect for rank now. No more tin-soldier discipline. What penalty can you impose upon a man mere days from death?

"You'd better put away the gun, Heinie."

Heinie stared back at McBride with a sort of thoughtful defiance. He didn't put away the gun.

"Then hand it over," McBride said, and started getting up.

"Stay where you are! All of you!"

Heinie's sunken eyes were suddenly glaring at the others over the muzzle of his gun. The others settled back, a little afraid but not caring much.

"As cook," Heinie was saying, "it's my place to prepare meals. I haven't been doing my job. Now I'm going to."

"Don't let it get you down, man," McBride cautioned. "It's not your fault if we haven't—"

"Listen to me!" Heinie cut in sharply. "I happened to be in the Navy when I was only a kid, and three other guys and myself were once in a fix a lot like this. Only we were adrift on the open sea in a life-raft. Three of us kept from starving to death, but we had to draw straws to do it. The one who got the short one—well, I've been having nightmares about it ever since. God! We didn't even have

a fire—”

His voice trailed off, his eyes drawing inward with some shocking memory. McBride edged toward him.

“Hold it!” Heinie ordered, coming out of the daze.

McBride stopped, half inclined not to. He wavered, drew back, and decided to try and argue it out.

“You’re—sick,” he said. “Say you do kill one of us; do you think you could go through that ‘life-raft thing’ again? Do you actually think any of us, starving or not, could bring ourselves to do what you suggest?”

“I’m not going to go through it,” said Heinie. “But if I could be around to collect, I’d lay you ten to one that you will.”

McBride shook his head negatively. “Stop being foolish. You need a rest.”

Heinie did it then. He did it quickly, before anyone had a chance to stop him. He jerked the muzzle of the automatic up to his own temple.

“So long, suckers!” he shouted, and pulled the trigger.

THE LOUD REPORT made the silence that followed seem even more silent. The men who had come to their feet stood like statues of a mad sculptor, watching the black hole turn red and gush. Then it came, dawning in their eyes. The hungry, frightened, hopeful fascination, the impact of conflicting thoughts. It grew stronger and burned in the sunken eyes of these dead men who wanted to live. There was no mistaking the intent, no mistaking the *desire*.

McBride saw it and understood. “Good Lord, no!” he said. He tried to keep saying it, thinking it.

But he was as near death as the others. The mutual thought bloomed in his mind like some evil flower. It made him tremble. Sweat suddenly stung his eyes, ran into his mouth.

Food! Slow miserable death on one side and food on the other! A chance to live a little longer. Maybe Flaunders would find something in another week, and one meal might make the difference between seeing that and not seeing it. One wanted

to live! You couldn’t bring Heinie back anyway, so why not live? Heinie had wanted it that way. A human is an animal as much as a pig or a cow. A chance to live, to hope again!

Some part of his mind screamed at him. “Cannibal!”

“The only chance!” cried another part.

“Vulture!” said the soul-part with unnerving keening. “Will you have loin? Or perhaps the rump?”

His flesh prickled, the sweat flowed in streams. Unheard murmurings distorted his mind.

“Only this once, for a little more time! —Maggot! Dungworm!—Only another week and maybe the Venus II, months ahead of time—Fool! Not a chance! Die now, quickly!—No, no, no! Still some hope! Never give up. Never say die! Oh, God, Heinie! Why did you suggest it?”

Gibbering conflict, a trend to insanity. The voices inside beat his brain against his temple and raged. The civilized man went to his knees and drew back. The beast man thumped his chest and screamed.

“Alright!” McBride shouted, wondering why his voice sounded so angry, why his face felt distorted. He drew his feelings within himself. His voice grew flat and quiet with bitter irony.

“Alright,” he said. “Go ahead. Undress the main course.”

WHEN THE MEAL ENDED the Hell came. Full stomachs restore sanity. The beast man lay down, well fed and sleeping, to leave the civilized man awake with his thoughts. A new kind of Hell, this one that started with a gun. You could see the fires of it burning the face of every man.

Like the extra-animated Henry Higgins. He sat with unnaturally red cheeks puffed out beneath his beard, eyes glassy wet, looking at McBride as if harboring some question too awful to ask. There was something of the frightened, wild animal about him as his eyes left McBride and jerked around from one face to another. Then he was up and awkwardly running in among the trees.

The men got up from the rough table

that had been set up outside the ship. They got up and went away, slinking, like a sex maniac leaving the scene of his crime when his reason returns and he knows his insanity. They went away by themselves—those not too sick to walk—and hid from one another.

But a man can't hide from himself. That was the Hell. This was not a life-raft on the open sea, every man told himself. This was a green, smiling world with the smell of flowers on the air, with plenty of glistening, tempting fruit growing wild and enough game to make an Indian hunter call it the Happy Hunting Ground. Like a camping trip back on Earth. Like a picnic where you get drunk and start eating and then sober up with the smell of blood in your nostrils to find yourself chewing the hair off the detached leg or arm of your best friend.

