

The Hate Disease

Murray Leinster

The background of the lower half of the page is a vibrant green. It is decorated with various blue geometric shapes: vertical bars, horizontal bars, triangles pointing up and down, and a large, thick, curved arrow pointing from the center towards the right. The text 'Project Gutenberg' is written in white at the bottom right, partially overlapping the green background and the blue shapes.

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THE HATE DISEASE

The Med Service people hit strange problems as routine: if they weren't weirdos, they weren't tough enough to merit Med Service attention. Now the essence of a weird problem is that it involves a factor nobody ever thought of before ... or the absence of one nobody ever missed ...

by MURRAY LEINSTER

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN SCHOENHERR



I

The Med Ship *Esclipus Twenty* rode in overdrive while her ship's company drank coffee. Calhoun sipped at a full cup of strong brew, while Murgatroyd the *tormal* drank from the tiny mug suited to his small, furry paws. The astrogation unit showed the percentage of this overdrive hop covered up to now, and the needle was almost around to the stop pin.

There'd been a warning gong an hour ago, notifying that the end of overdrive journeying approached. Hence the coffee. When breakout came, the overdrive field must collapse and the Duhanne cells down near the small ship's keel absorb the energy which maintained it. Then *Esclipus Twenty* would appear in the normal universe of suns and stars with the abruptness of an explosion. She should be somewhere near the sun Tallien. She should then swim toward that sol-type sun and approach Tallien's third planet out at the less-than-light-speed rate necessary for solar-system travel. And presently she should signal down to ground and Calhoun set about the purpose of his three-week journey in overdrive.

His purpose was a routine checkup on public health on Tallien Three. Calhoun had lately completed five such planetary visits, with from one to three weeks of overdrive travel between each pair. When he left Tallien Three he'd head back to Sector Headquarters for more orders about the work of the Interstellar Medical Service.

Murgatroyd zestfully licked his empty cup to get the last least drop of coffee. He said hopefully:

"*Chee?*" He wanted more.

"I'm afraid," said Calhoun, "that you're a sybarite, Murgatroyd. This impassioned desire of yours for coffee disturbs me."

"*Chee!*" said Murgatroyd, with decision.

"It's become a habit," Calhoun told him severely. "You should taper off. Remember, when anything in your environment becomes a normal part of your environment, it becomes a necessity. Coffee should be a luxury, to be savored as

such, instead of something you expect and resent being deprived of."

Murgatroyd said impatiently:

"*Chee-chee!*"

"All right, then," said Calhoun, "if you're going to be emotional about it! Pass your cup."

He reached out and Murgatroyd put the tiny object in his hand. He refilled it and passed it back.

"But watch yourself," he advised. "We're landing on Tallien Three. It's just been transferred to us from another sector. It's been neglected. There's been no Med Service inspection for years. There could be misunderstandings."

Murgatroyd said, "*Chee!*" and squatted down to drink.

Calhoun looked at a clock and opened his mouth to speak again, when a taped voice said abruptly:

"*When the gong sounds, breakout will be five seconds off.*"

There was a steady, monotonous *tick, tock, tick, tock*, like a metronome. Calhoun got up and made a casual examination of the ship's instruments. He turned on the vision screens. They were useless in overdrive, of course, Now they were ready to inform him about the normal cosmos as soon as the ship returned to it. He put away the coffee things. Murgatroyd was reluctant to give up his mug until the last possible lick. Then he sat back and elaborately cleaned his whiskers.

Calhoun sat down in the control chair and waited.



"*Bong!*" said the loud-speaker, and Murgatroyd scuttled under a chair. He held on with all four paws and his furry tail. The speaker said, "*Breakout in five seconds ... four ... three ... two ... one ...*"

There was a sensation as if all the universe had turned itself inside out, and Calhoun's stomach tried to follow its example. He gulped, and the feeling ended, and the vision screens came alight. Then there were ten thousand myriads of stars, and a sun flaming balefully ahead, and certain very bright objects nearby.

They would be planets, and one of them showed as a crescent.

Calhoun checked the solar spectrum as a matter of course. This was the sun Tallien. He checked the brighter specks in view. Three were planets and one a remote brilliant star. The crescent was Tallien Three, third out from its sun and the Med Ship's immediate destination. It was a very good breakout; too good to be anything but luck. Calhoun swung the ship for the crescent planet. He matter-of-factly checked the usual items. He was going in at a high angle to the ecliptic, so meteors and bits of stray celestial trash weren't likely to be bothersome. He made other notes, to kill time.

He reread the data sheets on the planet. It had been colonized three hundred years before. There'd been trouble establishing a human-use ecological system on the planet because the native plants and animals were totally useless to humankind. Native timber could be used in building, but only after drying-out for a period of months. When growing or green it was as much water-saturated as a sponge. There had never been a forest fire here, not even caused by lightning!

There were other oddities. The aboriginal microorganisms here did not attack wastes of introduced terrestrial types. It had been necessary to introduce scavenger organisms from elsewhere. This and other difficulties made it true that only one of the world's five continents were human-occupied. Most of the land surface was strictly as it had been before the landing of men—impenetrable jungles of spongelike flora, dwelt in by a largely unknown useless fauna. Calhoun read on. Population ... government ... health statistics.... He went through the list.

He had time to kill, so he rechecked his course and speed relative to the planet. He and Murgatroyd had dinner. Then he waited until the ship was near enough to report in.

"Med Ship *Esclipas Twenty* calling ground," he said when the time came. He taped his own voice as he made the call. "Requesting co-ordinates for landing. Our mass is fifty tons. Repeat, five-oh tons. Purpose of landing, planetary health inspection."

He waited while his taped voice repeated and re-repeated the call. An incoming voice said sharply:

"*Calling Med Ship! Cut your signal! Do not acknowledge this call! Cut your*

signal! Instructions will follow. But cut your signal!"

Calhoun blinked. Of all possible responses to a landing call, orders to stop signaling would be least likely. But after an instant he reached over and stopped the transmission of his voice. It happened to end halfway through a syllable.

Silence. Not quite silence, of course, because there was the taped record of background noise which went on all the time the Med Ship was in space. Without it, the utter absence of noise would be sepulchral.

The voice from outside said:

"You cut off. Good! Now listen! Do not—repeat, do not!—acknowledge this call or respond to any call from anyone else! There is a drastic situation aground. You must not—repeat, must not—fall into the hands of the people now occupying Government Center. Go into orbit. We will try to seize the spaceport so you can be landed. But do not acknowledge this call or respond to any answer from anyone else! Don't do it! Don't do it!"



There was a click, and somehow the silence was clamorous. Calhoun rubbed his nose reflectively with his finger. Murgatroyd, bright-eyed, immediately rubbed his nose with a tiny dark digit. Like all *tormals*, he gloried in imitating human actions, as parrots and parakeets imitate human speech. But suddenly a second voice called in, with a new and strictly professional tone:

"Calling Med Ship!" said this second voice. *"Calling Med Ship! Spaceport Tallien Three calling Med Ship Esclipus Twenty! For landing, repair to coordinates—"*

The voice briskly gave specific instructions. It was a strictly professional voice. It repeated the instructions with precision.

Out of sheer habit, Calhoun said, "Acknowledge." Then he added sharply: "Hold it! I've just had an emergency call—"

The first voice interrupted stridently:

"Cut your signal, you fool! I told you not to answer any other call! Cut your signal!"

The strictly professional other voice said coldly:

"Emergency call, eh? That'll be paras. They're better organized than we thought, if they picked up your landing request! There's an emergency, all right! It's the devil of an emergency—it looks like devils! But this is the spaceport. Will you come in?"

"Naturally," said Calhoun. "What's the emergency?"

"You'll find out...." That was the professional voice. The other snapped angrily, "Cut your signal!" The professional voice again: "... you land. It's not...." "Cut your signal, you fool! Cut it...." The other voice again.

There was confusion. The two voices spoke together. Each was on a tight beam, while Calhoun's call was broadcast. The voices could not hear each other, but each could hear Calhoun.

"Don't listen to them! There's...." "to understand, but...." "Don't listen! Don't...." "... When you land."

Then the voice from the spaceport stopped, and Calhoun cut down the volume of the other. It continued to shout, though muffled. It bellowed, as if rattled. It mouthed commands as if they were arguments or reasons. Calhoun listened for fully five minutes. Then he said carefully into his microphone:

"Med Ship *Esclipus Twenty* calling spaceport. I will arrive at given co-ordinates at the time given. I suggest that you take precautions if necessary against interference with my landing. Message ends."

He swung the ship around and aimed for the destination with which he'd been supplied—a place in emptiness five diameters out, with the center of the sun's disk bearing so-and-so and the center of the planet's disk bearing so-and-thus. He turned the communicator volume down still lower. The miniature voice shouted and threatened in the stillness of the Med Ship's control room. After a time Calhoun said reflectively:

"I don't like this, Murgatroyd! An unidentified voice is telling us—and we're Med Ship personnel, Murgatroyd!—who we should speak to and what we should do. Our duty is plainly to ignore such orders. But with dignity, Murgatroyd! We must uphold the dignity of the Med Service!"

Murgatroyd said skeptically:

"Chee?"

"I don't like your attitude," said Calhoun, "but I'll bear in mind that you're often right."

Murgatroyd found a soft place to curl up in. He draped his tail across his nose and lay there, blinking at Calhoun above the furry half-mask.



The little skip drove on. The disk of the planet grew large. Presently it was below. It turned as the skip moved, and from a crescent it became a half-circle and then a gibbous near-oval shape. In the rest of the solar system nothing in particular happened. Small and heavy inner planets swam deliberately in their short orbits around the sun. Outer, gas-giant planets floated even more deliberately in larger paths. There were comets of telescopic size, and there were meteorites, and the sun Tallien sent up monstrous flares, and storms of improbable snow swept about in the methane atmosphere of the greater gas giant of this particular celestial family of this sun and its satellites. But the cosmos in general paid no attention to human activities or usually undesirable intentions. Calhoun listened, frowning, to the agitated, commanding voice. He still didn't like it.

Suddenly, it cut off. The Med Ship approached the planet to which it had been ordered by Sector Headquarters now some months ago. Calhoun examined the nearing world via electron telescope. On the hemisphere rolling to a position under the Med Ship he saw a city of some size, and he could trace highways, and there were lesser human settlements here and there. At full magnification he could see where forests had been cut away in wedges and half-squares, with clear spaces between them. This indicated cultivated ground, cleared for human use in the invincibly tidy-minded manner of men.

Presently he saw the landing grid near the biggest city—that half-mile-high, cagelike wall of intricately braced steel girders. It tapped the planet's ionosphere for all the power that this world's inhabitants could use, and applied the same power to lift up and let down the ships of space by which communication with the rest of humanity was maintained. From this distance, though, even with an electron telescope, Calhoun could see no movement of any sort. There was no smoke, because electricity from the grid provided all the planet's power and heat,

and there were no chimneys. The city looked like a colored map, with infinite detail but nothing which stirred.

