

NOVEMBER 1955

ALL STORIES  
NEW AND  
COMPLETE

William L. Hamling

Editor

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Nobody could explain the strange substance that suddenly began to deluge Earth. Tests proved it was harmless — and edible. It appeared to be —

# MANNA

by

*John Christopher*

**I**T drifted down through the early morning air of North America. It was heavier than air, but not very much heavier. In color it was a pinky white, with the texture of a honeycomb, and the size of individual fragments ranged from a few inches to some feet in diameter. It had a smell that was tantalizing and strange and almost irresistible.

George Dell Parker, head janitor of a large office building in Boston, was probably the first to encounter it. At any rate, he put in the earliest report. He had once had journalistic ambitions, and he still made a few dollars a year by passing on such information that came his way as was newsworthy. He carried the fragment in his hand, when he went downstairs to telephone the *Monitor*.

The operator knew him. "City

Desk," George said.

"Yes, sir! I'll connect you with Mr. Lomax."

He was put on to the cub room. He had expected that. The reporter who took the call was tired and bored; there had been just enough doing during the night to keep him from getting more than an hour's sleep.

"O. K.," he said, "I'm listening."

George said: "There's some notably peculiar stuff floating down out of the sky, Mr. Lomax. I got a hunk of it right here beside the telephone. You want I should tell you all about it?"

"Public Health," Lomax said. "Try it on them. So the smog is killing us all by inches, it still isn't a story. Not in Boston it isn't."

"This is no smog," George looked down from the telephone at the



piece of the substance that lay, white with a pinky glow, against the battered yellow surface of his old desk. The smell of it pricked his nostrils. "This is sure enough no smog, Mr. Lomax. And it's big. This piece is maybe four inches across."

"Blown up from a garbage can, maybe."

"There's hardly any wind. I was up on the roof and I saw this piece coming down from the west, falling at an angle of about forty-five degrees. It near enough hit me, and went on to smack against the chimney stack. I went over and picked

it up, of course. It's not from any garbage can, Mr. Lomax. I guess I know as much about trash cans as anyone. It's kind of delicate looking, a sort of pearly mushroom color. I never saw anything like it. Smells powerful, too."

Lomax was beginning to make jottings on his pad. It was a story. An inch, maybe two inches.

"What does it smell of? Unpleasant?"

"No. It's a good smell, Mr. Lomax. Makes you want to put your teeth right into it. I never met it before, but it's good."

"Then put your teeth in it,

George. What are you waiting for? What's it taste like?"

"I don't know what it is, Mr. Lomax. It may be anything — poison."

"George, it's a hard drag trying to turn you into a reporter. We'll look after your widow."

"Haven't got a wife, Mr. Lomax."

"Then get those shiny teeth stuck in."

George lifted the piece up. Holding it under his nose, he could not believe that it could be poisonous. The smell was delicious. He broke off a corner and nibbled at it. The taste, like the smell, was something completely new. And it was completely satisfying.

Lomax said: "Well? You chewing yet?"

"It melts right away in your mouth, Mr. Lomax. You know what it is? It's manna. Manna, Mr. Lomax."

"Manna? That I don't get."

Lomax's failure to grasp a Biblical allusion neither surprised nor dismayed George. He explained it carefully.

"Like the Lord sent down to the Israelites, Mr. Lomax. The manna in the desert. That kind of manna." He was continuing to eat while he talked. "It sure has a heavenly taste, and it came right down out of the sky."

Yes, Lomax reflected. A story. "Manna from Heaven," he said,

more to himself than to George. Three inches, perhaps even more. He heard George say: "That's right, Mr. Lomax," and awoke to the immediate needs of the situation.

"Bring that manna in to me, George. Take a taxi."

There was a slight pause. George said: "I guess . . . I guess I've eaten it, Mr. Lomax. It kind of slipped down."

"Why, you fool, man!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lomax. It tasted so good."

"George," Lomax said bitterly, "don't go and get married for the next two or three hours. That widow's pension is out — right out."

"I'll go look on the roof. Maybe I'll find another piece."

"Don't bother," Lomax said. "Just don't bother."

Lomax put down the telephone as the cub room door opened. One of the night drivers came in.

"What do you make of this, Luke? Two or three hunks of it in the yard." He held his hand up, showing a piece of manna, a couple of inches square. "Smells good, too."

