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STORIES

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THE ANAHEIM DISEASE

EARTH IS no longer so desirable. The many atomic explosions have coated it, like a rich sweet plum with a layer of lead arsenate insecticide on its skin, with a poisonous veneer of radio-active particles. But there was a time, not too long ago, when alien eyes were looking at earth's richness. And were covetous.

Anne Sebastian caught the Spanish influenza in November, when the number of cases in the Napa valley was at its peak. Will Sebastian could get the doctor out from Napa only one time to see her, and he couldn't find a nurse at all.

by
Margaret
St. Clair

Anne was very sick. When she began to get better, her recovery was painful and slow. She used to lie in bed and weep from weakness and depression, knowing how foolish she was being, how good Will was to her, that things would surely be better, but obsessed by a haunting fear that they could only get much worse.

Earth may be safe from invaders, after all. And here's the reason why...

There was some objective reason, of course, for her emotion. In the world war that had just ended, some eight million

soldiers had been killed and nobody knew how many civilians; and the influenza epidemic, to date, had killed another twenty million of the world's population. It had been a true pandemic, with its mortality almost exclusively among the young and strong. Yes, 1918 had been a bad year.

On a more personal level, the lengthening shadow of National Prohibition—it was almost certain by now that the amendment would pass—might well make Anne anxious about her future and Will's, since he was a wine grower. They couldn't decide whether they should sell their acreage, or replant their vines with prunes, or stick it out and hope for better times. But Anne realized, without its doing her the slightest good, that to let these things make her feel that she had reached the end of everything, the jumping off place, the place where only disaster lay ahead, was ridiculous. That she *knew* it was ridiculous only increased her sense of black despair.

ONE DAY, early in January, Will came up to the

bedroom with Anne's lunch tray.

"Something bad has happened," she said as he opened the door.

"Damn," he said mildly. "...Dear, I wish you wouldn't do that."

"I can't help it," his wife answered. She tried to smile. "I've always been able to tell what people were thinking, and since I had the flu it's been much worse. I can't seem to shut my mind off, no matter how I try. ...What's gone wrong, though?"

"See if you can tell from my mind."

"Something about the vines. Phylloxera?"

"No, not the phylloxera." He set the tray down on her bedside table. "Honey, I'm afraid it's the Anaheim disease."

"Oh. Oh, my." Anne knew as well as he did what the Anaheim disease was. It had wiped out 30,000 acres of vines in Southern California in the 1880's, and caused a monetary loss of \$20,000,000. No one had ever known what caused it, or how to control it; it had seemed unstoppable. Abruptly and illogically it had stopped.

It had just stopped. But since nobody knew what had stopped it, there was no reason why it shouldn't start up again.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I dug up the vines—there were three—and burned them. All except a little piece, and I'm going to send that to the University. They might be able to suggest something. Or I may have caught it in time. . . . Eat your eggs, honey, before they get cold."

DUTIFULLY, Anne dipped a strip of toast in her soft-boiled eggs. Will kept telling her she ought to eat.

He sat down beside her on the bed. "I don't suppose it matters so much," he said, trying to be cheerful. "If prohibition goes through, I mean. But I hate to see my vines die."

"Yes. . . ." She finished her eggs. "Will, somebody's coming along the road. He's going past Garretson's place."

"Do you hear him? I don't hear anything."

"No, I see him." Anne's eyes were closed. "It's a medium-sized man. He'd been in a—a sort of wreck. In an auto. Not

exactly an auto, really, but like that. He's sick and dizzy. I wonder why he didn't stop at Garretson's for help. There's a big bump on his head."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He'll be knocking at the door in a minute. You'd better go down, Will, and help him in."

Obediently her husband rose to go. When he was still at the head of the stair, there came a knock at the door.

LEFT ALONE, Anne felt her anxiety come down on her again. The onset was so abrupt that she felt as if a dark ceiling had come crashing about her head.

After a moment, she sat up in bed, took hold of the bed post, and got wobblingly to her feet. She hadn't been out of bed before, except for brief journeys to the bathroom. But she couldn't lie there in bed any longer, feeling like this; she'd dress herself, and go down and see who the visitor was.