A tiny voice spoke. It was the voice of the spaceport.

"Calling Med Ship. Grid locking on. Right?"

"Go ahead," said Calhoun. He turned up the communicator.

The voice from the ground said carefully:

"Better stand by your controls. If anything happens down here you may need to take emergency action."

Calhoun raised his eyebrows. But he said:

"All set."

He felt the cushiony, fumbling motions as force fields from the landing grid groped for the Med Ship and centered it in their complex pattern. Then there came the sudden solid feeling when the grid locked on. The Med Ship began to settle, at first slowly but with increasing speed, toward the ground below.

It was all very familiar. The shape of the continents below him were strange, but such unfamiliarity was commonplace. The voice from the ground said matter-of-factly:

"We think everything's under control, but it's hard to tell with these paras. They got away with some weather rockets last week and may have managed to mount war heads on them. They might use them on the grid, here, or try for you."

Calhoun said:

"What are paras?"

"You'll be briefed when you land," said the voice. It added: *"Everything's all right so far, though."*



The *Esclipus Twenty* went down and down and down. The grid had locked on at forty thousand miles. It was a long time before the little ship was down to thirty thousand and another long time before it was at twenty. Then more time to reach

ten, and then five, and one thousand, and five hundred. When solid ground was only a hundred miles below and the curve of the horizon had to be looked for to be seen, the voice from the ground said:

"The last hundred miles is the tricky part, and the last five will be where it's tight. If anything does happen, it'll be there."

Calhoun watched through the electron telescope. He could see individual buildings now, when he used full magnification. He saw infinitesimal motes which would be ground cars on the highways. At seventy miles he cut down the magnification to keep his field of vision wide. He cut the magnification again at fifty and at thirty and at ten.

Then he saw the first sign of motion. It was an extending thread of white which could only be smoke. It began well outside the city and leaped up and curved, evidently aiming at the descending Med Ship. Calhoun said curtly:

"There's a rocket coming up. Aiming at me."

The voice from the ground said:

"It's spotted. I'm giving you free motion if you want to use it."

The feel of the ship changed. It no longer descended. The landing-grid operator was holding it aloft, but Calhoun could move it in evasive action if he wished. He approved the liberty given him. He could use his emergency rockets to dodge. A second thread of smoke came streaking upward.

Then other threads of white began just outside the landing grid. They rushed after the first. The original rockets seemed to dodge. Others came up. There was an intricate pattern formed by the smoke trails of rockets rising and other rockets following, and some trails dodging and others closing in. Calhoun carefully reminded himself that it was not likely that there'd be atomic war heads. The last planetary wars had been fought with fusion weapons, and only the crews of single ships survived. The planetary populations didn't. But atomic energy wasn't much used aground, these days. Power for planetary use could be had more easily from the upper, ionized limits of atmospheres.

A pursuing rocket closed in. There was a huge ball of smoke and a flash of light, but it was not brighter than the sun. It wasn't atomic flame. Calhoun relaxed. He watched as every one of the first-ascended rockets was tracked down and destroyed by another. The last, at that, was three-quarters of the way up.

The Med Ship quivered a little as the force fields tightened again. It descended swiftly. It came to ground. Figures came to meet Calhoun as, with Murgatroyd, he went out of the air lock. Some were uniformed. All wore the grim expression and harried look of men under long-continued strain.

The landing-grid operator shook hands first.

"Nice going! It could be lucky that you arrived. We normals need some luck!"

He introduced a man in civilian clothes as the planetary Minister for Health. A man in uniform was head of the planetary police. The others weren't introduced.

"We worked fast after your call came!" said the grid operator. "Things are lined up for you, but they're bad!"

"I've been wondering," admitted Calhoun dryly, "if all incoming ships are greeted with rockets."

"That's the paras," said the police head, grimly. "They'd rather not have a Med Service man here."



A ground car sped across the spaceport. It came at a headlong pace toward the group just outside the Med Ship. There was a sudden howl of a siren by the spaceport gate. A second car leaped as if to intercept the first. Its siren screamed again. Then bright sparks appeared near the first car's windows. Blasters rasped. Incredulously, Calhoun saw the blue-white of blaster bolts darting toward him. The men about him clawed for weapons. The grid operator said sharply:

"Get in your ship! We'll take care of this! It's paras!"

But Calhoun stood still. It was instinct not to show alarm. Actually, he didn't feel it. This was too preposterous! He tried to grasp the situation and fearfulness does not help at such a time.

A bolt crackled against the Med Ship's hull just beyond him. Blasters rasped from beside him. A bolt exploded almost at Calhoun's feet. There were two men in the first-moving ground car, and now that another car moved to head them off, one fired desperately and the other tried to steer and fire at the same time. The siren-sounding car sent a stream of bolts at them. But both cars jounced and

bounced. There could be no marksmanship under such conditions.

But a bolt did hit. The two-man car dipped suddenly to one side. Its fore part touched ground. It slued around, and its rear part lifted. It flung out its two passengers and with an effect of great deliberation it rolled over end for end and came to a stop upside down. Of its passengers, one lay still. The other struggled to his feet and began to run—toward Calhoun. He fired desperately, again and again——

Bolts from the pursuing car struck all round him. Then one struck him. He collapsed.

Calhoun's hands clenched. Automatically, he moved toward the other still figure, to act as a medical man does when somebody is hurt. The grid operator seized his arm. As Calhoun jerked to get free, that second man stirred. His blaster lifted and rasped. The little pellet of ball-lightning grazed Calhoun's side, burning away his uniform down to the skin, just as there was a grating roar of blaster fire. The second man died.

"Are you crazy?" demanded the grid operator angrily. "He was a para! He was here to try to kill you!"

The police head snapped:

"Get that car sprayed! See if it had equipment to spread contagion! Spray everything it went near! And hurry!"

There was silence as men came from the spaceport building. They pushed a tank on wheels before them. It had a hose and a nozzle attached to it. They began to use the hose to make a thick, foglike, heavy mist which clung to the ground and lingered there. The spray had the biting smell of phenol.

"What's going on here?" demanded Calhoun angrily. "Damnation! What's going on here?"

The Minister for Health said unhappily:

"Why ... we've a public-health situation we haven't been able to meet. It appears to be an epidemic of ... of ... we're not sure what, but it looks like demoniac possession."

II

"I'd like," said Calhoun, "a definition. Just what do you mean by a para?"

Murgatroyd echoed his tone in an indignant, "*Chee-chee!*"

This was twenty minutes later. Calhoun had gone back into the Med Ship and treated the blaster burn on his side. He'd changed his clothing from the scorched uniform to civilian garb. It would not look eccentric here. Men's ordinary garments were extremely similar all over the galaxy. Women's clothes were something else.

Now he and Murgatroyd rode in a ground car with four armed men of the planetary police, plus the civilian who'd been introduced as the Minister for Health for the planet. The car sped briskly toward the spaceport gate. Masses of thick gray fog still clung to the ground where the would-be assassins' car lay on its back and where the bodies of the two dead men remained. The mist was being spread everywhere—everywhere the men had touched ground or where their car had run.

Calhoun had some experience with epidemics and emergency measures for destroying contagion. He had more confidence in the primitive sanitary value of fire. It worked, no matter how ancient the process of burning things might be. But very many human beings, these days, never saw a naked flame unless in a science class at school, where it might be shown as a spectacularly rapid reaction of oxidation. But people used electricity for heat and light and power. Mankind had moved out of the age of fire. So here on Tallien it seemed inevitable that infective material should be sprayed with antiseptics instead of simply set ablaze.

"What," repeated Calhoun doggedly, "is a para?"

The Health Minister said unhappily:

"Paras are ... beings that once were sane men. They aren't sane any longer. Perhaps they aren't men any longer. Something has happened to them. If you'd landed a day or two later, you couldn't have landed at all. We normals had planned to blow up the landing grid so no other ship could land and be lifted off again to spread the ... contagion to other worlds. If it is a contagion."

"Smashing the landing grid," said Calhoun practically, "may be all right as a last

resort. But surely there are other things to be tried first!"

Then he stopped. The ground car in which he rode had reached the spaceport gate. Three other ground cars waited there. One swung into motion ahead of them. The other two took up positions behind. A caravan of four cars, each bristling with blast weapons, swept along the wide highway which began here at the spaceport and stretched straight across level ground toward the city whose towers showed on the horizon. The other cars formed a guard for Calhoun. He'd needed protection before, and he might need it again.

"Medically," he said to the Minister for Health, "I take it that a para is the human victim of some condition which makes him act insanely. That is pretty vague. You say it hasn't been controlled. That leaves everything very vague indeed. How widely spread is it? Geographically, I mean."

"Paras have appeared," said the Minister for Health, "at every place on Tallien Three where there are men."

"It's epidemic, then," said Calhoun professionally. "You might call it pandemic. How many cases?"

"We guess at thirty per cent of the population—so far," said the Minister for Health, hopelessly. "But every day the total goes up." He added: "Dr. Lett has some hope for a vaccine, but it will be too late for most."

Calhoun frowned. With reasonably modern medical techniques, almost any sort of infection should be stopped long before there were as many cases as that!

"When did it start? How long has it been running?"

"The first paras were examined six months ago," said the Health Minister. "It was thought to be a disease. Our best physicians examined them. They couldn't agree on a cause, they couldn't find a germ or a virus...."

"Symptoms?" asked Calhoun crisply.

"Dr. Lett phrased them in medical terms," said the Minister for Health. "The condition begins with a period of great irritability or depression. The depression is so great that suicide is not infrequent. If that doesn't happen, there's a period of suspiciousness and secretiveness—strongly suggestive of paranoia. Then there's a craving for—unusual food. When it becomes uncontrollable, the patient is mad!"

The ground cars sped toward the city. A second group of vehicles appeared, waiting. As the four-car caravan swept up to them, one swung in front of the car in which Calhoun and Murgatroyd rode. The others fell into line to the rear. It began to look like a respectable fighting force.

"And after madness?" Calhoun asked.

"Then they're paras!" said the Health Minister. "They crave the incredible. They feed on the abominable. And they hate us normals as—devils out of hell would hate us!"

"And after that again?" said Calhoun. "I mean, what's the prognosis? Do they die or recover? If they recover, in how long? If they die, how soon?"

"They're paras!" said the Health Minister querulously. "I'm no physician! I'm an administrator! But I don't think any recover. Certainly none die of it! They stay—what they've become."

