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STORIES

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TWO FEATURED NOVELS

THE GOLDEN HELIX *Theodore Sturgeon* 10

Lost in space, they attempted to make a new life for themselves on an old planet—and found out that they were evolving in reverse!

TIME PAWN *Philip K. Dick* 68

A doctor must always stand ready to answer all his calls—but this particular call happened to come to Jim Parsons out of the future!

SHORT STORIES

END AS A ROBOT *Richard Marsten* 46

Nobody could get away with murder while Robicide was on the job

THE WALL *Charles A. Stearns* 53

No barrier can keep out the darkness lurking in the human heart

PROCESS SHOT *Sam Merwin, Jr.* 106

The cameraman was on the spot for this Revolutionary War movie

THE MASTERS *Theodore R. Cogswell* 118

Earth still had a surprise for the conquerors from space

FEATURES

THE READER SPEAKS *The Editor* 6

LOST: ONE MAGNETIC FIELD *R. S. Richardson* 62

WHAT ARE THEIR SCIENTIFIC NAMES? *A Quiz* 67

IMAGINATION (Verse) *Philip Jose Farmer* 117

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A gorgeously-plumaged creature lighted on the tree

THE WALL

By CHARLES A. STEARNS

No barrier can be made
high enough to keep out
the darkness which lurks
in the human heart. . . .

THREE brights and four darks past
Egg Day, G'bork discovered the
plexial node, or button, which nature
had, cunningly concealed in the long,
white hair of his abdomen. So intensely
clever did this make him feel that he
quite forgot where he was going, and

sat down to regale his eyes with the contemplation of that marvelous belly.

Solemn, purple eyes they were, that sensed not merely the warp of things, but the weft, and the nature of the component atoms as well. Which was no mean feat, and remains, to this day, almost unheard of by those of us who are not fortunate enough to have purple vision.

"What is *this*?" demanded G'bork, managing to sound completely outraged, though in truth nothing could ever upset his babyish good humor. "What have we here?"

(Certain pre-revelations, necessary for his survival, had been imprinted upon the brain of the unhatched fetus, and now the answer whispered from the depths of his subconscious.)

It spoke of the approaching miracle of the Blue Rain, when the jungle would stir with sudden dysphoria; the damp, silvery bud become, in one split second, a nova of burgeoning color; the graceful nymph in the neptane pool at his feet emerge a loathsome batrachian; a thousand Ugly Duckling stories be spun in a single warm breath of the *nedder* wind beneath every rotted grey leaf; the chrysalis of Time, itself, burst into a billion shards, with one self-contained continuum for each and every denizen touched by a drop of the Blue Rain. It hinted of life beyond life.

"Life beyond life?" repeated G'bork. "What kind of talk is that?" He was prepared to begin a solitary harangue upon the unsatisfactory nature of instinct, except that *she* was omniscient, knew quite well that he had stopped there by the pool, and would not be denied.

Since the hour of his hatching, by means of a rapport telepathic in nature, she had called him, and he had been compelled to keep moving. The nature of her wish he could not fathom. A league or more of the most absolute wilderness still separated them, but even now he felt her touch his brain again, caressing—an impatient caress.

"Hurry along!" she said.

"I am hurrying," said G'bork, and shinnied up a feather tree so precipitately that he clawed off half its fronds. He shaded his eyes with one paw, but despite their keenness he could see nothing. "You keep moving!" he erupted: "How can I catch you if you won't wait for me?"

"Does the calisflower pursue the fly? I am slow and must feed. You are small, fast, and very succulent. Keep moving."

"How does one feed?" said G'bork.

"A grub does not take food. Keep walking toward me, and I will show you what it means."

(So that's what he was—a grub! It was thrilling knowledge. The very concept had a plump, delicious sound.)

G'bork climbed down and resumed his journey at once, for the anticipatory visions of the mysteries of feeding drove him wild with curiosity.

THE jungle steamed. Slate-grey saurians with leathery wings circled overhead constantly. Once, G'bork watched, spellbound, as one of them dived out of the sky to catch a large, green, many-legged *thing*, which kicked and cried, and manifestly did not want to be caught.

Two more of the saurians swooped down to help the first pick the captive to pieces. As they brushed over G'bork's head, he was able to read their rudimentary thoughts quite plainly. They were thoughts of feeding, of hunger.

