

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 11 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • MARCH, 1953

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PLANET STORIES • Published bi-monthly by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc., 1658 Summer St., Stamford, Conn. The entire contents of this magazine are copyrighted, 1952, by Love Romances Publishing Co., Inc. Reprinted as second-class matter August 18, 1950, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. All rights reserved. Price 25¢ per copy. One-year subscription: \$1.50; additional copies 25¢. Canada, Latin America and Europe, 30¢. For advertising rates address: Advertising Director, Fiction House, Inc., 1658 Summer Street, Stamford, Conn.



RICARDO'S VIRUS

By WILLIAM TENN

'A knife wound can be a serious matter on Earth. On Venus, it's a six-hour flow into vilest eternity.

GRAFF DINGLE stolidly watched yellow mold form around the stiletto hole in his arm. He smelled the first faint jasmine odor of the disease and glanced up to where the sun glowed unhappily behind a mass of dirty clouds and wind-driven rain.

Dingle kicked morosely at the Heat-wave thug left behind to ambush him, and the charred body turned sougingly in the mud. "Be seeing you, bully-boy, in about five and a half hours. Your electroblast may have misse:d me, but it cooked my antiscptic

pouch into soup. It made that last knife-thrust really rate."

There was a dumb dryhorn blunder, Graff reflected, sneering at himself out of a face that was dark from life-long exposure to a huge sun. Bending over an enemy before making certain he was burned to a crisp.

But he'd had to search the man's clothing for a clue to the disappearance of Greta and Dr. Bergenson and—even above Greta—the unspeakably precious cargo of lobodin they'd been flying in from Earth.

So I'll pay for my hurry, he thought.

Like one always does in the Venusian jungle.

Ricardo's Virus was viciously prompt: six hours after its light, saffron globules had formed in an open wound you were dead. And no frantic surgery, no pathetic attempts at drainage, could save you. Graff should know. His parents, his brothers and sisters had been a small fraction of the New Kalamazoo death totals due to cuts and scratches observed too late for antiseptics. The virus had accounted for most of three generations of Venusian colonists, including Vilfredo Ricardo himself, the first man to set hesitant foot on the swampy planet. Ricardo had merely skinned his hand on his new flagpole.

Nasty to die of the filthy mold before he knew what had happened to the Bergensons. Not that he had a personal interest in the matter any more for Greta wouldn't be marrying a corpse when she could pick any one of a hundred extremely live and woman-hungry pioneers. But her father was the only doctor in the tiny settlement. And the loss of the lobodin meant Ricardo's Virus would tuck many more New Kalamazoo colonists into seepy graves before the year was out.

A speck grew large in the sky. Graff involuntarily moved into the shade of a giant rosebush as his oversharpest instincts asserted themselves.

Yes, it was a terry all right. Friendly?

THE pterodactyl landed lightly on a frond of the opposite fern. Its absurd, leathery forehead wrinkled at him. Graff noted that it was barely out of range of his electroblast. Intelligent, sure enough, and an unusually fearless specimen to perch this close to man.

At any other time he would have been intrigued by the opportunity of making friends with one of the intelligent winged reptiles who had learned to speak man's languages and, with good reason, shun his works. Now, he had other things on his mind.

Like dying painfully in a few hours.

Graff looked up sharply as enormous bat-like wings ceased their rustle.

The lizard-bird's long, sloping forehead wrinkled even further. Its beak opened and closed several times. It cleared its throat.

"City?"

Then it was civilized, too. What had induced it to leave its communal eyrie in the San Mountains? The terries had avoided men for over fifty years. Many was the time that Graff, intent on stalking meat for the colonists, had been startled by a flock of pterodactyls winging overhead and shouting curses down at him in the three languages of the early settlers.

"City?" the question was repeated more insistently. "Heatwave or New Kalamazoo?"

"New Kalamazoo."

A relieved nod of the triangular head. "This I thought. You wish knowledge which Heatwave man has man and girl from shif?"

Graff's whole body tensed. "Yes! Do you know?"

Another nod. "This I know. Name is Fuvina."

