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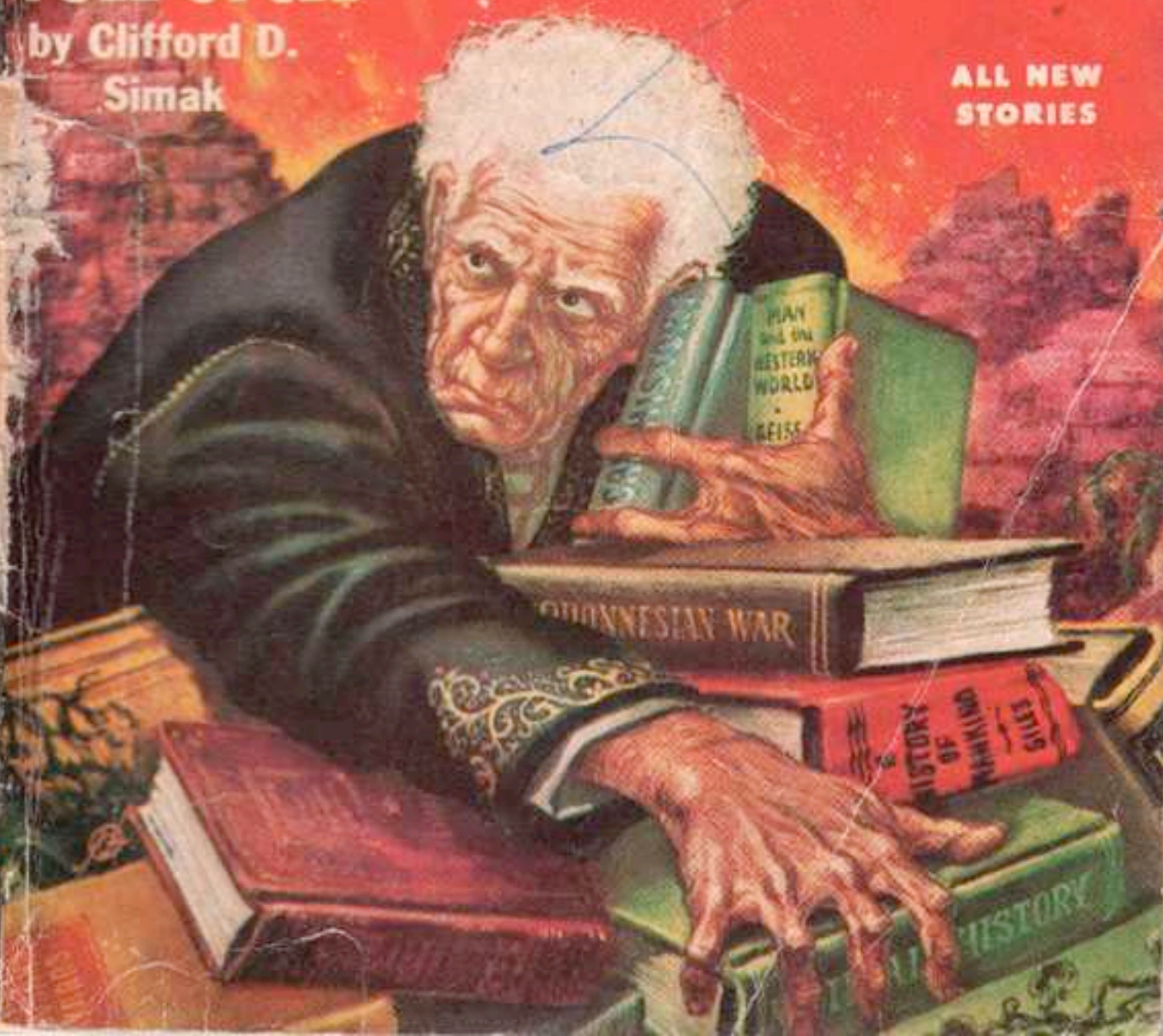
SCIENCE FICTION

FULL CYCLE

by Clifford D.
Simak

STORIES

ALL NEW
STORIES



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THE ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

November, 1955

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Why was it that the native females on this planet suddenly became sterile after humans had been there for awhile?