WHEN ANNE came into the parlor, Will got quickly to his feet. "Anne, you

shouldn't have got out of bed," he said. "You're not well enough." He put his hand under her arm and guided her to the bulbous old-fashioned sofa.

"Oh, I'm all right," Anne answered. "I'm feeling better." During her descent of the stair, she had pinched her cheeks to make the color come to them. She didn't, she thought, look as sick as she might have. She glanced toward the Mission oak armchair where the guest, who had been lying back, was struggling into an upright position.

"Won't you sit down again, Mr. . . .?" she said.

"Anne, this is Mr. Kerr. He had an accident to his auto and hurt his head. I had him lie back in the chair, and we've both been having a little brandy.

"Mr. Kerr, this is Anne Sebastian, my wife. She's just getting over the influenza."

"How do you do, Mrs. Sebastian. I'm sorry to hear you've been ill," said Mr. Kerr. He had sunk back in the armchair. He was a smaller and slighter man than Anne had seen him, with gray hair and sharp black eyes. "Excuse my

sitting down. I still feel faint."

WILL BROUGHT Anne a glass of brandy and poured out more for himself and Mr. Kerr.

"Nice brandy," said Mr. Kerr. He laughed. It was almost a giggle, and Anne thought, *he has a poor head for liquor*. "Do you make it yourselves?"

"No, we get it from one of our neighbors. I only grow wine."

They fell to talking about prohibition. Anne listened, sipping from her glass. Mr. Kerr seemed to be a nice man. Interesting. He talked well.

In the middle of a swallow, Anne's teeth began to click against the edge of the tumbler. She was shivering. For a moment she didn't know why. Then she realized what the reason was: She was frightened—frightened to death.

Frightened? Of what? This wasn't like the causeless horror that had enveloped her in the bedroom. This fear had a focus and a source.

She set her teeth together, to stop the shivering, and looked around the room. Mr.

Kerr, his hands over his eyes, was sitting back in the chair and saying to Will that he didn't think the amendment would be going to pass, it would never have had a chance of passing, except that the soldiers weren't at home to register their opposition to it. Will was nodding and agreeing. The clock was ticking peacefully.

MR. KERR—Will—the quiet familiar room—and Anne herself, shaken from head to heels by tremors of fear she could barely repress. She hoped Will wouldn't notice anything.

What was it? What *was* it? That she didn't know what she was afraid of only added to her fear.

The high neck of her shirt-waist was stifling her. She fumbled at the fastening. She licked her lips and looked down at the green roses of the carpet; she was afraid she was going to faint.

Mr. Kerr was saying, "Of course, it still may not pass." He laughed; and Anne, with the surface of her mind, thought, *he's a nice man, but*

he's had a tumbler and a half of brandy. He's a little drunk.

She wasn't going to faint. She looked up. There was a sensation of pressure released, a tiny click, in her mind, like the way her ears had clicked when she drove over Tehachapi Pass. Now she knew what she was afraid of. Mr. Kerr.

Yes, Mr. Kerr. For all he was such a nice man. She was afraid of him, and the others like him. Now that he was a little drunk his mind was relaxing itself and letting her see what was inside it. No wonder she was afraid.

SHE HAD a sudden indistinct picture of an airplane—no, not a plane, it was shaped more like a bullet—high, high in the air, casting something to the upper winds. The plane was so high that the earth beneath it looked round. And from what the plane cast out, people in the world below began to sicken and die. It was sowing the seeds of the flu.

Her heart was racing. She licked her lips again. She must be going crazy, she must be losing her mind... But Mr. Kerr was one of the ones that had been up in that plane.

Mr. Kerr stirred in his chair and coughed. Will was talking now, gesturing with the brandy glass to emphasize a point he was making. Mr. Kerr coughed again and then turned and shot an exceedingly sharp glance at Anne.

