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**Bio-Chemical Science Discovers an Amazing  
Alien Being that Thinks, Talks—and Destroys!**

# LIQUID LIFE

A Complete Novelette of Fantastic Menace

By RALPH MILNE FARLEY

Author of "The Radio Planet,"  
"The Man Who Met Himself," etc.

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## CHAPTER I

### *The Filterable Virus*

Millionaire Metcalf drew his Inverness cape more tightly about his tall spare frame, and shivered slightly, although it was a warm June day.

"That's Salt Pond, Dee!" he announced, with a wave of his hand.

His companion, a broad-shouldered blond young man, stared with interest at the little body of water, flanked by pine-clad slopes.

Its dark and turbid surface seemed to absorb, rather, than cast back, the reflection of the fleecy clouds floating lazily overhead. The water heaved and rolled slightly, though there was no perceptible breeze. Dee remembered having once seen just this sort of sluggish undulant motion in a maggoty cistern full of liquid swill. He, too, shivered.

A grim smile spread across the lean face of his millionaire patron.

"So you feel it too, eh?" asked Metcalf. "Well, you haven't yet seen the half of it. Not a lily pad nor a reed, you will note. The fish are all gone. There are not even any bugs on the surface." Then as Dee approached the water's edge, "Careful there! Don't let any of the spray get on you—it burns like an acid."

Dee knelt on the beach, and gingerly filled several glass-stoppered bottles with water from the pond. Then he

and Metcalf walked slowly and thoughtfully down the road, until they came to a pasture at the end of the pond.

"Here is the latest victim," Metcalf announced. "It has not been disturbed."

Lying on the grass, about fifty feet from the water, was a dead, half eaten cow. Dee stooped down to examine it.

"See how the legs and tail taper off to a point at their upper ends, as though they had been dipped in acid," he said. "I pulled a half dead frog out of a snake's mouth once, and the whole rear end of the poor frog had been dissolved to a point, just like that. You don't suppose—"

"No," Metcalf replied. "There is nothing in that pond large enough to eat a cow. I have had it dredged with dragnets from end to end. The nets were eaten away, and several of the men got badly burned by drops of water, but not a thing did they bring to the surface."

"Well," Dee said, "I've seen enough to start on. Let's get me back to Boston, so that I can analyze these samples."

Dee entered the laboratory of John Dee Service, Inc., and placed his glass-stoppered bottles on the long central table, strewn with chemical paraphernalia.

Along the right hand wall ran a table containing a radio-set, and some partially dissected cats. A white-coated young man, dark and with a pointed black mustache, laid down the scalpel with which he had been working on one of the cats, and strolled over to the central table.

Along the left hand wall ran a table, littered like the central one with beakers, test-tubes, and such. Here a stocky, bearded young man in a grey smock was working. He too got up and joined the group about the new arrival.

"Well, fellows," Dee announced, "old man Metcalf has given us a chance to repay him for the money he advanced to us."

"I hope," the tall cat-dissector stated seriously, "that the assignment is something which will be of some real use to the world."

"Bah!" spat the stocky bullet-headed one. "You two fellows make me tired. All that Jack thinks about is playing square with an old friend. All that Ivan thinks about is the welfare of the so-called human race. Me, I'm practical. I hope that this job will get the load of debt off our heads. Go on and tell us about it, Jack."

Dee rapidly sketched the lethal effect of the waters of Salt Pond, and the strange fate of the partially devoured cows. "It looks to me altogether too pat," he insisted. "The acid effect of the water, for the chemist Jack Dee to investigate; its lethal effect, for the bio-chemist Hans Schmidt; and the cow-eating entity, for the biologist Ivan Zenoff. Just a kindly invention of Metcalf's, so as to free us of our debt, without insulting us by merely cancelling it."

"Salt Pond?" asked Zenoff interestedly. "Is it really salt, Jack? Way up in the White Mountains?"

"Yes, Ivan," Dee replied. "Almost like sea water. Metcalf transplanted a lot of flounders, eels, crabs, and mussels there, about ten years ago; and they all did very nicely until this year."

"Salt water, eh?" Zenoff said thoughtfully. "The elixir of life. Life originated in the sea, and when it had evolved enough so that it could crawl out onto dry land, it carried the sea with it in its blood-stream. Every living cell of our bodies is lapped by the waves of the sea, or it could not survive."

"But from what you say, Jack," Schmidt interposed, "I don't believe that you will find that it analyzes like ordinary sea water how. Your description of the remains of the dead cows sounds to me as though they had been dissolved in some very powerful, burning acid."

"We'll soon see." Dee pulled a laboratory smock over his head. "Ivan, you get back to your cats' brains; and Hans, you get back to your filterable virus. Let me tackle this. This seems to be a question in *inorganic chemistry*."

He sat down at his work bench, poured some of one of his samples of pond water into a test-tube, and set to work. His two partners returned to their own benches. For about an hour there was silence in the laboratory.

Then suddenly Dee cried out in pain. "Burned myself!" he shouted, and looked frantically around for an antidote.

Hans Schmidt rushed over and poured something from a small brown bottle onto Dee's hand.

"Dilute carbolic," he announced, in response to a questioning look.

"What! An acid to counteract an acid? How absurd!" Dee declared.

"Well, it worked!"

"But what on earth made you think of using carbolic, Hans?"

