

could rotate at the Captain's will. The aliens were free now, but the Captain had only to spin ship in order to snare them again.

Four miles away, Tommy found the second polarizer. He backed away a carefully calculated distance before he re-entered the hull. At least he could know in advance how far he had to go—and he knew now, too, that the energy he had stored the first time had been adequate twice over. He rested a few moments; then, like a diver plunging into a torrent, he thrust himself into the fuel line.

He came out again, shuddering with pain, and pushed himself through the exit. He felt as bloated as he had before. The charge of energy was not as great, but Tommy knew that he was weakening. This time, when he discharged over the polarizer and watched it contract into a tiny, puckered mass, he felt as if he could never move again, let alone expose himself once more to that tunnel of flame.

The stars, he realized dully, were moving in slow, ponderous arcs over his head. The Captain was spinning ship. Tommy sank to the hull and lay motionless, watching half-attentively for a sight of the alien ship.

There it was, a bright dot haloed by the flame of its exhaust. It swung around slowly, gradually, with the rest of the firmament, growing smaller slowly.

"He'll get them before they're out of range," Tommy thought. He watched as the bright dot climbed overhead, began to fall on the other side.

The Captain had one polarizer left. It would be enough.

Wearily Tommy rose and followed the bright star. It was not a joke any longer. He would willingly have gone inside to the bright, warm, familiar corridors that led downward to safety and deserved punishment. But somehow he could not bear to think of those fascinating creatures—those wonderful playthings—going to fill the Captain's fat belly.

Tommy followed the ship until he could see the pale gleam of the functioning polarizer. Then he crawled through the hull once more, and again he found a sealed entrance to the fuel tube. He did not let himself think about it. His mind was numb already, and he pushed himself through uncaring, as condemned criminals often go carelessly to execution.

This time it was worse than ever before; he had not dreamed that it could be so bad. His vision dimmed and he could barely see the exit, or feel its pressure, when he dragged himself out. Lurching drunkenly, he passed a scanning wave on his way to the hull sphincter, and heard the Captain's voice explode.

Outside, ragged black patches obscured his vision of the stars. The pressure inside him pressed painfully outward, again and again, and each time he held it back. Then he felt rather than saw that he was over the pale disc, and as he let go the bolt he lost consciousness.

When his vision cleared, the alien ship was still above him, alarmingly close. The Captain must have had it almost reeled in again, he thought, when he had let go that last charge.

Flaming, it receded into the Great Deep, and he watched it go until it shrank beyond his vision to follow.

He felt a great peace and a great weariness. The tiny blue disc that was a planet had moved its apparent position a little nearer its star. The aliens were going back there, to their unimaginable home, and Tommy's ship was forging onward into new depths of darkness—toward the edge of the Galaxy and the greatest Deep.

He moved to the nearest sphincter as the cold bit at him. His spirits lifted suddenly as he thought of those three stabs of energy, equally spaced around the twelve-mile perimeter of the ship. The Captain would be utterly speechless with rage, he thought, like an aged martinet who had had his hands painfully slapped by a small boy.

For, as we warned you, the Captain was not precisely a captain, nor the ship precisely a ship. Ship and Captain were one and the same, hive and queen bee, castle and lord.

In effect, Tommy had circumnavigated the skipper.

PETER PHILLIPS

§ Field Study

"WHAT'S IT today?" asked the neurotic Mrs. Francis Pake. "Overtime or that night out?"

"I can't tell you for certain, sweet. I'll phone you. I'm nearly sure, but—"

"This is it," said Betty Pake. She got up from the breakfast table. "Change your job or change your wife. Quite simple, Frank. I thought I'd married a man, not an accounting machine."

She said a lot more before Pake finished his breakfast. He sighed, missed when he pecked for her check, and left.

The Mitchell embezzlement which had kept him in the office all hours for the past three months had been finally straightened out yesterday, and full material for the indictment handed over. Tonight, dine, dance and drink with Betty—unless something new turned up. She rated the break, of course, apart from the fact that her nerves, unsettled by a quiet life, played hell with his digestion. Maybe she should have married a younger man, with time and money to spare for her idea of living.

He realized uncomfortably that he was half hoping something would prevent the date.

The assignment this morning, for instance. It was out of the ordinary.

No books to examine or reluctant employees to quiz politely but inexorably. He got straight onto it before going to the office.

Early as it was, the waiting room in which he found himself was full. Forty patients at least. An obvious Parkinsonism stumbled to a bench. Every disease seemed to be represented there, from cancer to cretinism.

He recalled the chief's instructions: make no fuss, get in line with the others, take what he hands out and—bring it back.

"You have an appointment?" asked the dull-eyed, dull-voiced receptionist.

