

THE DAIRY FARM

by

Alan Conrad

“Let us all die, isn’t that it?”

Senator Russell Pike, the North American representative on the World Committee for Genetic Recovery, and another man, stood in the grey light of dawn on the deck of the Adirondack cabin facing a black inscrutable creature perched on the cedar railing. With a body two meters long and great transparent wings protruding from its back, it watched them both with enormous compound eyes. It was a consultant from the Galactic Bank, Biological Services Division.

Throughout the night in the cabin, while rain fell heavily outside, they had debated the future of Earth’s struggle to renovate humanity. Now they were out on the deck, the banker’s departure near at hand.

The rain had stopped, but a low grey blanket of cloud still rolled silently over the lake and the mountains. A gentle breeze brought with it the fresh scent of the forests and made the long wings of the visitor rustle softly, like the thinnest paper.

“You won’t all die Senator,” it said, “but you might just learn to live with some of your problems.”

“Here on Earth,” Pike continued grimly, “life is considered sacred. People won’t accept death as some kind of new medicine.”

He talked in his natural voice, while the banker spoke through a small black box on its back that translated both ways.

“But,” it replied, “they will still complain about their illnesses, their lung filters, the immunal stabilizers that make them sick, the allergies that plague them anyway, and the artificial sex that has been such a waste of time. Just let them know there is a solution that won’t bankrupt your world.”

“Solution!” Pike snorted.

Beside them, Doctor Magnuson-Hart, a research director in the World Biological Institute and owner of the cabin, remained quiet. He watched a slender belt of mist that hung ghost-like on the dark green forested slope across the lake and wondered if the banker was not right after all.

Almost a quarter of the world's twelve billion people were hospitalized with genetic disabilities, while most of the rest suffered from physical impairments, chronic allergies and declining vigour. Even the more robust gene pools in the slums and rural villages of the Third World had been eroded badly earlier in the century when the planet's more affluent inhabitants flocked there looking for healthier partners. The few valuable pools left, in remote parts of Asia, Africa and South America, were protected now, their genes, in sperm and egg form, available only through the World Health Institute. But the overall genetic condition of the race was still dropping.

The problem, according to the banker, was that humanity had lived too long in comfort and safety. The very bacteria and viruses that had helped it evolve over millions of years, culling out weaker individuals and occasionally assisting mutations, were now treated as enemies. This, it said, had to stop. Antibiotics would have to be banned for at least a century and the most virulent diseases released again to do their work.

That the laws of Nature should be restored and the human race left to her cruel justice again had shocked the scientist when he heard it the previous evening, but now he found himself silently arguing for the banker in the face of Pike's resistance. He tried to remember the words of Tolstoy – something to the effect that if it were not for suffering humanity would never know itself.

"Well, I can tell you one thing my friend," Pike said to the banker, "high infant mortality is out of the question."

"It serves others well enough," she said.

Magnuson-Hart, watching the creature all night, had come to the conclusion that its species had some sort of sexual dichotomy and that this was a mother. Now she flexed her long delicate wings, made them hum briefly, and watched the sky overhead.

"Politically, it will never float," Pike said.

"Senator," she replied, "we made those first loans to you because it is the policy of the bank to encourage client worlds to solve their own problems. But no race in the galaxy has ever made a success of genetic engineering on this scale."

A dragonfly landed on the railing, its body light blue with a black thorax, its four wings transparent except for a large black spot in the middle of each one. The banker lowered her

basketball-sized head and tilted one eye until it was almost touching the insect.

“If we have to, we’ll go it alone,” Pike said.

“Wasting more money that you don’t have,” she replied, still examining the dragonfly.

“We’ve got trillions invested in this project. You can’t expect us to abandon it now!”

“Listen,” she said, turning her attention back to the two men, “nothing you’ve learned has to be abandoned. We’re just asking for common sense, that you put back into the equation some of the factors you’ve taken out. For example, I forgot to mention macropredators. Besides acting as another natural culling mechanism, large hunting animals would add a zest to life in your cities that is missing now. If you don’t have enough suitable species left, we could provide some.”

“You’d have us throw our children to the wolves would you?” Pike’s face was red.

The banker turned to Magnuson-Hart.

“You’ve been very kind doctor, but I have no more time.”

Still deep in his own thoughts, Magnuson-Hart nodded, aware that her machine could translate gestures too.

“No more time for us, that is,” said Pike.

The visitor made her wings hum, warming her internal body with the muscular action, preparing for flight. She turned back to Pike.

“Senator, do you remember that dairy farm we toured last week? One did not have to be a geneticist to see that those wretched creatures you call Holsteins, those dull flabby cattle, must have once been magnificent wild animals. My assistant tells me that a cow needs only a half gallon of milk a day to feed her calf, yet she has to drag around bloated breasts bursting with milk, wearing trusses to support them, so you can extract thirty gallons a day. And your breeders are trying for still higher yields! Believe me, if it were put to a vote, there would be few citizens of the galaxy who wouldn’t prefer to see your next loan spent on restoring those unfortunate animals.”

With that, the banker rose into the air, her wings humming strongly, but Pike shouted after her:

“Maybe if you’d taken the trouble to research the benefits human children receive from that milk, you could talk sensibly about it! I happen to know there isn’t a more nutritious food in the galaxy than mammalian milk!”

The banker had started rising, but she stopped about three hundred feet above them in a shaft of sunlight, her wings like flickering prisms, and called back:

“Yes, milk, milk, milk, that’s all that counts isn’t it Senator? I’ve heard it said here that your race has been ‘milking’ this planet far too long!”

Then she rose swiftly, disappearing into the layer of cloud above them. She was on her way to a rendezvous with a ship that had been waiting for several hours. The senator and the scientist stood looking at each other until Magnuson-Hart spoke.

“Well Russ,” he said, “Are we still asking for the money?”