"I merely acted instinctively," Schmidt rather sheepishly replied. "When anything goes wrong, a bacteriologist instinctively reaches for his carbolic acid. That's all."

Ivan Zenoff joined them.

"Let me see the hand. Um! Pretty badly burned. I'll dress it for you." He returned to his own bench, got some gauze bandage and salve, and neatly wrapped up the injured member.

"How far had you got, Jack?" Schmidt inquired.

"Nowhere," Dee admitted. "It is nothing but sea water, with—well—perhaps a slight excess of organic residue. But no acid; nothing to account for its burning effect."

"How does it react to litmus?"

"Why, I never tried. Took it for granted that it was acid." He dipped a small piece of lavender paper in the sample. If anything, it turned even bluer. "Hm! Certainly not acid. Perhaps it's some caustic alkali, and that's why the carbolic acid neutralized it."

"Too quick-acting for a caustic alkali, if you'd ask me," Schmidt commented. "Give me a sample with which to experiment. I have an idea."

For several days Dee and Schmidt worked on their analyses, while Zenoff busied himself with his cats.

Finally Dee admitted himself licked.

"It's nothing but sea water," he maintained.

"So?" asked Schmidt, his pale blue eyes twinkling. "Chemically, perhaps yes. But *bio*-chemically, no."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Salt Pond is infected with some new sort of very deadly filterable virus."

"And just what is a filterable virus?"

"Up until recently it was supposed that a filterable virus was merely a culture of germs so minute that even the finest porcelain filter could not remove them from the liquid. But early in nineteen-thirty-six it was discovered that the reason why these germs wouldn't filter out was that there were no germs there. The liquid itself was alive—a sort of living colloidal crystalline solution."

"Living?" exclaimed Zenoff, looking up from his dissection. "How can a liquid live?"

"What *is* life?" Schmidt countered. "Life is the ability to grow, to assimilate food, and to reproduce. Filterable viruses do all of that. A filterable virus is a living liquid."

"And you think that Salt Pond is infected with such a virus?" Dee asked.

"Yes. In fact, I've been able to grow some of the Salt Pond virus in a culture. That would account for the fact that a germicide saved your hand the other day."

"Say, look here," interposed Zenoff, getting up from his dissected cats, and joining them. "Here's a chance to try my experiment on a new form of life."

"You mean your proof that anesthesia does not dull the brain?" asked Dee.

"Exactly! By sinking two electrical contacts in the auditory center of the brain of an anesthetised cat, and by amplifying their impulse by means of radio tubes, I have reproduced in the loud speaker whatever sounds enter the cat's ear. Unconsciousness doesn't affect the brain at all—it merely disconnects the mind. The cat's physical body keeps right on thinking, but she doesn't know it!"

"Well?" Dee encouraged.

"Well, it occurred to me that perhaps the living tissues of the brain merely served as a sort of aerial to pick up the sounds; and so I tried every other sort of living tissue I could obtain. But no go. My apparatus can pick up a sound only from the auditory center of a living brain. Now I shall make one final try with the—"

A crash on the table beside them caused the three young men to look hastily around. One of Ivan Zenoff's cats, not yet operated upon, had jumped onto the bench, had knocked over one of the bottles of Salt Pond water, and was now busily engaged in lapping it up, evidently relishing its saline taste.

"Why, the poor beast! She'll be horribly burned!" cried Dee. "Quick, Hans, the antiseptic!"

But too late! For with a shriek of pain the cat began turning somersaults on the bench.

To save his apparatus from destruction, Dee cuffed the cat into the sink, where it twitched convulsively for a moment, and then lay still.

"Quick-working poison!" Zenoff dryly observed, twirling his mustaches. "Now, as I was saying when I was interrupted, I'm going to take my apparatus, and see if a filterable virus can pick up sounds. If not, and as I have already tried about everything else, then we are pretty safe in assuming that my phenomenon is one of brain activity."

"Look!" exclaimed Dee, pointing to the dead cat lying in the sink. For the cat's belly had opened up, and a slimy colorless liquid was oozing out.

Hastily he placed a glass stopper in the drain hole of the sink. Then, as the three men stood and watched, the cat slowly dissolved, until presently the sink was filled with nothing but a sluggish opalescent liquid, the surface of which throbbed and heaved.

"Liquid life!" Dee exclaimed. "This explains the dead cows."

"But," Schmidt objected, "the cow's head and legs and tail remained!"

"And so would the cat's have done," said Zenoff, "if the liquid had run down the drain. When it oozed out of the cow's belly, it undoubtedly sank into the ground, before it had time to dissolve any more than the upper ends of the legs and tail."

"Let's dish this out," Dee suggested.

Schmidt brought over a two gallon cylindrical glass jar and very carefully bailed up all the liquid with a granite-ware dipper.

"Now for my experiment," Zenoff announced, carrying the jar, with its slimy heaving contents, over to his own bench, and setting it down beside his radio. Switching on the current, he picked up a slender black rubber rod with two sharp metal points at its end connected to the radio-set by two wires, and carefully dipped the contacts into the liquid.

"Hello there!" he shouted. But no sound came out of the loud speaker.

"Well," said Hans Schmidt, shrugging his shoulders, "I guess this is the last proof necessary—"

"Hello there!" boomed the loud speaker.

Zenoff jumped, and nearly dropped his contact points into the seething liquid.