"Fuvina?" The hunter repeated it with a frown. He knew the names of most of Heatwave's big shots; some were political criminals, escaped from Earth. Others were former residents of his own town who had left in search of an easier living than the continual struggle with marshy soil and carnivorous jungle.

But he couldn't recall any Fuvina. Possibly a new arrival; possibly one of the smaller fry who had recently killed and looted his way to the top of bloody Heatwave society. Fuvina? Fuv—

Of course! The not-quite-flexible pterodactyl beak was incapable of labial sounds like *p* and *b*, and transformed them into the labiodentals *f* and *v*. Pubina! Max Pubina had left New Kalamazoo in a hurry three years ago after cutting some farmer's throat in a boundary dispute and, by combining organized raids on isolated families with the smuggling of the illicit Venusian dunging drug to Earth, had become a power of sorts.

"You mean Pubina?"

"This I said. Fuvina. He and other Heatwave men took man and girl from shif and placed them in own shif. Also took vig green vottle. Left one Heatwave man hidden here. Then flew that way in own shif. A fantastically large and fleshy wing gestured south. "Them I follow. Where Heatwave men stof, I see. Then I come vack."

The terry drew an immense swallow of

air to compensate for his long speech and shook himself. The great fern trembled in sympathy.

GRAFF stepped forward from the rosebush and inspected his informant closely. "Thanks. But I don't see why you're interested."

The toothed beak, which was half as long as a man, opened uncertainly. "Vecause," the lizard-bird explained in a low voice, "Heatwave men have captured my mate before attacking New Kalamazoo sky-shif. In cage they fut her for shivment to Earth. This I can do nothing about fy myself. Vut them I follow, hoping to find way to rescue her."

"And you figure that if you help me find my friends, I'll help you save your mate from the sideshows on Earth? Well, I will, if—"

A big, complex *if*, with as many tendrils as sucking ivy. If he lived long enough, and, if he did, if he would be sane enough—considering the agonizing last hour of Ricardo's Virus infection—to do anything constructive once he arrived at Pubina's jungle hideout. If a man, guided by a pterodactyl flying overhead, could pick his way on foot through a completely unexplored section of swamp and have enough juice left in him when he emerged to take the prize of the century away from the toughest collection of cutthroats on an extremely tough planet.

He clenched his fist as the cramps began in his left hand—the cramps that would spread slowly throughout his body until they ended in fatal convulsions some five hours from now. If a one-armed man could do all this, and do it with just one portable electroblast . . .

He cursed sharply, suddenly, as he realized he'd been holding the electroblast in his hand ever since he'd given the Heatwave thug that finishing jolt. That was after he'd been stabbed, after the man's first wild blast had burned Graff's antiseptic pouch into a mess of fused glass vials and blackened fabric. Without immediate application of the ten different antiseptic solutions.

But now! He inspected the bright metal of the coils anxiously. Might still do. Just might. He holstered the blaster with infinite

tenderness and stooped over the blackened body that had almost disappeared into the mud. The man's electric gun was far too wet to be of any use but Graff fumbled around in the soggy soil until he located the stiletto.

He straightened and grinned at the long blade, its steel already reddening from the pervasive rust of Venus.

"Where is the ship?" he asked. "The ship my friends were in?"

The terry nodded at a flat and soggy expanse. "Under there. Heatwave sky-shif wait here high up. When New Kalamazoo shif come, Heatwave shif fly down fast upon it. New Kalamazoo shif hit mud hard. This I see. Then Heatwave men take your friends away and New Kalamazoo shif sink in mud. Altogether are four Heatwave men, besides Fuvina. You kill one, so now are only three, besides Fuvina." The flying reptile breathed heavily again. Its scaly claws moved restlessly about on the branch.

Call that a *break*, Graff decided. Four men to handle. Might have been twenty. Either Pubina had a smaller gang than had been believed, or he was playing the whole thing really smart. Toughs, especially Venusian ones, would really chop each other to merry hell over the first laboratory sample of a vaccine that promised immunity from Ricardo's Virus. A break to balance the loss of the ship.