FEMALE OF THE SPECIES

by CHARLES V. DE VET

illustrated by EMSH

EACH DAY the female found her mate less satisfying; soon she would kill him.

Hegland watched the bird as she spread her vermilion wings out wide and pirouetted coquettishly, keeping her attention all the while on the dun-colored male, who observed her diffidently from the edge of the copse. Apparently she had already chosen her mate's successor.

Behind him Hegland heard the screen door of the cottage open and Karol come out. He didn't turn as she came and stood beside him. For a minute they looked on as the piranya bird strutted, danced, and made tentative advances toward her interested but apprehensive visitor.

"She's got him," Karol said.

"If she doesn't get too bold," Hegland answered.

"That's right; she must never be too bold at first," Karol agreed. She glanced at Hegland with a trick she had of moving her eyes but not her head. Hegland felt the blood rise slowly into his neck and cheeks.

He knew his obvious discomfort must be apparent to her, and the knowledge was irritating; he tried to cover it now by turning to face her. Karol looked away.

As always she was blonde, and achingly feminine. She was wearing a low-cut sleeveless dress and her feet and legs were bare. The day was hot and a fine sprinkling of perspiration covered the tan of her rounded shoulders and neck like a thin film of oil.



Karol seemed unaware of his gaze and with a deliberate effort Hegland followed her glance to the foot of the porch where the piranya bird's mate drooped dejectedly in the hot sun. He differed from her in being a grayish brown in color, rather than her red, and was only half her size. His flightless wings were mottled a darker brown than the rest of his body.

"The miserable little dupe," Hegland said, directing his sourceless anger at the bird. "Why doesn't he leave her—before it's too late?"

"The fatal feminine allure," Karol answered. Her tone was faintly amused.

The piranya female made one too-aggressive advance, and her suitor fled back into the brush from which he had come. She returned to her brooding mate and began her dance in front of him. He



Karol came out as the piranya bird played the coquette.

sulked for only a short time longer before he began matching her dancing steps.

"The typically predatory female, eh, Ned? Never relinquishes anything—until she's certain of something better."

"I'd like to kill the little beast." Hegland turned and went into the cottage, letting the screen door slam behind him.

SHORTLY before dusk, as Hegland sat on the porch catching the first of the evening breeze, Bassett returned from the Queeg village. He walked with tired steps and his shoulders drooped dejectedly.

Karol must have heard him coming for she opened the door as he stopped on the steps. "Tired, dear?" she asked.

Bassett nodded and smiled wanly. His blue eyes had lost much of their youthful candor the last few weeks. Karol took his pith helmet and carried it into the cottage; Bassett and Hegland followed.

"Sometimes I think it's a blind chase, Ned," Bassett went to the wash basin in the corner, poured tepid water from a native jug over his hands, and began washing.

"No luck?"

"Nothing." Bassett didn't look at Hegland. His attention

was on his wife—twenty years younger than he.

"Come sit down," Karol said. She filled their plates with a salad of the spaghetti-like native grain, and edible snails which she had gathered at the creek bottom.

After dinner Bassett and Hegland took their chairs out on the porch while Karol did the dishes. Hegland knew that Bassett needed to talk. "I presume none of your feedings are showing any results," he said.

"Not one of them has had the slightest effect. I've tried every kind of food that the Queegs might have gotten from the colonists—using only one kind for each male and female—and so far there's no sign of any change."

"Yet they did become sterile after we came," Hegland said. "And they return to fertility again after they left us. Something we did, or gave them, must have caused the sterility; but are you certain it was the food?"

"I'm not certain, but what else could it have been?"

"I wish I could tell you. Still—I think you'd be wise to try something else."

"What do you have in mind?"

Hegland had been giving the problem considerable thought. "Perhaps it's some form of allergy."