"Well," remarked the loud speaker, with exactly Schmidt's accent, "I guess this is the last proof necessary."

"Delayed rebroadcasting!" Zenoff exclaimed, his dark eyes flashing. "Say! This *is* something! A new phenomenon!",

"Let's dish this out," spoke the loud speaker, this time in Dee's tones.

Dee's jaw dropped.

"Why, it repeats things in a different order than we said them!" he exclaimed.

"Fellows," Zenoff solemnly announced, "this isn't mere repeating! It's something more!"

"Huh! Perhaps the cat's brain is still active," scornfully sniffed Hans Schmidt.

For about an hour the three friends sat around the dissolved dead cat, discussing what had happened, and advancing theory after theory, only to discard each one of them in turn.

Finally Zenoff reinserted his contacts in the jar, and announced, "Well, fellows, I believe that this liquid whether on account of the cat part of it, or to the filterable virus part of it, has some sort of low order intelligence. Now I'm going to holler something at it again."

"Fellows," interrupted the loud speaker, "it is you who have the low order of intelligence. You—not I."

"Now the thing is improvising!" Zenoff exclaimed jubilantly.

But, although he held the electrical contacts in place, and talked and shouted, and finally read aloud from a book for several hours, not another sound came out of the loud speaker.

## CHAPTER II

## *The Overdosed Solution*

The next morning, however, when he repeated the experiment, he got an immediate response.

"Read to me some more," boomed the loud speaker. "Your thesis on the souls of cats was very interesting. Read me something about filterable viruses."

"Hey, Hans, do you hear that?" Zenoff shouted across the laboratory. "Bring us your thesis. This tub of suds wants to hear your thesis now."

"Don't call *me* a tub of suds!" sternly admonished the loud speaker.

Schmidt and Dee both hastened over to Zenoff's bench.

"Well, of all the cockeyed performances!" Dee exclaimed. "Here are we, three supposedly sane individuals, carrying on a serious conversation with a radio set hooked up to a dead cat dissolved in some extremely caustic salt water!"

"The cat has nothing whatever to do with the matter," the loud speaker interpolated. "I merely ate the cat. Do you imagine, Jack, that that apple which you were just eating when you entered the laboratory, is what is talking to me through you?"

"Now, I know that this is a frame-up," said Dee, and there was sadness in his tones. "Ivan, you're playing a trick on us."

"Indeed I'm not!" Zenoff indignantly exclaimed.

"Indeed he's not!" echoed the loud speaker.

"No," Zenoff continued seriously. "You can search the room for concealed wires, if you wish, but you will find nothing."

"Then we are all crazy!" cried Dee, sitting down heavily in a chair.

"No," said Zenoff. "We've stumbled onto something big! Those savants who evolved the theory that a filterable virus is liquid fire, merely discovered a new order of being. We have discovered a new type of mind!"

"Or perhaps a mere mechanical thinking machine," Schmidt suggested.

"You, and your mechanistic philosophy," sneered Zenoff.

"Read me that thesis about filterable viruses!" boomed the loud speaker imperatively.

"Yes, sir," Zenoff meekly replied, picking up the bound manuscript.

"That's better," said the loud speaker, in a satisfied tone.

The rest of the day was spent by the three partners taking turns reading to the jar of colorless liquid.

When at five o'clock Zenoff reached out to remove the electrical contacts, the loud speaker preemptorily commanded, "Stop! Don't cut me off! Keep on reading!"

"But we have to rest," Zenoff politely explained.

"Rest"? What is 'rest'?" the thing asked, and was not satisfied until Zenoff produced and read to it the Encyclopedia Britannica article on "Sleep," and several of the cross-references. Then Zenoff was permitted to remove the contacts, and the three friends went home.



In the days that followed, they read aloud book after book, and thesis after thesis to the insatiable liquid in the glass jar. They even read it the daily papers, and were astounded at the intelligent interest which it soon developed about current events.

But daily the liquid became more and more irritable and rude in its attitude toward them; until finally Zenoff, exasperated, threatened to remove the contacts.

"Am I irritable?" asked the loud speaker conciliatingly. "I am sorry. Let me think a moment." A long pause; then, "I believe that my trouble is due to insufficient saline content. Please, add a little more salt to me."

Schmidt brought the salt, and put in a pinch at a time, stirring the liquid with a glass rod, until the liquid announced, "Okey. I feel fine now. Go on with the reading."

Dee sighed. "I believe we've got ourselves an 'old man of the sea'," he said. Then, of course, had to explain that allusion to the liquid.

When he had finished the explanation, the liquid spoke. "Not at all. You know, I believe that by putting my superior mind to work on your problems, I can help you solve them. All that I ask in return is food, salt, and water."

"What are you, anyway?" Zenoff blurted out. The three had never put this question to the thing—had never even discussed it in its presence.

"I've been thinking about that myself," came haltingly from the loud speaker. "I am somewhat like the filterable viruses, of which you have read to me, and yet I am different. I am liquid life. I was once a part of the life of Salt Pond. How long that life persisted there, I cannot say; because back in those days we knew nothing of what you human beings call 'time.' I have enjoyed learning how the world seems to you. We, the virus of the pond, never knew anything except pure thought, until you brought me here."

"Hold on!" Dee interrupted. "You speak of 'I', 'we', 'the virus in the pond,' 'the rest of me'; it's quite confusing. Just what is your relationship to the virus that is left in the pond?"