"My experience," said Calhoun, "has been mostly with diseases that one either recovers from or dies of. A disease whose victims organize to steal weather rockets and to use them to destroy a ship—only they failed—and who carry on with an assassination attempt ... that doesn't sound like a disease! A disease has no purpose of its own. They had a purpose—as if they obeyed one of their number."

The Minister for Health said uneasily:

"It's been suggested—that something out of the jungle causes what's happened. On other planets there are creatures who drink blood without waking their victims. There are reptiles who sting men. There are even insects which sting men and inject diseases. Something like that seems to have come out of the jungle. While men sleep—something happens to them! They turn into paras. Something native to this world must be responsible. The planet did not welcome us. There's not a native plant or beast that is useful to us! We have to culture soil-bacteria so Earth-type plants can grow here! We don't begin to know all the creatures of the jungle! If something comes out and makes men paras without their knowledge——"

Calhoun said mildly:

"It would seem that such things could be discovered."

The Health Minister said bitterly:

"Not this thing! It is intelligent! It hides! It acts as if on a plan to destroy us! Why ... there was a young doctor who said he'd cured a para! But we found him and the former para dead when we went to check his claim! Things from the jungle had killed them! They think! They know! They understand! They're rational, and like devils——"



A third group of ground cars appeared ahead, waiting. Like the others, they were filled with men holding blast rifles. They joined the procession—the rushing, never-pausing group of cars from the spaceport. The highway had obviously been patrolled against a possible ambush or road block. The augmented combat group went on.

"As a medical man," said Calhoun carefully, "I question the existence of a local, nonhuman rational creature. Creatures develop or adapt to fit their environment. They change or develop to fit into some niche, some special place in the ecological system which is their environment. If there is no niche and no room for a specific creature in an environment, there is no such creature there! And there cannot be a place in any environment for a creature which will change it. It would be a contradiction in terms! We rational humans change the worlds we occupy! Any rational creature will! So a rational animal is as nearly impossible as any creature can be. It's true that we've happened, but—another rational race? Oh, no!"

Murgatroyd said:

"*Chee!*"

The city's towers loomed higher and taller above the horizon. Then, abruptly, the fast-moving cavalcade came to the edge of the city and plunged into it.

It was not a normal city. The buildings were not eccentric. All planets, but very new ones, show local architectural peculiarities, so it was not odd to see all windows topped by triple arches, or quite useless pilasters in the brick walls of apartment buildings. These would have made the city seem only individual. But

it was not normal. The streets were not clean. Two windows in three had been smashed. In places Calhoun saw doors that had been broken in and splintered, and never repaired. That implied violence unrestrained. The streets were almost empty. Occasional figures might be seen on the sidewalks before the speeding ground cars, but the vehicles never passed them. Pedestrians turned corners or dodged into doorways before the cavalcade could overtake them.

The buildings grew taller. The street level remained empty of humans, but now and again, many stories up, heads peered out of windows. Then high-pitched yellings came from aloft. It was not possible to tell whether they were yells of defiance or derision or despair, but they were directed at the racing cars.

Calhoun looked quickly at the faces of the men around him. The Minister for Health looked at once heartbroken and embittered. The head of the planetary police stared grimly ahead. Screechings and howlings echoed and re-echoed between the building walls. Objects began to fall from the windows: bottles, pots and pans. Chairs and stools twirled and spun, hurtling downward. Everything that was loose and could be thrown from a window came down, flung by the occupants of those high dwellings. With them came outcries which were assuredly cursings.

It occurred to Calhoun that there had been a period in history when mob-action invariably meant flames. Men burned what they hated and what they feared. They also burned religious offerings to divers bloodthirsty deities. It was fortunate, he reflected wryly, that fires were no longer a matter of common experience, or burning oil and flaming missiles would have been flung down on the ground cars.

"Is this unpopularity yours?" he asked. "Or do I have a share in it? Am I unwelcome to some parts of the population?"

"You're unwelcome to paras," said the police head coldly. "Paras don't want you here. Whatever drives them is afraid the Med Service might make them no longer paras. And they want to stay the way they are." His lips twisted. "They aren't making this uproar, though. We gathered everybody we were sure wasn't ... infected into Government Center. These people were left out. We weren't sure about them. So they consider we've left them to become paras and they don't like it!"

Calhoun frowned again. This confused everything. There was talk of infection, and talk of unseen creatures come out of the jungle, making men paras and then

controlling them as if by demoniac possession. There were few human vagaries, though, that were not recorded in the Med Service files. Calhoun remembered something, and wanted to be sick. It was like an infection, and like possession by devils, too. There would be creatures not much removed from fields involved, anyhow.

"I think," he said, "that I need to talk to your counter-para researchers. You have men working on the problem?"

"We did," said the police head, grimly. "But most of them turned para. We thought they'd be more dangerous than other paras, so we shot them. But it did no good. Paras still turn up, in Government Center, too! Now we only send paras out the south gate. They doubtless make out—as paras."



For a time there was silence in the rushing cars, though a bedlam of howls and curses came from aloft. Then a sudden shrieking of foreseen triumph came from overhead. A huge piece of furniture, a couch, seemed certain to crash into the car in which Calhoun rode. But it swerved sharply, ran up on the sidewalk, and the couch dashed itself to splinters where the car should have been. The car went down to the pavement once more and rushed on.

The street ended. A high barrier of masonry rose up at a cross street. It closed the highway and connected the walls of apartment buildings on either hand. There was a gate in it, and the leading car drew off to one side and the car carrying Calhoun and Murgatroyd ran through, and there was a second barrier ahead, but this was closed. The other cars filed in after it, Calhoun saw that windows in these apartment buildings had been bricked up. They made a many-storied wall shutting off all that was beyond them.

Men from the barrier went from car to car of the escort, checking men who had been the escort for Calhoun. The Minister for Health said jerkily:

"Everybody in Government Center is examined at least once each day to see if they're turning para or not. Those showing symptoms are turned out the south gate. Everybody, myself included, has to have a fresh certificate every twenty-four hours."

The inner gate swung wide. The car carrying Calhoun went through. The

buildings about them ended. They were in a huge open space that must once have been a park in the center of the city. There were structures which could not possibly be other than government buildings. But the population of this world was small. They were not grandiose. There were walkways and some temporary buildings obviously thrown hastily together to house a sudden influx of people.

And here there were many people. There was bright sunshine, and children played and women watched them. There were some—not many—men in sight, but most of them were elderly. All the young ones were uniformed and hastily going here or there. And though the children played gaily, there were few smiles to be seen on adult faces.

"I take it," said Calhoun, "that this is Government Center, where you collected everybody in the city you were sure was normal. But they don't all stay normal. And you consider that it isn't exactly an infection but the result of something that's done to them by—Something."

"Many of our doctors thought so," said the Minister for Health. "But they've turned para. Maybe the ... Things got at them because they were close to the truth."

His head sank forward on his chest. The police head said briefly:

"When you want to go back to your ship, say so and we'll take you. If you can't do anything for us, you'll warn other planets not to send ships here."

The ground car braked before one of those square, unornamented buildings which are laboratories everywhere in the galaxy. The Minister for Health got out. Calhoun followed him, Murgatroyd riding on his shoulder. The ground car went away and Calhoun followed into the building.



There was a sentry by the door, and an officer of the police. He examined the Minister's one-day certificate of health. After various vision-phone calls, he passed Calhoun and Murgatroyd. They went a short distance and another sentry stopped them. A little farther, and another sentry.

"Tight security," said Calhoun.

"They know me," said the Minister heavily, "but they are checking my certificate

that as of morning I wasn't a para."

"I've seen quarantines before," said Calhoun, "but never one like this! Not against disease!"

"It isn't against disease," said the Minister, thinly. "It's against Something intelligent ... from the jungle ... who chooses victims by reason for its own purposes."

Calhoun said very carefully:

"I won't deny more than the jungle."

Here the Minister for Health rapped on a door and ushered Calhoun through it. They entered a huge room filled with the complex of desks, cameras, and observing and recording instruments that the study of a living organism requires. The setup for study of dead things is quite different. Here, halfway down the room's length, there was a massive sheet of glass that divided the apartment into two. On the far side of the glass there was, obviously, an aseptic environment room now being used as an isolation chamber.

A man paced up and down beyond the glass. Calhoun knew he must be a para because he was cut off in idea and in fact from normal humanity. The air supplied to him could be heated almost white-hot and then chilled before being introduced into the aseptic chamber for him to breath, if such a thing was desired. Or the air removed could be made incandescent so no possible germ or its spores could get out. Wastes removed would be destroyed by passage through a carbon arc after innumerable previous sterilizing processes. In such rooms, centuries before, plants had been grown from antiseptic-soaked seeds and chicks hatched from germ-free eggs, and even small animals delivered by aseptic Caesarean section to live in an environment in which there was no living microorganism. From rooms like this men had first learned that some types of bacteria outside the human body were essential to human health. But this man was not a volunteer for such research.

He paced up and down, his hands clenching and unclenching. When Calhoun and the Minister for Health entered the outer room, he glared at them. He cursed them, though inaudibly because of the sheet of glass. He hated them hideously because they were not as he was; because they were not imprisoned behind thick glass walls through which his every action and almost his every thought could be watched. But there was more to his hatred than that. In the midst of fury so great

that his face seemed almost purple, he suddenly yawned uncontrollably.

Calhoun blinked and stared. The man behind the glass wall yawned again and again. He was helpless to stop it. If such a thing could be, he was in a paroxysm of yawning, though his eyes glared and he beat his fists together. The muscles controlling the act of yawning worked independently of the rage that should have made yawning impossible. And he was ashamed, and he was infuriated, and he yawned more violently than seemed possible.

"A man's been known to dislocate his jaw, yawning like that," said Calhoun detachedly.

A bland voice spoke behind him.

"But if this man's jaw is dislocated, no one can help him. He is a para. We cannot join him."



Calhoun turned. He found himself regarded with unctuous condescension by a man wearing glittering thick eyeglasses—and a man's eyes have to be very bad if he can't wear contacts—and a uniform with a caduceus at his collar. He was plump. He was beaming. He was the only man Calhoun had so far seen on this planet whose expression was neither despair nor baffled hate and fury.

"You are Med Service," the beaming man observed zestfully. "Of the Interstellar Medical Service, to which all problems of public health may be referred! But here we have a real problem for you! A contagious madness! A transmissible delusion! An epidemic of insanity! A plague of the unspeakable!"

The Minister for Health said uneasily:

"This is Dr. Lett. He was the greatest of our physicians. Now he is nearly the last."

"Agreed," said the bland man, as zestfully as before. "But now the Interstellar Medical Service sends someone before whom I should bow! Someone whose knowledge and experience and training is so infinitely greater than mine that I become abashed! I am timid! I am hesitant to offer an opinion before a Med Service man!"