"Not unless it takes a greater number than the three of us to induce it," Bassett answered listlessly; "otherwise our presence here should be showing some results. I'd like a chance to do a dissection on a dead Queeg. I think I could learn something then. But none of them have died since we moved in." He seemed to tire of the subject; Hegland didn't blame him.

"How's your book coming?" Bassett asked.

"It's just about finished. I've divided it into three sections. In the first I tell of the Earth colony landing here on Kronholm, and the early struggles to establish themselves.

"In the second I tell what we've learned about the local flora and fauna, devoting the greater part to the humanoid Queegs. I tell how the low-mentality creatures cooperated with us at first, helping us build homes and bringing us food; how, in turn, we taught them agriculture, and sanitation. Then how they left us when their females became sterile."

"In the part about sanitation did you use the notes I gave you on the trouble we had exterminating the chiggers?" Bassett asked.

"Yes," Hegland answered. "Also, I'm devoting a considerable portion of the last

third to your following the Queegs here—after they'd been gone from the coast for about six months—and your finding that they were reproducing normally again. When you find the reason for that lost—and regained—fertility, I'll be able to finish the book."

"If I find it," Bassett corrected gloomily.

"I'm sure you will," Hegland said.

The colonists had found the going much rougher without the Queegs to help them; they had sent Bassett to try to convince the natives to return. It all hinged on his finding the cause of their sterility—when they associated with humans. Hegland could see that discouragement, and the rigours of the investigation, had him at the point of exhaustion.

KAROL interrupted Hegland's thoughts by joining them on the porch; she had changed to a freshly-laundered white dress, and washed all traces of makeup from her face. Her blonde hair had been gathered into a "pony tail" and tied at the back of her head with a black ribbon. Hegland noticed how cool and fresh, and young she looked.

Karol placed her chair next to Bassett's and sat down, taking one of his hands in

both hers and placing it in her lap. "You'll solve it, my sweet."

Hegland watched the lines of fatigue disappear from Bassett's face. "Thank you, dear," he answered. "I'm glad you believe it." He regarded her gently for a moment. "I should never have brought you here; this is no place for a woman."

"I would never have let you go without me," Karol told him. She leaned over and touched her lips to his cheek.

"If there were any possible way for us to return to the coast," Bassett said, "I'd give this thing up and take you back."

Karol herself, Hegland reflected, had often suggested this—demanded it—in the first month of their stay here. After the initial enthusiasm of seeing herself as the heroic wife of a doctor—going with him into the unknown interior and sharing danger at his side—had faded before the heat and dirt, the odor of the native village, and soon—she had hated the place.

He remembered the innumerable arguments, the several hysterical scenes, before she was convinced that they could never reach the colony through the jungle that separated them from the coast. And there was no chance that

the colony copter would pick them up before the end of the agreed-upon year. There had been only enough fuel left for one more trip, and they had wanted to be certain to give Bassett sufficient time to do his job.

KRONHOLM'S abrupt darkness had been with them an hour when they heard footsteps approaching, and Queekong walked into the light of the porch lantern.

Queekong was definitely humanoid: He had two arms, two legs—all short and powerful—and a head with features common to humans. But despite the fact that he could swivel his head a full hundred and eighty degrees Queekong had no shoulders, or neck. Neither had he knees: His hip joints were retractable for walking convenience. His body was covered with a pink down.

The only clothing the native wore was a scarf, a gift from Karol which he wore knotted about his neck and hanging over his chest. Yet, his unclothed body gave Karol no cause for embarrassment; he had none of the human male's physical accouterments.

Queekong stood for a minute gazing up at the three on the porch, his features wearing their perpetual expression

of bovine placidity, his heavy-lidded eyes opening and closing as he pondered what he had to say. Finally it came. "Wife... dead."

Bassett stirred wearily. "I'll have to give him a hand," he said to the others. He called down to Queekong. "Will come."

They had had this same experience too often in the past months, since Bassett had induced the native to make his home near theirs, to be alarmed now.