THE first fall was light, and concentrated on Boston. There were other light falls during the next week. Geographically the distribution was impartial; New Delhi made the second report close-

ly followed by Edinburgh, Stockholm, Melbourne and Buenos Aires. By that time the manna had been thoroughly analyzed. It had a highly complex organic structure, and no noxious properties as far as was known. At the same time, people were strongly advised against eating the manna until further tests, necessarily of long duration, had been made.

The tests of long duration were simply the investigation of the effects of manna on laboratory animals. The publication of the results of the preliminary analysis of manna was incomplete; that part of the analysts' report which remarked, with some astonishment, on the fact that manna contained high protein, high carbohydrate, essential fats and, as far as could be judged, all the essential vitamins, was circulated only to the governments of other nations, with the suggestion that it would be good policy to suppress this news until the tests on animals had put it in better perspective.

In the second week after the first fall, news from Moscow made it certain that the falls were planet-wide. The Russian report said much the same as the American one had and expressed the same caution.

#### Manna was front-page news..

The question of its point of origin naturally provoked the main

interest. In the first week, a moderately well known biologist allowed his astonishment to overcome his caution and described the substance as "unearthly." It was enough to start a riot of speculation. After a day or two, people began claiming to have seen flying saucers overhead at the same time as the manna was drifting down to earth. The Martians were sending manna, or the little men from Venus. The Governments made no haste to discourage this particular campaign; people were more likely to be cautious of what they ate if the Martians were thought to have sent it.

But the bubble was pricked, decisively enough, by other scientists. In the first place there was nothing in the structure of manna that suggested an extra-terrestrial origin; it could be placed, in fact, as a variant of normal fungus anatomy. In the second place, if the manna were released by flying saucers in the upper atmosphere, then its arrival data would be anything up to five hundred miles in space and ten hours in time from that point. If you saw a flying saucer overhead at the same time as the manna came down, then whatever it was it wasn't the same flying saucer as had released it.

Then where did the manna come from? The scientists had no opinions to offer. Time would prob-

ably tell. Generally it did.

For the readers of the world's press, there could be no such patient view. If it wasn't the Martians, it was the Russians who were doing it. A significance was now read into the fact that Moscow had been the last world center to report the arrival of manna. It was all part of a Russian trick.

This story was elaborated in some detail before the more obvious discrepancies began to be noticed. By what means could the Russians simultaneously shower Greenland and Patagonia, Cape Town and San Francisco? And what possible point could there be in bombarding other countries with a pleasant-smelling, pleasant-tasting fungus-like substance, that didn't even have the slogan: "Read the Daily Worker!" stamped on the back?

By this time the news of the food value of manna was beginning to leak out. It leaked out, for example, to Rustus Hereford, the junior member but the essential driving force of the board of directors of Ambrosia Inc.. Less than three weeks after the first arrival of manna, he explained something of what he had learned to the other members of the board. He spoke to them deferentially but with the inner condescension of knowing that all this was but a very small part of the sphere that would eventually be his. And they listened in much

the reverse spirit, being aware of the same probabilities.

**R**USTUS Hereford tapped a folio in front of him on the table.

"Government laboratory report, gentlemen. It's been checked, to the best of their ability, by our own laboratory staff. Manna, wherever it comes from, is the wonder food of all time. It's got everything, and packed so that it just slides down the throat. If it were on the commercial market we might as well shut up shop."

Gavin, the Chairman of the board, said drily: "Fortunately, it's not. That report you've got hold of — I take it the Government knows what its about in withholding it?" \*

"Naturally. They don't want to release something like that until at least half a dozen generations of mice have been fed on it."

"By which time," Gavin commented, "the manna may very well have stopped falling."

"That's my own view. Whatever the stuff is, there's no reason to think of it as a permanent phenomenon. Spinet, in the lab, tells me about a writer named Charles Fort. He documented evidence of strange falls from the sky. Mostly from newspapers, but in good part from scientific periodicals. Listen to some of these falls:

"Russia, 1832 — a resinous yellow substance. Ireland, throughout the spring of 1695 — a clammy yellow substance like butter, which cattle fed on. France, 1863 — something like red meal, mixed with sand. England, 1686 — a cereal, like wheat. Michigan, 1901 — a brown dust of vegetable matter. Canada, 1868 — dark coloured vegetable matter, almost decomposed . . . total fall of 500 tons estimated."

Rustus Hereford looked up. "That's a sample. There's a lot more. Now, I'm not interested in Fort's conjectures about the falls; I don't suppose that you are, either. What is interesting is that the falls came, and then stopped. I think we can assume the same will be true of the present fall of manna."