It was not unprecedented for an eminent doctor to resent the implied existence of greater skill or knowledge than his own. But this man was not only resentful. He was derisive.

"I came here," said Calhoun politely, "on what I expected to be a strictly routine visit. But I'm told there's a very grave public health situation here. I'd like to offer any help I can give."

"Grave!" Dr. Lett laughed scornfully. "It is hopeless for poor planetary doctors like myself! But not, of course, for a Med Ship man!"

Calhoun shook his head. This man would not be easy to deal with. Tact was called for. But the situation was appalling.

"I have a question," said Calhoun ruefully. "I'm told that paras are madmen, and there's been mention of suspicion and secretiveness which suggests schizo-paranoia and—so I have guessed—the term para for those affected in this way."

"It is not any form of paranoia," said the planetary doctor, contemptuously. "Paranoia involves suspicion of everyone. Paras despise and suspect only normals. Paranoia involves a sensation of grandeur, not to be shared. Paras are friends and companions to each other. They co-operate delightedly in attempting to make normals like themselves. A paranoiac would not want anyone to share his greatness!"

Calhoun considered, and then agreed.

"Since you've said it, I see that it must be so. But my question remains. Madness involves delusions. But paras organize themselves. They make plans and take different parts in them. They act rationally for purposes they agree on—such as assassinating me. But how can they act rationally if they have delusions? What sort of delusions do they have?"

The Minister for Health said thinly:

"Only what horrors out of the jungles might suggest! I ... I cannot listen, Dr. Lett. I cannot watch, if you intend to demonstrate!"

The man with thick glasses waved an arm. The Minister for Health went hastily out. Dr. Lett made a mirthless sound.

"He would not make a medical man! Here is a para in this aseptic room. He is an

unusually good specimen for study. He was my assistant and I knew him when he was sane. Now I know him as a para. I will show you his delusion."

He went to a small culture oven and opened the door. He busied himself with something inside. Over his shoulder he said with unctious:

"The first settlers here had much trouble establishing a human-use ecology on this world. The native plants and animals were useless. They had to be replaced with things compatible with humans. Then there was more trouble. There were no useful scavengers—and scavengers are essential! The rat is usually dependable, but rats do not thrive on Tallien. Vultures—no. Of course not. Carrion beetles ... Scarabeus beetles ... The flies that produce maggots to do such good work in refuse disposal.... None thrive on Tallien Three! And scavengers are usually specialists, too. But the colony could not continue without scavengers! So our ancestors searched on other worlds, and presently they found a creature which would multiply enormously and with a fine versatility upon the wastes of our human cities. True, it smelled like an ancient Earth-animal called skunk—butyl mercaptan. It was not pretty—to most eyes it is revolting. But it was a scavenger and there was no waste product it would not devour."

Dr. Lett turned from the culture oven. He had a plastic container in his hand. A faint, disgusting odor spread from it.

"You ask what the delusions of para may be?" he grinned derisively. He held out the container. "It is the delusion that this scavenger, this eater of unclean things, this unspeakable bit of slimy, squirming flesh—paras have the delusion that it is the most delectable of foodstuffs!"

He thrust the plastic container under Calhoun's nose. Calhoun did not draw in his breath while it remained there. Dr. Lett said in mocking admiration:

"Ah! You have the strong stomach a medical man should have! The delusion of the para is that these squirming, writhing objects are delightful! Paras develop an irresistible craving for them! It is as if men on an Earth-like world develop an uncontrollable hunger for vultures and rats and—even less tolerable things. These scavengers—paras eat them! So normal men would rather die than become paras!"

Calhoun gagged in purely instinctive revulsion. The things in the plastic container were gray and small. Had they been still, they might have been no worse to look at than raw oysters in a cocktail. But they squirmed. They writhed.

"I will show you," said Dr. Lett amiably.

He turned to the glass plate which divided the room into halves. The man behind the thick glass now pressed eagerly against it. He looked at the container with a horrible, lustful desire. The thick-eyeglassed man clucked at him, as if at a caged animal one wishes to soothe. The man beyond the glass yawned hysterically. He seemed to whimper. He could not take his eyes from the container in the doctor's hands.

"So!" said Dr. Lett.

He pressed a button. A lock-door opened. He put the container inside it. The door closed. It could be sterilized before the door on the other side would open, but now it was arranged to sterilize itself to prevent contagion from coming out.

The man behind the glass uttered inaudible cries. He was filled with beastly, uncontrollable impatience. He cried out at the mechanism of the contagion-lock as a beast might bellow at the opening through which food was dropped into its cage.

That lock opened, inside the glass-walled room. The plastic container appeared. The man leaped upon it. He gobbled its contents, and Calhoun was nauseated. But as the para gobbled, he glared at the two who—with Murgatroyd—watched him. He hated them with a ferocity which made veins stand out upon his temples and fury empurple his skin.

Calhoun felt that he'd gone white. He turned his eyes away and said squeamishly:

"I have never seen such a thing before."

"It is new, eh?" Said Dr. Lett in a strange sort of pride. "It is new! I ... even I!... have discovered something that the Med Service does not know!"

"I wouldn't say the Service doesn't know about similar things," said Calhoun slowly. "There are ... sometimes ... on a very small scale ... dozens or perhaps hundreds of victims ... there are sometimes similar irrational appetites. But on a

planetary scale ... no. There has never been a ... an epidemic of this size."

He still looked sick and stricken. But he asked:

"What's the result of this ... appetite? What does it do to a para? What change in ... say ... his health takes place in a man after he becomes a para?"

"There is no change," said Dr. Lett blandly. "They are not sick and they do not die because they are paras. The condition itself is no more abnormal than ... than diabetes! Diabetics require insulin. Paras ... something else. But there is prejudice against what paras need! It is as if some men would rather die than use insulin and those who did use it became outcasts! I do not say what causes this condition. I do not object if the Minister for Health believes that jungle creatures creep out and ... make paras out of men." He watched Calhoun's expression. "Does your Med Service information agree with me?"

"No-o-o," said Calhoun. "I'm afraid it inclines to the idea of a monstrous cause, but it really isn't much like diabetes."

"But it is!" insisted Lett. "Everything digestible, no matter how unappetizing to a modern man, has been a part of the regular diet of some tribe of human savages! Even prehistoric Romans ate dormice cooked in honey! Why should the fact that a needed substance happens to be found in a scavenger...."

"The Romans didn't crave dormice," said Calhoun. "They could eat them or leave them alone."

The man behind the thick glass glared at the two in the outer room. He hated them intolerably. He cried out at them. Blood vessels in his temples throbbed with his hatred. He cursed them.



"I point out one thing more," said Dr. Lett. "I would like to have the co-operation of the Interstellar Medical Service. I am a citizen of this planet and not without influence. But I would like to have my work approved by the Med Service. I submit that in some areas on ancient Earth, iodine was put into the public water-supply systems to prevent goiters and cretinism. Fluorine was put into drinking water to prevent caries. On Tralee the public water supply has traces of zinc and cobalt added. These are necessary trace elements. Why should you not concede

that here there are trace elements or trace compounds needed——"

"You want me to report that," said Calhoun, flatly. "I couldn't do it without explaining—a number of things. Paras are madmen, but they organize. A symptom of privation is violent yawning. This ... condition appeared only six months ago. This planet has been colonized for three hundred years. It could not be a naturally needed trace compound."

Dr. Lett shrugged, eloquently and contemptuously.

"Then you will not report what all this planet will certify," he said curtly. "My vaccine——"

"You would not call it a vaccine if you thought it supplied a deficiency—a special need of the people of Tallien. Could you give me a small quantity of your ... vaccine?"

"No," said Dr. Lett blandly. "I am afraid you are not willing to be co-operative. The little of my vaccine that is available is needed for high officials, who must be protected from the para condition at all costs. I am prepared to make it on a large scale, though, for the whole population. I will see, then, that you have as much of it as you need."

Calhoun seemed to reflect.

"No," he admitted, "I'm not ready to co-operate with you, Dr. Lett. I have a very uncomfortable suspicion. I suspect that you carry a small quantity of your vaccine with you all the time. That you cannot bear the idea of being without it if you should need it. I say that because it is a symptom of other ... similar conditions. Of other ... abnormal appetites."

Dr. Lett had been bland and grinning in mockery. But the amusement left his face abruptly.

"Now ... what do you mean by that?" he demanded.

Calhoun nodded his head toward the para behind the glass wall.

"That poor devil nearly yawned his head off before you gave him his diet of scavengers, Dr. Lett. Do you ever yawn like that ... so you make sure you've always your vaccine with you to stop it? Aren't you a para, Dr. Lett? In fact, aren't you the ... monstrous cause of ... paras?"

Murgatroyd cried "*Chee! Chee! Chee!*" in great agitation, because Dr. Lett had snatched up a dissecting scalpel and crouched to leap upon Calhoun. But Calhoun said:

"Easy, Murgatroyd! He won't do anything regrettable!"

He had a blaster in his hand, bearing directly upon the greatest and most skillful physician on Tallien Three. And Dr. Lett did not do anything regrettable. But his eyes burned with the fury of a madman.

III

Five minutes later, or possibly ten, Calhoun went out to where the Minister for Health paced miserably up and down the corridor outside the laboratory. The Minister looked white and sick, as if despite himself he'd been picturing the demonstration Lett would have given Calhoun. He did not meet Calhoun's eyes. He said uneasily:

"I'll take you to the Planetary President, now."

"No," said Calhoun. "I got some very promising information from Dr. Lett. I want to go back to my ship first."

"But the President is waiting to see you!" protested the Minister for Health. "There's something he wants to discuss!"

"I want," Calhoun observed, "to have something to discuss with him. There is intelligence back of this para business. I'd almost call it demoniac intelligence. I want to get back to my ship and check on what I got from Dr. Lett."

The Minister for Health hesitated, and then said urgently:

"But the President is extremely anxious——"

"Will you," asked Calhoun politely, "arrange for me to be taken back to my ship?"

The Minister for Health opened his mouth and closed it. Then he said apologetically—and it seemed to Calhoun—fearfully:

"Dr. Lett has been our only hope of conquering this ... this epidemic. The President and the Cabinet felt that they had to ... give him full authority. There was no other hope! We didn't know you'd come. So ... Dr. Lett wished you to see the President when you left him. It won't take long!"

Calhoun said grimly:

"And he already has you scared! I begin to suspect I haven't even time to argue with you!"

"I'll get you a car and driver as soon as you've seen the President. It's only a little thing——"

Calhoun growled and moved toward the exit from the laboratory. Past the sentries. Out to the open air. Here was the wide clear space which once had been a park for the city and the site of the government building of Tallien Three. A little distance away, children played gaily. But there were women who watched them with deep anxiety. This particular space contained all the people considered certainly free of the para syndrome. Tall building surrounded the area which once had been tranquil and open to all the citizens of the planet. But now those buildings were converted into walls to shut out all but the chosen—and the chosen were no better off for having been someone's choice.