They knew Queekong's wife would not be dead. In his language "pain" and "death" had a difference only of degree, with death being the ultimate stage of pain; he used the same word for both, utilizing inflection to indicate degree.

Now, very probably, one of his wives was having her menstrual period.

Bassett went into the cottage and returned a minute later with a small surgeon's kit. Karol rose to accompany him. Hegland took down the paraffin lantern from its porch hook and led the way.

They followed Queekong to his hut, a natural growth of Kronholm's universal rapid-growing vine that wound about a framework of long poles. It was primitive, but quite weatherproof.

Inside the hut the light of the lantern revealed no furniture. There was nothing except a dirt-packed floor, and eight piles of leaves against the walls. On seven of the piles lay Queekong's wives. There were no children; young natives left their parents soon after they were able to walk, and lived in the jungle. Those that survived to adulthood wandered back and rejoined the tribes.

Six of the wives lay on their sides, watching the party with the same bovine expression that Queekong wore. The only physical difference between them and him, that Hegland had been able to discover, was the heavy sac that hung beneath his chin, and the boil-like eruptions on the backs of the females.

Queekong's seventh wife lay on her stomach, groaning. By the light of the lantern Hegland could see the swollen places on her back, each in a successive stage of development. One of them had grown until the skin stretched tight and glistening, with ugly red and purple streaks making a pattern through the purulent gray matter beneath. He could see, also, a thin red line that crossed the small of her back. This was the mouth of her marsupial pouch, that would open to receive her young when they were born.

BASSETT knelt beside the female and opened his kit. He moistened a wad of cotton wool with alcohol and bathed the festered spot on the native's back. Taking out a small scalpel he ran the blade lightly over the top skin. It parted and a stream of the thick matter flowed out and down the female's side.

Bassett caught the discharge with his wool and gently squeezed the last of the matter out of the sore spot. The female's body relaxed as the pressure eased, and soon she was asleep.

Queekong walked away from them and lay down on his own pile of leaves. His race had no word for thanks, or even any conception of gratitude. If one could—one did; that was all.

"I guess that will do it," Bassett said as they left the hut. "I'll stop in tomorrow to make certain that no infection sets in."

"What a horrible ordeal to have to look forward to all your life," Karol said. She shuddered daintily.

"To them it's normal," Bassett answered. "Their female ova develop on their backs, rather than in the womb, as with humans. If the egg's not fertilized they have the same menstrual periods. However, their suffering is greater than

an Earthwoman's during those periods. My being able to hurry the process the way I did saves them a great deal of pain."

"You've never been able to find...how they..." Karol hesitated, prettily confused.

"How they merge the male sperm with the female ovum?" Bassett finished for her. "No. How the actual act of fertilizing the egg is performed is a mystery. I think if we knew that we could find what there is about the humans that causes their sterility. But the Queegs themselves don't know how it is done. We have to keep in mind, of course, that they're not very intelligent."

"Is it possible that Queekong, and the others of his kind, aren't males?" Hegland asked.

They both turned to look at him, Bassett startled.

"What I mean," Hegland said, "is that they might belong to a neuter sex—one that contributes nothing to the reproductive process. And your trying to learn anything, the way you're going at it, might be useless."

Bassett's eyes widened. "I wonder," he said. "I did assume that Queekong's kind were males. But you think otherwise?"

"Well..." Hegland began uncertainly. "I thought, per-

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haps, that they might be neuters like drone bees back on Earth. Or that they might function as carriers."

"But then we come to the question: where are the males?" Bassett said.

"Could it be possible that there is no division of the sexes? I believe the word for it is androgynous. Or that the females, as we know them, change sex?"

Bassett shook his head. "Back on the coast we did try isolating a group of females; And after a time they stopped bearing children. So that probably isn't the answer. Some external fertilization of the egg is necessary."

Bassett's shoulders straightened. "I don't want to seem to be ridiculing your suggestions. You've certainly given me something new to think about. I'll start working on it again tomorrow."

THREE DAYS later Bassett awoke Hegland at daylight.

