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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IT'S ALL YOURS ***

It was a strange and bitter Earth over which the Chancellor ruled—a strange and deformed world. There were times when the Chancellor suspected that he really was a humanistic old fool, but this seemed to be his destiny and it was difficult to be anything else. Human, like all other organic life on Earth, was dying. Where it spawned, it spawned monsters. What was to be the answer?

it's all yours

by ... Sam Merwin, Jr.

It was a lonely thing to rule over a dying world—a world that had become sick, so terribly sick....

THE Chancellor's private washroom, discreetly off the innermost of his official suite of offices, was a dream of gleaming black porcelain and solid gold. Each spout, each faucet, was a gracefully stylized mermaid, the combination stall shower-steam room a marvel of hydraulic comfort and decor with variable lighting plotted to give the user every sort of beneficial ray, from ultraviolet to black heat.

But Bliss was used to it. At the moment, as he washed his hands, he was far more concerned with the reflection of his face in the mirror above the dolphin-shaped bowl. With a sort of wry resignation, he accepted the red rims of fatigue around his eyes, the batch of white at his left temple that was spreading toward the top of his dark, well-groomed head. He noted that the lines rising from the corners of his mouth to the curves of his nostrils seemed to have deepened noticeably during the past few days.

As he dried his hands in the air-stream, he told himself that he was letting his imagination run away with him—imagination had always been his weakness, and a grave failing for a head of state. And while he drew on his special, featherweight gloves, he reminded himself that, if he was aging prematurely, it was nobody's fault but his own. No other man or woman approaching qualification for the job would have taken it—only a sentimental, humanistic fool like himself.

He took a quick sip from the benzedral fountain, waited for the restorative to do its work. Then, feeling moderately refreshed, he returned to his office, sank into the plastifoam cushions of

the chair behind his tabletop mountain of a desk and pressed the button that informed Myra, his confidential secretary, he was ready.

There were five in the delegation—by their collars or robes, a priest, a rabbi, a lama, a dark-skinned Watusi witchman and a white robed abbess draped in chaste, flowing white. Automatically, he surveyed them, checking. The priest's right shoe was twice as broad as his left, the rabbi's head, beneath the black cap that covered it, was long and thin as a zucchini squash. The witchman, defiantly bare and black as ebony from the waist up, had a tiny duplicate of his own handsome head sprouting from the base of his sternum. The visible deformities of the lama and abbess were concealed beneath their flowing robes. But they were there—they had to be there.

Bliss rose as they entered and said, waving a gloved hand at the chairs on their side of the desk, "Greetings, sirs and madam—please be seated." And, when they were comfortable, "Now, to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

He knew, of course—sometimes he thought he knew more than any man should be allowed or able to know—but courtesy and custom demanded the question. It was the witchman who answered. Apparently he was spokesman for the group.

He said, speaking beautiful Cantabrigian English, "Honorable sir, we have come as representatives of the religions of the world, not to protest but in a spirit of enquiry. Our flocks grow increasingly restive, when they are not leaving us altogether, our influence grows less. We wish to know what steps, if any, are being taken toward modification or abrogation of the sterility program. Without hope of posterity, mankind is lost."

While the others murmured their agreement, Bliss focused his gaze on the sealed lids of the tiny face sprouting from the Watusi's breastbone. He wondered if there were eyes behind them, if there were a tongue behind those tiny clamped lips, and what words such a tongue would utter if it could speak.

"We are waiting, honorable sir," the spokesman said.

Shaking himself free of the absorption, Bliss glanced at the teleprompter on his desk. Efficient as ever, Myra had their names there before him. He said, "Gentle R'hau-chi, I believe a simple exposition of our situation, and of what programs we are seeking to meet and mitigate it with, will give you the answers. Not, perhaps, the answers you seek, but the answers we must accept ..."

Although the reports from World Laboratories changed from day to day, he knew the speech by heart. For the problem remained. Humanity, like virtually all other organic life on Earth, was dying. Where it spawned, it spawned monsters. On three-dimensional vidar rolls, he showed them live shots of what the laboratories were doing, what they were trying to do—in the insemination groups, the incubators, the ray-bombardment chambers, the parthenogenesis bureau.

Studying them, he could see by their expressions, hear by the prayers they muttered, how shocking these revelations were. It was one thing to know what was going on—another for them to see for themselves. It was neither pretty—nor hopeful.

