

# Lilies of Life

Malcolm Jameson

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# Lilies of Life

by MALCOLM JAMESON

*There was a disease on Venus, and the natives seemed to have a cure. But the symbiosis involved was madder even than the usual madness of Venus' life-cycles—*

The test tube dropped to the floor with a crash. A wisp of acrid fume trailed up from it.

Parks, ignoring it and gripping the edge of the table, moaned, "Something's happened to my schedule—this isn't due for an hour yet—"

He broke off, shivering.

Maxwell looked sharply at him from where he sat, and then glanced at the clock. It was only two. Three o'clock was when their next shots were due. But there was no doubt that Parks was working himself into a seizure. Already his hands were twitching and jumping convulsively, and the telltale tics of the deadly Venusian swamp jitters were commencing to go

to work. Parks' face was no longer his own, but a travesty of a human countenance—a wildly leering, alternately staring and squinting mask of agony.

Maxwell rose and pushed back his chair with a sigh. If Parks was going that way, so soon would he. Unhurriedly he walked to the medicine cabinet and took out two shiny syringes. He filled them both from their supply of ampules. Paracobrine was not much good, but it was the best men knew. Then he laid them by the "wailing wall"—an iron railing firmly secured to heavy stanchions—and went to where the now whimpering Parks huddled on his stool.

"Come on, old man," he said gently, "let's get it over with."

Parks allowed himself to be led to the place and long practice did the rest. By the time Maxwell had the needle in and the plunger thrust home Parks was gripping the rail as if he meant to squeeze it flat. Maxwell took a deep breath. It was his turn. He rolled up his sleeve and forced the amber liquid into his own veins.

For five interminable minutes the two men clung there, writhing and sobbing as the fiery stuff coursed through their bodies—molten iron, searing acid, soul-destroying agony. And then it passed. Fingers relaxed their deathlike hold, muscles untensed, and their gasping again became breathing.

"I ... won't ... go ... through ... this ... again—" began Parks through clenched teeth, "I—"

"Oh, yes you will," said Maxwell grimly. "We always say that ... everybody says it ... but still we go on. You know the alternatives, don't you?"

"I know them," said Parks, dully. Without paracobrine the jitters became a permanent condition, not a recurrent one, and one that ended necessarily in madness. The other course was the rope, or the jump from a high place, or a swifter poison.

"All right, let's get back to work then. What was in that tube?"

"Experiment eleven-o-four. It doesn't matter now. I used the last of the snooker bark. We haven't the stuff to duplicate it with. Not unless Hoskins smuggles in another supply."

"Forget it then. Let's have a look in the ward. Maybe eleven-o-three did the trick."

Parks followed silently, gradually pulling himself back into his normal self. Next time he would know to advance the clock. Paracobrine was no fun, but it was less hard to take in a calm mood than after the attack had begun.

The ward brought the usual disappointment. The monkey in the victim cage was gibbering hideously in his last convulsions. Within a minute it would be as dead as the limp piles of inoculated guinea pigs in the pens beyond. The last try at the formula had not worked. Two thirds of the human race would have to go on suffering for awhile, for a better answer to the swamp jitters than paracobrine was not yet.

Maxwell looked at the other cages. There were still some monkeys and guinea pigs, and there were a few other combinations yet to try. Men in vital research must be resilient. A thousand or so failures was nothing. It is a part of the business.

"I think," he started to say, "that we had best—"

"I'll get the door," Parks interrupted, as a discreet tapping broke in on them. "Sounds like Hoskins."

It was Hoskins, Hoskins the interplanetary smuggler. He carried a heavy satchel and wore a sour grin.

"Bad news, fellows," he said, setting down his bag. "No more stuff out of Venus from now on. They've trebled the offplanet patrol and tightened up on port inspection. Tony was pinched, and his ship and the stuff for you with it. They threw him in the clink, of course, and burned the cargo. That means you won't get any more snooker bark, or gizzle bugs, twangi-twangi melons or any other of that stuff. Shan Dhee has chucked his job, which leaves me without a buyer. I'm going out of business. Sorry."

"There's *nothing* for us?" asked Parks, aghast. He clung fiercely to his theory that the specific for the jitters would be found only in some organic product of Venus, where the disease originated. It would be there, if anywhere, that the virus' natural enemies would have evolved. But lately other Venusian maladies had been turning up and the quarantine

authorities must have ordered a stricter embargo. Without smuggled organics, his and Maxwell's hands would be tied.

"I've got this stuff," said Hoskins, opening the bag. "It's not the sort you usually order, but I happen to have it on hand and want to close it out. It's loot Shan Dhee got out of a Tombov temple he once robbed. It ought to go to a museum, but the stuff's hot and they ask too many questions. Could you use it?"

He dug into the bag and came up with a figurine. It was a piece of the curious coffee-colored semi-jade regarded as a sacred stone by the savage Tombovs, and, considered as Tombov work, was extraordinarily finely executed. Its subject was a rotund, jolly old Tombov godlet, sitting comfortably on a throne with his pudgy hands clasped across his belly. About his neck hung a rope of what appeared to be large pearls, and he was crowned with a chaplet of swamp lilies. Lily plants grew all about the throne, and there the jade had been cunningly colored green by the application of a kind of lacquer—the pale-yellow lilies being similarly tinted.