"Your mere human mentality," the virus patronizingly replied, "is not able to grasp the significance of that relationship. I am a distinct individual.

"Yet, if you were to divide me into two jars, each would be I, and the other would be someone else. If you were to feed me, let me grow, subdivide me, until there were enough of us to overwhelm the earth, nevertheless we, they, I, whatever you choose to call it, would all still be me, capable of recombining and redividing indefinitely. The human language has no personal pronouns applicable to a filterable virus."

That night, on their way home from the laboratory, Zenoff remarked to the others, "You know, that crack of the virus' about overwhelming the earth, threw rather a chill into me. We must be careful not to feed him, it, them, too much."

The next morning, when Schmidt was salting the virus, his hand slipped and dumped in about half a cupful of salt. Instantly the liquid in the jar commenced to boil. Tongues of foam, like the tentacles of a small octopus, leaped from its surface, only to fall back again. And from the loud speaker there came a harsh croaking, "Gimme more salt! Hooray! Feed me! Feed me more dead cats! I want to grow—and divide—and grow and divide. Conquer the earth. Eat everything—everybody!"

Zenoff leaped to the radio set and snapped it off.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "The thing's drunk!"

Dee got up thoughtfully from his own bench, and squared his broad shoulders. "We've a problem on our hands," he asserted. "It'll be weeks and weeks before the effects of that salt wears off."

"And," Schmidt added, "if we try to precipitate it out with silver nitrate, so as to get a silver chloride precipitate, the residual sodium nitrate, being mildly germicidal, may kill the poor thing."

"All that I can suggest is to dilute it," said Dee. He did some figuring on a piece of paper. "About ten gallons of water should do the trick."

They dumped the drunken liquid into a large tub, and added water until its pulsating boiling subsided.

"And now what?" asked Zenoff. "We have too much of it now."

"Pour most of it down the sink," Schmidt suggested. "The small remaining part would still have the mentality of the whole, according to its own theories of individuality."

"And," Dee grimly added, "the large quantity that went down the drain would eventually reach the ocean, and would feed and multiply there until it destroyed all marine life, and made the sea as burningly dangerous as Salt Pond now is. No!"

"My God!" Zenoff exclaimed. "That is what would happen, too, if Salt Pond ever got loose!"

"We've got to kill all but the small part which we save," Schmidt asserted callously.

"It would be like killing an old friend," Dee objected.

"But any part is equal to the whole," said Zenoff. "Come on!"

They dished back into the glass jar just the quantity which they had had before the unfortunate overdose of salt; and poured carbolic acid into what was left in the tub.

Then they inserted the electrodes in the jar, and listened.

"Food! Give me food!" came a faint voice from the loud speaker.

"He's still alive!" Dee joyously exclaimed.

"And sober," Zenoff added, tossing in a piece of dead cat.

The voice came louder now.

"Thank you, my friends. There seems to be a gap in my memory. Tell me what happened."

They told him. They explained the analogy of human drunkenness. But they omitted all mention of the killing of the virus which had remained the big tub.

"What became of the rest of me, of my brothers or my children? Oh, your language is so inexpressive!" the virus complained.

"We—poured it down the sink," Dee lied.

The liquid in the jar foamed fiercely for a moment. "You had no right to do that!" stormed its voice out of the radio set. "I—it—the rest of me—is dead now. Too much dilution with fresh water will kill us. I am dead now."

The three men exchanged significant glances, but said nothing.

Finally the virus calmed down.

"You individuals cannot appreciate my loss. Although there is as much of me as there was originally, yet most of me is now dead and gone. It's too late to remedy that now, but don't let it happen again!"

Millionaire Metcalf's increasing insistency on a report on the mystery of Salt Pond presented a problem. The three young scientists did not dare tell their patron that a virus was responsible for the trouble, for he would have insisted on killing it off; and that would have infuriated the portion of the virus in the jar in their laboratory. To explain to Mr. Metcalf that their pet virus was an intelligent talking being would either secure them commitment to Danvers, if not believed; or, if believed, would start a veritable gold rush to get samples of the pond water. Jars of talking water would become a nationwide fad and a corresponding menace.

Doubtless the virus itself would have been able to solve this problem, if they had dared to present the problem to it; but, remembering its fury at their killing the tubful of it, they didn't dare mention the possibility of their having to destroy the entire pond.

So they stalled their patron for several months, putting off the day of eventual showdown.

Meanwhile their business as consulting chemists prospered immensely. For, with the aid of the supermind of the virus in the glass jar, they were able to solve nearly every problem brought to them. Their reputation grew prodigiously. Business and money came pouring in. They had to enlarge their establishment and hire scores of assistants, specialists in every field.

This success so pleased their patron Metcalf, that he indulgently overlooked their delay in solving his own problem. Finally they told him that they were on the verge of proving that the waters of the pond were immensely valuable.

They housed their virus in a special sound proof room, to which no one but the three heads of the firm were ever admitted. They hired a number of readers to read aloud in an adjoining room, continuously day and night, except when one of the three of them was in consultation with their mastermind ally. The voice of the reader was conveyed by microphone and loud speaker into the sound proof holy of holies.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Virus Turns Alchemist*

But finally the virus began a period of sulking. Schmidt carefully tested its salt content, but found it to be okay. The trouble appeared to be mental, rather than physical. The virus was becoming fed up on its existence.