Or was it? All he had was the terry's word. Could be that the entire yarn about his mate being captured for export to the terran amusement parks was nothing more than a story made up by Pubina to play on a colonist's sympathy. The terry might be working for Pubina some way or other. Who knew anything about pterodactyls? Who knew if they experienced anything like love or loyalty?

Graff stared at the unwinking reptilian eyes, at the tapering ugly beak, both completely devoid of expression. Add another *if*.

"Ail right, MacDuff," he said at last. "Lead on."

"We go in vig curve," the terry told him, flapping its wings monstrously in preparation for flight. "Eight, nine hours for you. Other way take half time, vut—"

"Vut nothing!" Graff broke in. He mas-

saged his left forearm, which had begun aching in sympathy with the hand. "Let's use the short cut."

"It too hard for you, too dangerous! River cuts across—"

"So I'll get my feet wet. I'm not in a position to be worried by pneumonia. Let's head for the straight and narrow, MacDuff. I'm in a hurry."

THE animal cocked its head to one side, dropped its wings in a gesture like a shrug and moved off the fern in a soaring glide southward. When it was about three hundred feet up, it circled back to make certain that Graff was following.

Now if you ever go to Venus, the Polar Continent is probably where you'll live for the duration of your stay. Not only is its temperature and annual rainfall the lowest on the planet (which makes it just a shade more uncomfortable than the Amazonian Jungle), but also it is the most heavily populated stretch of land—averaging close to one person every thirty square miles.

But if you find yourself on the Polar Continent you will be advised, and well-advised, to stay away from the Southern Peninsula. This is not merely because it is a dank and deadly swamp. But chiefly because of the Black River which winds through the peninsula, doubling back on itself, crossing through itself and becoming a tributary of itself a dozen times over, like a living surrealist corkscrew.

The Black River rises somewhere in the unscalable peaks of the San Mountains and comes roaring into the flatlands with a tremendous velocity. Just before reaching the peninsula, however, it is joined by the Zetzot River, and the two of them make a combination that is really in a hurry. Even if there were no rain at all (which is definitely not the case!), there would be a perpetual mist over the Southern Peninsula. And by the time the Black gets through doubling back on itself, giving itself a shove, so to speak—well, the reason no one knows exactly where the river empties into the Jefferson Sea is because the entire area is completely obscured by an opaque steaming fog which boils about for miles on either side.

Not is that all. Certain animals like to

wallow in the swamp created by the Black. And most of them are very large. Creatures which can survive in the swamp of the Southern Peninsula are quite tough, quite dangerous and most uniquely suited to their environment. There are snakes and insects and carnivorous plants galore, not to mention the huge creatures who live in quicksand and have yet to be classified. One of the smallest animals of the peninsula is a dark little fish which swims back and forth in the Black itself. Venusian colonists have christened it the sardine, possibly because it is the size of a terrestrial sardine. Its habits, however, resemble those of the South American piranha. It travels in large schools and eats its way through anything.

All in all, the Southern Peninsular Swamp is an ideal home for a baron of crime who wants to get away from it all. The *all* doesn't include law, of course. On Venus, each man writes his own code of laws with the weapon he finds handiest.

The trouble was, Graff Dingle reflected, as he found a ford and leaped across the screaming waters to the opposite bank, the trouble was that his folks and people like them had come to Venus to get away from lawlessness of the international kind only to hit the inevitable individual lawlessness of a frontier.

Ordinarily a frontier is slowly and surely transformed from rowdy wide-openness into suburban quietude by the increase in population—but population doesn't increase in really dangerous spots; that's why the people of New Kalamazoo worked so hard and so long to make their settlement large enough to merit the establishment of a university. A university would mean laboratories and research facilities to investigate Ricardo's Virus and all the lesser plagues peculiar to Venus, the plagues which took more lives yearly than jungle monsters and murderous Heatwavers combined; and a university would mean an increase in population, and law and order.

