Victor Saparin

The Trial of Tantalus

I

BARCH WAS FLYING over the Pacific when his machine flashed the "forced landing" signal.

At the same instant the fire-fighting system went into action, and through the porthole he saw the left fire-extinguisher spraying the nose of the craft which was enveloped in heavy black smoke. A tongue of flame leapt up, but was snuffed out by the fire-extinguisher, and again the smoke billowed out. In a few minutes another jet of flame jabbed back along the side of the plane.

Looking about him Barch could see nothing but the vast expanse of the ocean spreading on all sides. But the machine had evidently found a piece of dry land in this watery wilderness and was straining toward it with every ounce of its remaining mechanical strength.

Barch, peering down, saw at last what the machine was heading for; it was a tiny volcanic island which from above looked amazingly like one of the spots that appeared on diseased sugar cane leaves after the Tantalus had been at it. At close quarters it turned out to be a heap of rocks that seemed to have been dropped casually in the middle of the ocean.

By now, however, the smoke was too thick for Barch to be able to see anything clearly. All he knew was that the machine circled the island twice, but even the light and manoeuvrable first aid craft could not find a place to land on this jagged pile.

After the machine had circled the island a third time,

the floor under the seat into which Barch was strapped gave way and he dropped out into space.

As he floated down under the parachute, Barch saw his plane plunging down toward the ocean, trailing a scarf of black smoke.

What happened after that was like a bad dream. The jagged rocks grew menacingly larger and larger, like the teeth of cruel monsters waiting to devour him. He struck his knee a painful blow against a rocky ledge, and almost at the same time hit a vertical wall of stone with his chest. The violence of the impact caused the buckle of his strap to snap and Barch fell out of his seat. Luckily for him, he did not have far to fall. The seat suspended from the chute floated away out of sight, taking with it the supply of food and medicines packed in the sealed pocket beneath it.

For a few minutes Barch lay on the rocky ledge, too dazed to move. Then almost instinctively he felt for his Universal in his breast pocket. The tough plastic case was intact but inside something was damaged. Now he was deprived of what he needed most—contact with the outside world.

Gritting his teeth and dragging his injured leg, Barch climbed painfully up the steep side of the rock to get his bearings.

All around him, as far as the eye could see spread the ocean, blue and seemingly fathomless. The waves rolling up from the horizon broke against the rocky island and receded as if surprised at finding it there.

This tiny islet was no bigger than a freckle on the face of the ocean; he doubted whether it even had a name.

Barch turned over on his back. Lying on the hard rock and staring up at the piece of sky hemmed in by the jagged stony crags he tried to remember how it had all happened.

The first image that rose to his mind was that of Svensen, the grim-faced gaoler.

II

. . . The "gaol" looked exactly as Barch had pictured it

from the numerous photographs he had seen. Consisting of some four dozen buildings, it was a whole town in itself, but a town without a single bush or blade of grass, a town of smooth plastic pavements covered with a huge dome of transparent plastic material.

"There is no escape from here," Svensen said in a solemn tone. His slightly sunken eyes and the deep lines at the mouth gave him the look of an ancient prophet.

"There is only one entrance, just like in Dante's Inferno, but no way out. Not so much as a seam in this wall."

"No cracks either?"

Svensen smacked his fist against the transparent wall. The fist bounced off as if from hard rubber.

"It consists of many layers, all of them self-sealing. It is resilient material. Crack-proof and bullet-proof."

"But there is an *entrance!*" Barch had insisted.

"You mean the entrance could serve as an exit? For men, yes. But not for microbes."

"Nevertheless one did escape."

"You will not find what you are looking for here."

"I quite believe that. But, after all, where did it come from? It couldn't have been dropped from Mars or Venus, could it?"

"Hardly. All rockets are reliably decontaminated. There is no danger of a slip there. The Safety Control people take care of that."

"But what about the bacteria that are specially brought here from other planets? Do they all come here too?"

"Yes. In sealed containers, and they go straight to our special building. That's it over there—the one farthest away from here. It is roofed with a double dome for additional insulation.

"Do you think it possible that some bacteria might have been left on the Moon?" Barch asked. "We don't decontaminate Moon rockets, do we?"

"No, that is quite excluded. Besides, as you know, the only bacteria found on the Moon were anaerobic. Just think of it!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands in a

truly prophetic gesture, "to destroy all the micro-organisms on a whole heavenly body! What a tragic blunder! One shudders to think how narrowly our Earth escaped the same fate! Remember how they began destroying all the influenza, dysentery and cholera germs? Some were completely wiped out. And now they are searching for them on Venus." The gaoler fell silent.

"Come," he said shortly.

"But where is the exit?"

"In front of you."

Looking closer, Barch saw a thin, hair-like seam on the section of the wall before him and two almost transparent hinges.

"This is the only place on Earth where there still are guards," Svensen explained. "Of course, no one would dream of entering here without permission. But the Safety Control people insist on the extra precaution. Open!" he called, raising his voice.

