



Mate in Two Moves

Marks, Winston K.

Published: 1954

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/32748>

Also available on Feedbooks for Marks:

- *Backlash* (1964)
- *Unbegotten Child* (1953)
- *The Test Colony* (1954)
- *Breeder Reaction* (1954)
- *The Mind Digger* (1958)
- *The Water Eater* (1953)
- *The Deadly Daughters* (1958)
- *Forsyte's Retreat* (1954)

Copyright: Please read the legal notice included in this e-book and/or check the copyright status in your country.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks

<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from Galaxy Science Fiction May 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

I

Love came somewhat late to Dr. Sylvester Murt. In fact, it took the epidemic of 1961 to break down his resistance. A great many people fell in love that year—just about every other person you talked to—so no one thought much about Dr. Murt's particular distress, except a fellow victim who was directly involved in this case.

High Dawn Hospital, where 38-year-old Dr. Murt was resident pathologist, was not the first medical institution to take note of the "plague." The symptoms first came to the attention of the general practitioners, then to the little clinics where the G. P.s sent their patients. But long before anything medical was done about it, the plague was sweeping North and South America and infiltrating every continent and island in the world.

Murt's assistant, Dr. Phyllis Sutton, spotted the first irregularity in the *Times* one morning and mentioned it to him. They were having coffee in Murt's private office-lab, after completing reports on two rush biopsies.

She looked up from the editorial page and remarked, "You know, someone should do a research on the pathology of pantie raids."

Murt spooned sugar into his mug of coffee and stared at her. In their six months' association, it was the first facetious remark she had made in his presence. To this moment, he had held an increasing regard for her quiet efficiency, sobriety, professional dignity and decorum. True, she wore her white coat more tightly belted than was necessary and, likewise, she refused to wear the very low hospital heels that thickened feminine ankles. But she wore a minimum of come-hither in both her cosmetic and personality makeup. This startling remark, then, was most unexpected.

"Pantie raids?" he inquired. "Whatever would justify an inquiry into such a patently behavioristic problem?"

"The epidemic nature and its increasing virulence," she replied soberly. "This spring, the thing has gotten out of hand, according to this editorial. A harmless tradition at a few of the more uninhibited campuses has turned into a national collegiate phenomenon. And now secondary effects are turning up. Instructors say that intramural romance is turning the halls of ivy into amatory rendezvous."

Murt sipped his coffee and said, "Be thankful you aren't a psychiatrist. Bacterial mutations are enough of a problem, without pondering unpredictable emotional disturbances."

His assistant pursued it further. "It says the classrooms are emptying into the marriage bureaus, and graduation exercises this year will be a mockery if something isn't done. What's more, statistics show a startling increase in marriages at the high school level."

Murt shrugged broad shoulders that were slightly bent from long hours over a microscope. "Then be thankful you aren't an overworked obstetrician," he offered as an amendment.

She glanced up from the paper, with annoyance showing in her dark, well-spaced eyes. "Is it of no interest to you that several hundred thousand youngsters are leaving high school and college prematurely because they can't control their glands?"

"Be glad, then," Murt said coldly, "that you aren't an endocrinologist—now drink your coffee. I hear the microtome working. We'll have some business in a minute."

Dr. Phyllis Sutton rustled the pages of the *Times* together, folded it up and threw it at the wastebasket with more vigor than was necessary. The subject was momentarily closed.

His staff position at High Dawn paid less, but the life suited Dr. Murt better than the hectic, though lucrative, private practices of many of his colleagues. He arrived at the hospital early, seven o'clock each day, to be on hand for quick tissue examinations during the morning operations. By ten, the biopsies were usually out of the way, and he spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon checking material from the bacteriology section and studying post-operative dissections of tumorous tissues and organs removed in surgery.

It was engrossing, important work, and it could be accomplished in a normal work-day, leaving the pathologist considerable leisure to study, read and relax. Shortly after the pantie-raid conversation with Phyllis Sutton, he found the evening paper attracting more than his usual quick perusal.

This emotional fuss in the young human animal was beginning to pre-occupy the newspaper world. Writers were raising their eyebrows and a new crop of metaphors at the statistics, which they described variously as alarming, encouraging, disheartening, provocative, distressing, romantic or revolting, depending upon the mood and point of view.

As June, the traditional mating month, wore into July, national statistics were assembled to reveal that marriages were occurring at almost double the highest previous rate, that the trend was accelerating rather than diminishing.

Jewelers and wholesale diamond merchants chalked up fabulous increases in the sale of engagement and wedding settings. Clergymen and qualified public officials were swamped with requests for religious and civil marriage ceremonies.

Parks, beaches and drive-in theaters were jammed with mooning and/or honeymooning couples, and amusement parks began expanding their over-patronized tunnel-of-love facilities.

The boom in houses, furniture, appliances and TV was on, and last year's glut of consumer goods for the home was rapidly turning into a shortage.

All was not good news, however. The divorce courts reported their calendars stacked months ahead of time, and an increasing number of lurid headlines were devoted to the love-triangular troubles of the rich, famous and notorious. Love-nest exposés and bigamous marriages rocketed in number.

The whole world, adolescent and adult, was falling in love, with the inevitable unrequited infatuations, the jealousies, infidelities and the bitter-sweetness of wholesale, illicit, impossible love situations in which vulnerable people found themselves increasing astronomically.

Writers of popular newspaper psychology columns attributed the rampaging emotional fire to everything from mass-hysteria, caused by sunspots, to the paternalism of a government that gave increased income-tax deductions to married people.