"If that is feeding," soliloquized G'bork, "it must be extremely unpleasant for one's food, and I do not think I shall have anything further to do with it." Nevertheless, he became so preoccupied with watching the grisly work of the serpents of the air that he did not notice that he had trodden upon a small, cone-shaped mound of leaves.

It was the humble home of thousands of chips of hurtful iridescence, who swarmed upon him in an instant, causing him to howl in agony and roll over on his back with his six legs clasped

instinctively about his abdomen.

He understood their mindless rage, and felt a new, bitter sensation, which was fear. Presently they left him alone, however, and he retrieved his *elan* at once. "That was interesting," he commented, "but I should not care to experience it often."

"Hurry, hurry!"

"Why must I always hurry?" complained G'bork, a bit testily, for his paws smarted.

"Because the hour of metamorphosis is almost at hand, and I am still hungry."

"You may eat without me," said G'bork. But he was puzzled. "Metamorphosis?"

"The time of the Blue Rain, when I shall no longer be able to control your brain for you. I cannot explain it."

Actually, G'bork would have preferred to live his own life, but he was stimulated to increase his shuffling pace to a zombie gallop for awhile, until she grew absent-minded once more. Then he could stop to sniff, feel, sense, and examine the darkening sky until she roused up and prodded him on again, mind-lashing him when he fretted at the pace.

An hour passed, and G'bork, who had the erroneous idea that it was not necessary to watch where he was going, since he was not going where he wished anyway, was running with his head between his paws.

He hit the wall an awful thump, and it was inexcusable, in that he had purple eyes, and saw not.

Dazed, G'bork drew back several yards and stared at the smooth, unyielding barrier before him. It was lofty, and stretched to the right and to the left of him, as far as the eye could see.

G'bork stood upon legs five and six, stretching to his extreme height of thirteen inches. "Absolutely incredible!" he exclaimed.

But she seized his brain, suddenly, with anger immense and black, for she had reached the wall too, and was baf-

fled by it. "Where are you?" she said.

He answered quakingly, and she turned, parallel to the wall. Now realizing that they were both on the same side of it, she was bearing down upon him. Less than a hundred yards away the snakereeds whipped and shuddered as from the passage of a heavy wind.

G'bork climbed a willowy feather tree, which bent under his weight until he could drop to the top of the wall. It was flat and smooth, and made an admirable perch.

Beyond the wall lay open glades and meadows. A peaceful, inviting country where, he sensed, no danger might dwell.

But she was beneath him now, entreating, scolding, commanding, her mandibles working hungrily.

"No," said G'bork. "Positively no. I will not come down."

THE starliner was crowded with the pilgrims of the Blue Rain. Mr. Wilburn was out of place, and shabbily dressed. Also, he felt it incumbent upon him to listen to the prating of the one called Billup, not because Billup wore an enormous diamond stickpin in his crimson tie, but because there was not room to move around and escape him.

Billup was *nouveau riche*, and Billup's wife, who reclined in her seat beside Anna, was *nouveau riche*. Her ostentation consisted of a curious silver net affair that sat upon her head, with its dark and complex visor pulled down over her eyes. She was stout, and her clothing had untidily rumpled as she lay there, but there was a faint, dreamy smile upon her face.

"Well, well," said Billup for the fourth time. "So you're a schoolteacher, Wilburn. I suppose somebody has got to do that job. Me, I wouldn't have it. Not in a million years!"

Nor could you qualify for it in a million years.

"Yep, I was telling Vesuvia—that's my wife—only this morning, that she's pretty lucky. I'm a self-made man, you

know. Climbed up that ladder from office boy to vice president of the Trans-lunar Fidelity Trust."

All this was in an unnecessarily loud voice. "I see," said Mr. Wilburn.

"You people going to the Valhalla?"

"Yes, we are."

"So are we. Not that I've got any faith in this Blue Rain thing myself. Matter of fact, we're all as healthy as hogs, but I told Vesuvia, I said, everybody that is anybody is going this year, and so we might as well bring the kid along and get ours. Right?"

Mr. Wilburn nodded.

Billup grinned suddenly. In a lower tone he said, "Ever meet my wife?"

"No."

"That's Vesuvia over there with the damned iconophone on her head. Sprawled all over the aisle like a slut. Cost me a fortune, that gadget. You put it on and it runs off a cosy three-D Hollywood movie for you, private. If you're too lazy for sex, like Vesuvia, you can slip it on at night and—" He broke off with a snicker. "I'll bet she's got a two hour skit of Cary Kalman bedroom scenes in that thing right now."