She felt mental tendrils brush her. Abruptly she realized why Mr. Kerr had gone past Garretson's place and come here. Her ability to see into people's minds had drawn him, without his being aware of it, in the same way, a man might be attracted by a woman's cologne and yet not know she was wearing it. Mr. Kerr had a little of the gift Anne had, and he had felt her mind. It had attracted him.

As he felt it now. Once more Anne had the sense of mental contact. This time, without volition, instantly, a screen around her mind went up—a screen of thoughts about tating and the neglected housework and worry about her illness, a screen of thoughts about the crocheted borders on bathtowels and whether Will was getting another abscessed tooth. Mr. Kerr looked away again.

ANNE FELT sick with relief. But she must be more careful; she must keep the screen up and go on thinking inside it. —The ship in the upper air, of course, had been the reason why she had been so haunted with fear, so anxious and depressed.

Will asked, "What brings you to this part of the country, Mr. Kerr? It's pretty here. But visitors mostly stay on the other side of the bay."

"Oh, just looking over things. Just getting the feel of the California countryside." (Perfectly true, Anne thought: just looking over things, the way a man who had bought a house looks it over before he moves into it.) "And then, in my line of work..."

"Your line of work?" Will asked interestedly.

"Yes. I'm a pathologist." He laughed. "I specialize in disease."

(And *that* was more truth.)

"From Washington?" Will was frowning. "Mr. Kerr, I wonder if you could help us. There's been a disease in my vines... Or do you specialize in diseases like that?"

"No, not exactly. But

might be able to suggest something."

"I'll go get the piece of vine to show you. I'm afraid it's the Anaheim disease."

Will left the room. Anne didn't want Mr. Kerr looking at her. She said, "Mr. Kerr, could I trouble you to pour me a little more brandy? And perhaps you'd like more yourself."

"Certainly." He laughed; again, it was almost a giggle. He *did* have a poor head.—The great thing, Anne thought, was to hold her mind relaxed and passive, open to Mr. Kerr's thoughts, without making the slightest effort to contact them. Mr. Kerr wasn't, umh, able to see into people's minds the way she was. But he'd certainly know it if she tried to contact him. If only she weren't so scared!

HE Poured brandy into the glass she held out to him. He poured more for himself. Anne said brightly, "Was the accident to your auto serious, Mr. Kerr? Will could call Napa and get help for you."

"No, not too serious, Mrs. Sebastian. I believe I can fix it myself after I've rested.

Your husband wasn't encouraging about the kind of help I could get from Napa."

Will came back with a piece of diseased vine. "I'm afraid it may be the Anaheim disease," he said, "because the vines died so quickly." He held the piece out to Mr. Kerr.

Mr. Kerr did not take it. He drew back a little, got a gauze mask out of his pocket—the kind of gauze mask so many people were wearing because of the influenza, and put it on.

"Please hold the plant still," he said to Anne's husband. He got what looked like a folding magnifier from his coat and bent over the specimen.

Will laughed. "It's a disease of vines," he said. "I never heard of *people* getting it."

"They might, they might," Mr. Kerr answered. It seemed to Anne that his face under the mask had turned pale.

Carefully he moved the magnifier up and down the piece of vine. He was frowning.

"I would burn it," he said at last. "I am sorry. I don't know any cure for it."

"You've seen it before?" Will asked.

INTO ANNE'S mind, relaxed and passive, there came a picture of a disease of vines—*this disease?*—that, where Mr. Kerr came from, was fatal to people too. Mr. Kerr's people were very much afraid of it.—And yet the flu didn't bother them at all. They could scatter it with impunity, or even make it more deadly. They were immune to it.

Will sighed. He put the piece of vine down on the parlor table and sat down beside Anne on the sofa. He seemed tired.

"I would burn it," repeated Mr. Kerr. "...Is there much of it on your place?"

Anne put her foot on Will's, and pressed. She hoped she wouldn't get one of his corns.

"Quite a lot," she said, staring into her brandy glass. "There's quite a lot of it in the valley, too. It's pretty much all over, really. Of course we try to keep it quiet. We don't want the dries to hear about the trouble we're having."

