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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FOUNDLING ON VENUS ***

Venus was the most miserable planet in the system, peopled by miserable excuses for human beings. And somewhere among this conglomeration of boiling protoplasm there was a being unlike the others, a being who walked and talked like the others but who was different—and afraid the difference would be discovered. You'll remember this short story.

foundling on venus

by ... John & Dorothy
de Courcy

The foundling could not have been more than three years old. Yet he held a secret that was destined to bring joy to many unhappy people.

UNLIKE GAUL, the north continent of Venus is divided into *four* parts. No Caesar has set foot here either, nor shall one—for the dank, stinging, caustic air swallows up the lives of men and only Venus may say, *I conquered*.

This is colonized Venus, where one may walk without the threat of sudden death—except from other men—the most bitterly fought for, the dearest, bloodiest, most worthless land in the solar system.

Separated by men into East and West at the center of the Twilight Zone, the division across the continent is the irregular, jagged line of Mud River, springing from the Great Serpent Range.

The African Republic holds one quarter which the Negroes exploit as best they can, encumbered by filter masks and protective clothing.

The Asians still actually try to colonize their quarter, while the Venusian primitives neither help nor hinder the bitter game of power-politics, secret murder, and misery—most of all, misery.

The men from Mars understand this better, for their quarter is a penal colony. Sleepy-eyed, phlegmatic Martians, self-condemned for minute violations of their incredible and complex mores—without guards save themselves—will return to the subterranean cities, complex philosophies, and cool, dry air of Mars when they have declared their own sentences to be at an end.

Meanwhile, they labor to extract the wealth of Venus without the bitterness and hate, without the savagery and fear of their neighbors. Hence, they are regarded by all with the greatest suspicion.

The Federated States, after their fashion, plunder the land and send screaming ships to North America laden with booty and with men grown suddenly rich—and with men who will never care for riches or anything else again. These are the fortunate dead. The rest are received into the sloppy breast of Venus where even a tombstone or marker is swallowed in a few, short weeks. And they die quickly on Venus, and often.

From the arbitrary point where the four territories met, New Reno flung its sprawling, dirty carcass over the muddy soil and roared and hooted endlessly, laughed with the rough boisterousness of miners and spacemen, rang with the brittle, brassy laughter of women following a trade older than New Reno. It clanged and shouted and bellowed so loudly that quiet

sobbing was never heard.

But a strange sound hung in the air, the crying of a child. A tiny child, a boy, he sat begrimed by mud at the edge of the street where an occasional ground car flung fresh contamination on his small form until he became almost indistinguishable from the muddy street. His whimpering changed to prolonged wailing sobs. He didn't turn to look at any of the giant passers-by nor did they even notice him.

But finally one passer-by stopped. She was young and probably from the Federated States. She was not painted nor was she well-dressed. She had nothing to distinguish her, except that she stopped.

"Oh, my!" she breathed, bending over the tiny form. "You poor thing. Where's your mama?"

The little figure rubbed its face, looked at her blankly and heaved a long, shuddering sigh.

"I can't leave you sitting here in the mud!" She pulled out a handkerchief and tried to wipe away some of the mud and then helped him up. His clothes were rags, his feet bare. She took him by the hand and as they walked along she talked to him. But he seemed not to hear.

Soon they reached the dirty, plastic front of the Elite Cafe. Once through the double portals, she pulled the respirator from her face. The air inside was dirty and smelly but it was breathable. People were eating noisily, boisterously, with all the lusty, unclean young life that was Venus. They clamored, banged and threw things for no reason other than to throw them.

She guided the little one past the tables filled with people and into the kitchen. The door closed with a bang, shutting out much of the noise from the big room. Gingerly she sat him down on a stool, and with detergent and water she began removing the mud. His eyes were horribly red-rimmed.

"It's a wonder you didn't die out there," she murmured. "Poor little thing!"

"Hey! Are you going to work or aren't you, Jane?" a voice boomed.

A large ruddy man in white had entered the kitchen and he stood frowning at the girl. Women weren't rare on Venus, and she was only a waitress ...

"What in the blue blazes is that!" He pointed to the child.

"He was outside," the girl explained, "sitting in the street. He didn't have a respirator."

The ruddy man scowled at the boy speculatively. "His lungs all right?"

"He isn't coughing much," she replied.

"But what are you going to do with him?" the man asked Jane.

"I don't know," she said. "Something. Tell the Patrol about him, I guess."

The beefy man hesitated. "It's been a long time since I've seen a kid this young on Venus. They always ship 'em home. Could have been dumped. Maybe his parents left him on purpose."

The girl flinched.

He grunted disgustedly, his face mirroring his thoughts. *Stringy hair ... plain face ... and soft as Venus slime clear through!* He shrugged. "Anyway, he's got to eat." He looked at the small figure. "Want to eat, kid? Would you like a glass of milk?" He opened a refrigerator, took out a plastic bottle and poured milk in a glass.

Chubby hands reached out for the glass.