"The capital building's over yonder," said the Minister, at once urgently and affrightedly and persuasively. "It's only a very short walk! Just yonder!"

"I still," said Calhoun, "don't want to go there." He showed the Minister for Health the blaster he'd aimed at Dr. Lett only minutes ago. "This is a blaster," he said gently. "It's adjusted for low power so that it doesn't necessarily burn or kill. It's the adjustment used by police in case of riot. With luck, it only stuns. I used it on Dr. Lett," he added unemotionally. "He's a para. Did you know? The vaccine he's been giving to certain high officials to protect them against becoming para—it satisfies the monstrous appetite of para without requiring them to eat scavengers. But it also produces that appetite. In fact, it's one of the ways by which paras are made."

The Minister for Health stared at Calhoun. His face went literally gray. He tried to speak, and could not.

Calhoun added again, as unemotionally as before:

"I left Dr. Lett unconscious in his laboratory, knocked out by a low-power blaster bolt. He knows he's a para. The President is a para, but with a supply of 'vaccine' he can deny it to himself. By the look on your face you've just found out you can't deny it to yourself any longer. You're a para, too."

The Minister for Health made an inarticulate sound. He literally wrung his hands.

"So," said Calhoun, "I want to get back to my ship and see what I can do with the 'vaccine' I took from Dr. Lett. Do you help me, or don't you?"

The Minister for Health seemed to have shriveled inside his garments. He wrung his hands again. Then a ground car braked to a stop five yards away. Two uniformed men jumped out. The first of them jerked at his blaster in its holster on his hip.

"That's the *tormal*!" he snapped. "This's the man, all right!"

Calhoun pulled the trigger of his blaster three times. It whined instead of rasping, because of its low-power setting. The Minister for Health collapsed. Before he touched ground the nearer of the two uniformed men seemed to stumble with his blaster halfway drawn. The third man toppled.

"Murgatroyd!" said Calhoun sharply.

"*Chee!*" shrilled Murgatroyd. He leaped into the ground car beside Calhoun.



The motor squealed because of the violence with which Calhoun applied the power. It went shrilly away with three limp figures left behind upon the ground. But there wouldn't be instant investigation. The atmosphere in Government Center was not exactly normal. People looked apprehensively at them. But Calhoun was out of sight before the first of them stirred.

"It's the devil," said Calhoun as he swung to the right at a roadway curve, "to have scruples! If I'd killed Lett in cold blood, I'd have been the only hope these people could have! Maybe they'd have let me help them!"

He made another turn. There were buildings here and there, and he was hardly out of sight of where he'd dropped three men. But it was astonishing that action had been taken so quickly after Lett regained consciousness. Calhoun had certainly left him not more than a quarter of an hour before. The low-power blaster must have kept him stunned for minutes. But immediately he'd recovered he'd issued orders for the capture or the killing of a man with a small animal with him, a *tormal*. And the order would have been carried out if Calhoun hadn't happen to have his own blaster actually in his hand.

But the appalling thing was the over-all situation as now revealed. The people of Government Center were turning para and Dr. Lett had all the authority of the government behind him. He was the government for the duration of the

emergency. But he'd stay the government because all the men in high office were paras who could conceal their condition only so long as Dr. Lett permitted it. Calhoun could picture the social organization to be expected. There'd be the tyrant; the absolute monarch at its head. Absolutely submissive citizens would receive their dosage of vaccine to keep them "normals" so long as it pleased their masters. Anyone who defied him or even tried to flee would become something both mad and repulsive, because subject to monstrous and irresistible appetite. And the tyrant could prevent even their satisfaction! So the citizens of Tallien Three were faced with an ultimate choice of slavery, or madness, for themselves and their families.

Calhoun swerved behind a government building and out of the parking area beyond. Obviously, he couldn't leave Government Center by the way he'd entered it. If Lett hadn't ordered him stopped, he'd be ordering it now. And Murgatroyd was an absolute identification.

Again he turned a corner, thrusting Murgatroyd down out of sight. He turned again, and again.... Then he began concentratedly to remember where the sunset-line had been upon the planet when he was waiting to be landed by the grid. He could guess at an hour and a half, perhaps two, since he touched ground. On the combined data, he made a guess at the local time. It would be mid-afternoon. So shadows would lie to the northeast of the objects casting them. Then—

He did not remain on any straight roadway for more than seconds. But now when he had a choice of turnings, he had a reason for each choice. He twisted and dodged about—once he almost ran into children playing a ritual game—but the sum total of his movements was steadily southward. Paras were turned out of the south gate. That gate, alone, would be the one where someone could go out with a chance of being unchallenged.



He found the gate. The usual tall buildings bordered it to left and right. The actual exit was bare concrete walls slanting together to an exit to the outer world; no more than a house-door wide. Well back from the gate, there were four high-side trucks with armed police in the truck-bodies. They were there to make sure that paras turned out, or who went out of their own accord when they knew their state, would not come back.

He stopped the ground car and tucked Murgatroyd under his coat. He walked grimly toward the narrow exit. It was the most desperate of gambles, but it was the only one he could make. He could be killed, of course, if anybody suspected him of attempting exit at any gate.

He got out, unchallenged. The concrete walls rose higher and higher as he walked away from the trucks and the police who would surely have blasted him had they guessed. The way he could walk became narrowed. It became a roofed-over passageway, with a turn in it so it could not be looked through end to end. Then—he reached open air once more.

Nothing could be less dramatic than his actual escape. He simply walked out. Nothing could be less remarkable than his arrival in the city outside of Government Center. He found himself in a city street, rather narrow, with buildings as usual all about him, whose windows were either bricked shut, or smashed. There were benches against the base of one of those buildings, and four or five men, quite unarmed, lounged upon them. When Calhoun appeared one of them looked up and then arose. A second man turned to busy himself with something behind him. They were not grim. They showed no sign of being mad. But Calhoun had already realized that the appetite which was madness came only occasionally, only at intervals which could probably be known in advance. Between one monstrous hunger-spell and another, a para might look and act and actually be as sane as anybody else. Certainly Dr. Lett and the President and the Cabinet members who were paras acted convincingly as if they were not.

One of the men on the benches beckoned.

"This way," he said casually.

Murgatroyd poked his head out of Calhoun's jacket. He regarded these roughly dressed men with suspicion.

"What's that?" asked one of the five.

"A pet," said Calhoun briefly.

The statement went unchallenged. A man got up, lifting a small tank with a hose. There was a hissing sound. The spray made a fine, foglike mist. Calhoun smelled a conventional organic solvent, well-known enough.

"This's antiseptic," said the man with the spray. "In case you got some disease inside there."

The statement was plainly standard, and once it had been exquisite irony. But it had been repeated until it had no meaning any more, except to Calhoun. His clothing glittered momentarily where the spray stood on its fibres. Then it dried. There was the faintest possible residue, like a coating of impalpable dust. Calhoun guessed its significance and the knowledge was intolerable. But he said between clenched fists.

"Where do I go now?"

"Anywheres," said the first man. "Nobody'll bother you. Some normals try to keep you from getting near'em, but you can do as you please." He added disinterestedly. "To them, too. No police out here!"

He went back to the bench and sat down. Calhoun moved on.



His inward sensations were unbearable, but he had to continue. It was not likely that instructions would have reached the para organization yet. There was one. There must be one. But eventually he would be hunted for even on the unlikely supposition that he'd gotten out of Government Center. Not yet, but presently.

He went down the street. He came to a corner and turned it. There were again a few moving figures in sight. There might be one pedestrian in a city block. This was how they'd looked in the other part of the city, seen from a ground car. On foot, they looked the same. Windows, too, were broken. Doors smashed in. Trash on the streets....

None of the humans in view paid any attention to him at all, but he kept Murgatroyd out of sight regardless. Walking men who came toward him never quite arrived. They turned off on other streets or into doorways. Those who moved in the same direction never happened to be overtaken. They also turned corners or slipped into doors. They would be, Calhoun realized dispassionately, people who still considered themselves normals, out upon desperate errands for food and trying hopelessly not to take contagion back to those they got food for. And Calhoun was shaken with a horrible rage that such things could happen. He, himself, had been sprayed with something.... And Dr. Lett had held out a plastic container for him to smell.... He'd held his breath then, but he could not keep from breathing now. He had a certain period of time, and that period only, before

—

He forced his thoughts back to the Med Ship when it was twenty miles high, and ten, and five. He'd watched the ground through the electron telescope and he had a mental picture of the city from the sky. It was as clear to him as a map. He could orient himself. He could tell where he was.

A ground car came to a stop some distance ahead. A man got out, his arms full of bundles which would be food. Calhoun broke into a run. The man tried to get inside the doorway before Calhoun could arrive. But he would not leave any of the food.

Calhoun showed his blaster.

"I'm a para," he said quietly, "and I want this car. Give me the keys and you can keep the food."

The man groaned. Then he dropped the keys on the ground. He fled into the house.

"Thanks," said Calhoun politely to the emptiness.

He took his place in the car. He thrust Murgatroyd again out of sight.

"It's not," he told the *tormal* with a sort of despairing humor, "that I'm ashamed of you, Murgatroyd, but I'm afraid I may become ashamed of myself. Keep low!"

He started the car and drove away.

He passed through a business district, with many smashed windows. He passed through canyons formed by office buildings. He crossed a manufacturing area, in which there were many ungainly factories but no sign of any work going on. In any epidemic many men stay home from work to avoid contagion. On Tallien Three nobody would be willing to risk employment, for fear of losing much more than his life.

There there was a wide straight highway leading away from the city but not toward the spaceport. Calhoun drove his stolen car along it. He saw the strange steel embroidery of the landing grid rising to the height of a minor mountain against the sky. He drove furiously. Beyond it. He had seen the highway system from twenty miles height, and ten, and five. From somewhere near here stolen weather rockets had gone billowing skyward with explosive war heads to shatter *Esclipus Twenty*.

They'd failed. Now Calhoun went past the place from which they had been launched, and did not notice. Once he could look across flat fields and see the spaceport highway. It was empty. Then there was sunset. He saw the topmost silvery beams and girders of the landing grid still glowing in sunshine which no longer reached down to the planet's solid ground.

He drove. And drove. Government Center might put a road block to the spaceport, just in case. But they'd really believe him still hiding somewhere in Government Center with no hope of—actually—accomplishing anything but his own destruction.



After sunset he was miles beyond the spaceport. When twilight was done, he'd crossed to another surface road and was headed back toward the city. But this time he would pass close to the spaceport. And two hours after sundown he turned the car's running-lights off and drove a dark and nearly noiseless vehicle through deep-fallen night. Even so, he left the ground car a mile from the tall and looming lacework of steel. He listened with straining ears for a long time.