A section of the wall slid back, leaving a narrow opening barely wide enough for one man to squeeze through at a time. Stretching out his hand, Barch touched something hard. They were not under the dome as he had thought but in a corridor.

"The cleansing process begins here," said Svensen, pointing to the floor which had a pimply surface consisting of tiny globules with minute openings. "More bacteria are carried on the feet than any other way."

"Aren't they allowed in either?"

"Certainly not. At least not in the 'legal' way. Your Tantalus couldn't possibly get in here even if it tried. So you see why I am so positive that you won't find it here."

"Perhaps, but you didn't invite me here merely to convince me of that, did you?"

Svensen made no reply.

The corridor ended in the wall of the main building. After a minute's wait, the floor began slowly to drop. When it stopped, the opening above was closed by a thick screen. The two men stripped naked and deposited their discarded clothing in sealed boxes. Then began a curious

journey through a seemingly endless succession of rooms, connected by small ante-chambers with double doors on both sides. And as they moved from room to room their bodies were sprayed, sprinkled, scrubbed and doused with jets of various chemical solutions at varying temperatures. Barch felt as if he were walking through a giant fountain. With his eyes shut, he followed Svensen, clinging to his guide's hand. Then followed a cycle of radiation, and they walked like ghosts from room to room now in orange, now blue, now green light radiated from the walls, now in utter darkness.

At one point the control apparatus following the procedure registered some doubt and they had to repeat one stage of the treatment. But at last it was over and they were permitted to don sterilized overalls which they took from sealed cupboards with sizes marked on the doors. These were milky-white garments resembling space suits with openings only for the face and hands.

One more final examination and they stepped out into the prison yard.

Svensen pointed to a low, rectangular structure.

"All the influenzas are in there. Over a hundred of them. And this is the plague block. Not very small either, is it?

"A pure anachronism," he added hastily, noticing Barch's involuntary shudder. "It is one of medicine's paradoxes that we have learned so much about the plague since we have had it here under lock and key and found such swift and effective remedies that even if it happened to escape it would only give us a little extra trouble, but that is all. If mankind had possessed these remedies before, the plague would have been no more harmful, in fact far less so, than influenza. I mean the common forms of plague, of course."

"What other kinds are there?"

"Oh, a great many varieties we never knew about have been discovered latterly. They were not noticed formerly because their bacilli always accompanied ordinary Bubonic plague, and in minute numbers. One of the new

forms discovered," Svensen continued with a note of pride in his voice, "is more deadly than anything mankind ever knew. No serum affects it."

"How thrilling," said Barch coldly. "You sound as if you would welcome the Tantalus as well!"

"And indeed why not?" said Svensen. "Remember the case of the relapsing fever pathogene?" he went on. "It was destroyed on the insistence of the doctors. And what was the result? Ten years after the last specimen was killed, a microbiologist studying the subject from books, established that this organism would have been extremely useful—in a slightly modified form, of course—for many of the processes man needs. But try and find a relapsing fever germ in the entire Universe now!"

In his eagerness Svensen gripped Barch's arm with a strength surprising in a man of his puny build. Barch saw that the famous germ gaoler was off on his favourite subject.

"Microbes, like men, are neither wholly bad nor wholly good," Svensen declared, his voice booming as if he were addressing an audience. "Men are coming to realize this, and in time their attitude to microbes will change still more. But for scientific purposes it is essential that all the microbes of Earth and the other planets should always be available to the researcher. That is why the germ gaol, or the microbe sanatorium, or whatever you choose to call it, is in my opinion a brilliant idea and we should all be eternally grateful to its author Karbyshev."

Barch listened to this tirade with interest although he caught himself thinking that the idea had indeed become an obsession with Svensen.

"We seldom have visitors here," Svensen said in a normal voice. "But I shall be glad to show you anything you wish."

"That is very kind of you."

"What exactly would you like to see?"

"The plague block," said Barch firmly.

They were admitted to the plague block without any special preliminaries. Evidently it was believed that the

danger of any microbes existing under the dome was excluded.

A wide corridor led into the depths of the building. On either side were narrow doors bearing signs indicating the different varieties of plague in black letters against a yellow background.

Svensen stopped at one of these doors.

"Here we have the Pestis mortis," he said. "The one I told you about."

The door opened and Barch followed Svensen into a small ante-chamber. To his surprise they were kept there for some time before the lamp in the ceiling flashed green.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked. "Surely not bacteria from the corridor? What could we bring in that would be more deadly than what is already here?"

"We don't believe in mixing bacteria," Svensen explained. "It distorts the picture. After all, that is why it took us so long to discover the Pestis mortis. . . ."

The laboratory was like any other laboratory—there was the usual long table with test-tubes and retorts and a row of thermostats along the walls.

"It is here," thought Barch, looking askance at the neat cupboards.

Two researchers, dressed in the same kind of overalls as those worn by Barch and Svensen but with white masks and white gloves, were working at the table.

Barch suddenly found himself wishing that he too were protected by gloves and a mask. He glanced questioningly at Svensen, but that enthusiast evidently scorned such precautions.