When it was over, the rabbi spoke. He said, in deep, slightly guttural, vastly impressive intonations, "What about Mars, honorable sir? Have you reached communication with our brothers and sisters on the red planet?"

Bliss shook his head. He glanced at the alma-calendar at his elbow and told them, "Mars continues to maintain silence—as it has for two hundred and thirty-one years. Ever since the final war."

They knew it, but they had to hear it from him to accept it even briefly. There was silence, long wretched silence. Then the abbess spoke. She said, "Couldn't we send out a ship to study conditions first hand, honorable sir?"

Bliss sighed. He said, "The last four spaceships on Earth were sent to Mars at two-year intervals during the last perihelions. Not one of them came back. That was more than a half century ago. Since I accepted this office, I have had some of our ablest remaining scientific brains working on the problem of building a new ship. They have not been successful." He laid his gloved hands, palms upward, on the desk, added, "It appears that we have lost the knack for such projects."

When they were gone, he walked to the broad window and looked out over the World Capital buildings at the verdant Sahara that stretched hundreds of miles to the foot of the faintly purple Atlas Mountains on the northwestern horizon. A blanket of brilliant green, covering what had once been the greatest of all Earthly deserts—but a poisonous blanket of strange plant mutations, some of them poisonous beyond belief.

Truly, Bliss thought, he belonged to a remarkable species. Man had conquered his environment, he had even, within the limits of the Solar System, conquered space. He had planted, and successfully, his own kind on a neighboring planet and made it grow. But man had never, at least on his home planet, conquered himself.

Overpopulation had long since ceased to be a problem—the atomic wars had seen to that. But, thanks to the miracles of science—atomics and automation—man had quickly rebuilt the world into a Garden of Eden with up-to-date plumbing. He might have won two planets, but he had turned his Eden into an arbor of deadly nightshade.

Oddly, it had not been the dreadful detonations of thermo-nuclear bombs that had poisoned his paradise—though, of course, they had helped. It had been the constant spillage of atomic waste into the upper atmosphere that had spelled ruin. Now, where four billion people had once lived in war and want, forty million lived in poisoned plenty. He was chancellor of a planet whose ruling species could not longer breed without disaster.

His was the last generation. It should have been a peaceful generation. But it was not.

For, as population decreased, so did the habitable areas of Earth. The formerly overpopulated temperate regions were now ghastly jungles of self-choking mutant plant growth. Only what had been the waste areas—Antarctica, the Gobi, Australia, Patagonia and the Sahara-Arabia districts—could still support even the strange sorts of human life that remained.

And the forty millions still alive were restless, frightened, paranoiac. Each believed his own group

was being systematically exterminated in favor of some other. None had yet faced the fact that humanity, for all practical purposes, was already dead on Earth.

He sensed another presence in the room. It was Myra, his secretary, bearing a sheaf of messages in one hand, a sheaf of correspondence for him to sign in the other. She said, "You look beat, chancellor. Sit down."

Bliss sat down. Myra, as his faithful and efficient amanuensis for more than fifteen years, had her rights. One of them was taking care of him during working hours. She was still rather pretty, he noted with surprise. An Afro-Asian with skin like dark honey and smooth, pleasant, rather flat features. It was, he thought, a pity she had that third eye in her forehead.

She stood beside him while he ran through the letters and signed them. "Meeting of the regional vice-chancellors tomorrow, eh?" he said as he handed them back to her.

"Right, chancellor," she said crisply. "Ten o'clock. You may have to take another whirlwind trip to tell them the situation is well in hand."

He grunted and glanced at the messages, scanned them quickly, tossed them into the disposal vent beside his desk. Myra looked moderately disapproving. "What about that possible ship from Mars?" she asked. "Shouldn't you look into it?"

He grunted again, looked up at her, said, "If I'd looked into every 'ship from Mars' astronomy has come up with in the nine years I've held this office, I'd never have had time for anything else. You can lay odds it's a wild asteroid or something like that."

"They sound pretty sure this time," Myra said doubtfully.

"Don't they always?" he countered. "Come on, Myra, wrap it up. Time to go home."

"Roger, boss," she said, blinking all three eyes at him.