Presently he and Murgatroyd approached the spaceport, on foot, from a rather improbable direction. The gigantic, unsubstantiated tower rose incredibly far toward the sky. As he drew near it he crouched lower and lower so he was almost crawling to keep from being silhouetted against the stars. He saw lights in the windows of the grid's control building. As he looked, a lighted window darkened from someone moving past it inside. There was an enormous stillness, broken only by faint, faint noises of the wind in the metal skeleton.

He saw no ground cars to indicate men brought here and waiting for him. He went very cautiously forward. Once he stopped and distastefully restored his blaster to lethal-charge intensity. If he had to use it, he couldn't hope to shoot accurately enough to stun an antagonist. He'd have to fight for his life—or rather, for the chance to live as a normal man, and to restore that possibility to the people in the ghastly-quiet city at the horizon and the other lesser cities elsewhere on this world.

He took infinite precautions. He saw the Med Ship standing valiantly upright on its landing fins. It was a relief to see it. The grid operator could have been ordered to lift it out to space—thrown away to nowhere, or put in orbit until it

was wanted again, or....

That was still a possibility. Calhoun's expression turned wry. He'd have to do something about the grid. He must be able to take off on the ship's emergency rockets without the risk of being caught by the tremendously powerful force fields by which ships were launched and landed.

He crept close to the control building. No voices, but there was movement inside. Presently he peered in a window.

The grid operator who'd been the first man to greet him on his landing, now moved about the interior of the building. He pushed a tank on wheels. With a hose attached to it, he sprayed. Mist poured out and splashed away from the side walls. It hung in the air and settled on the desks, the chairs, and on the control board with its dials and switches. Calhoun had seen the mist before. It had been used to spray instead of burning the bodies of the two men who'd tried to murder him, and their wrecked ground car, and everywhere that the car was known to have run. It was a decontaminant spray; credited with the ability to destroy the contagion that made paras out of men.

Calhoun saw the grid operator's face. It was resolute beyond expression, but it was very, very bitter.

Calhoun went confidently to the door and knocked on it. A savage voice inside said:

"Go away! I just found out I'm a para!"

Calhoun opened the door and walked inside. Murgatroyd followed. He sneezed as the mist reached his nostrils.

"I've been treated," said Calhoun, "so I'll be a para right along with you, after whatever the development period is. Question: Can you fix the controls so nobody else can use the grid?"

The grid operator stared at him numbly. He was deathly pale. He did not seem able to grasp what Calhoun had said.

"I've got to do some work on the para condition," Calhoun told him. "I need to be undisturbed in the ship, and I need a patient further along toward being a para

than I am. It'll save time. If you'll help, we may be able to beat the thing. If not, I've still got to disable the grid."

The grid operator said in a savage, unhuman voice:

"I'm a para. I'm trying to spray everything I've touched. Then I'm going to go off somewhere and kill myself—"

Calhoun drew his blaster. He adjusted it again to non-lethal intensity.

"Good man!" he said approvingly. "I'll have a similar job to do if I'm not a better medical man than Lett! Will you help me?"

Murgatroyd sneezed again. He said plaintively:

"*Chee!*"

The grid's operator looked down at him, obviously in a state of shock. No ordinary sight or sound could have gotten through to his consciousness. But Murgatroyd was a small, furry animal with long whiskers and a hirsute tail and a habit of imitating the actions of humans. He sneezed yet again and looked up. There was a handkerchief in Calhoun's pocket. Murgatroyd dragged it out and held it to his face. He sneezed once more and said, "*Chee!*" and returned the handkerchief to its place. He regarded the grid operator disapprovingly. The operator was shocked out of his despair. He said shakenly:

"What the devil—" Then he stared at Calhoun. "Help you? How can I help anybody? I'm a para!"

"Which," said Calhoun, "is just what I need. I'm Med Service, man! I've got a job to do with what they call an epidemic! I need a para who's willing to be cured! That's you! Let's get this grid fixed so it can't work and—"

There was a succession of loud clicks from a speaker unit on the wall. It was an emergency-wave, unlocking the speaker from its Off position. Then a voice:

"All citizens attention! The Planetary President is about to give you good news about the end of the para epidemic!"

A pause. Then a grave and trembling voice came out of the speakers:

"My fellow-citizens, I have the happiness to report that a vaccine completely protecting normals against the para condition, and curing those already paras,

has been developed. Dr. Lett, of the planetary health service, has produced the vaccine which is already in small-scale production and will shortly be available in large quantities, enough for everyone! The epidemic which has threatened every person on Tallien Three is about to end! And to hasten the time when every person on the planet will have the vaccine in the required dosage and at the required intervals, Dr. Lett has been given complete emergency authority. He is empowered to call upon every citizen for any labor, any sum, any sacrifice that will restore our afflicted fellow-citizens to normality, and to protect the rest against falling a victim to this intolerable disease. I repeat: a vaccine has been found which absolutely prevents anyone from becoming a para, and which cures those who are paras now. And Dr. Lett has absolute authority to issue any orders he feels necessary to hasten the end of the epidemic and to prevent its return. But the end is sure!"

The speaker clicked off. Calhoun said wryly:

"Unfortunately, I know what that means. The President has announced the government's abdication in favor of Dr. Lett, and that the punishment for disobeying Lett is—madness."

He drew a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders.

"Come along! Let's get to work!"

IV

As it happened, the timing was critical, though Calhoun hadn't realized it. There were moving lights on the highway to the city at the moment Calhoun and the grid operator went into the Med Ship and closed the air-lock door behind them. The lights drew nearer. They raced. Then ground cars came rushing through the gate of the spaceport and flung themselves toward the wholly peaceful little Med Ship where it stood seeming to yearn toward the sky. In seconds they had it ringed about, and armed men were trying to get inside. But Med Ships land on very many planets, with very many degrees of respect for the Interstellar Medical Service. On some worlds there is great integrity displayed by spaceport personnel and visitors. On others there is pilfering, or worse. So Med Ships are not easily broken into.

They spent long minutes fumbling unskillfully at the outer air-lock door. Then they gave it up. Two car loads of men went over to the control building, which now was dark and silent. Its door was not locked. They went in.

There was consternation. The interior of the control building reeked of antiseptic spray—the spray used when a para was discovered. In some cases, the spray a para used when he discovered himself. But it was not reassuring to the men just arrived from Government Center. Instead of certifying to their safety, it told of horrifying danger. Because despite a broadcast by the planetary president, terror of paras was too well-established to be cured by an official statement.

The men who'd entered the building stumbled out and stammered of what they'd smelled inside the building. Their companions drew back, frightened by even so indirect a contact with supposed contagion. They stayed outside, while a man who hadn't entered used the police-car communicator to report to the headquarters of the planetary police.

The attempt to enter the ship was known inside, of course. But Calhoun paid no attention. He emptied the pockets of the garments he'd worn into the city. There were the usual trivia a man carries with him. But there was also a blaster—set for lower-power bolts—and a small thick-glass phial of a singular grayish fluid, and a plastic container.

He was changing to other clothing when he heard the muttering report, picked up

by a ship-receiver tuned to planetary police wave length. It reported affrightedly that the Med Ship could not be entered, and the grid's control building was dark and empty and sprayed as if to destroy contagion. The operator was gone.

Another voice snapped orders in reply. The highest authority had given instructions that the Med Ship man now somewhere in the capital city must be captured, and his escape from the planet must be prevented at all costs. So if the ship itself could not be entered and disabled, get the grid working and throw it away. Throw it out to space! Whether there was contagion in the control building or not, the ship must be made unusable to the Med Ship man!

"They think well of me," said Calhoun. "I hope I'm as dangerous as Dr. Lett now believes." Then he said crisply: "You say you're a para. I want the symptoms: how you feel and where. Then I want to know your last contact with scavengers."



The intentions of the police outside could be ignored. It wouldn't matter if the Med Ship were heaved out to space and abandoned. He was in it. But it couldn't happen. The grid operator had brought away certain essential small parts of the grid control system. Of course the ship could be blown up. But he'd have warning of that. He was safe except for one thing. He'd been exposed to whatever it was that made a man a para. The condition would develop. But he did have a thick-glass container of grayish fluid, and he had a plastic biological-specimen container. One came from Dr. Lett's safest pocket. It would be vaccine. The other came from the culture oven in the doctor's laboratory.

The thick-glass phial was simply that. Calhoun removed the cover from the other. It contained small and horrible squirming organisms, writhing in what was probably a nutrient fluid to which they could reduce human refuse. They swarm jerkily in it so that the liquid seemed to seethe. It smelled. Like skunk.

The grid operator clenched his hands.

"Put it away!" he commanded fiercely. "Out of sight! Away!"

Calhoun nodded. He locked it in a small chest. As he put down the cover he said in an indescribable tone:

"It doesn't smell as bad to me as it did."

But his hands were steady as he drew a sample of a few drops from the vaccine bottle. He lowered a wall panel and behind it there was a minute but astonishingly complete biological laboratory. It was designed for microanalysis—the quantitative and qualitative analysis of tiny quantities of matter. He swung out a miniaturized Challis fractionator. He inserted half a droplet of the supposed vaccine and plugged in the fractionator's power cable. It began to hum.

The grid operator ground his teeth.

"This is a fractionator," said Calhoun. "It spins a biological sample through a chromatograph gele."

The small device hummed more shrilly. The sound rose in pitch until it was a whine, and then a whistle, and then went up above the highest pitch to which human ears are sensitive. Murgatroyd scratched at his ears and complained:

"Chee! Chee! Chee!"

"It won't be long," Calhoun assured him. He looked once at the grid operator and then looked away. There was sweat on the man's forehead. Calhoun said casually: "The substance that makes the vaccine do what it does do is in the vaccine, obviously. So the fractionator is separating the different substances that are mixed together." He added, "It doesn't look much like chromatography, but the principle's the same. It's an old, old trick!"

It was, of course. That different dissolved substances can be separated by their different rates of diffusion through wetted powders and geles had been known since the early twentieth century, but was largely forgotten because not often needed. But the Med Service did not abandon processes solely because they were not new.

Calhoun took another droplet of the vaccine and put it between two plates of glass, to spread out. He separated them and put them in a vacuum drier.

"I'm not going to try an analysis," he observed. "It would be silly to try to do anything so complicated if I only need to identify something. Which I hope is all I do need!"

He brought out an extremely small vacuum device. He cleaned the garments he'd just removed, drawing every particle of dust from them. The dust appeared in a

transparent tube which was part of the machine.

"I was sprayed with something I suspect the worst of," he added. "The spray left dust behind. I *think* it made sure that anybody who left Government Center would surely be a para. It's another reason for haste."