Dr. Murt's growing interest was not entirely academic. His bachelorhood was no accident of fate, but rather a carefully contrived independence, for which he paid the price of eternal vigilance. As the world supply of eligible bachelors diminished sharply, his wariness increased, and he became more and more curt with nurses and female technicians at the hospital.

He revealed the depth of his leeriness one afternoon at the scrub-up sink, where he and his assistant were washing after a messy dissection. Phyllis Sutton remarked, "Holly, down in Personnel, showed me a tabulation she ran off for her own curiosity today, Doctor. Do you realize that in this whole hospital there are only *eight* unmarried female employees?"

Murt threw water droplets from his bare arms and muttered, "Yes, and every one of them's giving me the eye—to say nothing of half the married ones."

His aide dried her long arms and slender hands and looked at him with a crooked smile. "Not to underestimate your good looks, Doctor, but I am one of the unmarried females. I trust I'm not giving you too much trouble?"

He looked up, startled. "Yes—no, *no*—of course not. I'm referring to the nurses and the technicians. What's got into them? The whole lot seems to be on the make!"

Phyllis combed out her short dark hair and looked at him in the mirror. "I assure you the males are just as bad. These interns and four of the male nurses give me a physical with their eyes every time I happen to meet them."

"I suppose this ties in somehow with your pantie-raid theory."

"Well, what do *you* think?"

"I don't think. I just dodge. You'd do well to do the same," Murt told her, putting on his jacket and adjusting his tie.

She sat down in his oak swivel-chair and crossed her slender ankles. "Are you aware of the problem they have downstairs in the out-patient clinic?"

"Hadn't heard," Murt said.

She removed a file from her purse and touched up her short nails. "The outlying clinics are sending their overflow to us. They can't seem to diagnose the odd symptoms they're getting."

"I had noticed the large number of negative test results coming out of the lab," Murt acknowledged. "Haven't followed any of them through, though."

"I have," Phyllis said with a little frown. "Seems to be a psychosomatic nightmare down there."

"What are the symptoms?"

"Mostly neurotic," she said. "Listlessness, loss of appetite, palpitations, cold sweats and absent-mindedness."

"Why don't they go to the psychiatric clinics?"

"Overloaded. They're sending patients here."

"What age groups?"

"From puberty to senility. I'd like your permission to do a little special work on blood samples."

"Another theory?" he asked caustically.

"Yes. Will you give me your permission to test it?"

Murt adjusted his Panama straw in the mirror and noticed that the nostrils of his straight nose were flared for some reason. "Your time is your own after three P. M. every day. If you want to take time out from your thesis research, that's your business."

He crossed to the door and was opening it when he became aware that he had had no answer. He looked back at the profile of his assistant's body, which was now stretched out full length, suspended at three points—her higher-than-practical heels on the linoleum tile, her spine and curved hips using only an inch of the chair's edge, and her head tilted over the chair's back. She inhaled from a king-size filter-tip cigarette and blew a feather of smoke at the ceiling.

"*Yuh!*" she said finally. Her flat abdomen jumped at the exhaled syllable, and so did her generous breasts under the soft emerald-green street dress.

"Good *night!*" Murt closed the door behind him quickly and became aware of a sharp stab of what he defined as pure rut—the first he had suffered in fifteen years.

II

He taxied downtown to the athletic club, where he maintained his three-room apartment. The 20-story building was a citadel of masculinity—no females allowed—and recently it was an especial relief to enter the lobby and leave behind the world of turbulently mixed sexes.

The small but lush entry chamber had a deserted air about it this afternoon. At the room desk, Crumbley, the clerk, handed him his key with a pallid hand and returned to sigh over a colored picture in *Esquire*—it was the "fold-out" page, featuring a gorgeous blonde reclining at full length. Crumbley's expression, however, was far from the loose-lipped, lecherous leer that he normally exposed to such art. His eyes had a thin glaze over them, he breathed shallowly and, if Dr. Murt had not known the little man's cynically promiscuous nature so well, he'd have sworn Crumbley was in love.

Upstairs, Murt donned rubber-soled gym shoes and sweat clothes and rode the elevator back down to the gymnasium. Three times a week, he put his muscles through the whole routine-work on the bars, rings, the leather horse, the rope climb and a twenty-lap jog around the balcony racetrack. Afterward, he showered, took a dip in the swimming pool and retired to the health service department for a rubdown and some sunlamp.

Throughout the whole routine, he encountered not a single other member. While Charlie, the husky blond masseur, hammered and kneaded his muscles, Murt reflected on the abating interest in athletics at the club.

"Are we losing members, Charlie?" he asked.

"You'd think so from how dead it is up here," Charlie replied. "But Crumbley says we aren't. The guys just aren't exercising. Can't figure it, Doc. Even with the usual summer slump, it's never been this slow."

When he had absorbed all the punishment he could stand, Murt rolled off, went into the ultraviolet room, set an alarm clock and lay down by himself on one of the paper-covered tables. He adjusted the dark goggles and reflected thankfully that he didn't have to go to the beach for his sun and have sand kicked in his face by a procession of predatory females, ogling his long limbs and trying to attract his attention.

The clean smell of ozone was pleasant, the warmth of the lamps relaxed him, and he dozed off. He dreamed that he heard someone else come in and lie down on the next table and, when he raised his head to

see who it was, was amazed to discover his assistant, Dr. Phyllis Sutton, stretched out like himself, wearing only shower-sandals and goggles.

The alarm clock wakened him from the disturbing dream. He was sweating profusely and took another shower, using the cold water at full needle force to dispel his shock at his subconscious.

Wrapping the robe around him, Murt returned to his apartment to dress for dinner. As he snapped the paper laundry band off a clean shirt, he caught himself wondering how old Phyllis Sutton was. Twenty-eight? Thirty? She appeared younger, but she was in her last year of residence to gain her specialty of pathology. That meant over eleven years of school and practice. She was a lovely creature, but she was no child.

