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The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Merchants of Venus, by A. H. Phelps

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MERCHANTS OF VENUS ***

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The MERCHANTS Of Venus

By A. H. PHELPS, Jr.

Illustrated by FREAS

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A pioneer movement is like a building—the foundation is never built for beauty!

The telephone rang. Reluctantly, Rod Workham picked it up. Nothing good had come from that phone in six years, and his sour expression was almost an automatic reflex.

"Workham here," he said.

He held the phone an inch away from his ear, but the tirade exceeded his expectations—it would have been audible a foot away:

"Workham! How long do you think we're going to stand for this! At the rate you're going, there won't be a man left on Venus or a dollar in the budget! What kind of a personnel director are you? Don't you know this project is vital to every person on Earth? Thirty more resignations came in on this last mail flight."

Rod put the receiver gently on his desk. General Carlson raved and ranted this way every time a colonist quit, and Rod knew he was not expected to answer, even if given the chance. The general would carry on for about five minutes and then would slam down the phone himself.

He dialed another number on the other phone.

"This is Rod, Dave," he said when he got an answer. "Carlson is on the other phone, yelling at my desk blotter. He says thirty more resignations came in just now. That right?"

"Close enough, Rod—twenty-three pulled out. That makes seventy-eight per cent resigned in less than—"

"Spare me the statistics—Carlson's probably blating them right now. How do they break down? Are they mostly farmers or technicians?"

"There were only nine technicians left, and all of them quit with this bunch. The rest were farmers." Dave Newson must be smoking his pipe, Rod decided—grinding sounds were coming over the phone. "That doesn't leave very much on Venus to start a colony with—a few farmers, some trappers. And the scientific personnel—damn it, they seem to stick it out all right—"

"Their contracts are different," Rod reminded him. "They go on a two year hitch and then come back to Earth if they want to. The ones who are there are the ones who can take it and are signed up again."



There was a speculative pause on the other end of the line. "Say, Rod," Newson said slowly. "Why not leave this last batch of quitters right where they are? Every one of them. They signed up for the project with their eyes open. Why don't you just refuse to bring them home? ... they'd have to make a go of the colony to save their filthy necks!"

Rod grinned nastily. "I'd like to do it—but even General Carlson wouldn't dare. We'd never get another colonist off Earth, once it got out. They wouldn't trust us. Our first problem is to get a self-supporting society on Venus—and that might do it, all right. But our main job is to relieve the crowding on Earth, and that means large numbers of people will have to go willingly later on. If we get tough with these babies, who will take a chance later on that we won't repeat the trick?"

"But we lose a hundred potential colonists every time one of these quitters starts talking about why he left! More harm is done by letting them come back than would result from leaving them where they are." Again the speculative pause. "Maybe you could shoot them on arrival?"

"I'll suggest it to the general when I see him," Rod said, "if he doesn't shoot me first. Now, can you get me the files on this latest group? And I'd like to see the staff psychologist here, along with all the interviewers who handled and passed the group. We'll see what we can salvage out of this. And if you see Jaimie, send

him along too, will you? Maybe our gambling historian can find us something useful in the Project Record."

"The files are already on the way. And I told Biddington you'd probably want to see him—he said he'd be along in about ten minutes. I haven't located all the interviewers yet. Jaimie's been right here, trying to talk me into a game of Nim and protesting he never heard of binary numbers. I'll send him up, but keep your hand on your wallet. If you need anything else, I'll be right here."



Rod thanked him and hung up, shaking his head. Dave Newsom was too good a man to be stuck on a government project—he ought to get out before the trouble started. Anyone who worked for Rod Workham on Project Venus was likely to end up with a bad name. They lived under the ax. The only person who could be sure of his job was Rod himself. He'd been recommended by a committee of top men in his field, and no other personnel man would accept the job if he were removed. Also, most of his men would leave the project if General Carlson bounced him, for they had been telling him so ever since the job had gotten hot.