But Earth hadn't been interested. The study of Venusian diseases was an exotic subject hardly touched upon in Terran medical schools. Earth had been far too busy manufacturing artificial diseases to supplement atom bombs and hydrogen bombs.

Earth had, however, investigated the Venusian plagues with a view to their use in biological warfare. And out of the investigation, as an accident, as a by-product, had come lobodin. A vaccine, not a serum. No good for Graff right now, for he was almost two full hours into the yellow death.

HE WORKED his left arm around slowly, wincing with each turn, his eyes on the terry above him circling southward in the damp murky sky. At the same time he tried to plant the broad soles of his boots on mud that wasn't quicksand, on rotten twigs that wouldn't crack too loudly. He knew his blood was now completely infiltrated with the obscene little yellow specks.

Pubina was probably trying to force Dr. Bergenson to inject the vaccine into him, ridiculing the old man's protests that all the bottle held was a starter culture, just enough so that with weeks of careful tending they might have sufficient vaccine to immunize the children.

It had been so expensive and difficult for the little colony to send Dr. Bergenson and Greta to Earth where his reputation and connections had enabled him to wheedle a spoonful of the precious stuff out of a government laboratory! Pubina hadn't been able to get it, for all of his bribes and underworld contacts. But the bribes and underworld contacts had served another purpose: Pubina had discovered when the Bergensons were due to return—and that was all he really needed.

Graff noticed abruptly that the terry was falling rapidly back at him. Could he be trying to warn—

A shriek gave him the answer. Less than a quarter-mile away, a brontosaurus squatted its tremendous bulk in a shallow pool and regarded him from the end of an undulating snake-like neck. The animal screamed again and Graff froze.

He watched the incredibly heavy reptile scramble to its feet and desperately tried to think. It wasn't a brontosaurus charge you had to be afraid of, but what usually traveled in its wake. A brontosaurus was herbivorous and, for all its size, extremely timid. It was ridiculous, possibly, but the mountain of living flesh was probably

screaming in terror at the sight of him. You only had to control yourself and think while the great beast charged.

Because a brontosaurus meets danger by running into it. It is so massive that it is virtually unstoppable once in motion. You can blast its stupid little head off and it will keep running for another twenty minutes, powered by the bundle of nerve cells just under the spine. You just have to stand still and remember that it is much more frightened than you and is trying to trample you to death before you can bite it.

Graff stood his ground, bending his knees slowly, until the behemoth was only twenty-five feet away. Then he straightened suddenly and leaped off to the right, then again, further, and again, still further to the right.

SCREAMING insanely, the tons upon tons of flesh roared past, absolutely unable to halt itself. Its momentum carried it up a small hill and Graff could hear it bellowing down the other side. It wouldn't return.

But something else was on its way. There's always a meat-cater in the wake of a brontosaurus. Sometimes there are several. The *kind* of carnivore was very important to Graff right now. He had an electroblast which he wasn't certain would work in an emergency and whose diminished power he'd certainly need later. And he had a stiletto.

He heard the beast thumping its way through the luxuriant weeds of the swamp. A moment later it had broken into the clear, had seen him and was loping toward him easily with all the confidence of a powerful creature which sees an easy meal in sight.

A shata. No larger than a terran wolf. But if a brontosaurus can be said to be all body-bulk and very little head, the shata is just the reverse. Twelve rows of teeth, and jaws which open wide enough to admit a sheep. Regretfully and a little uncertainly, Graff holstered the electroblast and balanced the stiletto on his palm. He'd hunted lots of shata in his time, but never with a knife.

He began weaving about, conscious of his awkwardness. The knots in his left side constantly made him misjudge his body and slip off balance. And here he was hoping

to take four men at a time—

As he expected, the shata was confused by his peculiar motion. It slowed to a dead stop, then slunk before him, growling. It moved in half-circles, coming in closer each time. Graff waited until it was directly in front of him. He stood still and immediately the shata sprang, jaws gaping.

The palate. Just behind the palate is the brain. It means sticking half your arm into a fearful set of jaws, but do it right.