"Queekong was just here," he said. "He tells me that one of the males died in the village about an hour ago. This is my chance to perform an autopsy; I thought you might like to come along and give me a hand."

"I certainly would. The other Queegs aren't likely to

object to your operating, are they?"

"I don't believe so. They seem to have no sentimental attachment to their dead."

They had to carry a great deal of equipment, for Bassett wanted to do as complete an autopsy as possible on the spot. "It would have been better if I could have had the body brought to the cottage," he said. "But we don't have the time; putrefaction sets in too fast in this climate."

On the way through the native village Hegland noted that the majority of the females bore children in their marsupial cavities. Tiny heads, or heads and chests, showed over the lips of most of the pouches. The infants were never longer than six inches when they dropped from the hatched ova into the pouches. The pouches exuded a milk-like fluid that nourished them until they were able to walk.

The Queeg females were prolific, but the years the young ones spent in the jungle reduced their numbers to only a small percentage of the original.

They found that the dead Queeg had been carried about a half mile from the village and dropped at the edge of the jungle. The animal and insect life there

would strip his bones clean before nightfall.

When they reached the cadaver, Bassett quickly spread out his equipment on the grass and knelt beside the body. "A rather unhandy way to work, but we don't have much choice." He drew on a pair of plastic rubber gloves. "Be careful not to touch any of the specimens; we don't know what this fellow died from."

Hegland made no reply. Knowing Bassett's habits as he did, he knew Bassett would keep up a running monologue while he worked—but he wanted no answers.

Bassett lifted one arm of the dead Queeg. It bent limply. "No rigor of the muscles. If we're lucky there won't be a complete cell death yet either." He reached for a scalpel. "The sac first."

He cut deeply through the center of the growth under the Queeg's chin and carefully spread out the two halves. Inside were dozens of small pockets, each filled with a near-transparent mucus.

Hegland knew what came next. He set up the microscope and a glass slide. Bassett smiled and nodded his thanks.

He took a smear of the mucus on his scalpel and spread it on the slide. "They're

still living," he said, as he peered into the eyepiece of the microscope. "And they're almost certainly male spermatozoae." He wasted no time, but gathered other specimens of the fluid into a sample bottle and sealed it with a rubber cork.

Bringing his scalpel up to the Queeg's head Bassett cut around the inner side of the lower jaw and down the neck at the edge of its sac.

Small globules of milky green blood gathered at the sides of the cut.

Reaching into the opening Bassett pulled out the flesh and tendons inside, cutting further where necessary. He rested the parts gently against the side of the neck and examined the opening with his fingers. "Pharynx, larynx, trachea, esophagus. Hyoid bone. Fauces." He straightened. "All quite similar to a human's. Now to trace the origin of that male spermatozoae."

HE PROBED with his fingers again and found a duct leading from the chin sac into the chest. Here he had to use a small saw, for the gristle was too thick for his knife. "No bone structure, as we know it. Merely a tough cartilage. One lung," he observed, as he spread

back the skin and gristle he had cut.

Using his scalpel again, Bassett cut through the skin down to the groin, laying open the abdominal cavity. "The internal organs are decidedly different from those of a human. And there's no diaphragm separating the chest from the abdomen. Each organ is protected by its individual cartilage wall. Probably a less vulnerable mechanism than our own." He cut through several walls of gristle. "No bladder; intestines perform both functions."

At the top of the abdominal cavity he found a small gland at the end of the duct leading from the sac on the Queeg's neck. He returned to the sac and cut one side away from the neck. When he turned to Hegland a deep frown creased his forehead. "There's no outlet for the sperm," he said, as though not believing his own words. "I was positive it would be the mouth. But there's none; none at all." He paused thoughtfully. "It was physically impossible for him to transmit his sperm!"

Bassett shook his head several times and was still muttering to himself as he returned to his work. He took samples from each of the organs, and the Queeg's flesh,

and his blood, and put them in bottles. Hegland labeled each bottle with the name Bassett gave him.