"Shan Dhee says it is the Tombov God of Health, and the temple was the big one in Angra Swamp where the Angra tribes hold their orgies."

"Ugh!" shuddered Parks. Those who had seen them reported the Tombov ritual was not a pretty thing to watch. "No, it's no good to us."

"I don't know," said Maxwell, slowly. "God of Health, you say? Mm-m. Come to think of it, most Tombovs are immune



to the jitters, or were until our pioneers went there. Maybe we ought to study it. How much?"

"Nothing, to you," said Hoskins. "You've been good customers. Take it for cumshaw. But I'll have to ask money for these."

He dug again into the bag and came out with a double handful of beautiful, iridescent spherelets. They were each about the size of a golf ball, and looked for all the world like so many soap bubbles—thin, fragile, and shimmering. Yet when Maxwell examined one he found it to be exceedingly hard, though almost weightless, and it appeared to be made of the toughest imaginable crystal.

"What are they?"

"Gems, I guess," shrugged Hoskins. "They came out of the temple, too. Shan Dhee said they hung around the neck of the big idol like a necklace—roped together with wisps of grass. See, the little idol wears a replica of it."

Maxwell considered the jewels, frowning. Hoskins added that the price would be a thousand for the lot. That was a lot of money, but what was money to men doomed to a lingering, fearful death? The baubles were somehow linked to the Tombov health rites, and the wild Tombov—though a filthy beast—was notoriously healthy. It was only the civilized ones who withered and died. It was doubtful that the gems themselves had any therapeutic value, but they came out of a temple. Therefore they were symbolic of something or other, a possible clue to the real secret.

Maxwell hauled a drawer open and swept the glistening spheres into it.

"Make out a check, Parks. I'm going to play a hunch."

Parks, still dazed from his premature seizure, nodded dumbly. And after Hoskins had gone, they took out the spheres again and huddled over them. Then they divided up the work and went at it.

Tests were applied, with results that were largely negative. The iridescent balls were acid-proof, shatter-proof, and exceedingly hard. But Maxwell managed to saw one in half, and found it empty, though as the saw first bit through the thin shell there was a sharp hissing as trapped inner gases escaped into the room. Parks was quick to catch a sample of the foul-smelling stuff, only to be baffled by the analysis. The organic gases of Venus have most complex molecular structures.

"Hey," yelled Maxwell, a little later, taking his eye away from the microscope. "I have some of that sawdust here. It isn't crystalline at all. It's definitely a cellular structure. These balls are certainly not minerals, but they are not plant or animal tissue either—not as we know them. They're just—"

"just Venusian," Parks completed for him, sighing. Anything that lived on Venus was a headache to the investigator. There was no perceptible borderline between flora and fauna, and there were times when both encroached

into the mineral zone. Venusian life cycles made those of such devious transformations as the human tapeworm on Earth seem as bleakly simple as the reproductive processes of the amoeba. Parks knew of, to name just one, a sort of aquatic ant that was fertilized by clinging to the skin of eels, and which then crawled ashore and laid its eggs, the eggs subsequently growing up into masses of moss. Weird, featherless birds ate that moss and developed intestinal parasites. Those, upon deserting their host, became crawling ants, sprouted wings, and then took off for the ocean. It was merely the usual Venusian complicated symbiotic set-up; the ants being somehow necessary to the survival of the eels, and in their later forms to the birds, both as food and as digestive enzymes. Scientists who attempted to follow through lost themselves in a maze of yet other ramifications.

Maxwell and Parks stared at one another.

"There's only one thing to do," said Maxwell. "Hoskins can't bring any more stuff to us, we'll have to go to it. I want to know why wild Tombovs don't have jitters, and why lilies are sacred to them, and what these things are. We're going to Venus."

Their arrival at Port Angra was not a cheerful occasion. Their arms and legs were puffed and aching from scores of prophylactic shots. Moreover, they had had to sign away most of their civil rights. Despite all precautions, white men rarely could remain more than three months on Venus without picking up one or more virulent infections, any of which would prevent his ever returning to sanitary Earth.

People therefore went there at their own risk, absolving the government and all others concerned in advance.

There was also nothing reassuring about their fellow passengers. A few were desperate scientists like themselves, stragglers in the procession that had been going by for years. Others were missionaries, gone to relieve brothers whose three months were about up. For similar reasons there were relief quarantine enforcement officers along, and representatives of the Radioactive Syndicate, come to take their turn at keeping the uranium mines going. Most regarded their assignments with unalloyed distaste.

They came down in the inevitable sticky, yellow, hot mist, and landed in a clearing made in a lush jungle. Awaiting them was a pathetic sight—rows and rows of grounded palanquins wearing the weathered and mildewing white and red insignia of the Red Cross. In litters lay the men they were coming to relieve, mere wrecks of what they had been a few short weeks before. For not a few of them their coming to the port was no more than a hopeless gesture. Whether they were accepted for the passage home would depend upon the doctors.

"This is some place," growled Parks.