Graff let the rigid, distended head slide off the knife and into the mud. He wiped his blade on the green fur, standing out like so many spikes, and grimaced. A nice specimen. Shatas were good eating, too.

Well, he wasn't a hunter any more. He was a dead man looking for a coffin. He was swamp-bait if he collapsed in this weedy muck.

The terry skimmed by with his head turned questioningly.

"I'm fine," Graff reassured him. "How much farther?"

"Between one and two of your hours." The lizard-bird curved up and ahead, leathery wings beating slowly.

Graff plodded on. He should arrive with about an hour and a half of life left. That would give him a half-hour to an hour at most in which to operate consciously and more or less effectively. After that there would be half an hour of writhing agony, leading into unconsciousness. After that he would be dead.

He'd hate to leave life. It meant leaving the thrill of tracking your quarry on the bracing slope of Mount Catiline where the dodle breeds in the Season of Wind-Driven Rains; it meant leaving a wild new world that was just a-borning as far as humanity was concerned; it meant leaving Greta Bergenson.

It also meant leaving wealth. Now that lobodin had been developed, the colonization of Venus would begin in earnest. He was the last alive of a numerous family who had homesteaded half the Galertan Archipelago into their possession. He was heir to all the rich, fertile, and deserted islands his father and brothers had claimed. With Ricardo's Virus taken care of, future Venusian farmers would pay well for those scattered spots of soil in the Jefferson Sea.

Following the terry, he hit the river again. He started downstream, looking for a ford as he had before. The Black was rather wide at this point and he wasted fifteen precious minutes before he found a bank that curved near enough to the opposite one to permit of a leap. He went into the weeds to get a running start.

A shadow plummeted past him.

"Vack," the terry screamed. "Get vack! Don't jumf here. Gridnik!"

Graff paused and peered across the river. Sure enough, there was the brown and white nest on the opposite bank where he would have landed. As he watched, a single gridnik droned out, looking like a winged red ant but with the size and disposition of a large, cornered rat.

"Thanks, MacDuff," he muttered, moving away. Well, there was no help for it. He didn't have time to look for another ford. He'd have to swim.

He waited on the crumbling bank until a dozen blue flashes swept past under him. "Sardine" schools were usually far enough apart to permit a fast swimmer to get through between them. When the tiny blue fish were fifty feet away, he dived.

The force of the river knocked the breath out of him. He fought his way through the torrent. His flailing hands touched a projecting piece of rock and he hauled himself painfully up the bank.

Graff noted gratefully that his head was clearer. The gnawing headache had diminished somewhat under the impact of the water.

The pterodactyl alighted near him. "There," it said, pointing ahead with a yellow claw. "Fuvina."

But the hunter was interested in something else. He removed his electroblast and examined its coils ruefully. The tight holster was supposed to be fairly waterproof, but it had not been intended for protecting a weapon in the Black River.

He started to throw it aside, but held it as he remembered how few cards he held in his hand.

MAX PUBINA'S hideout was a large prefabricated job that must have cost a medium-sized fortune to import from Earth across some thirty million miles of

empty space. The outlaw's house covered the top of a rise, and the soil around it was sufficiently high over the swamp proper to resemble the fine farmland of New Kalamazoo. Rich jungle growths were held at bay by a patch of sandy ground completely surrounding the house. It made it impossible for anyone or anything to creep up to the walls unobserved. Graff Dingle knew how expensive it must have been to sterilize so large an area of ground.

Crime does not pay, he mused. *Except on Venus.*

He reconnoitered the place cautiously, keeping well under cover. The man-made yard was empty. There was no one outside the house or the rocket-ship hangar attached to it. He could see the blunt nose of Pubina's sleek craft in the otherwise deserted hangar. But they probably had guards posted at the windows.

A long white line traced a curve in his path. Graff stepped over it gingerly, glancing to the left. Sure enough, hidden in thick bushes was the mass of white filaments that was the bulk of the sucking ivy. Touch the trigger-vine, however gently, with your foot . . .