"No, but if this is an open session, I'll hang around on the off-chance. My time's my own."

"Name?"

"Shando. James."

Did those dull eyes light up? No reason to. So far as he knew, the quack had no reason to suspect a Federal investigation.

"Sit down, please."

What was it, Pake asked himself as she went into an inside office—faith healing? That wouldn't fix peritonitis. But that was only a report. He'd have to wait and ask careful questions. Careful, because patients don't usually question doctors on their training and background.

He looked casually at the man next to him. A young Eurasian, drawn-in, huddled, gloved hands clasped together, as if in silent, fierce prayer.

"What ails, feller?"

The Eurasian seemed to shrink even further into himself, shook his head almost imperceptibly. *Please don't notice me.* It was as plain as words.

Then Pake saw the patch of silvery skin beneath the ear. He muttered, "Hell," and jerked away.

"Sorry, sorry." The faintest of whispers. "Not contagious."

"Maybe not, but you shouldn't be here. You should be—" Pake stopped, uneasy. There was a world of misery in the man's eyes.

If the fake beyond that door was giving false hope to poor devils like this . . . But that didn't make it a government matter. It was up to the state, or the local branch of the F.M.A. He didn't call himself a doctor, of course, nor did he advertise. But did that put him in the clear?

Pake cursed the brevity of his instructions. "If you question him," the chief had said, "make it simple. You can be normally curious, but that's all. And if he gets cagey, cut it out. You're not going as an agent. You're just an errand boy, Frankie, and you know as much as I do."

The receptionist came back, walked over to him.

"It seems you did have an appointment," she lied calmly. "This way."

A door closed behind him. Pake, off-guard, found himself talking before he had taken in the scene. "This is good of you, Doctor, but I had no appointment. I don't like jumping the line."

"I am entitled to use my discretion. You are an interesting case. Sit

down. And please don't call me doctor. In the healing profession, that title is reserved for those who have taken the Hippocratic oath. My name is Trancore."

Pake shut his mind to a thousand questions and concentrated on one. "How do you know about my case? You've never seen me before."

"My receptionist," said the man behind the desk, "has intuitive diagnostic ability."

THAT SETTLED it, Pake thought. A first-water quack. Heck, he'd never had a day's real sickness in his forty years. Mild post-nasal drip, maybe, but that was probably a penalty for oversmoking. He felt the tickle of it at the back of his throat now. He blew his nose. It gave him a few seconds to think and observe.

The "healer" was quite unremarkable except for an almost unnoticeable Asiatic tinge of skin. His features might have been the compounded norm of a thousand faces fittingly seen during a subway rush-hour. He'd be lost in a crowd. No, put him in a crowd and he would be the crowd—The fantastic thought touched Pake's consciousness and slid away before he could examine it.

The office, rented furnished, was quite unimpressive. Old-fashioned wooden desk, cheap chairs, battered filing cabinet, empty, Pake was willing to bet.

"Symptoms?" Trancore asked.

"Seems you can tell me," Pake said with a trace of belligerence.

"Let's say the recital is part of the treatment. I don't wish to guess."

It *should* be an "interesting case." Pake had spent an hour boning up on it at a medical library. An obscure disease, a complexus of symptoms calculated to faze the most expert diagnostician for a while. It would certainly defeat the snap diagnoses and miraculously swift cures attributed to this phony. And no doctor could confirm it without the most exhaustive physical examination, which this fellow didn't go in for, apparently.

As Pake was talking, Trancore looked into a drawer of his desk. His face was without expression.

He looked up only when Pake finished, and smiled. "Prognosis, death within eleven months, eh? But you won't die. Take this in water." He put a plastic capsule within Pake's reach.

"But this is crazy! How do I know—"

"You don't. I make no claims. What did you expect, a long, obscure rigmarole? You can take the capsule or leave it. How many tokens—pounds—do you have with you?"

"But listen, Doctor—"

"I'm not a doctor. How much?"

"Around fifty, I suppose."

"Give me twenty-five for the capsule, which you take on faith. If you take it."

"You say I'll die if I don't?"

"I said nothing of the kind. I have no intention of running foul of your laws. Please make up your mind."

Pake took it.

"As MUCH personality as a boiled duck," Pake reported to his chief. "But somehow I couldn't get around to asking questions."

The chief tossed the capsule in his palm. "That doesn't matter. This is all we wanted."

The laboratories took five hours to break it down, make tests and come up with the final, head-scratching nonsense line: just a mess of soluble protein with no discernible physiological reactions.

"That was yours," the chief said. "These were brought in by the others, a plainclothes man from Police H.Q., an employee of the National Medical Association, an official of the N.M.A., and a private investigator."

Pake leafed through the reports. "The same?"