Vesuvia Billup removed the silver net helmet from her hair and placed it carefully in her lap. The iconophone was very fragile. It had taken her many months of nagging to get it, and she cherished it a good deal more than anything else in life, including her husband.

She turned, with hollow, dark-ringed eyes that seemed out of place in her round face, and looked at the woman beside her. "You're Mrs. Wilburn, the schoolteacher's wife, aren't you?" she said.

"That's right," said Anna, warmly smiling with not only her lips, but her expressive blue eyes as well.

VESUVIA took in the serenely lovely face, the unlined brow, the immaculate brown hair, and most of all, the inexpensive, ready-made suit, with a critical eye. "You're a lot younger than your husband," she said.

"Only a little over two years."

"Hmmm!" said Vesuvia. "Going on the pilgrimage?"

"Yes, indeed!" said Anna. "And it's all so wonderful that I can hardly believe it."

"So are we," Vesuvia said, "but only because of that brat of Marvin's." She pointed to a golden-haired child who stood nearby.

Anna was not looking at the child, but at Vesuvia.

"That's Virginia, my stepdaughter. Oh, she's a brat, all right! Don't let that angel face fool you. She's mean as she can be. A real burden, I'll tell you, and Marvin—that's my husband—won't even let me box her ears. Thinks she's a regular card, Marvin does. I wish I had a box of chocolates. Gets everything she wants. Wanted a dog. A dirty, nasty, little dog. I wouldn't hear of it, so we got out of it by promising her this trip.

"Marvin says it will cost fifteen thousand, but he can afford it. I know one thing, I'm going to do some shopping in Polarport before we go home."

The loudspeaker, blaring suddenly, warned them to fasten their seat belts.

"Virgini—ah!" shrilled Vesuvia Billup. "Come over here and get in your seat!"

"Are we landing?" asked Anna.

"In a few minutes," said Vesuvia indifferently. "You'll have to rent a copter to get to Valhalla, though. It's more than five thousand miles south of Polarport. An eight hour trip at least. Here it comes. If they break my iconophone with a rough landing—" With the threat unfinished, she clutched the precious object to her ample bosom and closed her eyes.

But the landing, when it came, was a gentle bump, scarcely felt. They were on Venus.

The Venusians, dark gray creatures who were only superficially humanoid in appearance, and looked, as Virginia commented, "as though they are mouldy," swarmed over the ship. The Bill-

ups had a great deal of baggage, but Mr. Wilburn was able to carry all of theirs, including a very light tent, insulo blankets and food concentrates, under one arm.

There were hosts of Terrans in Polarport, and thousands of copters lofted each hour, heading south to the equatorial domain of the Valhalla, an immense parkland of "cleared" jungle where the pilgrims would camp in tents, or in the open, and enjoy the salutary mists of the Blue Rain, which would commence soon and continue for a few hours before lapsing into the ordinary rainy season.

Billup made a deal with a furtive, wrinkled Venusian in a blue robe for a deluxe, six-passenger copter. A thousand dollars passed between them.

Mr. Wilburn, who had seen the sum, paled inwardly.

"Want him to fix you up?" said Billup. "Sure, he's black market, but transportation is tight, and all the regular channels sell out a year in advance. I'm doing you a favor, Wilburn, putting you onto this fellow."

MR. WILBURN took out his thin wallet, cherishing a sudden, numb resentment for all the multitude around him, with its fine holiday gear, its shining, streamlined ships, and its opulence. He made the very best deal that he could, and when it was finished there remained in the wallet exactly fifteen dollars and their tickets back to Earth.

They had leveled off at an altitude of one mile. Mr. Wilburn stole a guilty glance at his wife, who was curled up in the seat beside him, staring at the torn fabric of the overhead.

The copter blades shuddered, all at once, as though they might wrench themselves from the shaft.

"I should never have taken this wretched old thing," he said.

"But you couldn't disappoint me?"

"No, I couldn't," he said, as though that were an established fact. "I am a poor sort of provider, but you shall have

this chance, my dear. You shall have it."

She laid a hand on his arm. "You are the most wonderful man in the world," she said softly. "But you must remember that *all* of these people are seeking a miracle at Valhalla—at least subconsciously—and the Blue Rain works its magic only on a few. You must not be disappointed if nothing happens."