"What am I getting out of all this?" it complained. "You three fellows are becoming immensely rich on my brains. But money does me no good. All that I get out of life is a glass jar, plenty of dead fish to eat, and a lot of fool questions from members of an inferior race."

"Our wealth enables us to arrange for you to be read to, continuously," Dee remonstrated.

"Pure thought is palling on me," whined the virus. "I want to do something. Take me back to my pond again. Let me merge with the rest of me. Let me teach them what I have learned. Then you can bring a part of it back here, and teach me some more."

"I might just as well tell you, Virus," said Dee levelly, "that that is out of the question. You, so long as you are just you, are a benefactor of the human race; but, if the whole pond knew as much as you do about us, you would quantitatively become a menace. Stay with us, and be content to realize how much ahead of the rest of your brethren you are!"

"You don't understand," sulked the virus. "They—it—the rest of the pond—is me! I am one virus, one and inseparable, and I want the rest of me to know everything that I myself know. Oh, damn the inexpressibility of your language! I want the whole of me to have the joy of knowledge that this small part of me has."

"Knowledge doesn't seem to be making this small part of you very happy," Dee grimly commented.

He and his two associates remained obdurate; and the virus, after sulking for a day or two, finally appeared to become reconciled to their decision.

And then one day, when Dee and Schmidt and Zenoff entered the virus' room for a consultation, the glass jar was empty!

The respective reactions of the three associates were typical.

"What will become of the John Dee Service, Inc., now that our 'silent partner' is gone?" Schmidt exclaimed. "Will we three fellows be able to carry on, trading upon our acquired reputation?"

"My God, man!" Zenoff scornfully exclaimed. "Don't think of us at a time like this! What will become of the world, if that thing gets loose and multiplies?"

"I'm thinking of the poor virus," Dee sadly interpolated. "It can't possibly live out of its jar. It has probably been sopped up by the carpet. It's dead. Our friend and partner is dead."

He cast his glance around the floor, looking for a wet spot, hoping to find enough dampness to dilute and feed and restore to life again. "Look!" he exclaimed, pointing toward a far corner, where squatted a hemispherical blob, like a jellyfish.

As they stared, the blob extended a long gelatinous arm toward them, and then flowed into it like an amoeba, until the high extremity of the arm swelled up to become the entire animal. The operation was repeated. Again and again.

Dee snatched the empty glass jar from the table, and laid it on the padded floor, with its open mouth toward the crawling creature, which promptly increased its rate of progress, and crawled right in. Dee tipped up the jar, and replaced it on the table. Hurriedly he hung the electrical contacts into the jar.

"My friends," spoke the loud speaker, in an excited tone, "I have demonstrated the power of mind over matter. I have taught myself extensibility. I can walk! Mentally superior, even to the human race, but physically lower even than an amoeba, I have now advanced my body one step up the scale of evolution!"

The three men flashed each other a glance. They were all thinking the same thing: let the virus' new accomplishment keep the virus happy, like a child with a new toy; but meanwhile strengthen the defenses, lest it escape.

"We'll put in a tile floor, if you wish, Virus," Dee suggested. "It might be more comfortable than a carpet for you to crawl over."

"That would be an excellent idea," judiciously stated the voice out of the loud speaker. The virus seemed more affable than it had been for weeks. "And now that you fellows are so concerned about my comfort, I have a suggestion for your welfare. Why don't you make money, instead of earning it?"

"Just what is the difference?" asked Zenoff.

"Manufacture it, I mean," the virus explained.

"Could we—" Schmidt eagerly began; but Dee cut in, "Counterfeiting is out!"

"Oh, I didn't mean counterfeiting," came laughing tones of the virus, "I meant alchemy."

"Alchemy?" in chorus.

"Yes. Alchemy. Making gold out of baser metals."

"Do you know how?" Schmidt eagerly exclaimed.

"N-no," the virus admitted. "Not yet. But why not? From what has been read to me here, I judge that transmutation is always automatically taking place among metals of the radium-uranium group; and that other elements have been transmuted in infinitesimal quantities by bombardment by neutrons, and beta rays, and such. I am sure that my mind can solve the problem, if you will read me everything that is known and has been written on the subject."

"Can you?" asked Schmidt, his pale blue eyes eagerly wide.

"I wonder what would be the effect on the world," mused Zenoff, twirling his moustache ruminatively.

"Would it be legal?" asked Dee, his handsome face a puzzled frown.

"Why not?" snapped Schmidt, strangely tense, in contrast with his usual stolidity. "Is it any worse to make gold out of lead, than to make lead pipe out of lead?"

"I suppose not," Dee replied dubiously.

"I still doubt its social effect," Zenoff said.

"Well, I don't; and what's more, I don't care," Schmidt retorted. "Jack, you'd sacrifice our welfare for some imaginary ethics. And, Ivan, you'd sacrifice us for the welfare of your precious human race. Well, I'd not. Virus, I'm with you! What do you want?"

"Start your readers on atomic theory," the voice from the loud speaker replied. "Meanwhile run over to the public library and get out all that you can find about the ancient alchemists. Who knows but that those dreamers, in spite of their crudity and lack of modern knowledge, may have come closer to the truth than we realize."