"When the jitters hit you again," reminded Maxwell grimly, "it won't matter. Any place you happen to be in will be that."

He studied the ranks of tamed Tombovs standing patiently beside the grounded chairs. They were the bearers, the helots

of this hole. They stood gaunt and shivering, for they were sick men too, sicker even than the whites. It was thought profitable to keep Earthmen alive by periodic doses of paracobrine, but a waste of good drugs when it came to natives. The swamps were full of them, and the promise of tobacco—the one non-native commodity valued by the savages—always filled up the ranks again. As Maxwell looked, one of the chair bearers jerked into violent convulsions and fell writhing and howling to the muddy ground. No one noticed. It was too routine. Tomorrow, maybe, the scavengers would attend to it.

The Tombov was remarkably humanoid, grotesquely so, more so than the great apes of Earth. The salient difference was in the feet, huge splayed pedals that served as mudshoes, distributing the body weight over a larger area so that the Tombov could walk safely on the thin crust that topped the viscous mire of the swamplands. They were ducklike feet, mostly membrane spread between long tapering toes.

The port captain came up and called litters for the new arrivals, one each for the men, and additional ones for their equipment. Then he barked out an order in the harsh Tombov tongue and the bearers picked up their loads and went on splashing away.

Despite the poor visibility, Maxwell found it an interesting ride. There was a feeling of luxuriousness in being carried along over impossibly sloppy ground on the bare shoulders of a half dozen jogging slaves. And he was interested and at the same time appalled at the riot of vegetation he glimpsed on all sides. There was an infinitude of species of every kind

of living thing, an overwhelming field for scientific study. With human mortality rates what they were, man would probably never know much about Venusian life forms. For the animals, if they were animals, that peered out from time to time, were as weird and incredible as the fantastic flowering lianas, smoking bushes, and trees that gave off metallic, cracked-bell clanking sounds.

His momentary sense of well being abruptly departed from him as their caravan hove into a clearing and trotted past a low mud wall. Over the group of buildings beyond the wall flew the drab banner of the U.M.—United Missions. He saw the corrals into which newly arrived Tombovs were being herded, preparatory to their being "processed" for the slave market. For since Earth men could not work and survive in that vile climate, they had to have natives as the beasts of burden. It was natives who dug the uranium, who did the building, and the hauling. And heathen Tombovs would not do. They were too intractable.

Maxwell thought cynically on the conversion statistics, of the thousands run through the salvation mills each year. It was not basically an evangelical proposition. It was an economic necessity. For all Earthmen, whatever their faith, agreed on one point—the Tombov in the raw was a lazy, lascivious, irresponsible rascal. The wild native was a chronic liar, a congenital thief, and what displeased him he was prone to kill out of hand, and his means of doing it were rarely nice. He saw no point in working, for natural food was on every hand. He was tough; therefore physical punishment meant nothing. His philosophy was virtually nil, so he was

deaf to abstract appeal. In short, to be useful, he *had* to be Christianized.

A turn of the road put the mission behind, and its hateful appendage—the labor mart. Ahead were the first straggling huts of Agra. They passed the inevitable dispensary, with its white-coated attendants and wailing wall. Then they stopped at a low building beyond whose sign read:

### **Bureau of Research Co-ordination.**

The doctor in charge was a haggard, sallow man with woebegone eyes. His hopeless expression did not change while Maxwell was outlining his theory. When he stopped the doctor shook his head.

"A chimera," he said, "a waste of work. Others have come to Venus with the notion that it was something the Tombovs ate or drank that made them immune to jitters. Every item of their diet has been analyzed many times, even the foul fen air they breathe. The results were always negative. Nor is there any appreciable difference between Tombov blood types and ours, or their vitamin reaction. We think now that the so-called Tombov immunity is due to nothing more mysterious than natural selection. The ones now in the swamps are descendants of those who simply could not be killed by the disease, and therefore have great resistance."

"Nonsense," said Maxwell, nettled by the negativeness of the man. "What becomes of their natural resistance when they are converted? Baptism has no effects on antibodies. Did it ever occur to you that there may be something they do at their secret rites which makes the difference?"

"Religion," said the doctor, stiffly, "is a subject I never discuss, and the less said about the abominable rites of the swamp savages the better. I assure you, sir, if you knew the Tombov as well as we here do—"

Maxwell snorted and turned away.

"Let's go, Parks. It's the 'old China hand' story all over again. When a scientist lets himself be blinded by prejudice he isn't a scientist any more."

At the dispensary they asked the whereabouts of Hoskins' former scout, Shan Dhee. According to Hoskins, Shan Dhee was a convert who backslid after living with the whites awhile and turned native again. It was because he promptly contracted the jitters and had sense enough to run away. The result of being apostate from both camps was that he became a sort of pariah, tolerated, but distrusted by both races. Yet he served well as a go-between because he was the one heathen Tombov who knew the ways of Earthmen and spoke their language, though Hoskins warned it would be in a variety of code.