Von Eckers, the sales director, asked him: "What's your plan, Rustus?"

"Stockpile it. Buy up whatever we can. We can say we're buying it for research purposes, and to a certain extent it will be true, though the lab people don't think much of the chances of duplicating it. Then put it in the deep freeze. When manna has stopped dropping and the Government report has told people how the mice thrived on it, we shall have a nice little luxury product on ice. Caviar will be out."

Gavin objected: "It looks like a

long chance. The stuff may stop falling tomorrow — today. Is it worth our while to undertake an operation of this scale for a profit that may be no more than a few dollars?"

"I'll always go after a few dollars if there's a chance in a thousand of them leading me to a million. What do we lose?"

He had his way; he was used to doing so. In three months' time he reported the acquisition of more extensive deep freezer space for the manna and the entry of some belated rivals into the field. Six months later again, he addressed another board meeting.

"At present count, gentlemen," he said, "this company has in stock approximately fifteen thousand cubic feet of manna. Once the manna stops falling, I estimate this as worth not much short of fifteen million dollars in luxury food. The first frozen manna has been sampled and shows no signs of deterioration. The Government report on manna will be issued tomorrow morning. It confirms the first reports of the food's edibility and nutritive content, and advises that it can be consumed without any fear of bad effects, providing, of course, that it has not been contaminated on the ground."

The only trouble," Gavin said, "is that it hasn't stopped falling."

"Not yet. But it must even-

tually. Some of the falls Fort catalogued ran for months, but they all ended. We only have to sit tight."

**G**AVIN'S nephew, Peter Gavin, asked: "What's the latest official theory about the stuff, anyway?"

Rustus Hereford shook his head. "None official. The view that strikes most people as the most plausible is that something—nuclear fusion tests, maybe or just Mother Nature — has triggered off a fungus mutation. But nobody can suggest where except that it should be somewhere pretty high, to account for the wind distribution—probably several high places . . . . the Andes, the Himalayas — that sort of setting. Biologically it's difficult to see how this wind distribution business fits in — the manna that does fall has no spores that they can recognize and it certainly doesn't start manna colonies. Maybe there's a complex involving barometric pressure, hours of sunlight, and so on, which triggers off spore production when met. They don't know."

Gavin looked up slowly. "If that theory is true, there is no reason to expect the falls to stop. Rather you could expect them to increase."

Rustus Hereford nodded. "Yeah."

"Well?"

Rustus Hereford smiled. "I'm waiting for them to turn up one

manna source. Just one. Don't think they haven't been looking — in the Andes and the Himalayas and even here in the Rockies."

Gavin said: "In that case, where does the stuff come from? From outer space? Someone suggests that in the Herald-Tribune today — that the planet, the solar system, might be passing through a cloud of it. Is that your view?"

Rustus Hereford said: "If that were what was happening, do you know what we would be collecting? Cinders! There have been cinder falls, but the manna I've tasted doesn't give the impression."

"Then you think . . . ?"

"I don't think anything, except in terms of profit and loss. When the falls stop, we've got a fortune in our lockers."

Von Eckers said: "When." There was something in his voice that focused their attention on him. He said apologetically: "I've been looking out of the window."

They followed his gaze. It was like a snowstorm, with incredibly large flakes. The sky was thick with it, drifting down on a sharp north-east wind. Gavin, who had a fad about fresh air, had opened some of the windows at the beginning of the meeting, to augment the air conditioning. While they watched, a flake of manna curled in on a vagrant draught of air and eddied down. Before their dumb-

founded eyes, it came to rest on the table around which they were sitting.

Young Peter Gavin said uneasily: "Just think — if it doesn't stop . . ." He laughed at the thought, but his laugh wasn't happy. "If it goes on falling, in greater and greater quantities — and that Government reports says it's O. K. to eat — what if people get to eating it? It's free. It's free and it tastes wonderful and the Government says it's full of vitamins. Who's going to buy our stuff? And what's all the manna in our deep freezes worth if it keeps on coming down like this?"

Rustus Hereford picked up the piece that had come in. It wasn't very big. He looked at it for a moment, and then put it in his mouth. After he had swallowed it, he said:

"If it does — I don't know what will happen, but I know one thing that won't." They looked at him. "We won't starve."

**I**N various countries there had been lobbying by food interests against the publication of official reports approving the food value of manna, but in every case they had lost. No government that has to appeal to an electorate with general adult franchise dared lift a finger against the cry for cheap food, and

this food was free. The food interests settled back into resignation at the prospect of decreased profits, and possible losses, until one of two things happened — the manna stopped falling or people got tired of the taste.