"There, that's better," the cook said. "Pete will see that you get fed all right." He turned to the girl. "Could he belong to someone around here?"

Jane shook her head. "I don't know. I've never seen him before."

"Well, he can stay in the kitchen while you work the shift. I'll watch him."

She nodded, took an apron down from a hook and tied it around her waist. Then she patted the sober-faced youngster on his tousled head and left.

The beefy man studied the boy. "I think I'll put you over there," he said. He lifted him, stool and all, and carried him across the kitchen. "You can watch through that panel. See? That's Jane in there. She'll come back and forth, pass right by here. Is that all right?"

The little one nodded.

"Oh?" Pete raised his eyebrows. "So you *do* know what I'm saying." He watched the child for a few minutes, then turned his attention to the range. The rush hour was on and he soon forgot the little boy on the stool ...

Whenever possible during the lunch-hour rush, Jane stopped to smile and talk to the child. Once she asked, "Don't you know where your mama and daddy are?"

He just stared at her, unblinking, his big eyes soft and sad-looking.

The girl studied him for a moment, then she picked up a cookie and gave it to him. "Can you tell me your name?" she asked hopefully.

His lips parted. Cookie crumbs fell off his chin and from the corners of his mouth, but he spoke no words.

She sighed, turned, and went out to the clattering throng with laden plates of food.

For a while Jane was so busy she almost forgot the young one. But finally people began to linger more over their food, the clinking of dishes grew quieter and Pete took time for a cup of coffee. His sweating face was haggard. He stared sullenly at the little boy and shook his head.

"Shouldn't be such things as kids," he muttered. "Nothing but a pain in the neck!"

Jane came through the door. "It gets worse all the time," she groaned. She turned to the little boy. "Did you have something to eat?"

"I didn't know what to fix for him," Pete said. "How about some beef stew? Do you think he'd go for that?"

Jane hesitated. "I—I don't know. Try it."

Pete ladled up a bowl of steaming stew. Jane took it and put it on the table. She took a bit on a spoon, blew on it, then held it out. The child opened his mouth. She smiled and slowly fed him the stew.

"How old do you think he is?" Pete asked.

The girl hesitated, opened her mouth, but said nothing.

"About two and a half, I'd guess," Pete answered himself. "Maybe three." Jane nodded and he turned back to cleaning the stove.

"Don't you want some more stew?" Jane asked as she offered the small one another spoonful.

The little mouth didn't open.

"Guess you've had enough," she said, smiling.

Pete glanced up. "Why don't you leave now, Jane. You're going to have to see the Patrol about that kid. I can take care of things here."

She stood thinking for a moment. "Can I use an extra respirator?"

"You can't take him out without one!" Pete replied. He opened a locker and pulled out a transparent facepiece. "I think this'll tighten down enough to fit his face."

She took it and walked over to the youngster. His large eyes had followed all her movements and he drew back slightly as she held out the respirator. "It won't hurt," she coaxed. "You have to wear it. The air outside stings."

The little face remained steady but the eyes were fearful as Jane slid the transparent mask over his head and tightened the elastic. It pulsed slightly with his breathing.

"Better wrap him in this," Pete suggested, pulling a duroplast jacket out of the locker. "Air's tough on skin."

The girl nodded, pulling on her own respirator. She stepped quickly into her duroplast suit and tied it. "Thanks a lot, Pete," she said, her voice slightly muffled. "See you tomorrow."

Pete grunted as he watched her wrap the tiny form in the jacket, lift it gently in her arms, then push through the door.

The girl walked swiftly up the street. It was quieter now, but in a short time the noise and stench and garishness of New Reno would begin rising to another cacophonous climax.

The strange pair reached a wretched metal structure with an askew sign reading, "El Grande Hotel." Jane hurried through the double portals, the swish of air flapping her outer garments as the air conditioning unit fought savagely to keep out the rival atmosphere of the planet.

There was no one at the desk and no one in the lobby. It was a forlorn place, musty and damp. Venus humidity seemed to eat through everything, even metal, leaving it limp, faded, and stinking.

She hesitated, looked at the visiphone, then impulsively pulled a chair over out of the line of sight of the viewing plate and gently set the little boy on it. She pulled the respirator from her face, pressed the button under the blank visiphone disk. The plate lit up and hummed faintly.

"Patrol Office," Jane said.

There was a click and a middle-aged, square-faced man with blue-coated shoulders appeared. "Patrol Office," he repeated.

"This is Jane Grant. I work at the Elite Cafe. Has anyone lost a little boy?"

The patrolman's eyebrows raised slightly. "Little boy? Did you find one?"

"Well—I—I saw one earlier this evening," she faltered. "He was sitting at the edge of the street and I took him into the cafe and fed him."

"Well, there aren't many children in town," he replied. "Let's see." He glanced at a record sheet. "No, none's reported missing. He with you now?"

"Ah—no."