Bliss turned on the autopi and napped while the gyrojet carried him to his villa outside Dakar. Safely down on the roof of the comfortable, automatic white house, he took the lift down to his second-floor suite, where he showered and changed into evening sandals and clout. He redonned his gloves, then rode down another two flights to the terrace, where Elise was waiting for him in a gossamer-thin iridescent eggshell sari. They kissed and she patted the place on the love-seat beside her. She had a book—an old-fashioned book of colored reproductions of long-since-destroyed old masters on her lap. The artist was a man named Peter Paul Rubens.

Eyeing the opulent nudes, she giggled and said, "Don't they look awfully—plain? I mean, women with only two breasts!"

"Well—yes," he said. "If you want to take that angle."

"Idiot!" she said. "Honestly, darling, you're the strangest sort of man to be a World Chancellor."

"These are strange times," he told her, smiling without mirth, though with genuine affection.

"Suppose—just suppose," she said, turning the pages slowly, "biology should be successful in stabilizing the species again. Would they *have* to set it back that far? I mean, either we or *they* would feel awfully out of style."

"What would you suggest?" he asked her solemnly.

"Don't be nasty," she said loftily. Then she giggled again and ruffled his hair. "I wish you'd have it dyed one color," she told him. "Either black or gray—or why not a bright puce?"

"What's for dinner?" he asked, adding, "If I can still eat after that."

The regional vice-chancellors were awaiting him in the next-to-the-innermost office when Bliss arrived at World Capital the next morning. Australia, Antarctica, Patagonia, Gobi, Sahara-Arabia—they followed him inside like so many penguins in the black-and-white official robes. All were deathly serious as they stated their problems.

Gobi wanted annual rainfall cut from 60 to 45 centimeters.

Sahara-Arabia was not receiving satisfactory food synthetics—there had been Moslem riots because of pork flavor in the meat.

Patagonia was suffering through a species of sport-worm that was threatening to turn it into a desert if biology didn't come up with a remedy fast.

Antarctica wanted temperature lowered from a nighttime norm of 62° Fahrenheit to 57.6°. It seemed that the ice in the skating rinks, which were the chief source of exercise and entertainment for the populace, got mushy after ten p.m.

Australia wanted the heavy uranium deposits under the Great Central Desert neutralized against its causing further mutations.

For a moment, Bliss was tempted to remind his viceroys that it was not going to make one bit of difference whether they made their spoiled citizens happy or not. The last man on Earth would be dead within fifty years or so, anyway. But that would have been an unpardonable breach of taste.

Everyone *knew*, of course, but it was never mentioned. To state the truth was to deny hope. And without hope, there was no life.

Bliss promised to see that these matters were tended to at once, taking each in turn. This done, they discussed his making another whirlwind trip through the remaining major dominions of the planet to bolster morale. He was relieved when at last, the amenities concluded, the penguins filed solemnly out. He didn't know which he found more unattractive—Gobi's atrophied third leg, strapped tightly to the inside of his left thigh and calf, or Australia's jackass ears. Then, sternly, he reminded himself that it was not their fault they weren't as lucky as himself.

Myra came in, her three eyes aglow, and said, "Boss, you were wrong for once in your life."

"What is it this time?" he asked.

"About that Martian ship," she repeated. "It just landed on the old spaceport. You can see it from the window."

"For God's sake!" Bliss was on his feet, moving swiftly to the window. It was there—needle-nosed, slim as one of the mermaids in his private washroom, graceful as a vidar dancer. The entire length of it gleamed like silver in the sunlight.

Bliss felt the premature old age that had been crowding upon him of late fall away like the wool of a sheep at shearing. Here, at last, was hope—real hope. After almost two and a half centuries of non-communication, the men of the infant planet had returned to the aid of the aging planet. For, once they saw the condition of Earth, and understood it, there could be no question of anything else.

Mars, during the years of space-flight from Earth, had been the outlet for the mother planet's ablest, toughest, brightest, most aggressive young men and women. They had gone out to lick a hostile environment, they had been hand-picked for the job—and they had done it. The ship, out there in the poisonous Sahara, was living proof of their success.

He turned from the window and went back to his desk. He said, "Myra, have their leader brought here to see me as soon as possible."

"*Roger!*" she said, leaving him swiftly, gracefully. Again he thought it was too bad about her third eye. It had made it awfully hard for her to find a husband. He supposed he should be grateful, since it had made him an incomparably efficient secretary.