He had half an impulse to phone her for dinner, then became lost in studying his own reaction to the thought. Pulse over a hundred, respiration quickening, irregular. There was a tensing of the abdomen, a faint burning in the pit of his stomach.

He remembered the urge at the office, the dream in the sunroom, the sudden sweat that had required five minutes under the cold needle shower.

After so many years of deliberate, scholarly celibacy, what was happening to him?

He stared at the phone. With six motions of one finger, he could dial Phyllis Sutton's face into view, and suddenly he yearned to do that very ridiculous thing.

After staring at her, off and on, for the six months since she had transferred to High Dawn to complete her residency, now he wanted to see her face outside of working hours for some inexplicable reason.

Call her up, date her, take her dancing, proposition her—get this silly feeling off your chest!

Suppose she was busy or refused to go out with him? Suppose she already had a boy friend?

This last thought deepened the burn in the pit of his stomach, and he finished dressing listlessly. To hell with it! This was poker night. If he did succeed in dating his assistant, they'd inevitably talk shop. That was why he enjoyed a night of cards with his six non-medical brother clubmen, once a week. It was refreshing to break away from the professional point of view.

No, he wouldn't sacrifice that for any woman.

He ate alone, read the paper, joined the poker party at seven o'clock, played six hands of stud, cashed in his chips and returned to his room. In a mood of deep irritation, he found Phyllis Sutton's home phone number and rang it four times with no result.

He thought to try the hospital. She answered from the lab extension on audio only, but her voice and its frankly curious tone sent vertically polarized chills through him.

"I—I wanted to apologize for my rudeness this afternoon," he said with difficulty from a suddenly dry mouth.

There was a brief silence. "Have you been drinking, Dr. Murt?" He noticed that she did not call him Sylvester. Why was he so damned thirsty for some little sign of warmth and friendliness from her?

He cleared his throat. "No, I'm serious. It occurred to me that your interest in the out-clinic problem was commendable, and that I was rather short in my remarks to you."

"Oh! I take it I have your permission to work my project in during the day, then?"

"That's right, so long as it doesn't interfere with the routine." He sounded stuffy to himself, but he was entirely out of practice in speaking to please a female.

"Thanks," she said wryly, and the conversation ended.

Somehow, the brief talk with her restored his perspective. Once again she was his assistant, and the significance of her as a woman faded. She was a dedicated physician like himself. In another few years, she would find a residency of her own. She had no more inclination to knock off and become a woman than he had to squander his time and energy on attaining the status of family man.

It was with mounting admiration that he followed her new project in examining blood samples. As they came up from the clinic, she sorted the specimen tubes at once, putting a tiny snip of yellow Scotch tape under the label of each sample that belonged to a patient with the new undiagnosed disorder.

Then, after the requested hemoglobin, blood sugar and other standard tests had been run, she retrieved the samples from the technicians, grouped them in a special rack and devoted every spare minute to further examination.

She centrifuged, precipitated, filtered and stained over and over, using every qualitative procedure in the book. Murt signed her requisitions for exotic reagents and rare stains. He helped her balance out the large

centrifuge to get the maximum r.p.m. from it. He let her use the most costly of the fine-porosity filters.

He had little hope of success, but it was good practice for her. She was required to identify every organism she found, bone up on its known effects, then determine that it could not cause the symptoms reported.

She did all this without impairing her usefulness to Murt. When he needed her, she was at his side, dissecting, taking down notes, preparing delicate sections and checking slides before they came to him.

In several weeks, she exhausted all known tests on the first samples. After lunch one day, she turned her palms up. "*Nichts da!*" she said, pulling a mashed cigarette from the huge pocket of her white smock.

He glanced at her and swiveled to stare out the window. It was part of his tight campaign to prevent a disastrous recurrence of the emotional tempest he had suffered the day she had begun this research.

"It was a nice brush-up on your bacteriology," he said. "Have you saved the filtrates?"

"Yes, of course. Did I overlook anything?"

"Nothing that we could do here, but there's an electron microscope downtown at Ebert Industrial Labs. How about photomicrography? Could be a filtrable virus."

He knew that she was aware of the possibility, and also that she was reluctant to ask him for additional funds to go into a virus hunt with the expensive piece of equipment.

"Wonderful!" she told him. "I did hate to ask you, but it would be a shame to waste all that immaculate filtrate."

III

A week passed, during which a bulletin from the Government Health Service announced official suspicion that the human race was suffering a mysterious, pandemic affliction which was as yet undiagnosed. Although the symptoms, as reported by hundreds of clinics, were relatively mild, the effect on the nation's economy was growing serious.

Industry and business reported unprecedented absenteeism. Factory supervisors and insurance companies were frantic over the upsurge in accidents. It was estimated that almost fifty per cent of the population exhibited the symptoms of depression, absent-mindedness, insomnia and loss of appetite.

Negligent driving was increasing the highway toll sharply. Educational institutions reported classroom discipline rapidly vanishing. Armed forces headquarters cautiously admitted a new high in desertions and AWOLs.

The consensus among psychiatrists and psychologists was that the condition stemmed from pathogenic causes.

Dr. Murt raised his eyebrows when he read this. Perhaps Phyllis Sutton was right, after all.

The bulletin continued, "All clinical pathologists are requested to be alert to the presence of any unusual organisms discovered in body fluids or tissues examined. Please report your findings to the U. S. Public Health Service."

Murt found Phyllis Sutton at the microtome, finishing a wax section, and showed her the bulletin.