But there was the danger that the general might decide to bypass Personnel in selecting colonists—or, what was more probable, might try to tame the planet with a military outpost.

Rod could hardly blame the man for his feelings. The job was vital, and everyone was intensely interested in making a go of it. Scientific agriculture had gone about as far as it could; hydroponics had already begun to shoulder the load required by an overpopulated planet. But the fact known to most intelligent people on Earth was that either new room was found in this kind of emergency, some place where people could go and live under nearly the same standards, or else some drastic changes in living standards would be required of all. And absolute and rigidly enforced birth control would have to go into effect. And all the attendant causes for race wars, nationalist wars, and have-not wars would crop up.

But the majority of the people wouldn't move to an undeveloped planet. You couldn't send ordinary citizens as pioneers. For one thing, they wouldn't want to go. For another, the new community wouldn't last long if you forced them to go—the average person had neither the attitudes nor the physique needed to make

over a wilderness.

The problem was to find people who would create a community on a new planet and develop an integrated society there. This had meant rigid selection, careful psychological preparation and a terrifically expensive transportation system to get the people there and keep them supplied. And the job had to be done soon. Economists predicted that thirty years were left on Earth under present standards, maybe fifty. If the population couldn't be thinned out one way by then, it would have to be done by another.



For six years, now, Rod had worked on the job of establishing a self-supporting colony on Venus. Three different colonies had been started, and each had died out in less than two years. Resignations would come in slowly at first, and then in a rush, until only twenty or thirty people would be left, of which the majority would be short-term scientific teams. By the terms of the colonists' contracts no man could be left on Venus more than a month after his resignation; so the bulk of two colonies had simply had to be shipped back to Earth, and plans made for another try.

And now the third colony was quitting, rushing home, leaving nothing on the jungle planet but a few small clearings soon to be taken over by the vegetation.

Several times in the last year Rod had thought of volunteering himself; but he knew it for a futile gesture. He wasn't five hundred men. He didn't even have the special skills or physique that were needed.

His gloomy thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the men.

Biddington was first. Then in twos and threes came the interviewers, all looking like the home team at the half, three touchdowns behind and just waiting for their coach.

If psychologists made good colonists, Rod thought, here would be a dozen more volunteers.

The arrival of Homer Jaimison brought the only cheerful face in the group. The project historian was a young man, just over thirty, and considerably over six feet. He wore the expression of a man who is itching to do something. Jaimie

had never really been busy yet on the project—the colonies had died out so quickly that his work had been mostly clerical, and he'd had to fill in time as best he could. So far he had done it making up improbable contests of skill for drinks, with such a weird assortment of shifting rules and scoring that he hadn't paid for a drink since his arrival. He made a valuable contribution to the project, however, since he helped to keep the group's minds off their troubles a part of the time.

Rod genuinely liked Jaimie, and expected to miss him strongly when Venus became self-supporting to the point where the historian would have to complete his work in residence.



When they were all seated, Rod leaned against his desk and said, "I can see you all know why we're here. To begin with, I'm not going to accuse anyone of mistakes. Each of you is the best possible man in the country for his job. If you weren't, you wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have asked for you; and General Carlson wouldn't have kept you. So there's nothing to feel bad about. If you can't do this work, no one can. Self-recrimination is foolish when you've been put on an impossible problem. I didn't call you in to bawl you out, but to ask you if we should continue spending project funds for nothing."

Jaimie raised his eyebrows at this speech, but said nothing.

"What do you mean, impossible problem?" one of the interviewers objected. "We know what we need—it's just that we're still making some mistake in selection that we haven't corrected."

"That's right, Rod." Biddington, the project psychologist, took up the dissension. "We know something is wrong with the selection techniques, or in the personality patterns we consider necessary. But it's only a problem of finding out what it is. The problem is by no means insoluble."

"As long as you're not ready to give us up," another interviewer said, "we aren't going to quit."