"Would you like to have a look?"

Svensen led him over to a microscope standing on the table. Barch bent over the eyepieces and started: a large snake was writhing and wriggling in the yellow broth—true, unlike a snake it had no head and its tail did not taper, but it looked disgustingly reptilian.

Svensen adjusted the microscope and Barch saw the fine blade of a knife approach the convulsively twitching body. The snake gave a jerk but at the same instant the

knife struck and severed a piece of its body. Another swift, almost imperceptible movement and the reptile had been halved lengthwise.

The automatic dissector went on with its work. Barch felt a wave of something like nausea. This was not the first time he was seeing these monsters, invisible to the naked eye, and no one knew better than he how much havoc and destruction they could cause. He was no coward. But the sight of this magnified microbe which seemed about to leap at the dissector's knife revolted him.

As he watched the silent men in masks calmly handing one another test-tubes containing the most horrible death that had ever existed on Earth, Barch could not help admiring them and all the others who worked in these laboratories, searching for means of protecting men from disease that might prove useful in combating diseases on other planets.

"Come along," Svensen said quickly. "The temporary masks on our faces and hands will soon evaporate."

So the exposed parts of their bodies had been subjected to some sort of protective treatment while they had stood in that ante-chamber. Barch felt a little better.

"Thank goodness that's over," he thought with relief when the lamp on the ceiling of the exit chamber flashed green.

But he had rejoiced too soon. The outside door still remained tightly closed. Another minute and the floor in the ante-chamber began to descend slowly. After that the entire procedure they had undergone on entering the gaol was repeated—the spraying, the washing, the radiation—before finally the control apparatus released them.

"But what if something did happen?" Barch asked.

Svensen shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, quarantine, of course. Injections, and all the rest of it."

"Yes, but you say no serum is effective?"

Svensen did not reply. To talk to him about the danger of infection was like talking to a soldier about the danger of stray bullets during a battle.

"Would you like to see the virus block?" he suggested.

They spent a long time in the virus block. Svensen showed Barch over all the laboratories. Although Barch had no hope of finding the Tantalus or any remote relative of the microbe here he was nevertheless much interested in what he saw. Much of what was being done here could not be observed elsewhere on Earth, for ordinary laboratories handled harmless material exclusively.

In one place he stood for a long while watching some tiny creatures resembling miniature wire springs splitting and multiplying before his eyes. The form of the springs constantly changed, making a kaleidoscopic pattern. All the transformations, the laboratory assistants told him, were induced artificially.

"We have already created about six hundred new forms," they said.

Barch took out his Universal and recorded the "springs" and the researchers' explanation.

"I am very grateful to you for this opportunity to visit your prison," said Barch as he took leave of Svensen. "I feel I have not wasted my time."

"That is what I thought," was the other's somewhat puzzling reply.

And now as he lay helpless on the desolate volcanic islet it seemed to Barch that Svensen had had some hidden motive in showing him over the gaol. Why had he gone to all that trouble? And why had they spent so much time in the virus laboratories?

He cast his eyes once more over the rocks that held him captive. He already loathed the sight of them. His leg ached intolerably. The knee had swollen and turned blue and the slightest movement gave him excruciating pain. He tore off the sleeve of his shirt and bandaged his knee as best he could. If only he had something to eat and could build a fire!

Were they searching for him? Of course! But try and find a man stranded in the midst of the vast Pacific ocean, especially when he had no way of communicating his whereabouts.

But he had to find a more comfortable position. To lie any longer on these rough rocks was unbearable. From where he was he could see a flat hollow not far off, which seemed overgrown with some sort of moss. Gritting his teeth, he dragged himself over to it. Yes, this was better.

And suddenly he saw water! It was a mere trickle running in a hollow between two stones. But it was clear. Water! He bent over and put his lips to the rough surface of the rock, lapping up the blessed moisture, drop by drop.

The setting sun had reached the horizon. It sank quickly into the sea as if it had dropped off some invisible nail in the sky. A cool breeze came up.

Barch decided to try and sleep. But as soon as he closed his eyes new scenes from the past flashed before his weary vision.

III

. . . He saw himself sitting on the verandah looking out over a field of sugar-cane. The plantation presented a pitiful spectacle. The once tall, sharp-leaved plants were withered, as after a prolonged drought and their stalks and leaves were covered with ugly spots and partly eaten away.

Barch had just returned from an inspection flight. The Tantalus had ruined two-thirds of all the sugar plantations on Jamaica. Where had that confounded virus come from? Even Clara, whose brain retained all the information on biology ever known to man, had nothing to say on this score. No one had ever seen or described a virus resembling the Tantalus. One would think that in the twenty-first century such unexpected discoveries would be altogether excluded!

Barch, who was a veteran of Biological Defence, had been entrusted with the difficult task of unravelling the mystery of the Tantalus. Where had it come from? He had made exhaustive enquiries but so far all his efforts had been unavailing.