Will gave her a quizzical look, but said nothing. "Can't the University help?" Mr. Kerr asked. He believed her—he didn't know she had any reason to lie to him—but he

was a little skeptical too. He thought she was exaggerating. He hadn't seen any sign of such wide-spread infection on his trip through the valley.

"They haven't been able to," Anne answered. "That's why Will asked you. He thought you might know something more, being from Washington."

MR. KERR shook his head. "No...I'm afraid I must be going. I'd better be getting back to my auto. Thank you very much indeed for your hospitality."

He wanted, Anne saw, to get away. He was afraid of catching the disease.

Would it be enough? Would the lies she had told him be enough? He was certainly alarmed. But—no, nobody ever abandoned a serious plan of conquest just because of the lies one person told him. It would take something more, a good deal more.

"You can't go without tasting the wine we make ourselves," Anne declared. "Can he, Will? After all, this may be the last chance you'll have to drink wine for a long time, if

the dries get their way. And if you're worried about catching the vine disease, Mr. Kerr..." she smiled, letting him see how foolish she thought him... "Why, wine's the best anti-septic in the world."

"Yes, Mr. Kerr, you've got to taste our wine," Will echoed. He rubbed his forehead as if it ached.

"It's Zinfandel," Anne said. "Three years old. We made it before we had any vine disease. That only showed up the last year."

MR. KERR sat down again. He didn't want any wine, but he didn't want to make them suspicious.

"I'll get it," Will offered.

"No, let me," Anne said quickly. "I feel quite all right. And you wouldn't know where the fancy glasses were, Will."

She got to her feet. Her heart was pounding, but she felt surprisingly strong. She picked up the vine fragment from the table, saying, "I'll burn it in the range," and went out to the kitchen.

There was an open bottle of the vintaged Zinfandel in the cupboard. She got the crystal

wine glasses down from the top shelf. She stripped pieces of vine leaf from the diseased vine fragment and put a few of them in each glass. She poured the wine in on top of them, and mashed and muddled the leaves with a teaspoon. When she had done a good job of mashing, she fished the leaves out again. It might give the wine an odd taste, but she doubted that Mr. Kerr would notice. He didn't seem a man who would care much for wine.

She put the glasses on a little painted tray her mother had given her, and carried them into the parlor.

MR. KERR accepted one of them. He drank the wine quickly, with hardly a pretence of critical appreciation. "Very nice," he said. "A shame we're going to be deprived of this, isn't it? And now, I really do have to go."

They accompanied him to the door. "Too bad he couldn't help us," Will said when they had seen him off. "Say, Anne, what did you tell him all those lies for?— He left that magnifier of his. I'd better go after him."

"No, don't." She put up her hand to restrain him. "He was in a hurry to get away. If he wants it, he'll come back for it." Nervously she opened up the magnifier and looked through it at the fabric of the cloth on the parlor table.

"My, this is certainly a high-power glass," she said distractingly. "It's lots stronger than that compound microscope you used to have, Will. I don't understand how a small glass can have so much power. Come and look, Will. You never saw anything like it."

"Is it?" her husband answered rather vacantly. "You know, Anne, I don't feel very well. I wonder if I'm getting the flu."

IT WAS THE flu. Fortunately, he did not have it in its most severe form, and Anne was by now well enough to nurse him through it. As she tended him, she used to wonder how Mr. Kerr was getting along. She didn't dare to try

to contact his mind with hers; and anyhow, as she got back to normal health her clairvoyant abilities diminished. Once she had an impression—it was no more than that, and extremely fleeting—that the people on the big plane so high up were beginning to sicken. But her depression, her despair, had gone.

The Anaheim disease, if it had been that, didn't come back. Perhaps Will had caught it in time. After he got well, the Sebastians decided to keep on growing wine.

There was another world-wide flu epidemic, not nearly so deadly as the September one, in March. The people on the big ship were in no condition to breed the yet more deadly viruses their program had called for. By April the danger was over. The invaders were all dead.

It will not recur. We ourselves have poisoned earth so thoroughly that our planet is no longer desirable.