What did every man tell himself? That it wouldn't happen again, ever, this terrible thing. When they found the strength and courage to go back and clean up the remains of a meal, knowing it to be the remains of a meal, when they had put what was left of Heinie in a hole and covered it with dirt and set up a stone marker, they promised one another it would never ever happen again.

The next day they put it on paper, in black and white. An agreement. On the third day they thought about it, and on the fourth day they began wondering why they had done it. And on the fifth day—

On the fifth day they found Thompson, the chemist, hanging from a tree a short distance from the ship. Quite dead, of course, and no one had to ask why he had done it.

Hunger madness walked among the men. They took Thompson down from the tree. Hunger madness whispered in their ears. They listened.

McBride took out the agreement and looked at it, having heard the tempter's whisper. He didn't think much. It hurt him to think. But something that had been done once—

He looked at the men and saw an inescapable vise tightening. He looked at himself and saw the same. At his feet fell the small fragments of the agreement.

THE CREEPING HELL closed in. The real Hell that had started with a gun. Could these any longer think of themselves as men? After the second time the change starts. It gets a little easier. All you have to do is keep from looking at anyone. It's nice to live. With life there's hope. Don't get cheated.

What happened one day surprised no one. Eight of the ten remained, two gone. Thompson had been gone for days. The hunger returned. The pendulum swung back. The beast man shoved out any remaining noble thought and screamed for food. The addict returns to his drug, the pervert to his revolting deed . . . As mad as these, the starving.

Nor was McBride surprised when he found himself holding a little stick. He wasn't greatly disturbed when it turned out to be the short one. Sympathy from the others? Not a bit. Only a sort of brooding resignation. And hunger. Always hunger.

"Flanders," McBride said. "Where's Flanders?"

"Don't worry," the one who had passed the straws said. "He took his chance with us. Been working like a madman since Thompson went. He wouldn't stop, so I took the straws in to him."

"I don't care about that," McBride informed. "But I've known him since we were kids. Just felt that I'd like to—well—maybe it's better this way." He started slowly away.

"Where you going?" someone said suspiciously.

McBride looked at the man with a feeling part disgust, part pity and a little of something unexplainable. He almost laughed.

"I'm not depriving you of your next meal," he said. "I just feel like being alone for this."

He walked slowly on, taking his thoughts with him. What was the purpose in all this? All a monotonous cycle, constantly repeated. From the torture of starvation to the torture of the shame and bitter self-accusation that makes one despise himself, back to the starvation. Men slowly becoming something lower than pigs, and knowing it all too well. A satisfying of

the body at the expense of decency, even of sanity. A Hell within souls.

And all for what purpose? To live? For how long, and in what hideous way? There would be only one lonely and sick man left long before help could come. What would that last man do? Go completely mad and try to devour himself? Like the two snakes who met one sunny afternoon and decided to swallow one another. Each took hold of the tail of the other and both swallowed and swallowed until nothing at all remained. There was no purpose. No purpose or reason at all.

A SHORT DISTANCE back among the trees McBride halted and looked back. There were bushes between the men and himself. This was it. He drew his automatic.

Strange, he thought. I don't feel at all like I should about this. It's just like routine procedure, something you do every day. I actually think I'm glad I came out with the short straw.

He even thought coolly about the best way to do it. The heart? Not sure enough. The brain, like Heinie? A little better, but what if there should be a nervous twitch at the wrong time and a deflection caused by the bone of the skull?

A babble of voices came to him as if from a great distance, through his thoughts. Excited voices. But he was in a world of his own, now. All the others were behind him, cut off.

Safety off, he put the muzzle of the automatic into his mouth and aimed it sharply upward. The most efficient way, probably. His finger tightened.

He heard the deafening report and felt the recoil jerk his arm down. Somewhere he had heard that a man killed instantly by a gun never lives to hear the report. It puzzled him. Why didn't he fall? Why could he still see the green tangle of Venus and hear sounds?

There was a ringing in his ears and a sickening shimmer before his eyes. His shocked mind refused to come back to things for a moment. Who were these laughing, crying, shouting skeletons whirling about him with their dirty beards and red-rimmed eyes?

"It's Flaunders," someone shouted. "He's done it!"

"Done it," McBride repeated dumbly. "Done what?"

Then Flaunders was shaking him by the shoulders and grinning. "Come out of it, man! You're safe; we all are, now! There's no need for any more of this—gluttony! Don't you understand? I've won! I know how to treat the fruit, even the edible animals of this world, so we can eat them and they won't hurt us a bit!"

McBride tried to call order to mind, starting from the beginning. He looked dazedly at the gun in his hand.

Flaunders laughed. "Don't look so surprised to be alive. One of the men hit your arm just in time. You missed death by an inch."

It was all too much at one time, a skirling confusion.

"That what you said about beating the poison," McBride said. "Are you sure? It's not just something on paper, something not proven?"

"Lord, no," Flaunders said, fighting down an urge to shout. "I had it worked out yesterday, but it still had to be tested and the white rats and two monkeys we brought along for experimental purposes were gone. So I went out last night and gathered some fruit and treated it and tried it on myself. Just look at me and you have your answer. I feel fine."