"You can't afford to get defeatist about this, Rod," Biddington went on. "This project is too important to fail. Whether you like it or not, your experience is too valuable for you to back out."

Rod grinned and held up his hands. "All right. That's the reaction I wanted. If you all still think we can get somewhere, we may as well try to analyze this last group." He sat down at his desk. "I have the files here, along with the tapes of the interviews. Let's see what difference we can find between those who hung on this long, and the ones that quit after the first three months."



The group settled down to trying to differentiate between a man who couldn't do a job but could try for six months longer than the next. They took the colonists carefully apart, trait by trait, and put them all back. They reviewed the colonists' records from birth, and compared them in endless combinations. Jaimie came into the discussion to show what the status of the colonies had been at the time each colonist had resigned: what diseases had been encountered when one man quit; how much jungle had been cleared before another did.

Files came and went in a continuous flux; coffee and sandwiches came and grew cold and stale. The air became gray with smoke.

Nothing.

The same results had come out of every investigation: You needed a man who was unstable to get him to leave Earth. You needed a man who was stable to have him stay on Venus. You needed initiative and resourcefulness to survive on a new planet. You needed a man who had so little initiative and resourcefulness that the competition on Earth wouldn't be profitable. You needed a young, healthy, vigorous specimen. You needed an older, experienced, more mature person.

You needed A and you needed non-A.

And even if you found people with the factors balanced just right, assuming you knew what the balance should be, where did you find five hundred of them?

The discussion went on. The solutions got wilder and more absurd. Take whole orphan asylums and bring them up on Venus under military guard. Build a development in the steamiest, nastiest jungle, and test recruits for the colony there. Send African natives.

The men were beginning to make the whole thing look impossible again, so Rod

decided to call a halt until they could get a better perspective. Tired himself, he dismissed them. They left quietly, not arguing in little groups or mumbling half-formed ideas to themselves, the way a team that has been progressing will do.

Only Jaimie stayed. He remained sitting hunched up near the desk, in the same position he'd held for the last hour. When the others had all left, he grinned at Rod.

"You know, for a group of practicing psychologists, this is the softest bunch of suckers I've seen."

"You've proved that to your own profit several times so far," Rod answered, rubbing his face as though smoothing the wrinkles could remove the tension. "Who have you robbed lately?"

"I'm talking about your performance just now. Here comes the whole crew, walking in with their heads hanging to the floor. Every last man was ready to tell you he was quitting—that the problem was insoluble. And before anyone can say a word, you tell them that the whole thing is impossible and imply that *you* want to quit. Even Biddington fell for it. You can't back out now, Rod, they say. Let's not have defeatist talk out of you, of all people—"

"I did feel that way," Rod said. "I'm just about ready to quit. I think that whatever our mistake has been, we can't do any better than we have. We just don't know enough."

Jaimie wasn't grinning now. "What will happen if you quit?"

"My guess is that Carlson will set up a military outpost there. Make a clearing, build a fort, maybe a town. Then he'll try to get people to come and live in it." Rod sighed. "It won't work. They'll want to know why the planet had to be colonized that way—why wouldn't the *first* colonists stay?"

"I agree. The military outpost is a fine method for spreading a culture to an existing civilization. Rome did much for Europe that way; the most powerful cities sprang up near the Roman forts and roads. But as a method for inducing the populace to a new place, it doesn't work. A free people will not willingly move into a military township." Jaimie looked sharply at Rod. "So what do you

intend to do—run out and turn it all over to Carlson?"

"I don't know, Jaimie. I just don't know. Six years is a long time."

"Damn it, Rod, you had much worse jobs than this one in industry! How did you select a computer man, a communications man, an engineering physicist, out of a group of men with similar backgrounds? It seems to me a harder problem than this."