The unfortunate result was that neither thing happened. In fact, the manna fell more and more heavily and more and more universally, and far from getting tired of the taste, people who had eaten it became increasingly reluctant to eat anything else. The cry was, in fact, raised that manna incorporated some kind of drug that produced addiction, but tests fail to bear out the claim. Human guinea-pigs were found to live on non-manna diets after varying periods of manna-only diets; they reported no physical or psychological ill effects, but they were very glad to go back to manna when the tests were over.

Three years after the first fall, manna was dropping in sufficient quantity to feed the world. Rustus Hereford, who, on the failure of Ambrosia, Inc. two years earlier, had been invited into a State Department post, was present at a meeting in which an official Government attitude towards manna was finally hammered out. He heard the President say:

"We don't know where it comes from, and we don't know what it is. All right, gentlemen, all right! It's

a fungus structure, and you guess some isolated high mountain sources, but the fact remains that no one has managed to identify a source. Your guess strikes me as being about as near the truth as that of a certain gentleman with religious views who has gone on record as explaining that we are in a spiritual wilderness. It may be a good guess, but it gets us no place.

"The question we are faced with, primarily, is the problem of manna in relation to the feeding habits of this nation. A month ago the last food marketing concern went out of business. The farmers have been living on relief for over eighteen months, and those of them who are any good are doing their damndest to get into some other kind of work — for they can see no future in their own.

"The Government's first concern was as to the edibility of manna. We have checked that, and triple checked it. The fifteenth generation descendants of the mice that were first fed on manna are frisking around in the pink of physical condition. There's some suggestion that they may be a little better at mouse IQ tests, too, but statistically it's only just significant, and we needn't bother about that. The point is that manna is good for you.

"The Government's second concern, apart from its natural concern at the disruption in national life

caused by manna becoming the staple diet, must be to secure against something that could precipitate the worst disaster in history — the end of the falls of manna. Fortunately that security can be achieved. Manna stores, with no loss of quality, in deep freeze containers. We already have extensive deep-freeze storage, and we are in the process of multiplying that capacity a hundred fold. In addition we are planning to maintain adequate seed stocks of all pre-manna foodstuffs. We aim to have at least two years' supply of manna in hand. Should the falls cease, we can be back onto a normal agricultural economy in less than half that time."

The President paused. He picked up a fragment of manna from the tray in front of him and nibbled it thoughtfully.

"Well, gentlemen," he inquired, "any questions?"

**R**USTUS Hereford sat behind his grade A desk and looked at the man Cafferty had just brought in. He was a little man, and although his face was deeply wrinkled, Rustus did not guess him to be more than forty. He sat, not quite at his ease, in the visitor's chair. Rustus leaned forward.

"Cigarette?"

The man took one. "Thanks." Rustus checked the dossier that

had been completed in the outer office. He looked up again.

"Your name's Thomas Herbert — Herbert's your family name, that right?" The man nodded. "You know why you've been brought in?"

Thomas Herbert shook his head. "They didn't tell me."

"I'll tell you. I'm interested in you. You run a farming group in Maine. I want to know why."

"There's nothing against it?"

"Nothing. It's a free country. You can walk right out of that door, and pause on the way to tell me to go to hell. But I'd like to know. I may as well tell you that this is not an official inquiry at all. It's a personal one. I'm very interested in manna and in peoples' reactions to it. When it first started dropping I made an error of judgment about the stuff. I lost a lot of money — my own and other peoples'."

Herbert looked at him curiously. "I guess the source of your information about what I do must have told you the kind of people I have up at my place. Cranks. What makes you interested in cranks?"

"Crank . . ." Rustus said thoughtfully. "Working in the fields when you don't have to, building up stocks of agricultural equipment and machines — I guess cranks do those kind of things. But some other things seem funny. I hear you've got a good technical

and scientific library — books and microfilms — up at that place?"

"Pretty good."

"I also hear that you've got a deep-freeze unit up there, and that you've got it stocked with, of all things, manna. Could that be right?"

"It could."

"Then the crank label doesn't fit."

"It may not fit, but it suits us well enough."

"Look," Rustus said. "What are you doing? You've got a theory about manna. What is it? I want to know for my own peace of mind, and if it's any good at all I'll get from behind this desk and join you. If you'll have me, I will."