"Score one for woman's intuition," he smiled. "Federal Health Service tends to agree with your theory."

"Now I *am* eager to see those pictures," she said.

Less than two hours later, a messenger brought the photomicrographs, and the two pathologists bent over them together. Phyllis had submitted eighteen samples, six of which were controls taken from healthy, unafflicted subjects. Per her instructions, smears of the specimens in various degrees of dilution had been photographed through the great electron microscope.

Murt muttered to himself as they compared the controls with the "infected specimens." The "healthy" samples were relatively clear, except for minute protein matter. Conversely, all twelve suspect specimens swarmed with shadowy six-sided dots.

Phyllis' eyes widened. "There is something there! Do you suppose it could be the Love Bug?"

"Love Bug?"

"Certainly. That bulletin didn't go into the psychologists' findings. The diagnosticians downstairs say that the symptoms appear to be no more than complaints of the lovesick."

"Are you back on the pantie-raid theme again?"

"I've never been off it," she replied. "From the first, I've had a notion that some organism was increasing glandular activity. Excess emotionalism often originates in overstimulated glands."

"Of course, but mental attitudes can trigger the glands, and they are interacting. How do you separate the effects? How could you guess that an organism was responsible?"

She shrugged. "It was a possibility within our specialty, so I set out to prove or disprove it. From the appearance of these photographs, I don't think we have *disproved* it."

It was a properly cautious statement that pleased Murt. They were a long way from proving that their newly discovered virus was the culprit, but the research had definitely produced a question mark.

Murt ordered copies of the photomicrographs from Ebert Industrial Labs and arranged for a complete dossier to be forwarded to the U. S. Health Service.

That night, he was startled by a headline and lead story that quoted the government bulletin. The science editor had a field day, tying in speculation that "Doctors Suspect Love Bug Epidemic."

The next day, three reporters called upon him, each with the same query. "It's rumored that you are doing research on the Love Bug, Dr. Murt. Anything to report?"

He shooed them out angrily, after learning that someone at Ebert Labs had given them the tip. Phyllis smiled at him as he slammed the door after the last reporter.

"You still discount the Love Bug idea, don't you?" she asked.

"I dislike sensationalism in a matter like this," he said. "Even if their assumptions were true, I wouldn't like it."

"You can't blame the papers. They're starved for some explanation. I pity your passion for anonymity if your virus proves to be the causative factor."

"My virus?"

"Certainly. The whole project is under your auspices and direction."

"See here, Phyl, *you* did the work."

"Don't you dare mention my name," she said. "You're my superior and senior pathologist and it's your duty to protect me against the press. I don't want columnists popping out of my bathroom any more than you do."

Murt gave up. "The argument is entirely anticipatory," he pointed out. "The virus might turn out to be a batch of dormant German measles. Would you consider having dinner with me tonight?"

"Why?" She shot the question back at him like a rebounding tennis ball. "Answer that first!"

Murt opened his mouth. He could not recall ever hearing such a rude rejoinder to an invitation to dinner. Not that there had been a plethora of amenities between them, but this was unthinkable! The question was, why *should* she have dinner with him? Give her eight good reasons. What was his motive in asking her? In one word, *why*?

Murt searched her face, but only a quiet interest showed in her expression.

"Why does any man invite any woman to dinner?" he countered.

"You aren't *any* man, Dr. Murt. Nor am I *any* woman. I want your specific reason for inviting me to dinner. Is it to discuss professional matters or—what?"

"Good Lord, Dr. Sutton!" He followed her lead in using the formal address. "Man is a social animal! I would enjoy your company at dinner, that's all. At least, I thought I would."

She looked at him unrelentingly. "If the talk will be about baseball, books or billiards, I'm for it. If it's to be moonlight, roses and dimmed lights—no sale."

It was like asking one's grandfather for a date. His regard for her highly professional approach turned to resentment. After all, she was a woman, a woman who persisted in belting her smock too tightly and wearing sheer nylons. Why this absurd revulsion at his casual acknowledgment of her sex?

He almost withdrew the invitation, but changed his mind at the last moment. "You name the place and the subject for conversation."

She nodded. "Very well, I'll pick you up at seven."

He had his date—with an emancipated female, and she didn't let him forget it during the whole meal. The restaurant she picked was expensive, but about as romantic as a bus depot. She ordered beer instead of a cocktail, toyed wordlessly with a \$5.00 steak, and argued over the check.

Only as they were preparing to leave did she betray a sign of femininity. A platinum blonde, two tables away, had been eying Murt. Suddenly, she lurched to her feet without a word to her escort, staggered over to the pathologist, slurred, "You're what I've b'n lookin' for all m'life," and planted a wet alcoholic kiss on his mouth before he could defend himself.

Her escort peeled her away with sad-eyed apologies. There was no jealousy or anger in his face, only a deep hurt. "She—she isn't well, I think," he said. "You know, this new—whatever it is that's going around."

Murt wiped off the lipstick and looked at Phyllis, expecting to find at best sardonic amusement, but she seemed pale and annoyed.

"I'm sorry I brought you here," she said.

"Think nothing of it," Murt told her. "You heard the man. This is what's going around. Do you think I'll catch it?"

Phyllis wasn't amused. She did let him ride the taxi to her apartment, but bade him a terse goodbye at the door.

Except for the incident of the blonde and Phyl's reaction, the evening had been a bust. Murt wondered how he had ever visualized her as a warm-blooded, responsive female. He smiled at the evening of torment she had once given him.

She was entirely frigid or else so leery of men that she might as well have been one herself.

IV

The following morning, he presided at a specialists' conference at the hospital, during which he revealed the results of the blood research. They had all read the Health Service bulletin and were sharply interested in the photomicrographs.