"We don't really know much, as I said," Rod said. "Ours has often been an imitation science. When we had to select a computer man, we just gave a battery of tests to successful computer men—structural vision, vocabulary, tri-dimensional memory, ink-blots, syllogisms, practically everything. Then we weeded out the tests whose scores appeared to have no statistical relevance. Any future computer man had to duplicate those results, whatever they were. If we had a recently pioneered civilization around, Jaimie, you'd find this whole staff running through it like pollsters before an election."

"What was all this talk about balance, instability, initiative and all the rest?" asked Jamie.

"That's what we do when we don't know, Jaimie. We try to predict what we need; then we try to find ways of finding it in people."



Jaimie made an explosive sound. "But I thought you *must* have progressed from empirical methods! I would have said something long ago, if I hadn't thought you knew what you were doing all the time!" The historian was on his feet, stalking about the room. "Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"Why? What difference would it have made?" Rod frowned, failing to understand the other's excitement. "Sure, we've progressed from the older methods, in that we now have pretty complete data for all present job descriptions. And we can synthesize data for a new job, if it's not too different. But there isn't any information on the kind of person needed in a new world. What the devil are you getting so upset about?"

The historian threw himself into a chair and glared at Rod. "If you couldn't find the kind of people you needed to test, you could have asked a historian if he

knew anything about them!"

Rod shook his head puzzledly. "Subjective data, such as that—"

"Don't bring subjectivity into this, damn it! We get enough of that from physical scientists." Jaimie held himself in the chair, almost shaking with the intensity of his feeling. "Look, Rod, you know I want to see the project succeed. And you admit that you haven't got an answer. Well, baby, I think I have! It's an idea that has about a fifty-fifty chance of being right in this case ... would you be willing to try it?"

"If I had been betting on your side for the last few months, I'd be several dollars richer," Rod smiled. "Yes, I think I might go along with your idea, if you can convince me it has an even chance for success. Three failures out of three tries makes for poorer odds than that. What do you have in mind?"

"H'm," Jaimie said. "I imagine your stock isn't so high with old scabbard and blade right now, is it?"

Rod laughed. "I don't think he'll shoot on sight, but I'm not positive enough to stand in front of a lighted window."

"Well, then—if I had an idea you agreed with, the surest way to kill it would be to have you present it to him, right? And if you *fight* it, that's sure to convince Carlson!" Jaimie thought hard for a moment, tapping the chair-arm. "Rod, I have to do something you aren't going to like. Do you trust me?"

"You mean you're going to try this without even discussing it with the personnel group?"

"That's right. If I don't tell you what I'm doing, I know you'll fight it. And I'll need that kind of help from you to push Carlson into doing it.

"But I have to do something far worse than that, Rod. I'm going to tell the general that you knew my plan from the start, and have been sitting on it because I'm not a psychologist. I'm going to ruin your reputation with the worst set of lies since the Red purges. I'll say you're fighting me, because you can't accept an idea that came from a man outside of your own group. If the scheme doesn't work you'll be ruined, because there'll be no way to retract the lies. If it does work, we can announce that we put on an act to sell the plan to Carlson. Can you take it?"

Rod was thoughtful for a few minutes. He liked and trusted Jaimie, but the man

had no experience in this field—and this sounded like an all-or-nothing shot.

Then he remembered his despair over the latest set of resignations. He'd been ready to quit—he had nothing to offer, and neither did his men. Even a wild idea was worth a try, he thought grimly—he would be risking nothing but a plan that had already failed.

"Go to it, boy," he said. "And if you need a fight, you'll get a damn good one."



The fight with Carlson was short, and Rod was abruptly overruled. After that Jaimie moved fast. The new colonists flocked in. Three months after Rod's talk with him, the compounds started to fill. A shipload was a hundred men, and each new man had to wait in a group until it was filled. But there was no waiting now except for processing; the compounds were full before the ships were ready.

Rod had paid no attention to Jaimie's recruiting methods, thinking that the historian's idea differed mainly in control over the colonists.

Until he saw the crowds.

Even from a distance, they didn't have the young look of the previous groups. Up close, they looked like the sweepings of the slums.