Herbert said slowly. "No, cranks doesn't fit. But uneasy people would do. My friends up there are all uneasy people. They don't trust manna, and they do trust me. I didn't have to sell any of them any theories or ideas to get them there, or to keep them there. I'm sorry, Mr. Secretary, but I'm not looking particularly for converts. I've got nothing to tell you."

"If there had been nothing," Rustus said, "—really nothing, then you'd have told me something. That's true, isn't it? There is something. You have got a theory, and a purpose?"

Herbert looked at him. "I'll give you that. But that's all I give you."

I've got a theory, all right, and a purpose, but I don't even think of them in my own mind if I can help it, and I never expect to make a friend close enough for me to share it with. Those who take me, take me on trust."

Rustus grinned wryly. "Take it or leave it — that right? You win. I'm uneasy myself. My resignation goes in today. I can be with you in a month, on the dot. Will you take me?"

"We'll take you."

**W**ITHIN a year, Rustus had taken almost entire charge of the administration of the colony. Thomas Herbert was glad to pass the handling over to him, and to stay himself in the background. The two men got on well together. Herbert did no more than throw out a suggestion from time to time; when he did it was acted on with alacrity by Rustus. And in between those times, Rustus exercised his tireless energy on keeping things ticking over quietly and evenly. The small group increased in size, but slowly. A year after Rustus joined, there were forty-one of them, an increase of seven. There were sixteen married couples, and nine children.

Late one afternoon, Rustus backed the bulldozer away from a bank he had been tearing down, and saw Herbert sitting on the stump of a

tree nearby. Herbert called and Rustus climbed down.

"You look hot, Rusty. I brought a jar of beer along."

Rustus drank deeply. He wiped the sweat from his face with his forearm. "Thanks, Tom. I was thirsty, all right."

He sat down beside Herbert. Herbert nodded towards the western horizon.

"Fine old sunset."

The sky was green and gold, heaped up with indigo clouds. High in the air there were golden flecks; flecks that drifted down towards the waiting earth.

"Good manna shower tonight."

Herbert lit his pipe and began drawing on it. "Spoils the view to my way of looking."

"It goes on and on." Rustus looked at him. "I wish I knew what the hell we were waiting for."

Herbert did not say anything for a moment. When he did, it was to the accompaniment of a jerk of his pipe towards the bulldozer.

"Don't like the sound of that engine. I should get Hank to have a look at it in the morning, before you take it out again."

Rustus grinned. The conversation had been turned like this before. He said:

"You've done a few different things in your time, Tom."

Herbert watched the smoke curl up from his pipe. "I guess so.

Grade-school teacher, travelling salesman, garage mechanic, window cleaner, dog catcher, rat killer . . . I never seemed to find the job to settle down in. Maybe this is it." He glanced sardonically at Rustus.

"Having knocked around so much, I'm happy enough. "Come day, go day, God send Sunday," as my old man used to say."

Rustus said: "I figure it's a good philosophy at that."

"Depends whether you've got a restless nature. You have, Rusty. How'd you like a trip to the big town?"

"More books?"

Herbert nodded. "And some instruments. Can you go tomorrow? Hank can be stripping the dozer."

RUSTUS had not been away from the settlement since his first arrival, apart from one early trip to Sanford. He looked at New York with interest. There didn't seem to be any great change in the place; the people were still breaking their necks to get from one block to the next, and if one missed the pungent smell of the small hash-joints, the gasoline fumes made up for that. He collected together the books and instruments Herbert had asked for, and left the next morning for what he now thought of as home.

Herbert checked through the stuff. He nodded at last. "That's

O. K." His look went up to Rustus. "How was it, Rusty? Didn't get too home-sick for the bright lights?"

Rustus shook his head decisively. "Nothing like that."

"Applejack?" Herbert asked. He poured from the stone jar into two glasses. The two were sitting in Herbert's cabin, on wooden chairs beside a wooden table. There was an oil lamp hanging from the ceiling, because the generator had gone on the blink.

Rustus took the drink. He raised his glass. "Here's to us — the uneasy people."

Herbert nodded "I'll join you."

Rustus said: "I'm still not asking you what's in your mind, Tom. But I'm going to tell you what I've been thinking it was. I've been thinking that maybe someone, somehow, was sending the manna deliberately. And that the intention was to sap folks morale. You know the principle: hand-out makes for bums. Someone was trying to turn the West — the world, maybe — into a bunch of loafers. In the end civilization would just curl up and die. It didn't seem too fantastic a notion to me; I was trained in big business.