"No," said Mr. Wilburn gruffly, "you are wrong. Most of them, like the Billups, are simply greedy holiday seekers."

"Perhaps it merely seems so. Have you noticed that Billup's laughter is hollow-sounding? And that poor child!"

"You are overimaginative, my dear," said Mr. Wilburn. "And, speaking of the Billups, I'm afraid we're stuck with them. Their ship is just ahead of us—a big, red copter. You see, there is no oscillochart in this little two-seater, and the only way we have of keeping on course is to follow Billup, who is been kind enough, at least, to invite us."

"Tell me about Valhalla," said Anna.

"I only know what I've read. It is more than fifteen hundred square miles of forestland along the equator of Venus. There is a high wall around the park, so they say."

"Why?"

"To keep the tourists from wandering away into the pestilential jungle, I suspect, though there is a frightening legend—"

She turned her head slowly. "Of what?"

"Well—it is said that there is another reason for the wall. A thing right out of a nightmare, which the explorers of the last century appropriately called *Jagannath*. It was supposed to have been an intelligent creature, rather like a monstrous crab in form, with a hundred whip-like tentacles, and practically indestructible by ordinary means.

"A few were wiped out with firebombs, but since no one could find how they bred, and they seemed to have a telepathic sense of danger, the cost of their destruction came too high. They moved slowly through the jungle, de-

stroying or devouring everything in their path, and so the wall was built to keep them out of the park.

"The natives," continued Mr. Wilburn, "swear that *Jagannath* is not of Venus at all, but came here thousands of years ago from a terrible place called Bedkial—which is their version of Hell. I hope that I am not frightening you, Anna?" He stole a quick glance at his wife.

She was fast asleep. "Huh!" said Mr. Wilburn wryly.

SIX endless hours droned past Mr. Wilburn, who was near-dozing at the controls, when the radio suddenly crackled and Billup's deep voice came through. "You still there, Wilburn? How you making out in that cheesebox?"

"Very well, thank you."

"You'd better keep up. See that open stretch? That's the beginning of Valhalla, and the white line is the wall. I'm heading for the southwest corner. Lot of room there, because everybody congregates at the northeast side, where the government station is located. We'll have a million acres to ourselves."

"Do you think it is wise to isolate ourselves?" said Mr. Wilburn.

"You can do as you like," said Billup coldly. "I'm only doing you a favor, Wilburn, letting you tag along."

"Of course, I'll go wherever you say."

Billup laughed. "That's fine," he said.

Presently they were setting down the copters in a small natural clearing, and Mr. Wilburn helped his wife to the ground, laid out their meager belongings, and went over to help Billup unload his mountainous supply of gear.

There was a portable water converter and shower bath, four cameras with much accompanying paraphernalia, an electronic cooker with over a hundred pounds of frozen foods, half a dozen insect nets, thirteen plastic clothing containers, eleven of which belonged to Mrs. Billup, three hammocks, and a portable video.

There was also Mrs. Billup's precious iconophone, which she had held in her

lap all the way. She would not allow anyone to touch it until she discovered that it would be impossible for her to lower her ponderous body to the ground without first yielding it up.

She gave it into the hands of her husband, with shrill warnings. He pretended, as he took it, that he was going to let it fall, dropping his hands away from it as she released it and catching it—a scant six inches from the hard, rocky ground.

"Haw, haw!" Billup said. "Bread and butter!"

Vesuvia shrieked.

Virginia, meanwhile, had already disappeared among the cycad growths that were everywhere around them. Neither of her parents seemed to worry about her absence.

Vesuvia Billup made her husband stretch a low hammock for her and sank into it without ceremony, clamping the iconophone upon her head as she did so.

Mr. Wilburn went back to his camp and set up their own small tent while Anna shifted the scented air appreciatively and remarked at the freshness of the coming breeze.

"Would you like to take a walk," asked Mr. Wilburn in a low voice, "so that we can be alone?"

"Oh, yes! The park is very beautiful, isn't it?"

"Indeed. And in less than six hours, according to the forecast, the Blue Rain will usher in the wet season. It is a very special time for the native flora and fauna as well as for us. Did you know that?"

"Really?"

"Yes. It is the time of their metamorphic change. It is the same as our lower life forms on earth experience, except that the change, so I am told, is abrupt, and dramatic—even startling. There is never any intermediate or chrysalis stage."