"Yes. But here are three reports on capsules given to genuine patients and 'borrowed' for analysis afterward. The patients didn't miss a thing, even though the operative substituted similar capsules containing water and a vegetable dye. It took five minutes for the laboratory to discover that that's all the 'borrowed' capsules contained, also."

Pake began to laugh. Then he remembered the leper. "Can't Trancore be booked for fraud?"

"How? He makes no claims for the damned things. And in several instances, he's given them away. But don't you see the implication of these reports?"

Pake nodded. "Patients get water. Investigators get something just as useless—except for giving laboratory men a headache. So he knows who is what. I don't get it."

"You will. I'm turning the case over to you, Frankie."

"I'm interested. But how come it's on our level?"

"It's international. Come and meet the United Nations." The chief frowned as he rose. "I've been trying to put my finger on something since you came in. Now I've got it. Your voice."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Not a thing. Sounds clearer, somehow."

Pake stood very still. He swore, slowly, then cleared his throat. There was nothing to clear. "My post-nasal drip!" He blew his nose frantically, pointlessly. "It's gone!"

SIR GREVILLE Gray of London, Luchaire of Paris, Frend of Berlin, Stawowy of Prague—Pake heard substantially the same story from each.

In Harley Street, London's specialist district, Trancore had rented a £50 a week consulting room, given free treatment to two cardiac cases,

then pulled out when the waiting list grew unmanageable—or when he'd fulfilled his unknown purpose.

Gray, chairman of the English Medical Association, had interviewed him officially.

"Impudent little devil called me 'the chief witch-doctor.' I nearly assaulted him." Gray squared his massive shoulders. "When I said we'd prosecute, he flatly denied that he practiced medicine at all. 'To arraign me,' he said, 'you would have to prove that I give treatment, that I charge for it, make claims for it, and that it may prove harmful. You cannot even prove the first accusation.' I pointed out that he dispensed capsules and charged for them. He said, 'They expect something material, like the evil-smelling charms you give them. I offer them a capsule. They take it or leave it. It makes no difference. They pay or don't pay. That makes no difference, either. I prefer them to pay. It makes my stay shorter.'

"I asked whether he expected me to believe that his patients were cured no matter what course they took. 'They are not my patients,' he said. 'If, after they have visited me, a cure is effected and they claim my instrumentality, then that is not my responsibility.'

"In a word, he disclaims everything, even success. Two days later, when a newspaper followed up a tip about so-called 'miracle cures,' a reporter found a queue stretching out into the street—and an empty office. Ten weeks later, the fellow turns up in Paris, and the business starts over again."

"But not," said Dr. Luchaire gently, "the same man."

Sir Greville shifted uneasily in his chair. "A good disguise."

"Photographs?" asked Pake.

His chief, smiling a little, handed him two buttonhole camera enlargements. There was an elusive similarity, a strained family likeness; but neither was patently of the man Pake had seen that morning.

Pake said, "The norm of a crowd. If it's the same man, he's a human chameleon."

ATTEMPTS to get fingerprints had been curiously unsuccessful. Either he had had them obliterated through surgery or he put on gloves before touching anything. Maybe he made sure to touch nothing. The last idea was fantastic, but what wasn't about this case?

Pake asked, "Why has no effort been made before to collate available material, if this has been going on for so long?"

Dr. Frend of Berlin grunted. "The medical profession is not an international police force. There is fraternal exchange of information in periodicals, naturally, but no medical man would risk his reputation by lending credence to such a fantastic rumor as, for instance, the cure of an advanced leukemia."

"But that man was my own patient!" Dr. Stawowy of Prague was indignant.

"I'm not challenging your veracity or ability. Genuinely mistaken diagnoses are not unknown," Frend said coldly. "I was merely explaining to this gentleman why there has been such delay in instigating an international investigation. The matter was brought into the open only recently at a European congress, of which I happened to be chairman. The feeling of the meeting was that these rumors should be traced to their source, as a professional and public duty. I agreed to act as coordinator of a small subcommittee appointed for this purpose. That is why we are here. Personally, I am not convinced that this man is anything more than a faker and an opportunist."

Michaels of the N.M.A. shook his head. "A man from an adjacent office was carried in to him a couple of days ago with every symptom of a burst appendix. This 'faker' protested at first, said he wasn't a doctor. Then he asked to be left alone with him. Ten minutes later, that man walked out unaided."

"Nicely stage-managed," said Frend. "He was a stooge."

"We checked. It's difficult to believe there was collusion. The patient is a solid, decent citizen. He said the pain began to go when Trancore had been looking at him for a while. In his own words, he felt something moving in his guts, and then the pain stopped."