The young man was space-burned and silver-blond of hair. He was broad and fair of feature and his body was tall and lean and perfect in his black, skin-tight uniform with the silver rocket-burst on the left breast. He stood at attention, lifted a gauntleted hand in salute and said, "Your excellency, Chancellor Bliss—Space-Captain Hon Yaelstrom of Syrtis City, Mars, bearing official rank of Inter-planetary legate plenipotentiary. My papers, sir."

He stood stiff as a ramrod and laid a set of imposing-looking documents on the vast desk before Bliss. His accent was stiff as his spinal column. Bliss glanced casually at the papers, nodded and handed them back. So this, he thought, was how a "normal," a pre-atomic, a non-mutated human, looked. Impressive.

Catching himself wandering, he pushed a box of costly smokes toward the ambassador.

"*Nein*—no thank you, sir," was the reply.

"Suppose you sit down and tell me what we can do for you," said Bliss, motioning toward a chair.

"Thank you, sir, I prefer to stand," was the reply. And, when Bliss motioned that it was all right, "My mission is not a happy one, excellency. Due to overpopulation on Mars, I have been sent to inform the government of Earth that room must be made to take care of our overpopulation."

"I see," Bliss leaned back in his chair, trying to read the situation correctly. "That may take a little doing. You see, we aren't exactly awash with real estate here."

The reply was rigid and harsh. Captain Yaelstrom said, "I regret to remind your excellency that I have circled this planet before landing. It is incredibly rich in plant growth, incredibly underpopulated. And I assure your excellency that my superiors have not sent me here with any idle request. Mars must have room to emigrate."

"And if we find ourselves unable to give it to you?"

"I fear we shall have to take it, your excellency."

Bliss studied the visitor from space, then said, "This is rather sudden, you know. I fear it will take time. You must have prospered amazingly on Mars to have overpopulated the planet so soon."

"Conditions have not been wholly favorable," was the cryptic reply. "But as to time, we are scarcely in condition to move our surplus population overnight. It will take years—perhaps decades—twenty-five years at a minimum."

Twenty-five years! That was too soon. If Captain Yaelstrom were a typical Martian, there was going to be trouble. Bliss recalled again that Earth had sent only its most aggressive young folk out to the red planet. He made up his mind then and there that he was somehow going to salvage for Earth its final half-century of peace.

He said, "How many people do you plan to send here, Captain?"

The ambassador hesitated. Then he said, "According to the computations of our experts, taking the population curve during the next twenty-five years into account, there will be seventeen million, three hundred thirty-two thousand five hundred—approximately."

The figure was too large to be surplus, Bliss decided. It sounded to him as if humanity were about to abandon Mars completely. He wondered what the devil had gone wrong, decided this was hardly the time to ask. He offered Captain Yaelstrom a drink, which was refused, then asked him if he wouldn't like to wash up.

To his mild surprise, the ambassador nodded eagerly. "I shall be grateful," he said. "You have no idea how cramped spaceship quarters can be."

"I can imagine," said Bliss dryly. He led the way into the black-and-gold washroom, was amused at the slight but definite popping of ambassadorial eyes. Earth might be dying, he thought, but at least her destroyers would leave a heritage. He motioned toward the basin with its mermaid taps and Captain Yaelstrom hesitated, then began pulling off his black gauntlets.

Bliss thought of something. "You mentioned twenty-five years," he said. "Is that Martian time or Earth time?"

"Martian time," said the ambassador, letting the water run over his hands.

Twenty-five years, Martian time—a Martian year was 1.88 Earth years. Bliss exhaled and said, "I think perhaps we shall be able to come to an agreement. It will take a little time, of course—channels, and all that."

The Martian held his hands in front of the air-drier. They were strong, brown hands with long, muscular fingers. Bliss looked at them and knew the whole story. For, like himself, Captain Yaelstrom had seven fingers on each. Man had done no better on Mars than he had at home. The reason for such a desperate move as emigration was all too clear.

Captain Yaelstrom stood back from the bowl, then noticed the stall shower. He said, "What is this? We have nothing like it on Mars."

Bliss explained its several therapeutic uses, then said, "Perhaps you'd like to try it yourself while I order us luncheon."

"May I, excellency?" the Martian legate asked eagerly.

"Go right ahead," said Bliss magnanimously. "It's all yours."

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