A soft hum in the air caused him to raise his head. A flock of about fifty sprayers, looking like giant umbrellas,

were passing in checkerboard formation over the fields leaving a cloud of light yellow mist in their wake. The chemists and biologists of the Central Laboratory were working day and night in an effort to find effective means of fighting the dangerous pest. Judging by the colour, this was something new.

There had already been talk of quarantining the whole island.

The sprayers bobbing up and down on the horizon like some fantastic sunflowers began to disappear one by one as they landed on a distant field.

Barch was still staring at the field before him when his Universal buzzed. He pressed the reception button and almost at once the face of Carey, chief of Biological Defence, appeared on the screen.

"Listen Barch," he shouted with his broad grin that made him look like the smiling young men in last century's tooth-paste advertisements, "still fussing with Tantalus? Drop it for a while. Forget about it for a couple of days at least. I have something more exciting for you. There's been a mysterious outbreak of disease among elephants in Central Africa. We can't trace it at all. Now, we've got to work fast before it has a chance to spread. I suggest you go down there at once. You can return to your Tantalus later on—the break will only help you to find a clue to your mystery. That's what I always do when I hit a snag. Well, what do you say?"

Barch, who needed nothing at the moment so much as an opportunity to apply his energies to something tangible and practical, agreed with alacrity.

"Charlie and App are already on their way," Carey told him. "Charlie from Ireland, App from Nicaragua. You'll be the third of the party. Keep in touch with me."

He gave the bearings and switched off.

Five minutes later Barch was on his way. Oh, there were no mishaps on that flight! His flying machine cut through the air at a good speed, heading straight for the point he had indicated on the map.

After two hours of flying he saw a lake in the distance

framed in bamboo thickets, and beyond it, a small house facing a large clearing. This was the elephant reserve where Ngarroba, Vice-President of the African Academy of Sciences, now away on Venus, was conducting his experiments. Barch pressed the landing button and the craft proceeded to choose a landing strip. It flew over the clearing once or twice, coming down lower each time and finally touched down alongside another first-aid plane standing there. Barch was just shaking hands with Charlie when App's plane appeared overhead.

Since time was precious the three men went down at once to the lake. They found the elephants on the sandy beach that had been churned up by their mighty feet. Less handsome than their Indian relatives, with disproportionately large heads, they stood or lay in the sand, listless and inert. Their enormous ears hung limp as rags and their trunks drooped weakly on the ground.

Bandy, Ngarroba's assistant, moved about among the huge beasts as if they were grey boulders instead of living creatures. And the animals paid no more attention to him than to the birds hopping about on the sand.

"Looks bad," said App watching the scene with a frown.

Bandy's black face was grey with worry and fatigue.

"It started yesterday," he said. "Just look at them."

"What did they eat?" Charlie asked.

"The same as usual," said Bandy, shrugging his shoulders. "That's their favourite food," he added pointing to the reeds.

Leaving Charlie and App to examine the sick elephants, Barch went over to the reed thickets.

He cut a few stalks and scrutinized them carefully, but could find nothing to arouse suspicion. Then he walked along the shore for about two kilometres, studying the reeds carefully as he went. But they were everywhere the same. He took samples for analysis from different places and went back to where the planes were parked.

Charlie and App were already there.

"It's anaemia," said App. "A very pernicious form."

"I took their blood for analysis," added Charlie.

Inside Charlie's plane, the gurgling sound of liquids being poured in and out of test-tubes and the winking of tiny electric light bulbs indicated that the automatic analyser was at work.

Climbing into his own machine, Barch cut up the reed stalks he had brought into small pieces and fed them into the automatic researcher. Meanwhile, to save time, he examined some of the cuttings under the microscope. He had scrutinized a good dozen cuttings without finding anything out of the ordinary, when a rash of tiny spots on the underside of one of the leaves caught his attention.

The spots were so infinitesimal as to be almost invisible on the delicate green background. Barch cut off a small piece of the leaf with one of the spots and increased the magnification. Now the spot looked like a miniature volcano with a crater in the middle.

The buzzers of two of the automatic researchers told Barch that their task had been completed. Without getting up, he reached for the blue slips. The first contained an analysis of the ash content; everything was normal except for an unexpected admixture of manganese. The other slip gave the composition of the protoplasm which did show some slight deviations that were worth examining.

But the slip from the third automatic researcher contained information that caused Barch to gasp. It showed enlarged photographs of the microbes found in the reeds, and among them—Barch wanted to pinch himself to make sure he was awake—were the familiar outlines of the Tantalus! He could not believe his eyes.

He seized the magnifying glass and, trying to keep calm, proceeded to examine the photographs carefully. No, he was not mistaken: that shape like the paragraph sign was all too familiar. There could be no doubt about it, this was the Tantalus!

The buzzers of the fourth, fifth and sixth automatic researchers sounded, but Barch laid their slips aside without even looking at them. He rang up Clara.

When at last she answered, Barch's table was positively

littered with slips. He glanced at them quickly and plied Clara with additional questions.