Bassett's attention was held for some time by the heart. "Auricles, but only semi-developed ventricles. Venous and arterial circulation would be more or less mixed. That would account for their phlegmatic movements, and, to a great extent, for their limited brain power.

"We'd better check that brain next," he said. He picked up the saw. "We won't bother removing the scalp." He sawed around the skull cap of the dead Queeg and removed the bone, cutting loose the brain attachments that clung to it with his scalpel.

He observed for a moment the brain which he had laid bare before he inserted the fingers of his left hand down the sides and under. Lifting the brain out slowly he cut the nerves at the base of the cavity with the scalpel in his free hand. "I'll have to take more time to examine this later. Hand me that large jar of alcohol, will you, Ned?"

As he spoke Bassett ran a pair of black threads under the gray mass in his hand. He lowered it into the jar Hegland handed him and secured the thread at the sides. The

brain hung suspended in its alcohol bath.

"And that's about as much as we can do here."

AS THEY returned to the clearing about the cottage Bassett and Hegland passed the piranya female and her suitor. She had him completely captivated by now; he stood quietly, still nervous, but allowing her to stroke his head and crest with the bottom of her neck.

"She's a two-timing little brute," Hegland said.

"That she is," Bassett agreed. "I'd like to run her off, but Karol won't let me. She said she needs a pet to keep her mind off the loneliness here. And I suppose she's right; this is a rough life for the poor kid."

Near the porch the female's mate fluttered out of their path, his short wings dragging dispiritedly in the sand.

"He knows what's going to happen to him," Bassett said. "Why doesn't he run away?"

"He can't make himself do it; in his own bird way he loves her."

Bassett shrugged. "He's just stupid."

"I wonder," Hegland demurred.

They had a quick lunch and Bassett rose to return to his specimens.

"I'm bored, Frank," Karol said. "Will you take me for a walk before you start that gruesome work?"

"I don't see how I can. I have to check those specimens before they spoil. Can't you wait until this evening?"

Karol, apparently, was in one of her less reasonable moods. "I'm bored now," she said.

"I wish you'd wait. I have this lead now that could mean the solution to our problem. I might not get the chance again soon."

"Then I'll go alone," Karol said.

"Don't do that," Bassett protested. "It might be dangerous. The big cats don't usually come out of the jungle in the daytime, but you can never be sure."

Karol was stubborn. "I'll take a gun."

"You can't handle a gun well enough to be safe."

"I can take care of myself."

Bassett rose reluctantly. He hesitated, then turned to Hegland. "I suppose you're tired, Ned?"

Hegland looked at Bassett and knew he couldn't refuse. "A walk would do me good."

THERE WAS only one way for them to go: Up the high hill behind the cottage. The jungle was impenetrable, and the village of the

Queegs too crowded and dirty for pleasant strolling.

Karol's melancholy mood left her soon after they started. The effort of picking her way through the boulders and shrubs brought a glow to her cheeks and soon she was breathing deeply, but happy.

They stopped in the middle of the hill to recover their breath. "The air is cleaner up here," Karol said. She stood with her head tilted upward and her chest out, so that her neck arched back and her breasts made a round pressure against her frock. She was breathtakingly lovely, Hegland thought. Like a blonde Greek goddess.

He knew then why she disturbed him so, and why he was so often angry with her. The anger was his defense against admitting that he loved her.

The realization brought a wave of agitation that washed up into his throat and caught at his breath. He felt the palms of his hands grow moist as they longed to stroke that honeyed throat.

Resolutely he fought to keep a tight rein on his emotions. Wiping his hands awkwardly down the sides of his trousers he searched for words that would show his indifference. "You have a nice tan," he heard himself saying, inanely.

Karol opened her red lips

in a smile. "I've been sunbathing on the top of the hill, where I can be alone," she said. "I'm done all over."

Hegland felt himself reddening again.

She took his hand in hers and they resumed their climb.