"Shan Dhee?" said the interne, lifting an eyebrow in surprise that a respectable person should inquire about one so shifty and disreputable. "Why, in jail, probably. If not, you'll



find him hanging around one of the dives down at the Edge, loaded to the gills with zankra. Take my advice and have a patrolman go along, if you have to see him. When a convert goes bad, he's *bad*."

"Oh, we'll manage," said Maxwell. The anti-Tombov prejudice seemed well distributed. He was still inclined to rely on Hoskins' recommendation.

The zankra joint was not a savory place. It was dark and dirty, and very, very smelly. Its patrons, white men who couldn't stand the gaff and had been barred from going home by reason of their condition, lay all about on dirty mats. They were dead to the world, even if their muscles did occasionally knot up in spasmodic twitchings. This was the way they chose to ease their doom—they had gone the zankra route. For zankra, though not a cure for anything, brought blissful anaesthesia, being as it was a natural elixir—a blend of protomezyl alcohol and a number of potent alkaloids. It was cheap, too, since the gourds of which it was the juice could be had for a copper coin or so. A gourd of it was just being broached as Maxwell and Parks walked in. They saw a native squat by the door and jab a hole in the fruit so he could insert a sucking quill.

"We're Mr. Hoskins' friends," Maxwell said to him. "Where can we find Shan Dhee?"

The Tombov studied him shiftily. There was some hesitation, and then,

"Me Shan Dhee."

Maxwell had also been studying him. He was gratified to note that the fellow seemed to be magnificently healthy. There was none of the residual tremor that persists even after paracobraine shots. Yet Shan Dhee's shoulders and arms bore mute testimony that he had been a jitters' victim at one time. They were covered with the scars of self-inflicted bites, usually a sure sign of an untreated case. The scars were very old, and confirmed in a way what Maxwell wanted to believe. The man had evidently been cured—a thing believed to be impossible. But how? By his reversion to his former pagan practices?

Shan Dhee turned out to be a poor subject. It was bad enough that he spoke the barbarous pidgin brought by the first missionaries, but he was also suspicious, stubborn, and evasive. By Maxwell's questions Shan Dhee at once divined that Maxwell knew that he had once robbed a temple, and he knew that if other Tombovs ever found that out he was sure to die horribly.

"No know what lily flower good for," he would say, averting his eyes. "Tombov no eat. Tombov wear. Lily flower no good Earth-fellow. Kankilona come out of lily flower. Earth fellow kankilona no like. Earth fellow priestfellow say kankilona horres ... horresnous monster. Earth fellow priestfellow wantchee kill all kankilona. Kankilona die, Tombov die. Die no good for Tombov. More better Earth-fellow no see kankilona."

That was that. No amount of questioning could elucidate more. They had to guess at what sort of "horrendous monster" a kankilona might be. On Venus it could be anything from an ambulatory flytrap to a firebreathing dragon. All that was clear was that there was a relation between the lilies and the monsters, that the missionaries did not approve of them, and that the monsters were somehow necessary to Tombov well being.

Questions as to the iridescent, gas-filled spheres brought little that was comprehensible, though much later it did come to have meaning. Shan Dhee tried desperately to duck the question, for evidently he had lied about them to Hoskins.

"Littily shiny balls no gems," he confessed at last. "Littily shiny ball no good at all. Littily shiny ball one day pretty ... six, eight day more ... no more littily shiny ball. All gone. Maybeso littily shiny ball papa-papa-fellow kankilona."

"He's lying," said Parks. "We've got eighteen of 'em at home in our vault. We studied 'em a lot longer than a week, and none of them vanished. I'd call 'em pretty permanent."

Shan Dhee refused to amplify. Maxwell noted the hinted link to the mysterious kankilona, but let it go and went straight to the purpose of his call. Would Shan Dhee fix it so they could attend a Tombov orgy?

Shan Dhee's reaction was close to terror. Tombov temples were strictly tabu to Earthmen at all times. They were even tabu to Tombovs, including the priesthood, except during the days of actual festival. The Tombovs would hardly dare

slaughter the Earthmen if they were found desecrating the place—the Tombovs had learned that hard lesson long before—but what they would do to Shan Dhee was too dreadful to think about. Shan Dhee would steal, smuggle, even murder for them—if tobacco enough was to be had—but not that.

"Don't Tombov priests like tobacco, too?" Maxwell asked, softly.

It was a lucky question. It rang the bell. Shan Dhee reconsidered. He sipped zankra and made calculations on his fingers. In the end he yielded.

"Maybeso can do," he admitted, uneasily, "Maybeso Tombov priest-fellow letchee Shan Dhee hidum Earthfellow godhouse-side, but priestfellow no likee Earthfellow in Tombov godhouse. Earthfellow no likee see Tombov catchee kankilona. Earthfellow get sick. Earthfellow pukum. Earthfellow get mad. Earthfellow smashee Tombov godhouse. Earthfellow in godhouse no good. More better Earthfellow hidee outside."

Both investigators promised faithfully they would watch unseen. They would be the soul of discretion. And they would pay any reasonable price. They were not scoffers or reformers. They wanted only to know the secret of Tombov health. Shan Dhee relaxed. He even grinned a crooked grin.