An inquiry about the spots elicited an unexpected answer: Clara named a virus found in the basin of the Amazon River half a century ago.

The Amazonian virus, she said, had been a harmless creature altogether unremarkable and in fact so colourless that the Unabridged Microbe Encyclopedia allotted no more than five lines to it. It evidently had no influence on the plants it lived on. Discovered by chance, it had existed in obscurity until Barch had dragged it into the limelight.

Barch called Carey. Jamaica replied at once.

"Try feeding the elephants with Tantalus-infected reeds. African elephants preferably," he said.

"All right. What's up?"

Barch told him.

Carey's grin was broader than ever.

"I say, you've got something there."

He beamed. It was not for nothing people said that the day the Biological Defence ran out of assignments Carey would pine away and die of some unknown disease.

He asked Barch to let him have all the data he had collected from the automatic researchers. Barch pressed the "transmit data" button and climbed out of his machine.

Charlie and App were also transmitting their initial finds to the Centre.

"It's a virus disease, of course," said App.

"I found a high manganese content in the blood," said Charlie. "What have you got?"

"Looks like the Tantalus," Barch said. He shrugged his shoulders. "But not quite. There's a good deal of manganese in the reeds too."

"Must be in the soil."

"Now we only have to check the insectarium," said App. "That's another problem of our age! By preserving corners of nature untouched, man is preserving seats of

infection. The question is, what is the best thing to do—to preserve or destroy? In other words, which is the most advantageous for man? Perhaps these preserves are the source of infection?"

. . . The net covering the tropical forest was green with a mesh so fine that it was almost invisible even at close quarters. Bandy found the entrance and opening the flap, stood aside to allow the others to enter. As they had passed through three rows of netting, Bandy carefully closed each opening behind them. At his insistence they all put on protective nets before embarking on their tour of the insectarium.

This was the world in its primeval state. Winged creatures, a single bite from whom was deadly poisonous for man, bred and multiplied unhindered in this moist, suffocating atmosphere. It was the sort of jungle that had filled even the boldest travellers of former times with horror and loathing.

Barch was a soldier of the Biological Defence. And like a soldier he strode confidently forward, observing a reasonable measure of precaution. The winged bullets whistled past his ears, bumped against his net, whirled above his head. But Barch was in his element. The swift and frequent change of scene, the danger involved, the urgency were what made the work in Biological Defence so thrilling. Barch caught himself smiling contentedly under his netting for all the world like Carey.

No, he could never spend his life behind thick, albeit transparent walls, like Svensen, though, to tell the truth, the work in the germ gaol's laboratories was no less dangerous and fascinating than his own. But it lacked the thrill of emergency calls that took one to the remotest corners of the globe. In a word, it lacked adventure.

Bandy bent down and pointed to large tracks in the ground.

"Elephants," he said.

App studied the prints closely for a few minutes.

"These were healthy ones," he said.

"Will we be able to take a blood test?" Charlie wanted to know.

Bandy shook his head. "Can't do it with healthy animals," he said.

"Well, we don't really need it, if they're healthy," said App. "It's the sick ones that interest us."

"Now let's see what the reeds have to say."

Cutting a number of reeds and stowing them away in hermetically sealed sacks, the men retraced their steps through the jungle, exercising the same caution as before. Bandy led them through the triple overall net at the exit and turned on a number of switches hidden in the bushes.

"The net is electrified," he explained. "That's to prevent the bigger animals from breaking through."

. . . The automatic researchers were given a fresh portion of work to do.

"Well, what's the result?" App inquired, looking into Barch's laboratory.

"No spots."

"What about the chemical analyses?"

At that moment the first machine buzzed.

"Manganese?" asked Charlie, coming up.

"No sign of it," replied Barch, examining the slip.

"Hm," Charlie looked puzzled. "Perhaps the manganese is the clue to the mystery?"

Barch summoned Carey again. The latter told him that the two African elephants that had been fed Jamaica reeds infected by the Tantalus showed no signs of sickness.

"Try it on some other elephants," suggested Charlie. "Feed them the same reeds treated with manganese."

"Look here," protested Carey, good-naturedly, "how many elephants do you think I've got? Okay, I'll do it. And if we get the serum we'll let you have it at once. You'd better try and save the ones you have."

"We'll have to move them to a healthier spot," said App after Carey had gone.

"I suppose any place will do so long as there's no manganese in the soil," said Charlie.

Barch climbed into his plane and went off to look for a place.

The others attended to the elephants. Many of the animals were too weak to stand. Bandy called out the freight helicopters. In about an hour the huge cargo craft began to land on the field one after another. The elephants were loaded in by crane. Some were so weak that they could hardly be made to lift themselves far enough for the hoist straps to be passed around them.

"These are the ones Ngarroba was experimenting with," said Bandy. "It will be too bad if they die."

Charlie, App and Barch spent the whole night transporting the elephants to the new grounds. It was daybreak when Bandy dismissed the helicopters.

"Well," said App, surveying the animals lying listlessly on the grass. "I think we've earned a rest. We'll sleep in relays—one sleeps while two carry on. Right?"