He shook his head again, still looking downward. He said slowly, "His parents must have found him. If he was wandering we'd have picked him up. There is a family that live around there who have a ten-year-old kid who wanders off once in a while. Blond, stutters a little. Was it him?"

"Well, I—" she began. She paused, said firmly, "No."

"Well, we don't have any reports on lost children. Haven't had for some time. If the boy was lost his parents must have found him. Thank you for calling." He broke the connection.

Jane stood staring at the blank plate. No one had reported a little boy missing. In all the maddening confusion that was New Reno, no one had missed a little boy.

She looked at the small bundle, walked over and slipped off his respirator. "I should have told the truth," she murmured to him softly. "But you're so tiny and helpless. Poor little thing!"

He looked up at her, then around the lobby, his brown eyes resting on first one object, then another. His little chin began to quiver.

The girl picked him up and stroked his hair. "Don't cry," she soothed. "Everything's going to be all right."

She walked down a hall, fumbling inside her coveralls for a key. At the end of the hall she stopped, unlocked a door, and carried him inside. As an afterthought she locked the door, still holding the small bundle in her arms. Then she placed him on a bed, removed the jacket and threw it on a chair.

"I don't know why I should go to all this trouble," she said, removing her protective coveralls. "I'll probably get picked up by the Patrol. But *somebody's* got to look after you."

She sat down beside him. "Aren't you even a bit sleepy?"

He smiled a little.

"Maybe now you can tell me your name," she said. "Don't you know your name?"

His expression didn't change.

She pointed to herself. "Jane." Then she hesitated, looked downward for a moment. "Jana, I was called before I came here."

The little face looked up at her. The small mouth opened. "Jana." It was half whisper, half whistle.

"That's right," she replied, stroking his hair. "My, but your throat must be sore. I hope you won't be sick from breathing too much of that awful air."

She regarded him quizzically. "You know, I've never seen many little boys. I don't quite know how to treat one. But I know you should get some sleep."

She smiled and reached over to take off the rags. He pulled away suddenly.

"Don't be afraid," she said reassuringly. "I wouldn't hurt you."

He clutched the little ragged shirt tightly.

"Don't be afraid," she repeated soothingly. "I'll tell you what. You lie down and I'll put this blanket over you," she said, rising. "Will that be all right?"

She laid him down and covered the small form with a blanket. He lay there watching her with his large eyes.

"You don't look very sleepy," she said. "Perhaps I had better turn the light down." She did so, slowly, so as not to alarm him. But he was silent, watchful, never taking his eyes from her.

She smiled and sat down next to him. "Now I'll tell you a story and then you must go to sleep," she said softly.

He smiled—just a little smile—and she was pleased.

"Fine," she cried. "Well—once upon a time there was a beautiful planet, not at all like this one. There were lovely flowers and cool-running streams and it only rained once in a while. You'd like it there for it's a very nice place. But there were people there who liked to travel—to see strange places and new things, and one day they left in a great big ship."

She paused again, frowning in thought. "Well, they traveled a long, long way and saw many things. Then one day something went wrong."

Her voice was low and soft. It had the quality of a dream, the texture of a zephyr, but the little boy was still wide awake.

"Something went very, very wrong and they tried to land so they could fix it. But when they tried to land they found they couldn't—and they fell and just barely managed to save themselves. The big, beautiful ship was all broken. Well, since they couldn't fix the ship at all now, they set out on foot to find out where they were and to see if they could get help. Then they found that they were in a land of great big giants, and the people were very fierce."

The little boy's dark eyes were watching her intently but she went on, hardly noticing.

"So they went back to the broken ship and tried to decide what to do. They couldn't get in touch with their home because the radio part of the ship was all broken up. And the giants were horrible and wanted everything for themselves and were cruel and mean and probably would have hurt the poor ship-wrecked people if they had known they were there.

"So—do you know what they did? They got some things from the ship and they went and built a giant. And they put little motors inside and things to make it run and talk so that the giants wouldn't be able to tell that it wasn't another giant just like themselves."

She paused, straightening slightly.

"And then they made a space inside the giant where somebody could sit and run this big giant and talk and move around—and the giants wouldn't ever know that she was there. They made it a *she*. In fact, she was the only person who could do it because she could learn to talk all sorts of languages—that's what she could do best. So she went out in the giant suit and mingled with the giants and worked just like they did.


"But every once in a while she'd go back to the others, bringing them things they needed. And she would bring back news. That was their only hope—news of a ship which might be looking for them, which might take them home—"

She broke off. "I wonder what the end of the story will be?" she murmured.

For some time she had not been using English. She had been speaking in a soft, fluid language unlike anything ever heard on Venus. But now she had stopped speaking entirely.

After a slight pause—another voice spoke—in the same melodious, alien tongue! It said, "I think I know the end of the story. I think someone has come for you poor people and is going to take you home."

She gasped—for she realized it had not been her voice. Her artificial eyes watched, stunned, as the little boy began peeling off a skin-tight, flexible baby-faced mask, revealing underneath the face of a little man.

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