"Tombov priestfellow more better Earthfellow priestfellow. Tombov wantchee long life now, swampside. Tombov no wantchee long life *bimebye*, Heavenside. Heavenside no good. Too far, Swampside more better."

Parks and Maxwell smiled. After all, they couldn't blame the poor devil. How could the warped missionary doctrine preached them be any solace for hard labor and suffering? Better good health now, and let them take their chances on Heaven. So they argued no further, but totted up the quantities of tobacco Chan Dhee said would be required.

It took three weeks of dreary slogging over slimy mud, sometimes proceeding by dugout canoe, before they came to the place of the Festival of Long Life. Shan Dhee showed them the markers that set off the sacred areas. Until they were removed three days later it was forbidden for ordinary Tombovs to pass them. But Shan Dhee shot the clumsy craft ahead. His coming had been arranged. He directed the canoe on past the tripods of saplings with their warning plumed skulls. The sluggish lagoon narrowed. Presently they came in between two lily fields. Shan Dhee explained that there were only a few places where such lilies grew and that the penalty for taking one off holy ground was death.

Maxwell studied the plants with interest, but saw little to distinguish them from the Terran variety except their great size and yellow color. And then he was startled to see monstrous hairy creatures crawling around among them. Far a long time he got only glimpses, and then he saw one entire. It was a sort of giant tarantula—a horror of mottled silky hair hanging from a bulbous, palpitating body as large as a basketball. There seemed to be a score of arching legs, each hairy and clawed at the tip. There were ugly, knifelike fangs, too, from which a greenish poison drooled. A cluster of luminous eyes were set above them, glaring venomously in shifting reds and violets.

"Kankilona," said Shan Dhee.

Parks shuddered. It was upsetting even to look on one. Had Shan Dhee said that the Tombovs *ate* them?

The lagoon shoaled and narrowed. In a moment Shan Dhee drove the dugout nose up onto a muddy bank. It was the island hummock of the temple grounds. They climbed out and dragged the canoe into the underbrush and hid it under broad leaves. Then they gathered up their baggage and went up onto the hummock.

It was a glade surrounded by heavy cypress, and under the trees were hundreds of little huts. In the distance stood the temple—an astonishing structure of gray atone, astonishing because the nearest solid ground was more than a hundred miles away. Only stubborn devotion could have carried those massive stones to where they were. But the temple's great portal was closed and barred. The whole place was deserted.

Shan Dhee disregarded everything until he could build their hiding place. It was a two-roomed hut he made for them, considerably apart from any other. As a tolerated outcast Shan Dhee said he was permitted to attend the festival, but he must keep his distance from the truly faithful. As it happened, his status was most convenient, for the two Earthmen could live in the rear, watching the show through peepholes, while Shan Dhee sat stolidly in the doorway, sure that no wild Tombov would venture near an untouchable. Shan Dhee said they could see all there was to see from there until the night of the culmination of the revels. By then the Tombovs would be blind drunk and would not notice if they

were being spied on from the darkness outside the temple door.

Maxwell and Parks laid out their gear. There were their food pellets and their store of tobacco twists that must be given to the priests. There was also their scientific paraphernalia—beakers and test tubes and reaction chemicals, and their all-purpose spectrographic camera. But the most essential item was their supply of precious paracobrine, for Parks was slipping fast, and needed shots at hourly intervals. They stowed that safely, and settled down to wait.

The subsequent week was not especially instructive, nor was it entertaining. During the first days the Tombovs began straggling in, filthy with swamp mud encrusted on them. They brought their women and children with them, and a tremendous number of zankra gourds. Each family settled into its own hut, and then proceeded to the tribal reunion. The affair was much like barbaric gatherings anywhere in the Solar System—attended by the monotonous banging on tomtoms; by wild, uninhibited dancing; by gorgings with food and drink. There were scenes of reckless drunkenness, but until the beginning of the fifth day it was essentially a social gathering. It was not until the fifth day that the priests showed up.

The activities thereafter took on a different tinge. No longer did the Tombov braves lie around in drunken stupor until midafternoon. They were put to work. And their women were put to work.

They went out into the swamp, paddling along on their splayed, webbed feet. The men carried curious nets made of twisted small liana. The boys trailed them, bearing roomy cages made of a sort of wicker. For the women's part, their job seemed to be the gathering of lilies. They stripped the plants methodically, taking blooms and leaves alike, leaving little more than pulpy stubble behind. It was not until evening came and the men came back that Maxwell knew what they had gone for. They returned triumphantly with scores upon scores of captured kankilonas, the trapped arachnids ululating horribly in protest at their restricted movement. The priests opened the temple doors long enough to receive the spiders, and then closed them again.

That went on for three days more, but as the swamps were stripped of their leafy covering and crawling monsters, Maxwell made an astounding discovery. For a few minutes one day the sun came through—a rarity on cloudy Venus—and as it did a miracle seemed to happen. The dull mudflats became beds of scintillating fire. What he had bought from Hoskins as jewels lay thick everywhere. They were as numerous as the dead leaves of fall. Then the clouds took over again and the glow died.

"What do you make of it?" asked Parks, who was looking on in wonder. "Could they be lily seed?"