At the top of the hill they stretched out in the shade of a clump of bushes and relaxed. Karol pillowed her face in her arms, while Hegland rested on his side, facing her. He found himself gazing at the soft hair at the nape of her neck, gazing as though it were something different, and precious.

After a time Hegland was certain that Karol slept, but she lifted her head suddenly and shifted her position nearer him. Her face was so close to his that he could see his reflection in her eyes. "I don't love him, Ned," she whispered.

Hegland could think of nothing to answer.

Karol waited.

"You can't be serious," Hegland said, when the silence became strained.

"I'm very serious," Karol insisted; "I never did love him."

"Then why did you marry him?"

"I've almost forgotten now, but I think it was the glamour. Marrying a doctor, one of the important men of the colony,

and all that. It took this trip, where I'd be with him all the time, to make me see my mistake."

"You're in one of your moods," Hegland said. "Tomorrow you'll realize how foolish you're being."

She waved her hand, as though brushing the argument aside. "He's an old man," she said. "He's twenty years older than I am. I'm married to an old man, Ned."

"It's too late to think of that now."

"It's not too late," she said. "I'm not going to let it be too late." She buried her head in her arms and began crying.

Hegland felt a pulse pound at the base of his throat as it quickened with the immediacy of his desire. After a minute he lifted his hands and saw that his fingers were tangled in grass and ruptured roots which he had torn from the ground.

THE SOLUTION to Bassett's problem still evaded him during the following days. He learned little more from his specimens than he had from the actual dissection of the dead Queeg's body, and he had been unable to find any other leads. Each day he seemed to grow more gray, more thin, and more discouraged.

Hegland accompanied him

now wherever he went. He did not admit to himself that he did it because he was afraid to be alone in the cottage with Karol.

There had been no change in her actions toward Bassett since their climb of the hill, but that only revealed that she was a good actress. The last day of the week Bassett had some work that detained him in the Queeg village, and he sent Hegland ahead to ask Karol to hold dinner.

Hegland delivered his message; when Karol said nothing, but continued to regard him speculatively, he went outside.

As he wandered about at the side of the cottage he found the small body of the piranya bird's mate laying in a pile of dust. There was blood and the marks of savage bill strokes on the back of his head.

Hegland walked over to the edge of the clearing and looked into the brush where the birds had made their nest. The female and her inamorata were both sleeping. He had his brown head resting on her red wing.

Hegland picked up a large stone from the ground at his feet and dropped it on the female's head. Back at the cottage he dug a shallow

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grave and buried the dead mate.

Hegland slept badly the next few nights. He thought of Karol every moment now; he knew, with a calm dismay, that she was in his blood, and that no amount of reasoning could drive her out.

Bassett came in one evening with his face twisted with misery. "Give me a hand, will you, Ned?" he asked as he stripped off his shirt. When he bared his upper torso Hegland saw that it was covered with fierce red swellings.

"I picked up a batch of chiggers," Bassett said.

Chiggers was the name the colonists had given the lice that infested most of the natives. They were larger and more vicious than the Earth vermin. The Queegs had developed an immunity to their bites and weren't bothered much by them; but they had been known to kill a man, when he couldn't rid himself of them soon enough.

Hegland led Bassett into his bedroom and had him strip. He bathed Bassett's body with alcohol, and dabbed on a healing salve. Later he carried the clothes Bassett had worn out on the porch and fumigated them.

Hegland convinced him to stay in bed.

Queekong visited them in the afternoon; another of his wives was having her menstrual period.

Despite the protests of Karol and Hegland, Bassett insisted on going with the native to lance the female's festered ovum. "She's suffering more than I am," he said.

As they couldn't stop him Karol and Hegland went along.

The operation, as before, was simple. On the way back to the cottage Karol gave them the clue that finally solved the riddle of the Queeg's sterility.

"Strange that none of Queekong's wives are bearing young ones," she said. She didn't notice that Bassett stopped walking abruptly. "Usually at least a couple of his wives are carrying children," she went on. "Yet I haven't seen a sign of one in over two weeks."