The grid operator ground his teeth again. He did not really hear Calhoun. He was deep in a private hell of shame and horror.

The inside of the ship was quiet, but it was not tranquil. Calhoun worked calmly enough, but there were times when his inwards seemed to knot and cramp him, which was not the result of any infection or contagion or demoniac possession, but was reaction to thoughts of the imprisoned para in the laboratory. That man had gobbled the unspeakable because he could not help himself, but he was mad with rage and shame over what he had become. Calhoun could become like that —

The loud-speaker tuned to outside frequencies muttered again. Calhoun turned up its volume.

"Calling Headquarters!" panted a voice. *"There's a mob of paras forming in the streets in the Mooreton quarter! They're raging! They heard the President's speech and they swear they'll kill him! They won't stand for a cure! Everybody's got to turn para! They won't have normals on the planet! Everybody's got to turn para or be killed!"*

The grid operator looked up at the speaker. The ultimate of bitterness appeared on his face. He saw Calhoun's eyes on him and said savagely:

"That's where I belong!"

Murgatroyd headed straight for his cubbyhole and crawled into it.

Calhoun got out a microscope. He examined the dried glass plates from the vacuum drier. The fractionator turned itself off and he focused on and studied the slide it yielded. He inspected a sample of the dust he'd gotten from the garments that had been sprayed at the south gate. The dust contained common dust particles and pollen particles and thread particles and all sorts of microscopic debris. But throughout all the sample he saw certain infinitely tiny crystals. They

were too small to be seen separately by the naked eye, but they had a definite crystalline form. And the kind of crystals a substance makes are not too specific about what the substance is, but they tell a great deal about what it cannot be. In the fractionator slide he could get more information—the rate-of-diffusion of a substance in solution ruled out all but a certain number of compounds that it could be. The two items together gave a definite clue.

Another voice from the speaker:

"Headquarters! Paras are massing by the north gate! They act ugly! They're trying to force their way into Government Center! We'll have to start shooting if we're to stop them! What are our orders?"

The grid operator said dully:

"They'll wreck everything. I don't want to live because I'm a para, but I haven't acted like one yet. Not yet! But they have! So they don't want to be cured! They'd never forget what they've done. They'd be ashamed!"

Calhoun punched keys on a very small computer. He'd gotten an index-of-refraction reading on crystals too small to be seen except through a microscope. That information, plus specific gravity, plus crystalline form, plus rate of diffusion in a fractionator, went to the stores of information in the computer's memory banks somewhere between the ship's living quarters and its outer skin.

A voice boomed from another speaker, tuned to public-broadcast frequency:

"My fellow-citizens, I appeal to you to be calm! I beg you to be patient! Practice the self-control that citizens owe to themselves and their world, I appeal to you...."

Outside in the starlight the Med Ship rested peacefully on the ground. Around and above it the grid rose like geometric fantasy to veil most of the starry sky. Here in the starlight the ground-car communicators gave out the same voice. The same message. The President of Tallien Three made a speech. Earlier, he'd made another. Earlier still he'd taken orders from the man who was already absolute master of the population of this planet.

Police stood uneasy guard about the Med Ship because they could not enter it. Some of their number who had entered the control building now stood shivering outside it, unable to force themselves inside again. There was a vast, detached stillness about the spaceport. It seemed the more unearthly because of the thin

music of wind in the landing grid's upper levels.

At the horizon there was a faint glow. Street lights still burned in the planet's capitol city, but though buildings rose against the sky no lights burned in them. It was not wise for anybody to burn lights that could be seen outside their dwellings. There were police, to be sure. But they were all in Government Center, marshaled there to try to hold a perimeter formed by bricked-up apartment buildings. But most of the city was dark and terribly empty save for mobs of all sizes but all raging. Nine-tenths of the city was at the mercy of the paras. Families darkened their homes and, terrified, hid in corners and in closets, listening for outcries or the thunderous tramping of madmen at their doors.

In the Med Ship the loud-speaker went on:

"I have told you," said the rounded tones of the Planetary President—but his voice shook, *"I have told you that Dr. Lett has perfected and is making a vaccine which will protect every citizen and cure every para. You must believe me, my fellow-citizens. You must believe me! To paras, I promise that their fellows who were not afflicted with the same condition will forget! I promise that no one will remember what... what has been done in delirium! What has taken place—and there have been tragedies—will be blotted out. Only be patient now! Only..."*



Calhoun went over his glass slides again while the computer stood motionless, apparently without life. But he had called for it to find, in its memory banks, an organic compound of such-and-such a crystalline form, such-and-such a diffusion rate, such-and-such a specific gravity, and such-an-such a refractive index. Men no longer considered that there was any effective limit to the number of organic compounds that were possible. The old guess at half a million different substances was long exceeded. It took time even for a computer to search all its microfilmed memories for a compound such as Calhoun had described.

He paced restlessly while the computer consulted its memory with faint whirrings of cooling blowers, and occasional chucklings as memory cubes full of exceedingly complex stereomolecules of recorded information were searched.

"Maybe," Calhoun said, "this isn't so much a new disease as a modification of a very old one. The very ancient Hate Disease—for the most important symptom

of this particular malady is the hate it's stirred up. I've seen a number of sick planets—but the hate index on this one earns it a record score." He paused for a moment as the computer did an extra-special burping chuckle, and slipped in an entire new case of memory cubes. "Hm-m-m ... if what we're looking for is a vaccine against hate we'd really have something.

"But I'm afraid not. That's too happy an outcome. We'll just call this Hate Disease, Tallien Three strain. It's standard practice," Calhoun continued, "to consider that everything that can happen, does. Specifically, that any compound that can possibly exist, sooner or later must be formed in nature. We're looking for a particular one. It must have been formed naturally at some time or another, but never before has it appeared in quantity enough to threaten a civilization. Why?"

Murgatroyd licked his right-hand whiskers. He whimpered a little—and Murgatroyd was a very cheerful small animal, possessed of exuberant health and a fine zest in simply being alive. Exposed to contagion, it was the admirable talent of his kind to react instantly and violently, producing antibodies so promptly that no conceivable disease could develop. *Tormals* were cherished and respected members of the Interstellar Medical Service because they could produce within hours antibodies for any possible infection, and the synthesis of such antibodies could be begun and any possible plague defeated. But Murgatroyd was not happy now.

"It's been known for a long time," said Calhoun impatiently, "that no form exists alone. Every living creature exists in an environment, in association with all the other living creatures around it. But this is true of compounds, too! Anything that is part of an environment is essential to that environment. So even organic compounds are as much parts of a planetary life system as ... say ... rabbits on a Terran type world. If there are no predators, rabbits will multiply until they starve."

Murgatroyd said, "*Chee!*" as if complaining to himself.

"Rats," said Calhoun somehow angrily, "have been known to do that on a derelict ship. There was a man named Malthus who said we humans would some day do the same thing. But we haven't. We've take over a galaxy. If we ever crowd this, there are more galaxies for us to colonize, forever! But there have been cases of rats and rabbits multiplying past endurance. Here we've got an organic molecule that has multiplied out of all reason! It's normal for it to exist,

but in a normal environment it's held in check by other molecules which in some sense feed on it; which control the population of this kind of molecule as rabbits or rats are controlled in a larger environment. But the check on this molecule isn't working, here!"



The booming voice of the Planetary President went on and on and on. Memoranda of events taking place were handed to him, and he read them and argued with the paras who had tried to rush the north gate of Government Center, to make its inhabitants paras like themselves. But the Planetary President tried to make oratory a weapon against madness.

Calhoun grimaced at the voice. He said fretfully:

"There's a molecule which has to exist because it can. It's a part of a normal environment, but it doesn't normally produce paras. Now it does! Why? What is the compound or the condition that controls its abundance? Why is it missing here? What is lacking? What?"

The police-frequency speaker suddenly rattled, as if someone shouted into a microphone.

"All police cars! Paras have broken through a building wall on the west side! They're pouring into the Center! All cars rush! Set blasters at full power and use them! Drive them back or kill them!"

The grid operator turned angry, bitter eyes upon Calhoun.

"The paras—we paras!—don't want to be cured!" he said fiercely. "Who'd want to be normal again and remember when he ate scavengers? I haven't yet, but—who'd be able to talk to a man he knew had devoured ... devoured—" The grid operator swallowed. "We paras want everybody to be like us, so we can endure being what we are! We can't take it any other way—except by dying!"

He stood up. He reached for the blaster Calhoun had put aside when he changed from the clothes he'd worn in the city.

"...And I'll take it that way!"

Calhoun whirled. His fist snapped out. The grid operator reeled out. The blaster

dropped from his hand. Murgatroyd cried out shrilly, from his cubbyhole. He hated violence, did Murgatroyd.

Calhoun stood over the operator, raging:

"It's not that bad yet! You haven't yawned once! You can stand the need for monstrosity for a long while yet! And I need you!"

He turned away. The President's voice boomed. It cut off abruptly. Another voice took its place. And this was the bland and unctuous voice of Dr. Lett.

"My friends! I am Dr. Lett! I have been entrusted with all the powers of the government because I, and I alone, have all the power over the cause of the para condition. From this moment I am the government! To paras—you need not be cured unless you choose. There will be places and free supplies for you to enjoy the deep satisfactions known only to you! To nonparas—you will be protected from becoming paras except by your own choice. In return, you will obey! The price of protection is obedience. The penalty for disobedience will be loss of protection. But those from whom protection is withdrawn will not be supplied with their necessities! Paras, you will remember this! Nonparas, do not forget it!" His voice changed. *"Now I give an order! To the police and to nonparas: You will no longer resist paras! To paras: You will enter Government Center quietly and peacefully. You will not molest the nonparas you come upon. I begin at once the organization of a new social system in which paras and nonparas must cooperate. There must be obedience to the utmost—"*



The grid operator cursed as he rose from the floor. Calhoun did not notice. The computer had finally delivered a strip of paper on which was the answer he had demanded. And it was of no use. Calhoun said tonelessly:

"Turn that off, will you?"

While the grid operator obeyed, Calhoun read and reread the strip of tape. He had lacked something of good color before, but as he reread, he grew paler and paler. Murgatroyd got down restlessly from his cubbyhole. He sniffed. He went toward the small locked chest in which Calhoun had put away the plastic container of living scavengers. He put his nose to the crack of that chest's cover.

"*Chee!*" he said confidently. He looked at Calhoun. Calhoun did not notice.