They drew lots. Barch got the "lucky" slip and went off to his bunk. He closed the door of his cabin tight, set the air conditioning apparatus to his accustomed temperature and humidity, and pressed a button. A mattress moved out from the wall, one of those new-type super-comfort mattresses designed by the Sleep Institute. Turning the knob of the electrical sleep apparatus to "natural awakening," Barch undressed. What a pleasure it was to sleep without the encumbrance of night-suits or bed clothing of any kind! For centuries man had bundled himself up in animal skins or blankets until at last he had freed himself from those primitive sources of warmth. Barch mused as he settled down on his bed. But the next moment all thoughts were banished as he sank gently into a dreamless sleep.

IV

But now as he lay on the hard rocks, Barch longed for the comfort of a primitive animal skin. His arm, shoulder and side were numb and he had nearly frozen during the night.

He lay wide awake, staring up at the bright sky. The sun was already high up and a cloudless sky hung starkly

over the boundless emptiness of the ocean. His knee had swollen still more and he could not move his leg.

His head throbbed from heat, pain and exhaustion and it was with difficulty that he marshalled his thoughts. What had happened after he had retired to his cabin to rest? Ah yes, he remembered now! He had awakened three and a half hours later, having slept half an hour more than he had expected.

As soon as he had opened his eyes, Carey was on the screen.

"Look here," he said, "there's nothing more for you to do there. Besides, you're interested in flora, not fauna. App and Charlie can take care of the elephants. I want you to drop everything and fly to the Tuamoto Islands. They've found a virus there which speeds up the growth of bamboo. Something queer is happening on this planet of ours. Perhaps some cosmic dust has come down to us? This is the last assignment, though. After this you can go back to your Tantalus."

. . . The assignment proved to be just the sort of adventure Barch's romantic soul had craved. And now here he was stranded on an unknown island, literally "on the rocks." As he lay there, waiting for help, the thought of the Tantalus gave him no rest. Again and again he went over every step in his investigation, every link in the chain of circumstances connected with his painstaking search for the elusive virus, every fact, every clue. Now he had plenty of time to think everything over carefully. Much more time than he had had in the previous hectic days.

Suddenly a thought struck him, making him start as if he had been stung. He even tried to rise, but a sharp pain in his leg forced him back.

In a flash, like a beam of light penetrating the darkness, came the answer to the riddle that had baffled him for so long. He knew now where the Tantalus had come from. How could he save been so blind? Why, Svensen had virtually placed the answer right under his nose. He had all but pointed his finger at it. So that was the explanation

for that guided tour of the germ gaol, that was why they had lingered so long in the virus block!

Of course! The Tantalus was no more than the result of a rapid evolution of some virus that had long existed on Earth. It seemed to Barch now that something of the sort had occurred to him vaguely as he had watched the innumerable transformations of the tiny live "springs." He remembered how closely Svensen had observed him that time in the laboratory.

Svensen had obviously had the same idea, but for some reason he had kept it to himself. Why? Perhaps he had wanted to receive confirmation of his theory. Or perhaps he was afraid of putting Barch on the wrong track? Svensen as a scientist was not prone to hasty conclusions.

One thing was now clear to Barch: all the new viruses whose discovery had created such a sensation were in reality one and the same virus. Or rather, they derived from one and the same virus.

It all began, of course, with some simple harmless virus that had existed for perhaps thousands of years in the tropical jungles of South America. This was the ancestor of the Tantalus and of the virus that had caused the disease of the elephants. And of the virus that was accelerating the growth of bamboo too, most likely. The manganese had acted on the "parent" virus found in the basin of the Amazon half a century ago and produced the form of virus that had infected the elephants! Had the investigators followed this pattern, they would have solved the problem at once.

What a pity the truth had dawned on him so late! If only the confounded Universal had not gone out of commission. How badly he needed it now! . . . At that very same moment Barch heard a faint buzz from the apparatus. For a moment he thought it was his imagination, but the buzz was repeated.

It was the "urgent message" signal. He snatched the device up and feverishly tuned in. He discovered that only one wave-length worked: the one for emergency messages.

It had its own circuit and by some lucky chance this had escaped damage.

A voice intruded on his thoughts: "Venus-8 is returning to Earth."

For a moment the full import of the message escaped him.

"Thank goodness," he thought absently, "Karbyshev will soon be on Earth. He will help solve the mystery of the Tantalus." Then the significance of what he had just heard dawned upon him, filling him with alarm. What had happened to "Venus-8"? It was not due back on Earth for another ten months!

The message had merely said that the space ship was on its way to Earth. This had been established by astronomical observation, for there was no radio communication with it. Nor could there be, Barch recalled, until it was a good distance from Venus. Barch stood his Universal up against the rock so that he could see the screen without turning his head, and switched on the receiver knob.

He passed a quiet night—the second on the island—and awoke to hear the announcer say in a voice that shook slightly with emotion:

"The Eighth found intelligent beings on Venus."