He came back to the terry. "Listen, Mac-Duff," he said. "I want you to stay out of trouble as long as possible. When I need you, I'll need you bad. Meanwhile, on the wing or on the ground, you're a sucker for an electroblast with that wingspread. But you could be useful as a lookout. I wouldn't like to be outflanked."

A grave nod of the narrow beak. "This I do." The reptile soared up in a high spiral over the house.

Now. He had to get into the house across thirty-five feet of open ground, under the electroblasts of four highly proficient murderers. How?

The headache returned, stronger than ever, and Graff swayed dizzily. Red roaring fires tore up and down his left side. He'd never make it. Swamp-bait, that's all he was, bait for the mud of the Black.

He straightened then and laughed. Bait? Well, that was one way to hunt.

The hunter strode toward the house, across the creeper of sucking ivy, counting each step. He stopped under cover of a

sweeping fern just outside the sandy expanse.

"Pubina!" he yelled. "I've come for the Bergensons."

There was a flicker at one of the windows. "Who are you?"

"Graff Dingle of New Kalamazoo. Listen, Pubina, I'll trade the rest of our lobodin for Greta Bergenson and her father."

A pause while they digested this. Then: "Send one of your men in and we'll talk it over, Dingle."

"Can't. I'm alone. Send one of your men out with the Bergensons, and I'll give you the lobodin."

No reason for Pubina to be certain that the Bergenson lobodin represented the first and only shipment. And what he claimed to have would raise the quantity to the point where all of the outlaws could be vaccinated.

The terry came down behind him and whispered gently! "Three men leave house from rear. Two coming around on left, one on right. Man on right has clearer fath, so will ve here first."

Graff gestured assent with the electroblast. He heard the terry take off again.

Pubina was being safe and cozy. Sending his henchmen while he held the fort himself!

He heard a soggy clump to the right and grinned. Why, the man was making more noise than a dryhorn freshly arrived from Terra! When he saw the black waterproof jumper through the high weeds, he stepped out from under the fern and moved backwards. He held the electroblast out, as if it worked.

The outlaw's face, lined with years of dunging inhalation, broke into a lunatic smile. Since Graff wasn't looking at him, he deduced Graff hadn't seen him. Pubina's henchman took larger steps. Graff backed.

He counted as he retreated. He counted slowly, taking steps that were uniform and even, looking off to the side of the outlaw, trying to keep his tortured body from making a deadly mis-step.

There! He breathed gustily as he saw he'd passed the white line. The outlaw crept forward, crouching, trying to get close enough for a certain blast. He too noticed

the trigger vine, and stepped daintily across it.

Graff whirled to face him then, electroblast at the ready. The man jumped—and one boot dug into the creeper!

He barely had time to scream. A haze of white tendrils whipped around him, each armed with thousands of microscopic suckers. A moment later the bloodless husk that had been a human was being dropped from the sucking ivy's clutches, rattling like so much paper.

The scream had been heard. Graff's jungle-trained ears caught the whispers of the other two men on his left as they conferred worriedly. If only he had a decent weapon. Anything besides the stiletto! He could take such dryhorns with an old-fashioned pistol!

But he didn't have a pistol. All he had was twenty-seven years' experience on Venus as a native-born citizen. So he began to run.

He stopped after a moment and listened. The crashes behind him indicated he was being pursued. If he was afraid, the outlaws had evidently decided, he was weak enough to chase. Graff ran toward the Tuscany.

By the time he reached the river, he was weaving from side to side and sobbing. The exertion magnified his pain a thousandfold. His pursuers were getting closer. Desperately, he trotted downstream.

They were quite close now. He heard them chuckling and calling to each other triumphantly—but there was the Gridnik nest!

He waited just a moment, poised on the bank of the river, until they broke into the clear, almost within electroblast range. Then, as they caught sight of him and increased their speed, he hurled his useless weapon into the striped little dome—and jumped.

WHEN he came threshing out of the water, twenty feet further down the bank, the hideous swarm of insects were still gorging themselves. Graff crept away, nauseated. He rubbed his eyes against the darkness welling within them.

"MacDuff!" he called, his voice crackling with agony. "MacDuff!"