When the meeting was over, Feldman, the bacteriologist, and Stitchell, an endocrinologist, volunteered to work with Murt. They gave Phyllis' "gland-irritation" theory more credence than Murt. He outlined a program. Both agreed to take the problem back to their own departments.

The conference set Murt behind in his work and he spoke scarcely five words to his assistant until he was ready to leave. As he finished scrubbing up, she handed him an early edition of the *Times*.

"Local Doctor Isolates Love Bug!" The story was sketchy and not half so positive as the headline, but it did name him and High Dawn Hospital, and described the new virus.

He stared at Phyllis Sutton. "Did you—"

"Of course not. The reporters were here, but I sent them away. I told them we were medicine men, not tobacco men."

"Your name isn't even mentioned," he said suspiciously.

"You signed the report to the Health Service," she pointed out. "The leak probably came at that end." She put her hand on his arm. "It wasn't your fault."

His fury cooled as he noted her gesture. Then she realized that he was looking down at her hand and withdrew it quickly.

The next few days were blindly busy. A note from the government acknowledged receipt of his report and pictures, and was followed by a message that the virus could not be identified. The implication was that there was a strong possibility that it was the causative factor in the new *malaise*.

Murt devoted more attention to the joint laboratory work on the virus. The newspapers continued to come up with confidential information they shouldn't have had, and they dubbed the Love Bug, *Murt's Virus*. The name stuck, and the pathologist found himself famous overnight.

Phyllis continued to force all the credit upon him, on threat of transferring out if he violated her confidence. Except for the nuisance of dodging reporters, the accolade was not entirely unpleasant.

His pictures—old ones, Lord knew where they had dug them up—began appearing in the papers. Instead of reproving him, the

hospital board voted him a substantial salary increase and gave him a free hand in directing the research. A government grant was obtained to supplement his budget, and the work picked up speed.

Necessarily, the lead that Phyllis Sutton's early research had given them on the rest of the medical world was maintained largely because of the time lag in disseminating the information contained in Murt's report, and the additional time it took for other clinical laboratories to confirm it.

Cages of experimental animals began arriving along with several additional specialists. Ebert Industrial Labs, contrite over the original information leak, made available their electron microscope, and Murt assigned the new toxicologist to work over there with Feldman, the bacteriologist, studying ways to weaken or destroy the virus.

Stitchell, the endocrinologist, and a trio of psychologists from the State University began injecting monkeys with virus when Feldman found he could propagate it in sterile medium.

On September 12, 1961, Dr. Sylvester Murt became a victim of the virus which bore his name.

He had slept poorly and he awakened feeling empty. His first dismal thought was that Phyl wouldn't be at the hospital this morning. He had told her to spend a few hours down at Ebert Labs, getting notes on their progress.

As he shaved, dressed and breakfasted, this thought preyed on his mind. It wasn't until he had put in half the morning clock-watching and door-gazing that he stepped outside his wretchedness and took an objective look at his feelings.

It wasn't that he missed her help—he had plenty of personnel at his disposal now. He simply longed for the sight of her, for the sound of her voice and her heels clipping busily around his office-lab.

Here we go again, he thought, and then he came up short. The feeling was similar to the silly evening of infatuation he had allowed himself, but it was intensified tenfold. The burn in his stomach was almost painful. He caught himself sighing like a frustrated poet, and he grew to hate the sight of the hall door, through which she kept right on not appearing.

When she failed to show up by 11:30, and he gagged over his lunch, he knew he was sick.

He had Murt's Virus!

Now what? Did knowing you had it make it any easier? Easier to make a damned fool of himself, he supposed. He'd have to take hold of himself or he'd scare her off the grounds.

At the thought of her leaving him for good, something like a dull crosscut saw hacked across his diaphragm, and he dropped his forkful of potato salad.

Back at his office, he diluted 30 cc of pure grain alcohol with water and swallowed it. Some of the distress and anxiety symptoms were relieved, and he bent determinedly to his work.

When her distinctive steps finally came through the door, he refused to raise his head from the binocular microscope. "How are they making out over there?" he mumbled.

"It's slow," she said, dropping her notes on his desk. "They're halfway through the sulfas so far. No results yet."

Relief at having her near him again was so great, it was almost frightening. But he gained equal pleasure from finding his self-control adequate to keep from raising his head and devouring her with his eyes.

"Sylvester," her voice came from behind his stool, "if you don't mind, I'd rather not go over there again."

"Why not?"

Her voice was strangely soft. "Because I—I missed... ."

At that instant, her hand rested on his shoulder and it sent a charge of high voltage through him. He stiffened.

"Don't do that!" he said sharply.

He could see her reflection dimly in the window glass. She took a step backward. "What's the matter, Sylvester?"

He fought back the confusion in his brain, considered explaining that he was making a fine adjustment on the scope. But he didn't. He turned and let her have it. "Because I've got the virus," he said in a flat voice. "And the object of my affection—or infected, overstimulated glands—is *you!*"

"Oh, dear! That blonde at the restaurant... ." Phyl's face was pale, but she composed her features quickly. "Do you want me to leave?"

"Lord no! That magnifies the symptoms. Stay with me and—and just be yourself. I won't bother you. If I lay a finger on you, clobber me."

"Have you had your blood tested?"

"I don't have to. I've got all the symp—"

He broke off, realizing that he was taking for granted that the new virus *was* the cause of his feeling. Clinically, this was nowhere near proved yet. Slowly he rolled up his sleeve above the elbow. He dipped a swatch of gauze in alcohol and swabbed a vein.

"All right, Phyl, you're the doctor. Make with the syringe."