"I find it less difficult to believe that he was a stooge," repeated Frend obstinately.

Pake's chief intervened. "Gentlemen, my department has received instructions to give every assistance in obtaining information about this man. Mr. Pake will be in charge. We are not concerned with the medical side of the case, but only with its legal aspects."

HE PAUSED, dropped diplomatic language. "Though why in hell it should be my department instead of the police, or the D.A.'s office, or the Bureau of Public Welfare, or the Bureau of Immigration is something I still haven't figured."

Sir Greville Gray said, "In every instance where a direct law-enforcement agency was about to investigate, even before his identity papers could be asked for, the man has disappeared. His nationality is unknown. He operates only for as long as he can escape widespread notice and police attention. That's why the few newspaper stories that have appeared are quite disconnected and based solely on speculation. Your approach must be very discreet."

"Seems it'll have to be invisible, too," Pake said. "He knows I'm an operative already. But he cured my—"

Pake stopped. Maybe his post-nasal drip had cleared up of its own accord. It was a comforting thought. He wished he could believe it.

IN HIS office—"I'm sorry, sweetkin," he told the phone. "Just can't make it tonight. I've got to stay on this case. It's—er—detective work. The police are helping me."

The nerve-edged vehemence of his wife's voice grated on his ear. He held the receiver an inch away.

"So you think you're a real G-man now, a big tough hero running around with a bottle of rye and a blonde. Well, listen, hero, I hope they shoot first. I'm through."

"It's nothing like that, hon. You're getting mixed up, anyway. Bureau men don't drink on duty. And you're pretty hard to please—you called me an accounting machine this morning. But look, lovesome, I'll be home around seven. It's just that I have to stay near a phone. We could play checkers. And I promise I'll grab me a day off—"

He held the receiver six inches from his ear. "I'm sorry," he said again loudly and lowered the phone, which was still angrily vibrating, to the cutoff.

There was a note on the kitchen table when he got home.

"An old school friend called. Anyway, that's my story, hero. And we're going places. Don't wait up."

Pake sighed. Hero . . . He curled his lean body up in a chair by the phone with a book.

The call came at midnight: "He's skipped."

"I was waiting for that. I've seen the papers. Keep on it."

Pake turned back to the midnight editions. There were few facts. Three patients had been interviewed. From the descriptions, one was the Eurasian with leprosy he had seen that morning.

The word-of-mouth snowball and the inevitable newspaper swoop had taken just two weeks this time. In Paris, Trancore had lasted a month.

One newspaper admitted that they had an anonymous call claiming a miracle cure, days previously, but had put it down to a cultist bid for publicity.

The phone rang again. The caller said, "If this guy doesn't come out of his office soon, these newspapermen will bust the door down. What shall I do?"

"You're on loan from the police, aren't you? If they try that, identify yourself and threaten to book 'em. You don't need to mention that Trancore isn't in that office anyway."

The phone spluttered disbelief.

Pake grimaced. "I know how you feel, Sergeant. Maybe he flew out of the window. He was picked up as he came out of the front entrance, and I'm waiting to hear where he holes up. But spin those reporters some yarn and keep them there if you can."

Pake shook his head as he put the phone down.

He took a freshening shower. Past twelve was a fine time for newspapermen, police and miracle healers to be about their business—did Trancore ever sleep, or had he gone in for all-night sessions?—but Accountancy Branch men worked office hours.

Discreet investigation guaranteed, every cent traced through the best-cooked books. That was probably Washington's line of thought: if Ac-

countancy could do it with embezzled cents, they could do it with elusive fake doctors.

But these cents didn't add up. It didn't make sense.

Nonsense. A whole row of thaumaturgical non-cents.

Accountancy could trace a cent.

So, logically, they could scent a trace. And sense a non-scent . . .

Uh-uh. Pull yourself together, hero . . .

Pake lolled his tongue at the mirror. Clean and pink, no fuzz or sign of civilized costiveness.

Constipation. Post-nasal drip. And leprosy.

He leaned forward until his forehead touched the mirror. His eyes showed red tracery beneath drooping lids. What did real government men—not the office-bound type—do to stay awake?

Pake recalled Betty's crack about rye and a blonde. And he remembered a nearly full bottle.

He answered the insistent phone with a glass in one hand.

He jotted the address of a cheap rooming house, dressed and left, thoughtfully putting the bottle in a pocket.

THE MAN on watch said, "Room five. Going in?"

Pake shrugged. "I don't know. If I do, he'll probably float out of a back window. This kind of thing isn't up my alley."

The watcher looked surprised. "Why, you're F.B.I., aren't you?"

"Not so's you'd notice," said Pake gloomily. He shivered a little in the after-midnight chill.