Barch almost leapt to his feet in excitement! So that was why they were returning! What foul luck to be stranded on this accursed island when such tremendous things were happening!

Hours later came the first announcements about the inhabitants of Venus. Their bodies were covered with a thick growth of something resembling beaver fur, they wore no clothes, but carried hunting weapons—stone-pointed spears.

There were several more announcements. But by now Barch had lapsed into a state of semi-consciousness. He heard the words but they had no meaning for him. He did not know how long he had been here, but he felt it must be many days. At last a familiar sound penetrated his consciousness—it was Charlie's voice.

"Hallo, Barch! Where are you? What's happened?"

Charlie's face appeared on the screen, he looked pale and distraught and he stared fixedly at Barch as if he was trying to see him.

"Why are you silent?"

Charlie disappeared and Barch, his head whirling, was not sure whether he had actually seen him or whether he was only dreaming.

At one point the sharp voice of the announcer brought him back to reality for a few moments. A blurred spot appeared moving diagonally across the screen like a centipede: the rocket was coming within range of observation from the Earth.

Barch closed his eyes again. . . . He was awakened by a loud noise near by. He opened his eyes and saw a large crowd of people on the screen. They were packed into a vast stadium. Barch recognized the Melbourne Stadium which seated half a million people.

An open vortex plane appeared on the screen. Karbyshev stood on the platform, holding on to the rails. Barch gazed at the familiar energetic face with the blue eyes that always had a twinkle in them. Beside Karbyshev stood Ngarroba, huge and beaming. The other two participants of the expedition were there too: Sung-ling, calm as always, and the small dapper Gargi, whom Barch only knew from photographs. The four men stepped down from the plane to a platform.

Karbyshev delivered a speech, while the automatic television cameras scanned him and the other members of the expedition and showed films they had taken on Venus.

Charlie appeared again on the screen. He looked worried.

"Barch, Barch! Where are you?" he called, staring anxiously about him. "Give us your bearings at least. We've searched everywhere. . . ."

Charlie disappeared again.

With an effort of will Barch dismissed all extraneous thoughts and tried to sleep. He must hold out a little longer. There was still a chance of their finding him.

. . . Now he saw Charlie through a haze. His friend

looked straight at him as if this time he actually did see him. Then he stepped forward, and Barch saw that this was really Charlie and not his image on the screen.

"At last!" he heard Charlie say. "What's wrong with your leg?"

Barch tried to speak but the words would not come.

"I've searched the whole Pacific," Charlie was saying. "We were afraid you might have been carried beyond the island. The machine didn't confirm landing. It only radioed that it had dropped you and gave the wrong bearings. It burned up in the air."

Barch waited until Charlie's face emerged from the haze and his voice sounded distinct. Mustering all his strength, he shouted: "Tantalus . . . and the elephant virus, it's the same thing. The one from the Amazon. . . ."

V

Tradition demanded that all parties concerned be present in the courtroom. By the same unwritten laws both the defence and the prosecution always wore black. Historians maintained that this custom dated back to the remote times when human beings were put on trial and the judges garbed themselves in black robes.

At last the day of the trial came.

As usual, no speeches were delivered. Only a brief outline of the case was given to refresh the memories of those present. The luminescent cupola of the circular hall darkened, the walls vanished and the spectators were transported, as it were, to the heart of a primeval forest on the banks of the Amazon River. Giant trees reared up on all sides, their branches intertwined above to form a green tent overhead. Birds flew from branch to branch right above the heads of the hushed audience, filling the air with their shrill cries. The hall, or rather its floor, was now a sort of island floating in the midst of a green ocean. Now the island began to move slowly through the impenetrable jungle which closed behind it. Presently the jungle thinned and a body of water appeared only to be hidden almost at once by tall stands of bamboo. Now the spectators were

surrounded by whispering bamboo thickets, their fluffy crowns nodding in the breeze. A creaking sound caused all heads to turn in one direction—the bamboo stalks parted and a tall man with a face bronzed by the sun appeared. He cut off several green stalks with a machete and held them out towards the audience.

An enormous hand appeared in the air and took the stalks. In an instant the forest vanished and the spectators found themselves in a laboratory equipped with a large number of automatic researchers. Closer examination revealed that this was not one but six identical laboratories.

For the convenience of the spectators the picture was shown in several parts of the hall at once. In the middle of six huge circles, flashed simultaneously onto the ceiling of the hall, there appeared six identical and greatly magnified reproductions of Tantalus-1, as the common ancestor of all the Tantalus viruses was now called. All six Tantaluses jerked and wriggled in unison, as if they were performing calisthenics in some fantastic parade. It was indeed a sort of parade. One Tantalus followed another down to the last, Tantalus-10, recently discovered on the Solomon Islands.

The evil deeds of the criminals were then demonstrated.

The spectators were shown the withered plants on the sugar plantations of Jamaica, the African elephants sprawled listless on the ground.

"It is not only a matter of elephants," said the commentator, "but of Ngarroba's experiments."