He and Biddington talked to a few before they fully realized what Jaimie had done. All the men were sure that Venus was a mineral paradise—gold in the streams, uranium lodes so pure you had to wear a shield to get near them, diamonds, silver—every treasure that had ever excited men on Earth was scattered around the new world waiting to be picked up. That was what Jaimie had told them.

Rod got to a phone, fast.

"Jaimie, you fool! I know what you're doing, and I won't put up with it! You've told these dupes they can get rich on Venus! You intended to attract large numbers of recruits, in the hope that some of them will be what we need—but look at what you attracted! Crooks, gangsters, bums, hoboes, sharecroppers and I don't know what. You got recruits all right ... but what the hell kind of a society are you going to start with them! And who will go and live there among them later?"

"What's the matter, Workham?" Jaimie asked coldly. "Are you a racial purist? Want only your kind of people to get to Venus?"

"I don't care *who* goes, as long as they fit some standards. But to make a decent place, you need decent people—morally clean and healthy. Not this collection of mental cripples, alcoholics and thieves. Probably half of them are wanted men!"

He argued further, unable to believe that this was Jaimison's great fifty-fifty chance. He said many things ... and regretted every one; for that night the telecasts carried a recorded version of his outburst. Jaimie had maneuvered him into saying things he didn't quite mean, so that it looked as if he was trying to hide the all good things on Venus and save them for his own friends. One commentator said outright that if you weren't a college graduate recommended by one of Workham's friends, it would cost you a thousand dollars to get on an outgoing ship. By the next morning, half the papers in the world were after Workham's scalp.



Rod could only take the abuse and grind his teeth. How did you fight a thing like that? You were condemned if you kept silent, and if you answered, people nodded their heads and said, "See—he's still trying to deny it."

The failures from the old colonies were Rod's only allies. They tried to tell people what Venus was like, and what lies Carlson and his stooge Jaimison were using for bait. But it was pointed out that these men naturally had a stake in the secret ... and, after all, everyone knew how well off the returning colonists were! This was actually due to the high premium paid to get men to go to the planet, but no one believed.

Days passed. Weeks. The compounds filled, and emptied, and filled again. People stood in lines to apply. They walked miles to appear at a recruiting center. They fought for a place on the next ship, or the one after that. Farmers, clerks, ragged families, hoboes, armed men, teen-age boys and old men. Four thousand people applied in the first few months and were shipped out. Then the crowds thinned, even though the Get Rich propaganda continued. Soon, only a few hundred appeared where there had been thousands; then twos and threes; at last only a dozen or so a day, many of whom changed their minds before the full shipload had been assembled.

Rod clung to his job throughout. He had little to do, though his department had never been formally discontinued. Sooner or later, he knew, their services would be needed—when this cheap trick had failed. So he and his staff remained. Studying old files, making up test batteries, discussing survival factors, they readied themselves for the project again. From time to time they interviewed and tested a few of those waiting in the compounds. There was too much time to just sit around—even this activity was a welcome diversion.

As the year passed, the number of prospective colonists stopped decreasing and held steady at about five a day. But slowly something else changed. Among the new arrivals there began to appear engineers who had tossed up good jobs to emigrate, farmers with their families, school-teachers, storekeepers, lawyers, even doctors. All of them young. Not in any great number; but their appearance was a surprise still. Then there came two former colonists who had resigned on one of the earlier attempts, now trying to get back to Venus without inducement of bonus, high pay or guaranteed return.

That was the day Rod decided to call on Jaimie.



"I have here a bottle of eight-year-old rye, Jaimie," he began. "I think you're entitled to a drink, and I'm entitled to an explanation. Want to swap?"

"Rod!" Jaimie's bony face lit up. "It's good to see you. I've been afraid to call you until we could admit to the hoax. Come in, come in."