Someone was emerging from the building. The watcher drew Pake into the shadow of an unlighted shop doorway. "It's him, anyway." Then he frowned. "No. Sorry. Same build, but—"

"For my money," Pake murmured, peering across the road, "you were right first time. The norm of a crowd."

"Hey, whadya doing?"

Pake shook off the restraining hand. "I don't know," he said again. "Ask him for a light, maybe. This can't be played according to the Detectives' Manual. If there is such a thing. I wouldn't know. If he vanishes in a puff of smoke, call the psychiatric ward ambulance—for me."

Pake's lanky strides quickly overtook the slow-moving man.

"Pardon me—"

The man turned. "Good morning, Mr. Pake. I congratulate you on your acuity of perception and your imagination. How are your nasal passages?"

The world reeled a little on its axis.

"Walk with me," said Trancore, and took Pake's arm. "But first signal to your policeman that he needn't follow us."

Frankie Pake flapped a limp, dismissing hand at the watcher in the shadows, and walked on into a dream.

"Am I mad?" he asked simply, after a while.

"No. You're saner than most. Your higher cortical centers are momentarily dulled by fatigue and alcohol, giving full reign to intuition. 'Hunch,' you term it. An endearing quality when allied with imagination. A saving grace, indeed, of your race."

"You're from India?"

"Trancore is a good Indian name. Incidentally, fatigue is a disease."

Pake said, "Don't cure me; I couldn't bear to wake up. When do we start running like hell to stay in the same place? Pardon me."

Trancore shook his head as Pake, still walking, upended a bottle to his lips. The sidewalk was crowding up and the lights brightening in nagging neon as they neared Broadway.

Pake lowered the bottle. "You still here?"

"You expect me to disappear? I could, quite easily, by convincing you of my non-presence, as I did when I walked past those men outside my office. Or I could slip into a crowd and, within limitations, alter the apparent cast of my features to conform seemingly with an average. But don't you want to ask me some questions?"

Pake pondered this. "Maybe I do. Why do you want to answer them?" He was feeling less like a real G-man and more like an Accountancy Branch investigator every moment. "You figure I'm harmless, huh?" he added resentfully. "Like my wife?"

"By no means. If I weren't about to conclude my own particular investigation, I would say that you were most dangerous to me. Your imagination is quite highly developed."

Pake stopped. He grabbed Trancore's sleeve. "I can't walk and think," he announced. He dumped the empty bottle by a fire-plug.

THEY SAT on high stools in the garish light of an open-fronted soft-drinks bar.

"If this is going to be a jag," Pake said, "I suggest we lay a foundation of milk."

Smells wafted in from the street, the delicate and the insistent intermingled: rubber, hot oil, burned gasoline, cheap perfume, sweat, dust, peppermint: astringent tang of warm steel, of leather, even of stone. It had been a hot day before the sun went down.

Pake sniffed appreciatively.

"It's a sense we abuse and neglect," he said as the milk was served. "You did cure my post-nasal drip, didn't you?"

Trancore had been watching him with a half-smile. "All those questions in your mind, yet you relish this rediscovery above all. I don't despair of you." Trancore sipped his milk. "The infection was cured by your body. I helped. I can't tell you how, unless you have five hundred years to spare."

"Hardly," Pake said. "I haven't twelve hours to spare, if I'm to save

my job. Or my reputation. Which, or either, I'm not sure." He caught Trancore's amused eye. "All right, that's not true. But I need answers to a pretty lengthy questionnaire. Who, when, what, why, where—you know."

"You're convinced I'm a telepath?"

"Aren't you?"

"Not in your sense of the term, which is a semantic misnomer in any case. As a diagnostician, I sense abnormalities in physiological functioning. As a psychologist, I sense—difference. In purpose and function. When you came into my waiting room, I knew you were not there as a patient. Your presence was a disharmony. The same with your colleagues. As for your name and your occupation, they are naturally blazed so clearly on the surface of your mind that even your native clairvoyants could read the information."

"That," Pake breathed, "takes a load off my mind. You don't, for instance, know what I'm thinking about that dark-haired ex-blonde who just served us those shakes?"

"The one with the excellent pectoral development? No. Your own muzzy picturate and thalamic concepts are your own. I can't interpret them."

Pake said, "Fine. You know all about the aphrodisiac effects of alcohol, though. Are you too big for me to understand, or can I see you clear and self-explanatory against the background of Broadway?"

Trancore did not reply for a moment. He was looking at the other occupants of the bar. There was something like pity in his eyes. Not pity, though, Pake decided, searching hard for another word. Something bigger; less human, perhaps. Or more human. Compassion?

Trancore said, as if to himself, "The girl with the bright face laughing at the febrile witticisms of her unpleasant escort: three-quarters of her right lung has gone."

Pake felt he was overhearing something he shouldn't. But he said, "You could put her right?"

"I could stop the rot in that lung, Pake. But she would return to that back room full of smoke and dust. She would still travel on a crowded subway to an overheated office. She'd still starve herself to buy clothes to keep in fashion. I don't have a cure for those things."

"That's the first time you've admitted you have a cure for anything."

Frankie Pake felt confused, despite his acceptance of the situation—which still surprised him. And he felt grudgingly humble. He saw, as if for the first time, the face of the man who called himself Trancore.

It had been the norm of the crowd, a pale blur in a flashlight shot of a moving mob. Now it was individual, seen clear and not through a wavering mask. The underlying personality was revealed, strong, but with no desire for domination.

There were those once-precious pulps that Betty had scornfully banished to an out-of-the-way cupboard when they'd moved into the apart-

ment. Clues there, maybe? Mutant superman in hiding? Spy from a far galaxy?—ouch! No ray-guns, no squirming, tentacled horrors, no—

A little sanity, a little sobriety, little hero . . .

"What are you, Mr. Trancore?"

"A healer. That is my profession."

"And now suppose you answer the question."

"Is your head clear?"

PAKE, REMEMBERING the rye, said, "Strangely, it is. But I'm a little drunk from the neck down, and the dream-state persists."

"I wish," said Trancore—and it seemed the most foolish, yet the most significant thing that Pake could remember hearing him say—"I wish sometimes that I could escape reality so easily, by imparting to it the patina of a dream. You all do that." He got up. "I'm going to work now. I have about eight hours. You will be my guide."

"What do you want to see?"

"This city at play in the pre-dawn hours."

Pake gave a humorous grunt. "My wife would suit you better in the role of guide. She's playing pretty hard right now."

He explained. He *wanted* to explain. Betty was suddenly vivid in his mind: beautiful but fretful, at odds with life, yearning for the opiate of soft lights and sweet music, afraid to face herself, afraid to proclaim her interest in humanity in case such a generalized belief should hurt her in some way.

Trancore listened sympathetically as Pake spoke of the broken date and his own preference for the quiet life.

Trancore said, "Surely she'll appreciate the irony of this when you tell her?"

"The hell she will! If she knows I've been painting the town without her, even in line of duty—"

Trancore asked, "Do you know where she's likely to be?"

Pake looked at him curiously. "There's a couple of spots she fancies."

"Could we go there a little later?" He held up his hand as Pake was about to veto the idea. "I promise you there'll be no unpleasant consequences if we meet her."

Pake believed him. Pake would have believed in a panhandling green hippo with puce spots at that moment. The apparition would have been absorbed without comment into the basic fantasy of this situation.

THEY STARTED at Brondine's, where it was boasted that any potable man had ever devised for the delectation of palate and the drugging of senses could be served—with second choice on the house if first choice wasn't in stock.

Trancore asked for the first twelve favorites, took them in turn without a blink.

Pake stuck to rye, watched, and listened.

"Your palates," observed Trancore, "are more civilized than your minds."

"But why," asked Pake in wonderment, "are you still upright?"

"I make sure to eliminate the poisons in the alcohol, and thus the toxic effects. As a rule, I don't drug. But when in Rome—"

Something lit up in Pake's mind. Fantasy came to fantasy. He remembered a story. "Now I get it. You're from the future!"

Trancore laughed, genuinely. "Your imagination deserves something better than comic strips to work on. It's fascinating, but depressing, to see science negated by superstition, and your concept of time is the greatest superstition. Let's go. A game shop next."

He meant a pinball arcade.

He cheated abominably. Pake watched a steel ball bump the thousand pin twenty times, defying gravity. "Surgical manipulative technique," Trancore murmured.

A strabismic attendant, called by the clanging of the surfeited machine, shouldered through the watching crowd and squinted unbelievably.

"Whatcha doon?" the attendant demanded menacingly.

"Or this," Trancore said gently. "The same technique."

The man pressed a hand to his eyes and made an animal noise. Then he looked at his fingers, held up one, two, three; blinked at the lights.

Pake grasped Trancore's arm, pulled him outside. He was suddenly quite sober. There was a strange harshness in his voice.

"Do you have to impress me? The world needs your knowledge and"—he waved at the glitter of Broadway—"you fritter time and energy mooching around here. You don't cure a girl of T.B., but you fix that old thug's squint."

"A whim. Alone, I can do so little."

"Why do you do anything?"

TRANCORE FINGERED a green bill reflectively. "Even a healer must eat. Field research is expensive. And we are pledged to live as far as possible within the framework of the society we examine, applying our skills to that end. In that way, we reduce the possibility of observation affecting the subject we observe.

"By using the hypnotic and telekinetic techniques which I have developed in my own profession, I could obviously earn sufficient of your tokens for subsistence during my period of study by gambling, for instance; but that would not be ethical."

Pake imagined a poker player who not only reshuffled cards as they were being dealt to him, but who could disappear, if his opponents queried his success, by erasing the fact of his presence from their minds.

"You could teach—" he began.

"And run foul of the witch-doctors who briefed you yesterday? Think,

Mr. Pake! Would you give a hypodermic and a gallon of cocaine to an aboriginal tribe suffering from toothaches? Besides, these techniques have taken me five hundred years to learn."

"That's why I thought—"

"That I was from the future? I might be, in terms of possibility. We are," said Trancore, "no older than you, as a race, in terms of universal evolution. But as individuals, we are longer-lived. The biggest single advance you will make as a race will be when you increase the life-span of the individual."

Pake thought that over, and fantasy was far from his mind.

"You could help us," he said.

"We may, when you become more than ephemerate. And, for psychological reasons, that must be achieved by your own efforts."

"Are we so contemptible?"

"Would we study you if you were? Our architects, our musicians, even our fiction writers do field-work in this territory, write scholarly theses when they return. Anthropology, in our sense of the term, embraces all the arts and sciences. We are all scholars. Occasionally we innovate, and you benefit."

"Why do you tell me this?"

Trancore shrugged. For the first time, Pake noticed that they were standing in the middle of a busy sidewalk. They might have been in the middle of the Gobi desert for all the notice people took of them. A plump man walked straight toward them, frowned, then detoured carefully around the spot where they stood. Pake wondered what the man thought he saw. Probably a puddle or broken-up sidewalk.

"I like you," Trancore said simply. "And you will remember very little that you can impart to others and expect any measure of belief. And you have imagination enough to control your terrestrial chauvinism and your natural resentment at being studied. It may comfort you to know that, in the physical sciences, your race is considered to be quite well advanced."

It did, somehow. Yet—

ALL THE niggling, back-mind-biting inferiorities that man has ever suffered, from the time he was first chased by a sabertooth to his feeling of helplessness when science outran his emotional control, suddenly seemed to crowd together into Pake's brain for a staggering second.

"Resentment isn't the word," Pake said slowly. "I could kill you."

"But you won't. Others would. Now you understand why our visits are unannounced. And they will remain so until all men are as essentially civilized—that is to say, non-aggressive—as you are."

Pake knew the question was really unimportant and that its true answer would be incomprehensible, anyway. But he asked it.

Trancore smiled. "Your preoccupation with the physical sciences . . . No, I don't have a spaceship garaged anywhere. Your popular concept of

time may be superstition, but the limiting speed of light is not. We don't travel. We arrive. I'm afraid the distinction is not clear to you, but it will have to do.

"And now—" The slender man took Pake's arm. Crowds brushed against them again. "Quick visits to a burlesque show, an all-night cinema. And perhaps we could look in at those nightclubs where your wife might be. I owe you a favor. Then I must return home."

They cabbed to three clubs before they found Betty.

"You are not members, we are booked up, it is evening dress only," objected the hastily summoned manager.

"Are you mad?" asked Trancore pleasantly. "Or is your memory so very short?"

The manager thumb-and-fingered his eyes, then beamed at them.

"Good evening, gentlemen. Good to see you again. This way."

"Teach me that trick," muttered Pake as they followed him.

He looked down at his open overcoat and tweed suit.

"Tell me, am I wearing a soft shirt or a boiled one?"

"Boiled."

"Good. I like to be formal."

Trancore stopped at the entrance to the big circular room. The manager left them and hurried back to his private office with the conviction of a frantic headache to be numbed with aspirin immediately.

"Do you see her?" Trancore asked.

Pake glanced around the soft-lit tables. He looked hard at one table. He made a wry face.

"Boiled," he said, "has more than one meaning. Or maybe Betty just can't resist using that torso of hers as a prop. I wish she wasn't wearing that dress at that angle of inclination. Would you think me so uncivilized, Trancore, if I walked up and poked Football Shoulders in one of those roving eyes of his?"

"You are not altogether without blame in this arisement," Trancore observed mildly. "You make insufficient allowance for her. You are reasonably well-adjusted. She is not."

"I'd like to adjust that damned dress."

"Primitive possessiveness. You disappoint me, Pake," Trancore said, but his eyes were laughing.

Betty looked up as they approached. Her eyes weren't quite focused. "Frankie . . . What the hell! Lookit what the river washed up!"

She grabbed the table for support as Football Shoulders rose suddenly, rubbed his forehead. "Phone call or—or something," he muttered. "Pardon me. Must go."

Betty did a double-take like a puppet as the shoulders lumbered off. "Wheel me home. What goes—"

Pake said, "Meet Mr. Trancore."

TWO MEN walked slowly along the footpath of a great girdered bridge. The taller man had a hesitation in his walk and stooped a little, as if burdened.

Halfway across, they stopped and watched in silence the slow dawn rose-gilding the towers of Manhattan.

A tugboat below, looking no larger than a water bottle, made its loud, self-important noise. As much noise as an ocean-going liner.

Pake had put Betty in a cab, had walked with Trancore, had asked many more questions, and learned very little. Now he asked the final question as Trancore turned and held out his slender hand.

"Good-by, Mr. Pake."

"At least tell me—which star?"

"You haven't seen or named it yet. Take care of Mr. Trancore for me, won't you? You'll find his address in this pocket. Good-by."

Pake took the hand. For a crazy moment, despite what he knew, he expected it to be withdrawn from his grasp suddenly, to see a figure drawn heavenward along a lancing path of light.

But there was merely a sigh from the lips of the slender man, who collapsed limply into Pake's ready arms.

PAKE TOLD his chief, "Those quacks can examine him until they drive the poor devil crazy, but he won't be able to tell them any more. His name is Chandra Trancore, a second-rate doctor who disappeared from his practice in Madras province ten months ago. He has less idea of what he has been doing during those months than they have."

"How do you explain it?"

Pake stood by the window of the office and inhaled deeply. Somewhere nearby there was a window-box with gardenias. He caught their scent as well as if they had been under his nose.

He said, "I don't. And I'd like you to hurry through my resignation as fast as you can, Chief."

"I still don't understand why, Frankie. We're pals, aren't we, apart from official status? I know I've had to drive you hard lately. Had to drive myself, too. Sorry I put you on this off-routine stunt. But if you want to rest up for a while—"

Pake inhaled again, audibly. Someone was cooking spaghetti bolognese quite a distance away. "I want to be free to take legal action on behalf of Trancore if those witch-doctors have him arrested on some trumped-up charge just to give themselves more time to examine him. I'll take personal responsibility for seeing him home to India."

"You can do that without resigning. I'll fix special leave, if you insist on being crazy."

"That's not all, though." Pake wondered how he could explain, regretfully decided it was impossible. "I'm taking an intensive two-year course for a new career."

"So you told me. I thought you were drunk. Anyway, how will Betty take to a fool idea like that? She goes for the bright lights, doesn't she? And I thought her—nerves were edgy?"

"She's all for it," Pake said, and was amused at his chief's gape-mouthed disbelief. "A neurosis is a disease. And she met Trancore. I'll send you a card when we get started."

THE CARD arrived three years later. It was headed:

M'Beli Medical Mission Station
Upper Congo

Pake wrote: "... probably the most backward tribe mentally and physically in the whole of Africa. Some trouble from the witch-doctors at first, but I've settled down quite nicely now and I think they're beginning to trust me, with Betty's help. The women love her. Tribal customs are fascinating. Watch out for my name in the *Anthropological Review*."

PART V

§ Let's Build Somebody!

The idea of synthetic life occurs often in literature: *Pinocchio*, *The Golem*, *Frankenstein*, and so forth. Presumably, we are synthetic ourselves, for Adam was created from inorganic matter, according to hitherto reliable sources.

I think it's almost certain that we will discover the secret of life, at the very least to the extent of creating simple living forms in the laboratory. Nor have we any way of knowing how close we are to that at this moment. We may have found the secret already, without being aware of it, just as the Greeks discovered the principle of the reactor motor and never realized its potentialities.

What we may be sure of, however, is that researchers are digging relentlessly into the mysteries of the cell. Once they learn how to duplicate a single cell out of inorganic matter, they can string the cells together, combine them in various shapes, buttress them with lab-made bone, wire them with extruded nerves, fuel them with a manufactured digestive system, ventilate them with a wholly constructed respiratory and circulatory system . . . and put the life-infused creation under the self-control of an artificial brain.

The product may be anything at all, a dinosaur, a Neanderthaler, a modern man . . . or nothing ever seen before on this planet.

It may also be a method to modify our race so we will be immune to disease and accident.

One doesn't decide in advance whether this or any other discovery is either beneficial or desirable. If it can be achieved, it will be. The uses of the discovery, as in the case of the atomic bomb, depend on the needs of society, and change as those needs change.

Synthetic creation of a single cell or an entire life-form, the problem, when it is finally solved, will be of great potential value. Cancer, to take only a single instance, would be conquered. Genuine limbs and organs, to mention another, could replace those diseased or removed.

No matter what, synthetic life can produce genuine fiction!