Still dazed, still not quite understanding how everything had happened, McBride started back toward the ship with the others. But one thing he knew. Venus had been beaten!

THE MEAL was all day in the preparing. The eating was a gala event, a banquet, a roaring party. It lasted two hours.

There wasn't any wolfing down. When you have been starving for weeks you just don't start off that way. You take a small bite and wait until you are sure it is safely down. Then you take another small bite and wait again. If you keep doing that you have a chance of holding what you eat.

They didn't mind. This food was not the kind you had to force yourself to

chew on, like—some other things.

There were little animals looking something like rabbits, but tasting more like chicken, fried golden brown. There were oranges that tasted like nothing of Earth and apples that reminded you of paw-paws in fall. Seven different kinds of meat there were, and it seemed like a hundred different kinds of fruits and nuts and herbs. There was even a juice that proved mildly intoxicating. All a little different, but all delightfully, temptingly good!

"We'll be eating like this every day!" Flaunders said. "Maybe we can even set up a bar, with fruit-juice drinks and wine and even invent a new kind of beer. Big, foamy schooners of beer on Venus! Won't the work crew be surprised when they get here!"

They let it run away with them. It went to their heads. The warmth of intoxication, the feel of stomachs filling out. All the things long missing now returning in full force, all at one time. Almost it was too much. Almost death from excessive joy.

They went on and on like that, the most happy men ever. They wanted it to go on for ever, but the feast had started late and it ended late. After the two hours they felt like sleeping. In fact, they felt a more relentless urge to sleep than they ever had before.

The result of a full stomach, they supposed, or the aftermath of months of hardship let in by the sudden relaxation. It certainly wasn't a matter of choice. Who wanted to sleep at a time like this, a time for staying up all night and celebrating? But the sandman said no, and right now he had the advantage.

One by one they yawned, stretched and drifted off to bed like carefree children, and to hell with cleaning up. That could wait until tomorrow. Tomorrow! It was wonderful to have one to think about. Tomorrow was a golden day.

The last to turn in was Captain McBride, just as sleepy but not so carefree. He alone, perhaps, was not completely satisfied. Underneath the powerful urge to sleep was a question, and that question needed answering. Or did it? In one way

it didn't really matter. He went in and found his bed in the darkness and decided to forget the question.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER McBride lay awake. The great urge to sleep was still there, but sleep wouldn't come. No, that was not it exactly. He wouldn't let it come. He was fighting it. The question wouldn't go away, and it really did need answering after all.

Moving around quietly in the darkness he made sure that the men were sleeping. Then he returned to the bed next to his, the one in which Flaunders slept.

"Flaunders," he said softly.

The question grew in his mind. "Flaunders," he called more urgently. He jostled the quiet form.

"What's wrong?" said Flaunders, half asleep.

"Nothing exactly. I want to talk a bit."

"Better sleep. The time is—"

"Go on," McBride said intently.

Flaunders fought himself awake. "Nothing. Half asleep. Didn't know what I was saying. What do you want?"

McBride lay down on his own bed, hardly able to keep his eyes open. "Maybe I want to talk about the Garden of Eden, about the pair who were told that a certain fruit was death to them, and about a serpent who told them it wasn't."

Flaunders said nothing.

"Must have been quite a persuader, that serpent," McBride went on in dream talk. "Up until this morning I guess I might have welcomed such a one, and I don't think I was alone in feeling that way. Men were never intended to live the way we were living. We really didn't want to live if we had to live that way. We only convinced ourselves that we did. We were caught in a hellish vise and each of us knew it, underneath. So a talking serpent who could convince us that the fruit of

Venus was not poison might not have been such a bad idea."

"Why talk about that?" said Flaunders, like a man talking in his sleep. "It's over. We've beaten Venus."

McBride tried to open his eyes. It was too much trouble. His own words seemed to him like someone else talking, far away and unreal. There was a feeling like being detached from one's body.

"Beaten Venus, yes," he said. "But I'm wondering how. I keep thinking how this kind of poison acts. Probably affect us as it did the rats and monkeys. Takes four or five hours to act, and it hasn't been three since we started eating. Was it only chance that your treatment of the food took all day and had to be extended up to the last moment before serving? It wasn't even sampled before three hours ago. And so I wonder."

Flaunders's voice seemed to come out of a deep well. "Let's get some sleep."

McBride's voice almost matched it. "Not yet. I haven't mentioned about the medical supplies we brought along. Even drugs. It would have been simple for the welcome serpent to treat the food with something to deaden pain, to make us sleep through it."

His voice trailed off in sleep, his thoughts drifting away with the night. Still the question wouldn't go away. It forced him partly awake. He didn't even realize how little of a question it was now. His body was a chunk of lead, not able to move. To speak required almost more effort than he could muster.

"Flaunders. You didn't. It's just fatigue, letdown after strain. I know you won't lie if I ask you. All I want is to hear you say you didn't."

Flaunders wouldn't have tried to move if he could. He lay on his back with his hands folded on his chest. Appropriate.

"Goodnight," he said.