"But that's not the way things are coming out, Tom. New York is turning on its spindle just as fast as ever. People aren't any different. They eat manna, and they eat noth-

ing else but manna, but outside of that they aren't changed at all."

He waited for Herbert to say something. There was silence for a moment. Then Herbert said:

"I'm glad you got that McGuire book. It was never published in this country, and the London edition has been out of print for ten years. But it's a very useful book."

Rustus said quietly: "I'm still not to be trusted. Is that it, Tom?"

Herbert said: "Trust doesn't come into this, Rusty. Maybe . . . Look, Rusty. What's in my mind is too crazy to talk about. I told you before you came that this outfit operates on a crazy hunch. I don't want to keep you if you want to go. Go and eat manna and live a normal life, if that's the way you'd rather have it. I'd be sorry as hell to see you go, for more than one reason. But if you've started being uneasy about me and not about the rest of the world, then I don't see how you can stay."

Their eyes met and held. Rustus said: "You're the boss, Tom."

**I**T was three or four months later that Hank reported the auto wreck. The road between Sanford and Springvale ran fairly close to the settlement; it was not an especially busy road, especially now, at the beginning of winter. The auto was a six-seater convertible, and it had its nose in the ditch.

Hank said: "I don't know how he came to kill hisself. Paint's no more than scratched."

Herbert said: "He's dead?"

"Dead right enough. Face twisted real nasty."

Herbert said: "Where is he?" His voice was grim. "I'd like you to come along, too, Rusty."

They got the driver out of the car. He was a man about forty, and his dead face was contorted in an agonized grimace of pain. Herbert looked at him for a moment.

"Heart failure?" Hank suggested. "Scared hisself to death?"

Herbert said: "Bury him, Hank. Rusty and I will take a run into Sanford. Think this car will run?"

"Don't see why not."

While Hank was checking the car's engine, Herbert said to Rusty: "How's your stomach? If it's not too good, you'd better stay here."

Rustus still did not know what Herbert was driving at, but in some way his curiosity had soured. He said briefly: "Good enough, I guess."

They met death on the way in to town—death sprawled in a hundred different attitudes of agony and despair. In the town itself, the sidewalks were thick with bodies, as though the dying had come crowding out for air. Herbert stopped the car when it could be seen that the road itself was impassible, just a

little way ahead.

The words almost choking him, Rustus said:

"O. K. You can tell me now, I guess. The manna? But I don't get it. It was all right. They checked it and triple checked it!"

Herbert said: "The reason I wouldn't tell you, Rutsy . . . when I first had the idea, I tried to tell people. That was in the early days. They thought I was mad — mad in a nasty way. One time it was touch and go whether I was certified. After that, I didn't tell anybody."

Rustus said: "But it was good. You even put some in deep freeze up at the settlement."

"*Then* it was good. The idea . . . I got it from one of the jobs I used to do. There it was good at first. You could have checked it any way. You get their confidence first with the *good* stuff. Then the stuff is . . . slightly different."

Rustus stared at the heaped parade of corpses. "The stuff . . .?" he echoed.

Herbert spoke the word softly. "*Bait!* That's the way you kill rats. Rats are cunning devils. You can't just put poison down and expect them to take it. You've got to feed them up first."

"My God! Who . . . the Russians?"

Herbert shook his head. "I wouldn't like to see Moscow right

now."

"Then . . ."

Herbert looked up, into the pale blue wintry sky. "We haven't met them yet. I guess we will eventually. They may just have killed to wipe out a future danger, but it's more likely they want our planet."

"From outer space? But it was proved the manna wouldn't hold together in that kind of fall . . . it would fry, too."

Herbert said wearily: "That's easy enough. It isn't hard to work out a container that will dissolve — burn maybe — at the right height, and release the contents for a short drop."

Rustus looked up at the sky himself, and back to the tumbled bodies.

"The swine!"

"Swine, all right."

Despair was heavy on him. "And they've won."

Herbert began backing the car. "Not yet they haven't."

"What can a group like ours do?"

"Organize. There will be others who've missed the poison. People sick maybe, or just fasting. We'll find them, or they will find us. When our rat-killing friends drop down . . ."

"We don't know anything about them — what weapons they may have."

"Two things we know — they preferred *not* to risk a straight

fight, and they're poisoners. I've got another hunch, Rusty. I've got a hunch that when they come they're going to be over-confident. They may expect some of the rats

to be alive, but they won't expect them to be in fighting trim."

"No, by God!" Rustus said.

"They won't."

THE END