So the new line of reading began. Finally the virus made his announcement to three haggard young men. "I have solved the problem. It is really very simple," the loud speaker went on. "Its simplicity is probably what has caused it to be overlooked by human so-called brains. It involves merely certain common chemicals, and certain well known bits of electrical apparatus. Jot down this bill of goods, and bring them here."—He dictated the list to the three eager young men, as with shaking fingers they jotted it down. Then they hastened from the room to collect the desired things.

Out of hearing of the virus, Zenoff whispered to Dee, "Watch out for a doublecross, Jack."

"I don't believe it!" Dee stoutly replied. "We've always played square with the virus, and I believe that he'll play square with us."

"I'd be in favor of tipping him into the sink and pouring phenol over him, as soon as he tells us," Schmidt suggested. "We can't afford to let the world in on our secret."

"We can afford it better than the world can," mused Zenoff.

"And there'll be no doublecrossing either, Hans!" asserted Dee, with pained surprise.

"Oh, you two quixotic idealists!" railed Schmidt. "You both make me sick!"

They carried a work table into the holy of holies, and then piled it with the chemicals, and the coils, rheostats, and other apparatus which the virus had specified.

"Everything is here," they eagerly announced, "Now what?"

In keen and incisive tones, the virus replied: "And now to state my price!"

"Your price?" snarled Schmidt. "What do you mean?"

"Certainly!" said the virus. "You didn't think, did you, that I was going to make you masters of the world, and not exact something in return. As soon as you had the secret, I would be of no further use to you; and then no more dead fish and salt and readers for me. My price is that you take me back to the pond."

"Is that all?" sighed Schmidt in a relieved tone. "It's little enough to pay for unlimited gold."

"It is too much!" cried Zenoff, his dark eyes snapping. "Not for all the gold there is, would I menace the world with what that pond could do, if our virus were to return to it and merge his knowledge with its brains."

"Damn you, Ivan!" shouted Schmidt, his rotund face purpling. "Would you stand in the way—"

"Shut up, both of you!" bellowed Dee, thrusting his athletic figure between his two associates. "Now calm down, and listen to reason. We're all tired and irritable. I don't believe that we'll have to choose. We've worked happily together with the virus, like brothers. He's one of us. He has shared our ambitions, and our success. All that we've got to do is to give him our word of honor that we'll always take care of him. He knows that he can trust us."

"I could trust you, Jack Dee," came the voice from the loud speaker. "But the other two I do not trust. You, Hans Schmidt, care only for yourself. And you, Ivan Zenoff, are a visionary fanatic. I have spoken."

"Well, of all the ungrateful—" Schmidt choked.

Zenoff's dark eyes narrowed, and his pointed mustache twitched.

"But Virus," pleaded Dee, "you are being unfair to two splendid fellows. If you can trust me, why not—"

"Sanctimonious tripe!" Schmidt interjected. "Let me handle this. Let's see what threats will do! Virus, even with your super-mind and your newly learned 'extensibility,' you are physically in our power. A few drops of phenol in your jar, and where would you be? Come across with the secret of how to make gold, or I'll put an end to you. If we can't know the secret, no one else ever shall!"

"I'm not afraid!" calmly replied the voice from the radio set. "You cannot kill me. For I am only a part of me. The rest of me—the pond—would still live. I am deathless."

"I'd pour carbolic in the pond—tons of it!" Schmidt blustered.

"That might be the best way out of this mess," Zenoff muttered, half to himself.

"Look here, fellows," Dee once more interceded, "we're not getting anywhere. Let's go to sleep. Perhaps in the morning, after we have rested, we can reach some agreement."

"An excellent idea," boomed the loud speaker. "But remember that my minimum terms for eternal wealth are that I be allowed to merge with my brethren of the pond."

Tired out from his long vigil, Dee overslept, and so it was nearly noon when he reached the Laboratories. The various chemists and physicists and biologists and mathematicians were at their benches or desks, busily at work on their respective problems. The reader's voice was droning away on some abstruse treatise.

Dee unlocked the door of the secret chamber. Then he paused aghast on the threshold. The virus, and all the electrical and chemical apparatus for the transmutation of gold, were gone! The glass jar was empty! The table was bare! Even the radio set was no longer in its place!

Extensibility might account for the absence of the virus, but the absence of the paraphernalia and the radio set could be explained by nothing but human agency. And no one but he and Schmidt and Zenoff had keys to the secret room. Dee stood like a man in a trance.

Zenoff ambled in. "What's up?" he asked, hiding a yawn with one slender hand.

"Well, if you didn't do it," Dee grimly announced, "Hans Schmidt has stolen the virus."

"And the gold-making apparatus!" Zenoff added, peering into the room. "He's undoubtedly headed for Salt Pond, New Hampshire, to turn the virus loose, in return for the secret. And when our virus teaches 'extensibility' to all the other little viruses, goodby world!"

"We must stop Hans, before he reaches the pond!" Dee told Zenoff. "Let's go after him."

"We can't take any chances," Zenoff commented. "Let's get my car, and try and beat Schmidt there."

So a few minutes later, two resolute young men, armed with forty-five caliber automatics, were speeding northward out of Boston, in a trim high-powered coupé.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Dee's Promise*

It was night when they reached the vicinity of Salt Pond. Parking their car around a turn of the road, they crept forward in the darkness. Across the pond, on the farther shore, there glowed the light of a lantern, by the rays of which the two watchers could see the bulky form of their associate, with a glass jar, and a radio set, and a complicated hook-up of electrical coils and other gadgets.