By nightfall, Murt came to understand the reasons for the increase in industrial accidents, absenteeism and the rest of the social effects of the "mild" epidemic. Phyllis Sutton was in his mind constantly. He deliberately did not look at her. But he was aware of her every movement, the texture and shape of her hand when she handed him a slide, the scent of her powder, the sound of her heels.

When she left the room, he found himself awaiting her return and conjecturing on what she was doing every moment. Not that it was difficult to adjust his behavior—no, that was relatively easy. All he had to do was think about every remark he made to her, censoring word, inflection and tone of voice—and, by keeping his back to her, it was easy to prevent his eyes from darting glances at her profile and staring at the curve of her hip below the tight belt.

By staying busy, he fought off the depression until he left for the club, when it closed in on him like an autumn fog. He stopped at the club bar.

Curly, the bald-headed bartender, eyed him curiously when he ordered a double Scotch.

"Heavy going down at the hospital these days?" Curly asked.

Murt envied him his relaxed, carefree expression. He nodded. "Pretty busy. I suppose you're catching it, too. Lot of people drowning their sorrows these days?"

Curly looked up at the clock. "You said it! In about a half hour, the place'll be loaded. This epidemic is going to run the distilleries dry if it doesn't end pretty soon."

"Does liquor help any?"

"Seems to—a little. It's the damnedest thing! Everybody's in love with the wrong people—I mean ten times as bad as usual. Of course, not everybody. Take my wife—she's got it bad, but she's still in love with *me*. So it could be worse."

"What do you mean?" Murt asked, raising his head.

"I mean it's bad enough for the poor woman to have the guy she wants. It's the jealousy angle. Every minute I'm away, she sits at home wondering if I'm faithful. Calls me up six times a shift. I don't dare take her out anyplace. Every time another female comes in sight, she starts worrying. Kate's a damned good wife, always has been, or I wouldn't be putting up with it. That's what's happening to a lot of marriages. Some guys get fed up and start looking around. About that time, the bug bites *them* and look out, secretary!"

"But it's not her fault," Murt said emphatically.

"I know," Curly shrugged. "A lot of people don't make any allowances for it, though. You know Peter, the elevator boy? He and his wife both got it. For a while it was okay, but I guess they finally drove themselves nuts, keeping tabs on each other. Now they can't stand to be together and they can't stand to be apart. Poor joker ran the cage past the basement limit-switch three times today and had to be bailed out of the shaft. Mr. Johnson said he'd fire him if he could get another boy."

The implication was shocking to Murt. He had supposed that unhappiness would stem principally from cases of unrequited love, such as his own, but it was apparent that the disease magnified the painful aspects of mutual love as well. Over-possessiveness and jealousy were common reefs of marriage, so it was hardly illogical that the divorce courts were as busy as the marriage license bureaus, after all.

It helped a little to immerse himself in the troubles of others, but, after another double Scotch, he went to his apartment and immediately fell into despondency. The desire to phone Phyllis was almost overpowering, though he knew talking to her wouldn't help. Instead, he dressed and went to dinner. The club boasted a fine chef, but the food tasted like mucilage.

Later, he went to the bar and drank excessively. Yet he had to take a sedative to get to sleep.

He awoke in a stupor at ten o'clock. His phone was jangling persistently. It was Phyllis Sutton, and her face showed sharp concern.

"Are you all right, Sylvester?"

For a moment his hangover dominated, but then it all came back. "Good morning! I'm *great*!" he moaned.

"Stitchell and the new toxicologist think they have something to report," she said.

"So do I. Alcohol is positively not the answer."

"This is important. Your suggestion on the sulfa series seems to have paid off."

"I'll be right over," he said, "as soon as I amputate my head."

"Come down to the zoo. I'll be there."

The thought of a remedy that might relieve him was a fair hangover cure. He dressed quickly and even managed to swallow a little coffee and toast.

V

At the hospital, he went directly to the "zoo" in the basement. A knot of personnel, including Phyllis, Peterson, the toxicologist, and Feldman, opened to admit him to the cage under their inspection. A quick glance at the control cages showed no change in the undoctored monkeys. Males and females were paired off, huddling together miserably, chattering and sadly rubbing their heads together. Each couple eyed the other couples suspiciously. Even here, the overpossessiveness was evident, and Murt cringed from the pitiful, disconsolate expressions.

The cage before him, however, appeared normally animated. The monkeys were feeding and playing happily. Feldman was grinning. "Had to try a new derivative, Sylvester, but the sulfa series was the right approach."

Murt stared at the cage, redefying. "Hadn't realized you succeeded in producing the symptoms in monkeys."

Phyllis said, "Why, I gave you that report yester—" She broke off with an understanding glance.

Peterson was exclaiming, "I never saw such a rapid-acting remedy! And so far, there's no evidence of toxic effect."

"It must absorb directly into the gland tissue," Feldman added. "Hardly had time to materially reduce the virus content significantly."

Murt murmured words of congratulations to them, turned on his heel and stalked out. Phyllis followed him to his office.

"Get me some of the stuff and notes on the dosages they administered," he ordered.

"Certainly," she said. "But why didn't you ask—*Dr. Murt, you aren't going to try it on yourself?*"

"Why not?" he barked hoarsely.

"It'll be weeks before we can determine if it's safe," she protested, horrified.

"We haven't got weeks. People are falling apart. This thing's contagious."

Even while Murt said it, he felt it was the wrong approach. He knew his own perspective was shot, but Phyllis would probably try to protect him against himself.

She did not. Instead, her face softened with sympathy and something else he refused to identify. She said, "I'll be right back."