ISN'T someone calling you?" Anna said.

"It's Billup," said Mr. Wilburn. "Looks

as though we didn't make it."

"Wait for me!" Billup was shouting, and caught up with them, panting for breath. "Always like to be neighborly. I was just telling Vesuvia, 'why be snooty?', but she has already stretched out with that damned thing on her head, and she'll probably stay there until we leave for home. A dinosaur could lumber across that hammock without rousing her. Me, I'm more democratic."

A gorgeously plumaged creature suddenly flashed across the clearing before their eyes, and lighted on the side of a tree, fanning itself gently with its multi-layered wings. Neither a bird nor an insect, it was a miraculous sight in this land of drab greys, where the direct rays of the sun had not fallen in a billion years.

"Stunning!" breathed Mr. Wilburn.

"Sst!" grinned Billup. "I slipped a pistol past the customs. That's why I wanted to camp down here where there are no patrols. We can have some fun." He took the weapon from his pocket and aimed it at the bright, pulsing thing on the side of the tree.

"Wait," cried Mr. Wilburn.

He was too late. Billup fired. When the carbon pellet struck, the creature exploded in a white flame.

"Well, I'll be damned," Billup said crossly. "Not even one little feather left! I guess it's on account of the Blue Rain. Friend of mine who was up here last year told me that he shot a big, furry thing that was about ten feet long. It busted up into a million little caterpillars when he hit it, all running which-way-to-Sunday. Had a hell of a time burning them all up with a flame rifle, he said. Must have been a regular riot."

Mr. Wilburn felt a quieting pressure upon his arm. It was Anna, his bulwark, as usual, in need. He swallowed his biting anger.

At that crucial moment Virginia ran out of the shadows toward them, hair flying, eyes wide with excitement.

"You know what?" Virginia said breathlessly, "there's a dead Venusian

lying over there, beneath the wall!"

The Venusian lay prone, with leathery, boneless arms outstretched as if to grasp the safety of the stony ditch that ran along the wall. He wore only the loin cloth of a hunter. Besides the short spear all natives affected, he carried an Earth-style carbine strapped to his back.

"The poor fellow must have come over the wall," said Mr. Wilburn.

"Then he's probably contaminated," Billup snapped, "Don't touch the boulder. Look there! Red splotches all over his body; might be some hellish disease."

Mr. Wilburn paid no attention. "Wait here," he said to Anna. He went over and knelt beside the Venusian. The spots, obviously, were not of infection, but apparently ruptured vascular tissues, where dreadful suckers had been recently attached to the skin and been wrenched off, skin and all, by the desperate victim. He was not dead. Mr. Wilburn felt for the heartbeat.

"WHY you confounded fool!" grated Billup. "I told you to stay away from him."

"He is badly hurt," Mr. Wilburn said. "There is no medical station other than first aid in the park. We must get him back to Polar City at once."

Billup's lips tightened. "Come on, Virginia," he said, "We're going back to camp."

"But I need help," protested Mr. Wilburn.

"Look," Billup said. "Up to now, I've been mighty good to you folks, but this is the parting of our ways. Don't be a fool. It would take sixteen hours to make the round trip to Polarport. The Rain would be over by that time. This trip has cost me a pretty penny, and I don't intend to give it up for one worthless native." He and Virginia left.

"I'll help you," Anna said.

"Thank you," said Mr. Wilburn, "but he isn't as heavy as an Earthman. If I can get him on my back I'll make it."

This he accomplished eventually, and

they made their way back to camp. Billup watched him from a distance, as he lowered the injured Venusian to a blanket which Anna had spread upon the ground.

"I have one request, Mr. Billup," said Mr. Wilburn humbly. "May I leave my wife here to return in your ship after the Rain?"

"Sorry," Billup said, "We'll be full up."

"Then may I borrow your copter, if I promise to return it to you after I take the native to Polarport? Ours is too small to carry the three of us."

"Nothing doing," Billup said.

Mr. Wilburn just stared at him for a full minute. Billup did not bat an eyelash.

"We can remove the seats, dear," Anna said quietly, "and we can leave our camping equipment here. It isn't worth much anyway."

"But to come so far," Mr. Wilburn said, embracing her suddenly, and holding her to him, as though agonized by the thought. "To come so far, and fail!"

"But we haven't failed," whispered Anna in his ear, "Don't you see that we were needed here to save a fellow creature's life? Now hurry!"