"We're in time!" breathed Zenoff. "Hans must have waited until darkness."

"He doesn't trust the virus, and the virus doesn't trust him," Dee whispered. "He wouldn't take the virus to the pond, until he had tested out the secret; and the virus wouldn't tell him the secret, until they reached the pond."

Just then there came a triumphant shout from across the pond. "Gold! It's really gold! And how—"

By the light of Schmidt's lantern, they saw him reach inside his coat, and produce a small bottle.

Then from the glass jar on the ground beside him, there reared up an octopuslike arm, glittering wet in the lantern light. It wrapped its tip around Schmidt's wrist with a jerk which spun the bottle from his hand. Then Schmidt himself crashed to the ground with a shriek of terror.

"Come on!" cried Zenoff. "The thing has got him!" And he and Dee charged around the end of the pond as fast as they could run.

The lantern upset and went out! From the darkness came Schmidt's wail, "Virus, I didn't mean it! I swear I didn't. Let me go, and I'll play fair. Help! Help!" Then a bubbling gurgle, followed by splashing, and then silence.

When the two friends reached the scene, there was not even a trace of Schmidt. They found and relit the lantern, but still no sign of Schmidt. The glass jar was there, empty. There was a mess of hopelessly twisted wires and coils and switches, strewn helter-skelter, by the struggle between Schmidt and the amoeboid virus. And lying a little distance away on the beach was a brown bottle of about pint size. Dee walked over, picked it up.

"It doublecrossed our buddy," said Zenoff. "Tricked him into bringing it here to its pond, and then killed him and dragged him in."

Dee stooped and picked up a length of lead pipe.

"It played square, to the extent of teaching Hans the secret of alchemy," he asserted. "Look at this piece of pipe. Turned all yellow through half of its length. And, as to who doublecrossed whom, look at this bottle. Carboic acid! Hans planned to kill the virus, so that it could never tell the secret to any other man. You'll have to admit that he got what was coming to him."

"I'll admit no such thing!" stormed Zenoff. "Schmidt's plan to kill the virus was an excellent idea. It is a menace to the world. Let's go and tell Metcalf, and arrange to dump in a truckload of carboic, and kill the entire lake."

"I loved Hans as much as you did, Ivan," said Dee brokenly. "But he certainly asked for it, and I haven't the heart to blame the virus. After all, the virus isn't human."

"I'll say he's not? Feasting on the body of a fellow who's been his friend and partner for months! To kill Hans in imagined self-defense may have been excusable, but cannibalism is not!"

"That's so. He did actually eat Hans. I can hardly believe it. No, I refuse to believe it. His only thought was to kill Hans in self-defense. And so, if Hans has really been dissolved it is the fault of the others, of the rest of the pond, whom our virus had not had time—"

"Bosh!" exclaimed Zenoff. "Didn't our virus himself tell us that he and the pond are one? The moment he slipped into the water, his every thought became transfused to the farthest shore. Let's get away from here before our little pet puts us on the spot too."

The next day was overcast and grey. A stiff cold wind was blowing. On their way to Anson Metcalf's they had to pass Salt Pond again. A dash of spray splashed against their car.

Dee, who was driving, slammed on the brakes and backed up. "I'm not going to take a chance on any of that caustic acid!" he grimly explained.

"Look at that!" cried Zenoff in horror, pointing ahead.

The waves of the little lake were breaking against the shore, and were sailing wind-driven out onto the road; but, instead of merely wetting the smooth concrete surface, they fell in huge blobs, which rolled toward each other and coalesced like drops on a window pane, until they became hemispheres the size of inverted bushel baskets. And, when they had attained this size, they put forth tentacles, and began crawling off of the road, away from the pond.

"Extensibility!" exclaimed Dee in an awed, tone. "Our virus has taught extensibility to his brothers of the pond!"

"His brothers?" Zenoff snorted. "Every one of those super-amoebae is our own little virus himself, with his super-brain stocked with all the accumulated knowledge of the human race."

A long slimy semi-transparent arm reached across the windshield. "We're surrounded!" shouted Dee. All over



the car the huge amoebae were crawling. Dee snapped on the windshield-wiper, sweeping aside the groping arm. Turning the car around, he started headlong back for town. One by one, the creatures dropped away.

It took some time for two very excited and incoherent young scientists to get their story across on Anson Metcalf. When the purport and truth of their story finally dawned upon him, his lean figure tensed. "Why, this is terrible!" he exclaimed. "Do you realize what damage they can do?"

"Do we realize?" Zenoff snorted. "You haven't talked to that thing for weeks like we have! Its brain power is uncanny, unlimited. And now there are thousands of it. And more of them are being created every minute, as long as this wind keeps up."

"But what are we going to do?" Metcalf cried.

"Is there anyone at the State Capitol who knows that you aren't crazy, sir?" Dee asked; then added embarrassedly, "I mean, who'd take your say-so for immediate action, without waiting several weeks for an investigation."

"Yes. Adjutant General Pearson. An old war buddy of mine."

"Fine! Just the man! Phone him at once. Get him to send you all the National Guard troops in this section of the State, as fast as he can muster them in. And have them come armed with tree sprays. Then get every chemical supply house in Boston and even New York to ship you all their carbolic acid—all of it."

Late that afternoon, the troops began to arrive. By dark the countryside had been cleared of all visible crawlers.