The terry swept down to his side.

"Listen, pal, I haven't got much time left,

so we'll have to hurry. No more fancy stuff. Think you can fly in the rear windows or something, by way of diversion? It'll give me time to cross the sandy stretch."

Without a word, the lizard-bird went away. Graff came to the edge of the arid soil surrounding the pre-fab and waited.

He saw the enormous shadow tilt down behind the house and heard the crash of breaking glass. He threw himself forward. Sand boiled away from his boots. His head wobbled as if his neck had ceased to exist. Must be getting close to deadline time, Graff decided. A few minutes more at most before he caved in completely. He drew the stiletto out, holding it with difficulty in a twitching hand.

There was a yell inside the house and the sizzle of an electroblast bolt. As he smashed off the door, he heard the electroblast go off again.

He saw a huge cage holding a fluttering pterodactyl as he tottered into the living room. Dr. Bergenson and Greta were tied to chairs with long coils of fongool vine. Greta's pink overall-jumper was ripped and there was the mark of a man's hand on her face. Pubina stood under a charred hole in the ceiling where his first blast had gone wild. At his feet, a hole neatly burned in one wing, writhed MacDuff, awaiting the finisher.

Pubina whirled to face Graff, his electroblast coming up swiftly. The hunter staggered toward him, fully conscious of his lack of speed, his almost infantile weakness. Knots of pain pulled at his knees.

The Heatwaver's forefinger flicked down on the firing button. MacDuff lifted himself on his one good wing and lunged at the boot before him. His long beak closed on Pubina's ankle. There was a horrible bony crunch and the outlaw cursed, turning to beat down at the reptile.

Graff reached them, almost falling against Pubina. For a moment he couldn't coordinate his arm muscles enough to use the stiletto; then, sinking his teeth deep into his own lip, he drove the thin blade ahead. Pubina shrieked and fell, the stiletto throbbing in his side.

Deciding to let MacDuff finish him, even if the terry was making a mess of it, Graff bent over clumsily and retrieved the electro-

blast Pubina had dropped. He almost went over backwards as he straightened.

Placing one foot in front of the other intently, he walked to the Bergensons. He slid like a man walking on banana skins. Darkness roiled all about him now and every cell in his body seemed to writhe.

The bottle containing the vaccine was on a table, he noticed. It was still full; the shining hypodermic beside it was empty. Good.

Very carefully, he burned off the fongool vine with the electroblast at low power. Greta rushed toward him, but he slipped and fell at her feet.

"Darling," he heard her sob; it sounded as if her voice were on the other side of the Jefferson Sea. "You're infected! Oh, Graff, Graff! The lobodin won't work on an infected case!"

"I know," he muttered thickly, and let his head loll round to where the terry was inching along the floor to the cage in the corner. The last thing he saw was the neat little hole in the wing.

"Be seeing you, MacDuff," Graff whispered as the darkness came down, pinpointed with multitudes of exploding yellow dots . . .

That was why he was so surprised when he opened his eyes to see the terry

perched by his bed with a neat patch of gauze taped to one wing.

"How in hell did you pull through, MacDuff?" he asked.

"The same way as you," the lizard-bird told him. "We are both natives of Venus."

"Huh?" He raised himself waveringly on one elbow. He was lying in the Bergenson home in New Kalamazoo. They must have used Pubina's rocket ship to fly back. "What do you mean—*naive?*"

"Just what he says, Graff." Greta pushed open the screen-door and bustled in with a pile of linen. "You were both born on Venus. Father says that you must have had all kinds of skin abrasions as an infant: your body developed a natural immunity to Ricardo's Virus. We'll still use the vaccine on everybody else, including the children, just to be on the safe side. But Father has felt for a long time that the blood of the pioneers would adjust to its environment. When you got sick, but didn't die, you proved it."

"Well, I'd like to point out," Graff said, as he sat up to permit Greta to change his sheets, "that I am very, very happy to have given your father a chance to prove that theory."

MacDuff closed a lidless eye in an assenting reptilian wink.