"This," said Calhoun, completely white, "This is bad! It's ... it's an answer, but it would take time to work it out, and we haven't got the time! And to make it and to distribute it—"

The grid operator growled. Dr. Lett's broadcast had verified everything Calhoun said. Dr. Lett was now the government of Tallien Three. There was nobody who could dare oppose him. He could make anybody into a para, and then deny that para his unspeakable necessities. He could turn anybody on the planet into a madman with ferocious and intolerable appetites, and then deny them their satisfaction. The people of Tallien Three were the slaves of Dr. Lett. The grid operator said in a deadly voice:

"Maybe I can get to him and kill him before—"

Calhoun shook his head. Then he saw Murgatroyd sniffing at the chest now holding the container of live scavengers. Open, it had had a faint but utterly disgusting odor. Locked up, Calhoun could not smell it. But Murgatroyd could. He sniffed. He said impatiently to Calhoun:

"*Chee! Chee-chee!*"

Calhoun stared. His lips tightened. It was the function of the *tormal* members of the Med Service to react to any infection more swiftly than humans could do, and to develop antibodies which destroyed that infection and could be synthesized to cure it in humans. But Murgatroyd was immune only to infections. To toxins. He was not immune to an appetite-causing molecule demanding more of itself on penalty of madness. Murgatroyd had no more inherent resistance than a man.

"*Chee-chee!*" he chattered urgently. "*Chee-chee-chee!*"

"It's got him," said Calhoun. He felt sickened. "It'll have me. Because I can't synthesize anything as complex as the computer says is needed to control the molecular population that makes paras!"

Murgatroyd chattered again. He was indignant. He wanted something and Calhoun didn't give it to him. He could not understand so preposterous a happening. He reached up and tugged at Calhoun's trouser-leg. Calhoun picked him up and tossed him the width of the control room. He'd done it often, in play, but this was somehow different. Murgatroyd stared incredulously at Calhoun.

"To break it down," said Calhoun bitterly, "I need aromatic olefines and some acetone, and acetic-acid radicals and methyl submolecular groups. To destroy it absolutely I need available unsaturated hydrocarbons—they'll be gases! And it has to be kept from reforming as it's broken up, and I may need twenty different organic radicals available at the same time! It's a month's work for a dozen competent men just to find out how to make it, and I'd have to make it in quantity for millions of people and persuade them of its necessity against all the authority of the government and the hatred of the paras, and then distribute it—"

Murgatroyd was upset. He wanted something that Calhoun wouldn't give him. Calhoun had shown impatience—almost an unheard-of thing! Murgatroyd squirmed unhappily. He still wanted the thing in the chest. But if he did something ingratiating....

He saw the blaster, lying on the floor. Calhoun often petted him when, imitating, he picked up something that had been dropped. Murgatroyd went over to the blaster. He looked back at Calhoun. Calhoun paced irritably up and down. The grid operator stood with clenched hands, contemplating the intolerable and the monstrous.

Murgatroyd picked up the blaster. He trotted over to Calhoun. He plucked at the man's trouser-leg again. He held the blaster in the only way his tiny paw could manage it. A dark, sharp-nailed finger rested on the trigger.

"*Chee-chee!*" said Murgatroyd.

He offered the blaster. Calhoun jumped when he saw it in Murgatroyd's paw. The blaster jerked, and Murgatroyd's paw tightened to hold it. He pulled the trigger. A blaster-bolt crashed out of the barrel. It was a miniature bolt of ball-lightning. It went into the floor, vaporizing the surface and carbonizing the multi-ply wood layer beneath it. The Med Ship suddenly reeked of wood smoke and surfacer. Murgatroyd fled in panic to his cubbyhole and cowered in its farthest corner.

But there was a singular silence in the Med Ship. Calhoun's expression was startled; amazed. He was speechless for long seconds. Then he said blankly:

"Damnation! How much of a fool can a man make of himself when he works at it? Do you smell that?" He shot the question at the grid operator. "Do you smell that? It's wood smoke! Did you know it?"

Murgatroyd listened fearfully, blinking.

"Wood smoke!" said Calhoun between his teeth. "And I didn't see it! Men have had fires for two million years and electricity for half a thousand. For two million years there was no man or woman or child who went a full day without breathing in some wood smoke! And I didn't realize that it was so normal a part of human environment that it was a necessary one!"

There was a crash. Calhoun had smashed a chair. It was an oddity because it was made of wood. Calhoun had owned it because it was odd. Now he smashed it to

splinters and piled them up and flung blaster-bolt after blaster-bolt into the heap. The air inside the Med Ship grew pungent; stinging; strangling. Murgatroyd sneezed. Calhoun coughed. The grid operator seemed about to choke. But in the white fog Calhoun cried exultantly:

"Aromatic olefines! Acetone! Acetic acid radicals and methyl submolecular groups! And smoke has unsaturated hydrocarbon gases. This is the stuff our ancestors have breathed in tiny quantities for a hundred thousand generations! Of course it was essential to them! And to us! It was a part of their environment, so they had to have a use for it! And it controlled the population of certain molecules...."

The air system gradually cleared away the smoke, but the Med Ship still reeked of wood-smoke smells.

"Let's check on this thing!" snapped Calhoun. "Murgatroyd!"



Murgatroyd came timidly to the door of his cubbyhole. He blinked imploringly at Calhoun. At a repeated command he came unhappily to his master. Calhoun petted him. Then he opened the chest in which a container held living scavengers which writhed and swam and seemed to seethe. He took out that container. He took off the lid.

Murgatroyd backed away. His expression was ludicrous. There was no question but that his nose was grievously offended. Calhoun turned to the grid operator. He extended the sample of scavengers. The grid man clenched his teeth and took it. Then his face worked. He thrust it back into Calhoun's hand.

"It's—horrible!" he said thickly. "Horrible!" Then his jaw dropped. "I'm not a para! Not ... a para—" Then he said fiercely. "We've got to get this thing started! We've got to start curing paras—"

"Who," said Calhoun, "will be ashamed of what they remember. We can't get co-operation from them! And we can't get co-operation from the government! The men who were the government are paras and they've given their authority to Dr. Lett. You don't think he'll abdicate, do you? Especially when it's realized that he was the man who developed the strain of scavengers that secrete this modified butyl mercaptan that turns men into paras!"

Calhoun grinned almost hysterically.

"Maybe it was an accident. Maybe he found himself the first para and was completely astonished. But he couldn't be alone in what he knew was—degradation. He wanted others with him in that ghastly state. He got them. Then he didn't want anybody not to be like himself.... We can't get help from him!"

Exultantly, he flipped switches to show on vision screens what went on in the world outside the ship. He turned on all the receivers that could pick up sounds and broadcasts. Voices came in:

"There's fighting everywhere! Normals won't accept paras among them! Paras won't leave normals alone.... They touch them; breathe on them—and laugh! There's fighting—" The notion that the para state was contagious was still cherished by paras. It was to be preferred to the notion that they were possessed by devils. But there were some who gloried in the more dramatic opinion. There were screamings on the air, suddenly, and a man's voice panting: *"Send police here fast! The paras have gone wild. They're—"*

Calhoun seated himself at the control desk. He threw switches there. He momentarily touched a button. There was a slight shock and the beginning of a roar outside. It cut off. Calhoun looked at the vision plates showing outside. There was swirling smoke and steam. There were men running in headlong flight, leaving their ground cars behind them.

"A slight touch of emergency rocket," said Calhoun. "They've run away. Now we end the plague on Tallien Three."

The grid operator was still dazed by the continued absence of any indication that he might ever become a para. He said unsteadily:

"Sure! Sure! But how?"

"Wood smoke," said Calhoun. "Emergency rockets. Roofs! There's been no wood smoke in the air on this planet because there are no forest fires and people don't burn fuel. They use electricity. So we start the largest production of wood smoke that we find convenient, and the population of a certain modified butyl mercaptan molecule will be reduced. Down to a normal level. Immediately!"

The emergency rocket bellowed thunderously and the little Med Ship rose.



There have been, of course, emergency measures against contagion all through human history. There was a king of France, on Earth, who had all the lepers in his kingdom killed. There have been ships and houses burned to drive out plague, and quarantines which simply interfered with human beings were countless. Calhoun's measure on Tallien was somewhat more dramatic than most, but it had good justification.

He set fire to the planet's capital city. The little Med Ship swept over the darkened buildings. Her emergency rockets made thin pencils of flame two hundred feet long. She touched off roofs to the east, and Calhoun rose to see which way the wind blew. He descended and touched here and there....

Thick, seemingly suffocating masses of wood smoke flowed over the city. They were not actually strangling, but they created panic. There was fighting in Government Center, but it stopped when the mysterious stuff—not one man in a hundred had ever seen burning wood or smelled its smoke—the fighting stopped and all men fled when a choking, reeking blanket rolled over the city and lay there.

It wasn't a great fire, considering everything. Less than ten per cent of the city burned, but ninety-odd per cent of the paras in it ceased to be paras. More, they had suddenly regained an invincible aversion to the smell of butyl mercaptan—even a modified butyl mercaptan—and it was promptly discovered that no normal who had smelled wood smoke became a para. So all the towns and even individual farmhouses would hereafter make sure that there was pungent wood smoke to be smelled from time to time by everybody.

But Calhoun did not wait for such pleasant news. He could not look for gratitude. He'd burned part of the city. He'd forced paras to stop being paras and become ashamed. And those who hadn't become paras wanted desperately to forget the whole matter as soon as possible. They couldn't, but gratitude to Calhoun would remind them. He took appropriate action.

With the grid operator landed again, and after the grid was operable once more and had sent the Med Ship a good five planetary diameters into space—some few hours after the ship was in overdrive again—Calhoun and Murgatroyd had coffee together. Murgatroyd zestfully licked his emptied tiny mug, to get the last least taste of the beverage. He said happily, "*Chee!*" He wanted more.

"Coffee," said Calhoun severely, "has become a habit with you, Murgatroyd! If this abnormal appetite develops too far, you might start yawning at me, which

would imply that your desire for it was uncontrollable. A yawn caused by what is called a yawn has been known to make a man dislocate his jaw. You might do that. You wouldn't like it!"

Murgatroyd did not reply.

"You don't believe it, eh?" said Calhoun. Then he said: "Murgatroyd, I'm going to spend odd moments all the rest of my life wondering about what happens to Dr. Lett! They'll kill him, somehow. But I suspect they'll be quite gentle with him. There's no way to imagine a punishment that would really fit! Isn't that more interesting than coffee?"

"*Chee! Chee! Chee!*" said Murgatroyd insistently.

"It wasn't wise to stay and try to make an ordinary public-health inspection. We'll send somebody else when things are back to normal."

"*Chee!!!*" said Murgatroyd loudly.

"Oh, all right!" said Calhoun. "If you're going to be emotional about it, pass you cup!"

He reached out his hand, Murgatroyd put his tiny mug in it. Calhoun refilled it. Murgatroyd sipped zestfully.

The Med Ship *Esclipus Twenty* went on in overdrive, back toward sector headquarters of the Interstellar Medical Service.



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