"Well, you did it," Rod said, after they had settled down. "I met two former colonists in the compound today. They know there isn't gold on Venus, and still they want to go out for free. No contract. And lately we've been getting professional people. There was even a kid fresh out of journalism school who wants to start up a paper. Jaimie, how did you do it? Were we so far wrong as that?"

"You did it yourself, Rod. You told me how—but you wouldn't have believed, then. Or if you had, we never would have sold it to Carlson. Remember, you said if there were only a recent pioneer civilization around, you'd run to them with ink-blots and vocabulary tests? All you needed to do was duplicate the kind of person who settled America or Australia or California.

"Well, as a historian I *knew* those people. And I knew what brought them. So I merely put out the same kind of bait."

"The same kind of bait!" Rod exclaimed. "What about freedom of religion and freedom from oppression? Isn't that what brought people to this country? There's no oppression to flee from these days! And even if it was the same bait, why weren't the same kind of people attracted? You saw that first compound full—where in that cesspool was Thomas Paine, or Franklin, or Miles Standish?"

"Franklin was born here," Jaimie grinned. "Paine didn't come over in the first wave. And I suppose General Carlson was Miles Standish. Maybe that kid journalist you saw was Paine's counterpart. No, Rod—the bait I held out attracted the same kind of people initially as it always has. You have been compromising all along on the factors you really wanted in order to get young, healthy, moral people to Venus. The answer is simply this: Pioneers are not necessarily young, healthy, or moral. So you didn't get what you wanted.

"You see, America wasn't only founded by pilgrims. They were actually a minority here. We were settled by promoters, trappers, bonded servants, exiled British deportees, pickpockets and thieves. We were explored by French and Spanish pirates. The better element in Europe didn't come here at first—why should they? It was dangerous. Pioneering was to the advantage of the worst elements. They came by court order, out of necessity, for adventure. They came for gold more than for freedom; for a new chance more than for a new religion.

"Australia was set up as a penal colony. Others went there for gold, or to start over where they weren't known. That's the kind of person who settles a new land—the misfits: too impulsive, drunkards, weaklings, convicts, and fugitives from justice. Too sick in mind and body to make a go of it where they are.

"So we announced that there was a brand new world with a new chance for everyone on it. We implied that there was wealth. We told them everything about Venus that brought the English to America, the Spanish to South America, the Easterners to the West, and the Middlewesterners to California. We didn't hunt for pioneers. They came to us."



Rod refilled his glass thoughtfully. "But what kind of a society will men like that create? A fighting, lawless structure...."

"That's right. And the lawless will eliminate themselves by their very activities. Like the early West. While the doctors come in to treat wounds, and the lawyers to plead their cases; while their wives and the other wives will start schools and bring in school-teachers. That society will purge itself, Rod—many of the worst will become good citizens out of meeting the challenge of a new planet, and the rest will disappear."

"Well, then, what about the gold story?" Rod asked. "Won't they be angry with everyone connected with the project because of the hoax?"

"That was a little raw, but no worse than other gold rushes—few of the stampedeers ever found the gold they went after. The captain of one of the rockets told me that the first few months the colonists were trying to stow away on the returning ships. Now they send messages to friends and relatives to come before the opportunity is gone—that's why you've seen this better element. Our lies will soon be forgotten, and crops and foods and minerals will be coming from Venus, and better people will go to meet the diminished challenge on our brave new world."

Rod stood up. "Well, my compliments for a job well done, Jaimie. When do you expect to go and live there yourself? You'll have to soon, won't you, to complete the Project Record in residence?"

Jaimie nodded. "About six months from now, I think. Why?"

"Good," Rod exclaimed. "We can all go together."

"What are you planning to do? Volunteer?"

"The whole personnel staff will be going. Here's just what we need—a young pioneer society! We can get adequate data for future selection, a better idea of what kind of person a colony needs at different stages of growth." Rod grinned. "After all, your method was pretty sloppy, even if it did work. And you sent far too many wrong people. Once we have some good data ... anything you can do, we can do better!"

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