"Hardly," said Maxwell. "They are too light and airy. Seeds have to sink into the soil to germinate. Those things won't even sink in water."



At last the final day of the festival came. Men and women dressed themselves in gala garments made from lilies. There were chaplets and leis, garlands and leafy headdresses. And they were drinking ankra in colossal doses. All afternoon there was unrestrained dancing, and toward dark the drunken choruses became a bedlam of hideous howling. Then the temple doors were thrown open wide, and torches lit inside.

"Pretty soon you Hoskins friend-fellow see kankilona feast," remarked Shan Dhee. He looked worried, as if repenting the deal. "No letchee priestfellow catchee looksee," he warned. Maxwell and Parks repeated their promise.

It was near midnight when they decided the worshippers were so drunk that nothing would matter. Maxwell and Parks stole out of their hut and across the glade, being careful not to step on the many Tombovs who had already passed out. They stopped close to the great door and looked in. The orgy was at its height. They saw now how the feast was conducted. Two acolytes would hand up a squirming kankilona, stripped of its legs. The high priest would receive it, and then defang it with two swift jerks. The slimy fangs he would hurl into a basket at the foot of the chief idol; the carcass he would throw to the yelling celebrants. There would be a scramble for it. then a howl of disappointment as the unlucky ones watched the favored sink his teeth into the soft venom sac of the mangled tarantula.

Parks gripped Maxwell's arms.

"I ... I've got to go back to the hut," he gasped.

"What's the matter?" asked Maxwell sharply. "Can't you take it? We're not squeamish missionaries."

"T-that's not it. I forgot my shot. See how I'm jumping? But you stick around. I'll be back in a jiffy."

Maxwell let him go. It was routine, more or less, and he did not want to miss any unexpected feature of the rites before him. He watched Parks disappear into the dark, and then started to turn his gaze back at the orgies.

He did not complete the movement. A surprisingly strong arm encircled him, and a husky knee entwined and gripped his. He knew from the wide flat foot that it was a Tombov that assailed him. Then there was a mocking voice in his ear—it was Shan Dhee's voice, and Shan Dhee was crazy drunk. His breath stank of zankra, and worse.

"Earthfellow wantchee long life, huh?" he taunted. "Okeh, okeh. Earth fellow catchee long life. Earthfellow catchee kankilona juice."

Maxwell felt himself being bent irresistibly backward to the peals of the maddened Tombov's maniacal laughter. A disgusting gob of hairy, mushy something was slapped down on his face. He could not get his breath. He struggled and tried to cry out. It was what Shan Dhee wanted him to do. His teeth broke the tender membrane of the kankilona's venom sac. There was a gush of indescribably nauseating oily stuff. It stung his cheeks and shoulders. Maxwell felt utterly defiled and ashamed. He wanted to die then and there. And then something happened to him.

In one swift instant all the nausea and revulsion was swept away. In its place there was heavenly exhilaration, an exaltation that exceeded any ecstasy he had ever known. He was no longer a sick man; would never be one again. He was strong, well—a champion among champions. Life was wonderful. It had to be expressed. Maxwell cut loose with a war whoop that shook the glade. Then things went madly round and round. Lights flared up and faded. The howling within the temple died, dwindling into an infinitude of distance. After that Maxwell did not remember.

He awoke in what he thought must be the gray dawn of the morning after. He was lying face down in the muck outside the temple door. He lay very still for a moment, wondering when the inescapable headache would begin to rack him, for after the heady intoxication he now faintly remembered, it was unthinkable that there would not be one—and a super one at that. But there was no headache. There was no foul taste in the mouth. Maxwell had to admit he felt fine, which, under the circumstances, was humiliating. He wondered if he was altogether sane. He started to get up, gingerly, expecting to find himself full of Charlie horses. There weren't any. He was fit as a fiddle. He quit worrying and arose briskly, but promptly regretted it. His head thumped into something, and there was a crash. He stood amazed and aghast at what fell. It was three long sticks of wood lashed together and tied with a bunch of plumes. A skull lay grinning at him from the wreckage. During the night someone had erected that dire symbol over him—the warning that he was tabu—under a curse!

Maxwell shot a glance at the temple. Its doors were closed and barred. It was that way also in the glade. The huts were empty, the celebrants gone. The festival was over. Now everything was tabu. Maxwell's wrist watch said it was late afternoon. He had slept more than the night.

Then his heart jumped as he belatedly remembered Parks. Parks said he would come back. Where was he? Had Shan Dhee assaulted him, too? Maxwell looked around, but there was no sign of him. He started off across the glade in great bounding strides.

Before the hut he was brought to an abrupt stop. Another tabu tripod stood there. But there was more besides. On a stake nearby there was the grinning newly severed head of a Tombov, and scattered about the foot of the stake were freshly picked bones—near human bones. The head was Shan Dhee's head. It meant that Shan Dhee had transgressed somehow, and Shan Dhee had paid the penalty. It was ominous. Maxwell feared to think of what he might find inside.

What was inside was bad enough. Both rooms were a shambles of smashed possessions. Most of the scientific equipment was hopelessly ruined, and food pellets were mixed indiscriminately with spilled chemicals. Every scrap of the tobacco was gone. But far worse, the whole interior reeked of paracobrine. Shattered ampules and broken syringes explained that readily enough. The looters, Nazilike, had destroyed what they did not value themselves.