Barch, of course, knew about this experiment. It had been the subject of much discussion. Ngarroba had found the well-preserved remains of a mammoth in the Siberian permafrost belt and had been able to revive some of its cells, including the reproductive cells. He had used the latter to impregnate twenty female elephants from the African preserve. If his experiment succeeded and the hybrids were obtained, he intended to use the same artificial method on the second generation whose offspring would then be three-quarters mammoth. The fourth generation would produce "pure bred" mammoths with a negligible

admixture of "foreign" blood. It was Ngarroba's idea to settle these mammoths in the Antarctic, the only part of the world where the animal world was still poor.

And now the Tantalus had ruined his first experiment. Even if he began all over again there would be one generation of mammoths less.

"For that alone it deserves to be wiped out," remarked the man next to Barch.

But this was not the only crime Tantalus had committed. There followed a series of impressive figures: thousands of tons of ruined sugar-cane and other raw materials; human time and energy wasted in connection with the quarantines necessitated in many districts by the advent of the Tantalus, and so on. The ubiquitous virus had cost mankind dearly.

"But the Tantalus is not only harmful," said the commentator. "In all justice it must be said that it can be useful too, very useful indeed. It has been established that it facilitates the growth of plants. Even sugar-cane in the first period of infection showed a rapid increase in growth though later the growth ceased and the plant perished. On bamboo plants, however, one of the varieties of Tantalus, No. 4, has a remarkable effect. Bamboo is noted for its rapid growth, but in this case the process is speeded up to an amazing degree. Moreover, the fibre becomes stronger and more resilient. For all art work Tantalus bamboo is now considered the best."

Barch waited impatiently for the commentator to come to the problem on whose solution he had devoted so much energy.

And at last it came:

"Tantalus-1 lived quietly and peacefully in the upper reaches of the Amazon River until man, whose activity has now extended to every corner of this planet, reached these formerly unexplored regions. He cut clearings in the jungle and the sunlight poured in. As time went on, the advent of dams, cities and factories brought to these parts numerous chemical substances which Tantalus-1 had never encountered previously. It proved particularly sensi-

tive to some of them—not only to manganese which produced Tantalus-3, but even to ordinary lime. A rapid change of form and characteristics began.

And now the fate of the virus was about to be decided. What was to be done with it?"

"Clap it in gaol," said Barch's neighbour, "and at once. Isolate it the way you would a madman whose actions no one can predict."

"What!" cried Svensen. "Imprison a virus with so many positive characteristics? *That* would be madness if you like!"

"Hear! Hear!" said another member of the gathering. "Why should we throw away the opportunity to speed up plant growth, or obtain a higher grade bamboo?"

"And ruin our sugar-cane and poison our elephants," someone added caustically from the other end of the hall.

"We already have effective means of combating Tantalus-2 and Tantalus-3."

"Yes, but who knows what Tantalus-11 may bring?" As usual everyone was eager to express his opinion.

But the most vehement was Svensen.

"If we cut short Nature's experiment," he said, "we deprive ourselves of knowledge it may take our laboratories ten or twenty years to acquire."

"What are more important: human beings or microbes?" objected the representative of the Planning Bureau. "What has nature got to do with the case? After all, the new activity of Tantalus is the virus's reaction to man, not nature. It lived in nature thousands of years without raising its head. No, this is a downright revolt against man, against mankind and his works. . . ."

"You're forgetting the bamboo!" someone cried.

"Rather too high a price to pay for bamboo!"

Several people pressed their chair buttons at once asking for the floor. The dispatcher could barely keep pace with the demand. At the height of the discussion, when about a dozen tiny lamps had flashed on the dispatcher's panel, Karbyshev's voice sounded.

"I have a proposal to submit!"

The hubbub in the hall subsided. The founder of the microbe preserve was a well-known figure and his opinion was respected.

"I move that all the Tantaluses without exception be confined in the germ gaol. Those remaining outside the gaol are to be exterminated. The gaol should open a separate wing for Tantalus, one laboratory for each variety and thirty in reserve for varieties that might arise in the future. In this way we can replace Nature's hit-and-miss methods by planned experimentation. We shall use all the known means of acting on the micro-organisms. And as soon as we obtain permanent forms with positive characteristics we shall release them."

The motion was put to the vote. The progress of the voting was flashed on a panel on the ceiling. As each person in the hall pressed the button on the arm of his chair, the figures changed.

The results were 500 for, none against.

The voting over, the participants in the trial, opponents of the Tantalus and its champions alike, rose and moved toward the exit.

The announcer broadcast the decision to the world.

* * *

Karbyshev was talking with Ngarroba and Sung-ling when Barch came up. They all stopped talking to look at him.

"Look here," said Karbyshev to the young man, "it seems to me that there's nothing much left for you to do here on Earth. What we witnessed today is in my opinion Nature's last rebellion against Man. Venus, now, is another matter entirely. It's chock full of unknown micro-organisms. One vast natural preserve. With dangers lurking at every step. We are selecting a staff for the first permanent research station on Venus. How would you like to join it?"