"We've brought the sterility again!" Bassett exclaimed.

And there was no doubt that he was right. Now they had only to figure what they had done to—or for—Queekong and his family that they had not done for the others.

At first they could think of nothing, even while they knew they had the solution within their grasp. They had

IN THE MORNING Bassett had a fever and Karol and

only to fit the facts together.

Karol and Hegland tried to persuade Bassett to return to bed, but he was too excited to listen to them. "I feel it's right in front of me," he said, as he paced the porch. "But what is it? What is it?"

The excitement, added to the fever from the chigger bites, had brought a red flush to Bassett's face. Hegland was afraid that he was over-exerting himself. "You'd better go to bed, Frank; those chigger bites can be pretty rough on you if you don't get the proper rest."

Bassett swung around to face Hegland with his mouth gaping, and his eyes wide and excited. "That's it!" he shouted; "the chiggers! Don't you see—the chiggers are the carriers! When the colonists first came they fumigated the native village, and deloused the Queegs—doing it as much to protect themselves as to help the Queegs. And we did the same for Queekong and his family; when we killed the chiggers we brought the sterility!"

A weakness of relief seemed to drain the strength from Bassett's legs and he sank into a chair. Karol and Hegland helped him back into bed.

Bassett's fever was worse the next day.

Karol cared for him solicitiously, but one incident puz-

zled Hegland. He had walked into the bedroom without knocking and surprised her in the act of bending over Bassett. He couldn't see what she was doing, but when she heard the door open she swung around, and for just an instant her face flashed an expression of consternation.

She recovered her poise instantly. "He seemed restless," she said; "I gave him a sleeping powder." She tucked a small bottle which she held in her hand into a pocket of her frock.

Bassett slept most of the afternoon. But toward evening Karol called Hegland and he went into the bedroom to find Bassett sitting up in bed, deathly pale. "I'm thirsty," Bassett said when he saw Hegland. "Will you give me a glass of water, please?"

Hegland poured a glass full from a pitcher on the stand in the corner and brought it to him.

As Bassett swallowed Hegland saw his back straighten. His throat swelled and jumped several times as he struggled to keep the water down.

After a minute he was calm again. "Put another blanket on me, will you, Ned?"

Soon Bassett's head began to rock back and forth on his pillow. Abruptly he was sick

again. Hegland ran to bring him a basin and Bassett began a long series of retching and vomiting, alternated by deep gaspings for breath. His eyes took on a glisten from the pain he was suffering and an hour later he was no longer rational.

During one of Bassett's quiet spells Hegland spoke to Karol. "This is something more than chigger fever," he said.

"But what can it be?" She had been steady-nerved, and more help to him during this crisis, than he would have expected.

"I wish I knew; but I'm no doctor. We'll just have to give him the best care we can and hope he recovers."

BASSETT died during the night.

Hegland buried him early the next morning because of the heat.

Karol had remained self-composed throughout the ordeal; only after it was all over did she lock herself in her bedroom and cry.

The next week both Karol and Hegland were very quiet. They abided by an unspoken agreement not to talk about Bassett, and tried to carry on the same as before. Karol did her housework, while Hegland made an attempt to work

on his book. He accomplished very little; and, of course, it wasn't the same with Bassett gone.

All this time something in the back of his mind nudged Hegland's thoughts. It was not until the fourth day, however, that he recognized what it was. He went around to the rear of the cottage and into a tool shed where Bassett had kept most of his equipment and supplies.

He found what he sought in a metal box of fumigants. A small, round bottle, like the one Karol had held in her hand when he surprised her bending over Bassett.

On the bottle was written: *Danger, Poison.*

For some reason that he could not explain to himself Hegland never mentioned the bottle to Karol. And the third week his hunger for her returned. He despised her, hated her—but...

He found her strolling in the front yard. She was wearing a bright red dress. As he came up, she twirled around, making the dress flare out at the hips. "How do I look, Ned?"

Like the female piranya bird, Hegland thought.

He took her in his arms, and...