At the moment none of that bothered Maxwell overmuch. It was Parks he wanted to find. And find him he did, half hidden beneath a pile of torn clothes. Maxwell uncovered him and knelt beside him, staring at him in bitter dejection. He felt like a murderer, for Parks had never been keen about this wild goose expedition. It was Maxwell, who insisted on playing the hunch. Now Parks' tense face had a deathly pallor, and the few weak tremors were eloquent of the complete exhaustion that must follow a night and day of uncontrolled convulsions. Parks had been late for his shot, and must have fallen, out of control. Maxwell should have foreseen that, and returned with him. Now it was too late. There was no more paracobrine. By morning Parks would be dead.

Maxwell sat for minutes, torturing himself. Then, of a sudden, a great light dawned on him. Why, he himself had missed at least two shots, and he felt fine! Unbelieving, he stretched out his arm. There was not so much as the hint of a tremor. What ... why—

In another instant Maxwell was outside, ransacking abandoned huts. In a little while it would be deep twilight, and he had no time to lose. In the third hut he found a kankilona net. In another a broken cage, which he speedily repaired. Then he set off for the swamp's edge.

Maxwell quickly discovered that catching wily kankilonas alive was work that required men in gangs. The first several he spotted eluded him. The fourth one squared off and circled, warily fighting back. Maxwell was in no mood to quibble. Did kankilona venom lose its potency when the

spider died? He couldn't know. But he knew he had to have some—of *any* strength—and quickly. He hurled his knife into the monster and watched it die. Then, lacking any kind of container, he tore off part of his shirt and dipped it into the ebbing poison. He ran back to Parks with that.

"Open your mouth, old man," he coaxed, but there was no response. Maxwell pried the jaws apart and blocked them. Then, drop by drop, he wrung nauseous oil out of the rag. Parks winced and tried to avert his head, but he was too weak. He gulped the stuff down, perforce. Maxwell fed it all, then waited.

The reaction was mercifully quick. Within seconds Parks' almost imperceptible breathing deepened, and his absent pulse returned. Slowly the iron-set neck muscles softened, the face relaxed, and there was a show of warming pink. In a little while Parks was sleeping peacefully. Maxwell examined him carefully from head to foot. There were no tremors. Not any. Maxwell heaved a big sigh of relief. Then he lit a torch. He had to do something about retrieving those food pellets.

Miraculous as the newfound remedy was, Parks' convalescence was slow. Either because he was so far gone in the beginning, or because the venom was not strictly fresh. His complete recovery was a matter of weeks, not hours or days, and in that time Maxwell had the opportunity to observe many things.

He kept a sharp watch on the swamp. He wanted to see what happened to the crystalline spheres, which Shan Dhee

had said would vanish after awhile. He put on mudshoes and gathered a few and stored them in the hut. Then he maintained a vigil at the hummock's edge.

Nothing whatever happened for almost a week, and when it did happen, it happened at night. It was by the purest chance that Maxwell couldn't go to sleep, and walked out into the glade for more air. It was then he saw the shimmering violet light that seemed to pervade the entire swamp area. It was as if the mudflats were a bed of smoldering anthracite, dimly lit by flickering bluish flame. Maxwell went back to the hut for the torch and mudshoes. Then he investigated.

What he discovered was a horde of sluggish crawlers, creatures not too distantly related to the queer Australian platypus. Many were feeding noisily on the lily stubble, but most just lay, as if entranced, staring at the crystalline spherelets. It was the light of their violet eyes that furnished the illumination, a fact that did not astonish Maxwell. The majority of Venusian fauna had luminous eyes. What did bowl him over was what the light did to the shimmering balls. They shrank, and shrank. They dwindled to mere pellets, hard, and relatively heavy. Then they were no more. There were only bubbles to mark the spot where they had sunk into the mire. Maxwell pocketed several of the shrunken balls just before they disappeared.

The next day he dissected one. It was now obviously a seed, perhaps a lily seed. It was one more curious example of the deviousness of Nature. Apparently in its first state it was infertile, and therefore of a shape and weight which would

keep it on the marsh surface. Then, perhaps by symbiotic impulse, the platypus creatures were attracted to it, gazed upon it with their violet rays, and somehow fertilized it. Whereupon it planted itself by gravity.

Maxwell followed through on that theory. That night he went into the swamp differently armed. He carried a bundle of dry sticks, and the spectrographic camera. He recorded the exact composition of the violet light, and noted the time it was applied. Then he marked a number of the bubbly places with his sticks. If lilies came up there, the spheres were lily seeds.

The next day he reversed his camera, making it a projector. He duplicated the platyputian light and shed it on the crystalline balls he had retrieved first. They did shrink into seed. He had at least one bit of positive proof. Then he planted them at a marked spot.

Slowly Parks improved. For several days Maxwell sought and found more spiders, but each day they grew scarcer. There came a day when there were none at all. The festival apparently had been timed to coincide with their greatest density. When would the new crop of them come, and from where? Maxwell thought on that, and began the study of the small pile of carcasses piled outside the hut. He hoped to learn something about the reproduction methods of the kankilona.