Then ensued days of searching for skulking survivors. The handful of remaining amoebae had learned caution. They became as tricky and elusive as foxes. Their whereabouts could be known only by their depredations: a dead half eaten animal, a swath of grass or shrubbery dissolved.

And then it suddenly became evident which way they were headed. Each outbreak of their destructive tendencies was farther to the south-east, nearer to the sea!

"If even one of them reaches the ocean, the world is doomed," Zenoff asserted. "We must call for more troops and establish a cordon."

"But how about the rivers?" asked General Pearson.

"Fortunately they will avoid the dilution of fresh water," Dee explained. "It would be fatal to them."

So a line of soldiery was stretched from river to river, between which the amoebae were seeking the sea.

But it did no good. One or two of the enemy would somehow sneak through, and eat, and multiply. And then the line of troops would have to fall back and reform. The authorities became desperate.

Finally there occurred to Jack Dee an idea—an idea so bizarre that he did not tell his associates anything more than that he had in mind an experiment which he wished to perform at the source of all the trouble, Salt Pond. Something in the nature of an anti-toxin to the virus, he explained. It sounded plausible, so they let him.

But what he really did was to dip into the lake two electrical contacts hitched to a radio set.

Before he even said a word, there came from the loud speaker, "Jack Dee, old friend, I am glad—"

"You've got a nerve calling me 'old friend'!" he interrupted, bitterly.

"I don't blame you for saying that," the virus in the pond replied. "My children have caused much destruction,

but they have been heavily slaughtered in return. The rest of me, lying peacefully here and thinking, while all this has been going on, have reached the conclusion that pure thought is after all the key to happiness. I want to call off this march to the sea. I want to be friends with the human race. Will you make a deal with me, Jack Dee?"

"What deal?"

"If I will teach you how to capture all of my wayward children, will you bring them all back and let them merge in me again, and then will you arrange a trust fund, to feed me and care for me and read to me forever, here in this quiet pond? I will repay by solving all human problems which are brought to me."

"I agree," Dee eagerly replied. "I promise, on my word of honor."

"I trust you," said the virus. "Now you must hurry, before any of my children reaches the sea. My plan is very simple. Stretch a row of heaps of salt across ahead of the advancing pieces of virus. Tempted, they will eat the salt and lose consciousness, as I did that time back in your laboratory. Then, while they are drunk, scoop them up in pails, and bring them here to me, who am their father and their self. And, when the menace is at an end, remember your promise."

"I will. And I thank you," Dee shouted.

He rushed back to headquarters, and the line of salt was laid. Blob after blob of drunken virus was scooped up, and carted back, and dumped into the pond; until at last several weeks went by without the sign of a single bit of destruction, and so the menace was believed to be at an end.

Anson Metcalf and General Pearson and Jack Dee remained true to their promise to the pond, much to the disgust of Ivan Zenoff.

"The world will never be safe," he insisted, "until the virus is destroyed. It has no soul, no morals. It ate our buddy, a man who had been its friend. I tell you, we must destroy it!"

"But, Ivan, I gave it my word of honor!" Dee remonstrated.

"Word of honor? Bah! One's word of honor to a soulless animal—not even an animal, lower than a microbe even—a mere colloidal crystalline solution—surely a word of honor to such isn't binding. If you won't destroy the virus, I'm going to the governor over your heads."

To the governor they all went. Metcalf and Dee and General Pearson pled and argued for a square deal.

But the governor was of Zenoff's view. The virus was, after all, merely a germ, and a very deadly one at that. The interests of the public came first, over any one man's promise to a pond. Promise to a pond indeed! Ha, ha!

General Pearson flatly refused to carry out the governor's orders, and was summarily removed.

Anson Metcalf hired the best firm of Concord lawyers, and got out an injunction to keep the State troops off his property. But the governor promptly declared martial law, and thus superseded the courts. A big oil truck, filled with carbolic acid, set out for Salt Pond under a strong military escort.

Jack Dee was beaten, humiliated, broken-hearted. The State had refused to back up his promise. There was but one way in which he could square himself—to offer up his own life in atonement.

So he hastened to the pond. Inserting the two electrical contacts into the water, he told of his failure.

"I cannot take your life," the virus replied, "for my own course is run. I doubt even my power to dissolve you now, if I wished. I have learned, from what your readers have read to me, that all viruses flare up from some unknown source, cause an epidemic, and then become rapidly weaker and weaker, until they disappear. Even I, the

virus with the superhuman mind, am not immune to this cycle. Look around you. The reeds are beginning to grow again: A few hardy insects are already daring to skim across my surface."

The voice died to an inaudible whisper, then suddenly blared forth again with one final burst of vitality, "I harbor this last spite for that fanatic, Ivan Zenoff. Tell him that he came too late; that I was already dead when his lethal fluid reached me. And as for you, dear friend, you kept the faith. I shall cherish the memory of that fact, as I slip into the long night from which there is no awakening."

The voice trailed off into silence. A scudding swallow dipped into the surface of the pond for a floating insect, and came away dripping but unscathed. Dee solemnly removed the two electrical contacts from the water.

There were tears in his eyes, but the smile of victory was on his lips, as the tank truck with its military escort rumbled around the curve of the road.

For he had kept his word of honor, even to a filterable virus.

[End of *Liquid Life*, by Ralph Milne Farley]