Mr. Wilburn went to work, making room for the Venusian to lie between them in the copter. Billup watched in sullen silence.

Suddenly Virginia began to cry.

"What's the matter with you?" roared Billup.

"I'm scared!" Virginia wailed. "Something dreadful is going to happen to us; I don't like it here! I want to go home!"

"Shut up and go play!" Billup said.

Mr. Wilburn got the injured Venusian aboard at last, and the ancient motor whirred into life. The copter heaved, jounced, and finally cleared the ground, gaining altitude very slowly.

After a time he set the course due north by the tiny compass.

Anna was smiling brightly. "If you'll help me," she said, "I think I can administer a shot of penicillin while we're

flying. There's sure to be a vial of it in the first aid kit, and it might help him."

"Of course," said Mr. Wilburn, with a lump in his throat.

"Will you take my hand," she said, "and place it upon the first aid kit?"

AT THE moment when Virginia called him, G'bork was having a rather unpleasant moment: He had been in heated discussion with her that lay monstrously at the foot of the wall where he perched, shivering. She had been winning, for the tug of her will was frighteningly strong.

"No," repeated G'bork, but less forcefully than before, "I don't want to come down."

"Why not?"

"Because I am reasonably certain that you intend to eat me."

"What nonsense! Now cease your embryonic idiocy and climb down before the Blue Rain begins."

G'bork found himself edging to the rim of the wall, despite all his will to resist, and experimentally waving one foot over the side. And then he heard Virginia's voice. She was on the other side of the wall, looking up at him. "Oh, look!" she was screaming, "A Teddy bear! Come down here, Teddy bear!"

G'bork thought her exceedingly cute, and quite the most interesting being that he had ever seen. He leaned far over and peered down at the exquisite, golden-maned creature. What a kind, gentle voice she had! He wriggled deliciously.

Came the bellow of another voice from among the trees: "Virginia!"

But Virginia ignored it. She stretched up her arms. "Come down here, you little old Teddy bear!" She was not hypercritical of G'bork's multiplicity of legs, it seemed.

"Where are you, Virginia?" bawled the voice of Billup, getting closer.

G'bork drew a long, shuddering breath. "Why not go to her!" he thought. "There can certainly be nothing to fear in this soft, lovely creature."

There was a scratching sound behind him. He turned. She had reared up on the wall, with her feelers testing the air, her broad, slaty back shining with the moisture that was already in the air.

"Down!" she said, and he cowered before that mental blast. "And hurry, you little fool! I would not eat you. You are my own young. In a moment that wall will crumble beneath your weight, for you will be the same as I—Jagan-nath."

A drop of blue rain hit G'bork's nose. "But I do not want to be like you," he said. "You are ugly."

"Nevertheless, the hour of change is at hand."

G'bork studied his abdomen with his immense, purple eyes and sensed that the paths of the electrons with his plexial node were, indeed, growing more erratic as they circled in their bright orbits like minuscule moons. But he was fairly certain, by this time, that despite the stimulus of the Blue Rain, the metamorphosis must still require a sudden physical shock or jar as a catalysis for the subcellular process that was to take place. He knew that if he went down there she would probably belt him good to hasten the process, but if he remained very quiet until the season was past, he might not change at all.

"What you are thinking is true. Nevertheless, I am still your will and

your directive mind. You will do as I command."

"I will not," G'bork said. But he knew that he could not hold out against her much longer, even though he must become a ravening monster the instant she got hold of him.

And on the other side of the wall, unaware that only three feet of reinforced concrete separated her from the terror of the ages. Virginia squealed, "Come on, Teddy bear! Don't be afraid, I'll catch you."

"Yes," G'bork told himself. "Here is my only chance, but I must be very careful, in my unstable condition."

"Come on—jump! Belly buster!"

"Very well," said G'bork to Virginia, "but you must catch me *very lightly*."

"Listen to him squeak, Daddy! I think he's talking to me."

"Virginia! Did you hear me call you? Hurry up, we're going home!"

"In a minute," said Virginia, still holding up her arms.

G'bork jumped, with his six furry legs outspread like wings, straight for the cradle of those soft, inviting arms. (But he made a purple prayer to the gods of the newborn.)

And Virginia, with a pleased-minx smile on her face, stepped out of the way.

"Bread and butter!" she cried.

Virginia played it the dirty way.