All but one of his dissections were negative. In that one he found an object that definitely jolted him. It was obviously an egg. But the kankilona egg was one of those crystalline balls! He now had one more link in its life cycle. He would have to wait for the rest of it to develop.

He had to wait for another reason. Parks was gaining, but he would not be able to travel under his own steam for some time to come. On the way back they would not have the assistance of Shan Dhee. Maxwell wondered whether the angry priests had left them the canoe. He dashed off worriedly to investigate.

The dugout was safe where they had left it. Maxwell eased it into the water and tried it out. And while he was learning the trick of handling it, he paddled it a way down the lagoon. He backed water vigorously as he neared the tripod tabu signs that marked the boundary of the lily reservation. Just beyond there was an encampment of Tombov braves. It was a troubling discovery.

But a moment later he was a little bit relieved. A Tombov had spotted him just as he sighted them, and for a long minute both men stared at each other. Other Tombovs got up and looked, stolidly inexpressive. They made no outcry or hostile gesture, and as Maxwell turned the dugout about and headed back toward the temple clearing, the savages sat down again, as if the incident was closed.

It was Parks who guessed the purpose of the outpost. He was strong enough to talk, then, and was following Maxwell's theories with great interest.

"This kankilona business is the Tombov's big secret. They know by now how selfish the Earthman is, and how ruthlessly and wastefully he exploits. They don't want to kill us—if they had, they would have done it the night they left. But they are not going to let us get back to Angra with a live spider, or its egg, or any other thing they value. If we leave here alive, it will have to be barehanded."

"I get it," said Maxwell, gloomily. "They know, as you and I do, that if our race learned about spider venom, swarms of humans would invade these swamps and exterminate the genus in a single season. There just aren't enough kankilona. They would go the way of the bison and the dodo. And then we would be in a fix."

"Right," agreed Parks. "What we ought to do of course, is analyze that poison and see what ingredient makes it work. But our stuff is smashed. If we can't take back a specimen of it, all this has gone for nothing."

"We'll see," said Maxwell.

Meantime lily plants were sprouting where the ball-seeds had sunk. Soon the plants would be maturing. Then it would be time for another festival. They wanted to leave before that came, and they had to leave for a still more urgent reason. If they did not get back to Angra soon, their stay would overstretch the six-months time limit. Nothing would convince stupid quarantine officials that they weren't crawling with every variety of Venusian virus.

The first lilies were well in bloom the day they climbed into the dugout for the trip back. Maxwell shunted the canoe over close to a stand of the flowers, and plucked one. It was a very curious blossom, lacking either stamen or pistil. It was a sexless plant. But he observed a fatty swelling in one of the lush petals. He slit it open and laid bare a small tumor. He cut into that. Dozens of tiny black objects scattered out, like ants from a disturbed hill. They were baby kankilona!

"Well, that's that," said Maxwell, dropping the torn lily into the lagoon. "Now we have the whole story. Lilies beget spiders, spiders lay eggs, friend platypus comes along and the egg becomes a lily seed. That is where we came in."

"And," supplemented Parks, "kankilonas are health-giving, so *after* they have laid their eggs, the Tombovs come and eat them. The so-called temple jewels, I suppose, are simply a reserve seed crop in case of a drought."

"Drought on Venus," laughed Maxwell. "You're crazy." But he got the idea.

At the edge of the lily swamp the Tombovs looked them over. They were grave and silent, and offered no violence, but they were thorough. Their search of the boat revealed no contraband. A surly chieftain waved in the general direction of Angra. Maxwell dipped his paddle in and thrust the dugout ahead.

"It's tough," remarked Parks, regretfully, "but at least you and I are cured. On another trip we may have better luck."

"We're not cured," said Maxwell, grimly. "Our cases are arrested, that's all. The Tombovs do this twice a year, you know. But we have succeeded better than you know. The proof of it is here."

He tapped the note book where he had noted the spectrum of the platypus gaze.

"At home," he said, "we have a lot of kankilona eggs, and we know how to activate them. We can start in a properly humidified hothouse for our first few batches. After that we'll expand. The world need never know that what they're taking is a distillation of kankilona poison. They'll probably label it Nixijit, or something cute like that."

"Oh, well," said Parks, irrelevantly, "I suppose the Congo Valley won't be so bad."

"Nothing is ever as bad as it seems," said Maxwell.

A month later he made the same observation in a different form. They were on the homebound liner, and were among the few well enough to sit up and enjoy the lounge. A pest of a missionary came over and dropped into a seat beside him.

"It's great to be getting back to God's footstool," he wheezed. "What a cross I've had to bear working with those beastly Tombovs. Ugh! A race of brutes, steeped in the vilest superstitions and practicing the most abominable rites. Our own primitives had some horrible customs, but the Tombov culture hasn't a single redeeming feature."

"Oh," said Maxwell, screwing up one eye and smiling faintly, "I wouldn't say *that*."

THE END.

[The end of *Lilies of Life* by Malcolm Jameson]