The pressure in his head throbbed down his neck into his body. He wanted her so much, it was difficult to resist following her out into the hall. She returned in a few minutes with a 500-cc glass-stoppered reagent bottle half full of a milky fluid.

"Oral administration?" he asked.

She nodded. "Fifteen cc for the monkeys."

She secured a small beaker and a tapered graduate from the glassware cabinet and set them before him. He poured 50 cc into the graduated measure and transferred it to the beaker.

"What do they call it?" he asked.

"Sulfa-tetradine," she replied. "One of a series Peterson was testing. There is no physiological data on it yet. All he knows is that it inhibited the virus in culture. So they tried it on the monkeys."

Murt raised the beaker to his lips. It was against every sensible tenet of scientific procedure. He was amazed that Phyllis was silent as he swallowed the bland, chalky fluid. He heard a clink. Turning, he saw her raising the graduate to her lips. In it was a like quantity of sulfa-tetradine.

"What are you doing?" he half-shouted. "We don't need a test-control!"

"I'm not a control," she said softly, touching her lips with a scrap of gauze. "I've had the virus for months."

He stared at her unbelievably. "How do you know?"

"One of the first test samples was my own blood," she said. "You saw it. It was one of the twelve positive."

"But the symptoms—you don't show a sign of—"

"Thanks," she said. "I started to break down yesterday, but you didn't notice. You see, you are my fixation and when you told me that you had it, too, I—"

"*Your* fixation!" The beaker slipped from his fingers and smashed to the tile. "*You're in love with me?*"

Her arms hung loosely at her sides and tears rimmed her eyes. "Pathologically or otherwise, I've been a case since before I started the blood tests."

They moved together and clung to each other. "Phyl, Phyl—why didn't you tell me?"

Fiercely, she closed his lips with her own, and her fingers dug deeply into his shoulders. His arms pulled her closer yet, trying to fill the void in him that was greater than the Universe. For a long minute, the knowledge of her love and physical contact with her straining body dispelled the bleak loneliness.

When their lips parted, they gasped for breath.

It was no good. It was like tearing at an itching insect bite with your fingernails. The relief was only momentary, and it left the wound bleeding and more irritated than ever. Even if they were married—look at Peter at the club—Peter and his wife, mutually in love and completely miserable. It wasn't normal love. It was the damned virus!

As well argue with gravity. He tried to tell her, but he couldn't make her understand. Her restraint had been magnificent, but when the dam broke, it was beyond stopping the flood of her emotion. And now he couldn't believe it himself. Nothing this wonderful could be destroyed by mere misunderstanding. He cursed the years of his celibacy. All that time wasted—lost!

It was six o'clock before they reached her apartment. The License Bureau had been a mob scene. Hours more, upstairs in the City Hall waiting for the judge, while they held hands like a pair of college sophomores, staring into each others' eyes, drinking, drinking the elixir of adoration with a thirst that wouldn't be sated.

Phyllis weakened first. In the cab, after the ceremony, she released his hand and wiped her damp forehead.

Then, in the elevator, Murt felt himself relaxing. The alchemy of sustained passion had exhausted them both, he decided.

As Phyllis slipped the key in the door, she looked up at him in surprise. "Do you know, I'm hungry. I'm starved—for the first time in months."

Murt discovered his own stomach was stirring with a prosaic pangful demand of its own. "We should have stopped to eat," he said, realizing they had forgotten lunch.

"*Steaks!* I have some beauties in my freezer!" Phyllis exclaimed. They peeled off their coats and she led him into the small kitchen. She pointed at the cupboard and silverware drawer. "Set the table. We'll eat in five minutes."

Slipping into an apron, she explored the freezer for meat and French fries, dropped them into the HF cooker and set the timer for 90 seconds. When it clicked off, she was emptying a transparent sack of prepared salad into a bowl.

"Coffee will be ready in 50 seconds, so let's eat," she announced.

For minutes, they ate silently, ravenously, face to face in the little breakfast nook. Murt had forgotten the pure animal pleasure of satisfying a neglected appetite, and so, apparently, had his wife.

Wife! The thought jolted him.

Their eyes met, and he knew that the same thing was in her mind.

The sulfa-tetradine!

With the edge barely off his hunger, he stopped eating. She did, too. They sipped the steaming coffee and looked at each other.

"I—feel better," Phyllis said at last.

"So do I."

"I mean—I feel differently."

He studied her face. It was new. The tenseness was gone and it was a beautiful face, with soft lips and intelligent eyes. But now the eyes were merely friendly.

And it aroused no more than a casual pleasure in him, the pleasure of viewing a lovely painting or a perfect sunset. A peaceful intellectual rapport settled over them, inducing a physical lethargy. They spoke freely of their sensations, of the hypo-adrenal effects, and wondered that there was no unpleasant reaction. They decided that, initially at least, sulfa-tetradine was a miraculous success. Murt thought he should go back to the hospital and work out a report right away.

Phyllis agreed and offered to accompany him, but he said she had better get a night's sleep. The next day would be hectic.

After four hours at his desk, he called a taxi and, without hesitation, gave the address of his club. Not until he fell wearily into bed did he remember it was his wedding night.

By mutual agreement, the marriage was annulled the next day.

Feldman and Peterson were gratified at the efficacy of their drug, but both were horrified that Murt had chosen to experiment on himself. As usual, Phyl had insisted on being left out of the report.

After a week of close observation, one of the monkeys was chloroformed and tissue-by-tissue examination was made by an army of histologists. Blood samples showed completely clear of the virus, as did a recheck on Murt's own blood. No deleterious effects could be detected, so the results were published through the Government Health Service.

It was the day before Christmas before Dr. Sylvester Murt first noticed the approaching symptoms of a relapse, or reinfection—he couldn't guess which. The past weeks had been pleasantly busy and, as acclaimed authority on Murt's virus, he had had little time to think subjectively about his experience.

Sulfa-tetradine was now considered the specific for the affliction and was being produced and shipped by the carload all over the world. The

press had over-generously insisted on giving him all the credit for the remedy as well as the isolation of the disease virus. He was an international hero.

The warning of another attack came to him at 3:30 in the afternoon, when Phyllis Sutton was leaving. She stuck her head back in the door and gave him an uncommonly warm smile and cried, "Merry Christmas, Doctor!"

He waved at her and, as the door closed, caught his breath. There was the burn in his stomach again. It passed away and he refused to give it further thought.

His own cab wound its way through the heavy Christmas Eve traffic an hour before store-closing time. Finally, the vehicle stalled in a jam. It was only six blocks to his club, so Murt paid off the driver and walked.

Part of his strategy of bachelorhood had been to ignore Christmas and the other sentimental seasons, when loneliness costs many a man his independence. But now it was impossible to ignore the snowflakes, the bustling, package-laden crowds and the street-corner Santa Clauses with their tinkling bells.

He found himself staring into department store windows at the gay decorations.

A pair of shimmering, nearly invisible nylons caught his eye. They were the most impalpable of substances, only their bare outline visible against the white background.

He thought of Phyllis and, on impulse, went into the store and bought a pair. The clerk had to pick a size at random for him. Outside, on the sidewalk, he stared at the prettily gift-wrapped package and finally acknowledged the tremor, the tension and the old ache in the region of his diaphragm.

Relapse!

He plodded three slushy blocks up a side-street before he found a cab. He gave Phyllis Sutton's address to the driver and sank back in the taxi as a wave of weakness overcame him. What if she weren't home? It was Christmas Eve. She would probably be visiting friends or relatives.

But she wasn't. She opened the door under his impatient knock, and her eyes widened cordially.

"Sylvester!" she exclaimed. "Merry Christmas! Is that for me?" She pointed to the package, clutched forgotten in his hands.

"Merry, hell!" he said dispiritedly. "I came to warn you to look out for a relapse. Mine's been coming on all day."

She drew him inside, made him take off his coat and sit down before she acknowledged his remark. The apartment was cozy, with a tiny Christmas tree decorated in the window. She returned from the hall closet and sat beside him.

"Look what I did—on impulse," he said and tossed the package on her lap. "That's what really turned it on."

She opened the nylons and looked up at him sideways.

He continued unhappily, "I saw them in a window. Made me think of you, and about that time the seizure began. I tried to kid myself that I was just getting you a little token of—of my esteem, but the symptoms are almost as bad as before already."

Apparently she refused to accept the seriousness of the situation. Her smile was fatuous, he thought, kissably fatuous.

"Don't you realize what this means?" he demanded. "Peterson and Feldman turned up a very distressing fact. Sulfa-tetradine deposits out in the endocrines, so a single dose is all a person can take. This relapse of mine means we have it all to do over again."

"Think, Dr. Murt! Just think a minute," she urged.

"About what?"

"If the sulfa deposits out in the very glands it's there to protect, how could you be suffering another attack?"

His arms ached to reach out and emphasize his argument. "I don't know. All I know is how I feel. In a way, this is even worse, because—"

"I know," Phyllis said and perversely moved close to him. "My relapse came last Tuesday when I bought you a tie for Christmas. I sent a blood sample over to Ebert Labs right away. And do you know what?"

"What?" Murt asked in a bewildered fog.

"It was negative. I don't have Murt's Virus." She slipped an arm around his waist and put her head on his shoulder. "All I've got is Murt himself."

Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded

Louis Trimble

Probability

If you ever get to drinking beer in your favorite saloon and meet a scared little guy who wants to buy you the joint, supply you with fur coats and dolls and run you for Congress—listen well! That is, if you really want the joint, the fur coats, the dolls and a seat in Congress. Just ask Mike Murphy....

Horace Brown Fyfe

Manners of the Age

With everyone gone elsewhere, Earth was perfect for gracious living—only there was nothing gracious about it!

Raymond Fisher Jones

The Unlearned

The scientists of Rykeman III were conceded by all the galactic members to be supreme in scientific achievement. Now the Rykes were going to share their vast knowledge with the scientists of Earth. To any question they would supply an answer—for a price. And Hockley, of all Earth's scientists, was the stubborn one who wanted to weigh the answers with the costs....

Winston K. Marks

Forsythe's Retreat

Sextus Rollo Forsythe had his trouble with the bottle, but nothing out of a bottle ever produced such a hotel as the Mahoney-Plaza: only 260 rooms ... only two guests to a room ... but accommodating 5200 guests—all at the same time!... Floor please?

Jack Taylor

The Moralist

Aye, 'tis a difficult thing to be a lady on a far world—but who needs them there?

Robert Moore Williams

Be It Ever Thus

The planet's natives were so similar to their conquerors that no one could tell them apart--except for their difference in thinking.

Robert Moore Williams

The Lost Warship

Jap bombs rained down, there was a tremendous blast—and a weird thing happened to the Idaho.

Leroy Yerxa

One-Way Ticket to Nowhere

Like a ghost in the night a whole Mono train vanished. And it was up to Jeff Blake to find out where it had gone...

Richard Stockham

The Valley

If you can't find it countless millions of miles in space, come back to Earth. You might find it just on the other side of the fence—where the grass is always greener.

Harry Warner

Cancer World

Greg tried desperately to find an illegal method of joining his family on Mars; for the law said that no healthy man could land on a— CANCER WORLD



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind