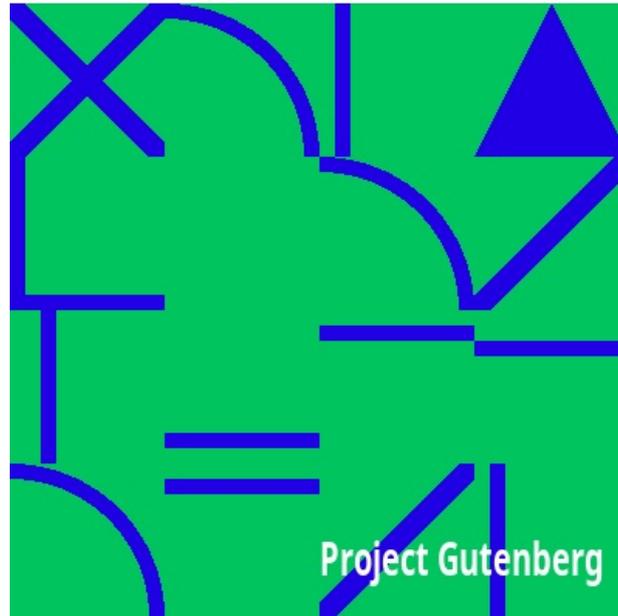

Vital Ingredient

Charles V. De Vet



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Title: Vital Ingredient

Author: Charles V. De Vet

Illustrator: Bob Martin

Release Date: November 17, 2009 [EBook #30491]

Language: English

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Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*It is man's most precious possession—
no living thing can exist without it. But
when they gave it to Orville, it killed
him. For the answer, read 1/M.*

Vital Ingredient

By Charles V. De Vet

"NOW WATCH," Remm said, indicating the native. Macker had been absent, exploring the countryside in the immediate vicinity of their landing place, and had not witnessed the capture of the native, or the tests his two companions made on it.

Macker followed Remm's gaze to where the biped native sat hunched. The creature was bent into an ungainly position, its body crooked at incongruous angles, in such a way as to allow most of its weight to rest on a packing-box at the base of a middle angle. Its stubby feet, on the ends of thin, pipelike legs, rested against the floor of the space ship. Its body was covered, almost entirely, with an artificial skin material of various colors. Some of the colors hurt Macker's eyes. In the few places where the flesh showed through the skin was an unhealthy, pallid white.

Slowly the creature's head swiveled on its short neck until it faced them.

"Those orifices in the upper portion of its skull are evidently organs of sight," Remm said. "It sees that we are quite a distance away. It will probably attempt to escape again."

Slowly—slowly—the native's head rotated away from them in a half-circle until it faced Toolls, working over his instruments on the far side of the room. Then it turned its head back until it faced the door of the ship.

"It is setting itself for flight now," Remm said. "Notice the evidence of strain on its face."

The creature leaned forward and the appendages on the ends of its upper limbs clutched the sides of the box as it propelled its body forward.

It raised its right foot in a slow arc, employing a double-jointed, breaking action of its leg. For a long moment it rested its entire weight on its lumpy right foot, while its momentum carried its body sluggishly forward. Then it repeated the motion with its left leg; then again its right. All the while evidencing great exertion and concentration of effort.

"It is making what it considers a mad dash for freedom," Remm said. "Probably at the ultimate speed of which it is capable. That would be ridiculous except that it's normal for its own environment. This is definitely a slow-motion world."

The creature was a third-way to the door now. Once again its head turned in its slow quarter-circle, to look at them. As it saw that Remm and Macker had not moved it altered the expression on its face.

"It seems to express its emotions through facial contortions," Remm said. "Though I suspect that the sounds it makes with the upper part of its trachea during moments of agitation are also outlets of emotional stress, rather than efforts at communication." He called across the room to Toolls. "What did you find out about its speech?"

"Extremely primitive," Toolls replied. "Incredible as it may appear to us it uses combinations of sounds to form word-symbols. Each word indicates some action, or object; or denotes degree, time, or shades of meaning. Other words are merely connectives. It seems to make little use of inflections, the basis of a rational language. Thoughts which we can project with a few sounds would take it dozens of words to express."

"Just how intelligent is it?" Macker asked.

"Only as intelligent as a high degree of self-preservation instinct would make it."

"Are you certain that it is a member of the dominant species of life on the planet?"

"There's no doubt about it," Toolls replied. "I've made very careful observations."

"This attempt at escape is a pretty good example of its intelligence," Remm said. "This is the sixth time it has tried to escape—in exactly the same way. As soon as it sees that we are farther away from it than it is from the door, it makes its dash."

It was an arm to be proud of—but what good was it?

THE CREATURE was one step away from the space ship's open portal now and bringing its foot up to cross the threshold. Remm walked over and lifted it off the floor.

"Its legs are still moving in a running motion," Macker said. "Doesn't it realize yet that you've picked it up?"

"Its nervous system and reflexes are evidently as slow as its motor muscles," Remm replied. "There has not been time for the sensation of my picking it up to reach the brain, and for the brain to send back its message to the legs to stop their running motion."

"How heavy is it?" Macker asked.

"Only a few ounces," Remm replied. "But that's logical considering that this is a 'light' planet. If we took it back to our own 'heavy' world, gravity would crush it to a light film of the liquid which comprises the greater part of its substance."

Remm set the creature down on the box in its former queerly contorted position. Toolls had left his instruments and strolled over beside them to observe the native.

"One of its appendages seems bent at a peculiar angle," Macker said.

"I noticed that," Remm answered. "I think that I may have broken the bone in several places when I first captured it. I was not aware then of how fragile it was. But now that you mention it, I should be able to use that injury to give you a good illustration of the interplay of emotional expressions on its face. Observe now as I touch it."

Remm reached over and touched—very lightly—the broken portion of the native's appendage. The muscles of the creature's face pulled its flaccid flesh into distorted positions, bunching some and stretching others. "It is very probably registering pain," Remm said.

Suddenly the starch seemed to leave the native's body and it slowly slumped across the packing-box.

"Why is it doing that, Toolls?" Remm asked.

Toolls concentrated for a minute, absorbing the feelings and thought pulsations emanating from the creature. "The conscious plane of its mind has blanked out," he said. "I presume the pain you caused by touching its wounded member resulted in a breakdown of its nervous system. The only thought waves I receive now are disjointed impressions and pictures following no rational series. However, I'm certain that it will be only temporary."

"Don't you think that in justice to the creature we should repair its wound before we free it?" Macker asked.

"I had intended to have it done," Remm replied. "You shouldn't have any trouble fixing it, should you, Toolls?"

"No," Toolls answered. "I may as well attend to it right now." He rolled the portable *converter* over beside the creature and carefully laid its arm in the "pan." The *converter* automatically set its gauges and instruments of calculation, and gave its click of "ready."

Toolls fed a short length of *basic* into the machine and it began its work. The native was still unconscious.

The bone of the wounded arm slowly evaporated, beginning with the wrist joint. The evaporated portion was instantly replaced by the manufactured bone of the *converter*. At the same time it repaired all ruptured blood vessels and damaged ligaments and muscles.

"It was not possible, of course, for me to replace the bone with another of the same composition as its own," Toolls said, after the machine had completed its work. "But I gave it one of our 'heavy' ones. There will be no force on this planet powerful enough to break it again."

THE NATIVE'S first evidence of a return to consciousness was a faint fluttering of the lids that covered its organs of vision. The lids opened and it looked up at them.

"Its eyesight is as slow as its muscular reactions," Remm said. "Watch." Remm raised his hand and waved it slowly in front of the native's face. The eyes of the native, moving in odd, jerking movements, followed the hand's progress. Remm raised the hand—speeding its action slightly—and the eyesight faltered and lost it. The native's eyes rolled wildly until once again they located the hand.

Remm took three steps forward. The native's eyes were unable to follow his change of position. Its gaze wandered about the room, until again it settled on Remm's waiting figure.

"Can you imagine anything being so slow," Remm said, "and still ..." Suddenly Macker interrupted. "Something is wrong. It is trying to get up, but it can't." The native was registering signs of distress, kicking its legs and twisting its body into new positions of contortion.

"I see what the trouble is," Toolls said. "It's unable to lift the appendage with the new bone in. I never thought of that before but its 'light' muscles aren't strong enough to lift the limb. We've got the poor creature pinned to the box by the weight of its own arm."

"We can't do that to it," Remm said. "Isn't there any way you can give it a lighter bone?"

"None that wouldn't take a retooling of the *converter*," Toolls said. "I'm not certain that I could do it, and even if I could, we don't have the time to spare. I could give it stronger muscles in the arm, but that may throw off the metabolism of the whole body. If it did, the result would be fatal. I'd hate to chance it."

"I have an idea," Macker said. By the inflections of his tones the others knew that some incongruity of the situation had aroused Macker's sense of humor. "Why don't we give the creature an entirely new body? We could replace the flesh and viscera, as well as the cartilaginous structure, with our own type substance. It would probably be an indestructible being as far as its own world is concerned. And it would be as powerful as their mightiest machines. We'd leave behind us a superman that could change the course of this world's history. You could do it, couldn't you, Toolls?"

"Quite simply."

"Our policy has always been not to interfere in anyway with the races we study," Remm protested.

"But our policy has also been never to harm any of them, if at all possible to avoid it," Macker insisted. "In common justice you have to complete the job Toolls began on the arm, or you're condemning this poor thing to death."

"But do we have the right to loose such an unpredictable factor as it would be among them?" Remm asked. "After all, our purpose is exploration and observation, not playing the parts of gods to the primitives we encounter."

"True, that is the rule which we have always followed in the past," Macker agreed, "but it is in no way a requirement. We are empowered to use our judgment in all circumstances. And in this particular instance I believe I can convince you that the course I suggest is the more just one." He turned to Toolls. "Just what stage of cultural development would you say this creature's race has attained?"

"It still retains more of an animal-like adaptation to its surroundings than an intellectual one," Toolls replied. "Its civilization is divided into various sized units of cooperation which it calls governments. Each unit vies with the others for a greater share of its world's goods. That same rivalry is carried down to the individual within the unit. Each strives for acquisition against his neighbor.

"Further they retain many of their tribal instincts, such as gregariousness, emotional rather than intellectual propagation, and worship of the mightiest fighter. This last, however, is manifested by reverence for individuals attaining position of authority, or acquiring large amounts of their medium of exchange, rather than by physical superiority."

"That's what I mean," Macker said. "Our policy in the past has been to avoid tampering, only

because of the fear of bringing harm. If we created a super being among them, to act as a controlling and harmonizing force, we'd hasten their development by thousands of years. We'd be granting them the greatest possible boon!"

"I don't know," Remm said, obviously swayed by Macker's logic. "I'm still hesitant about introducing a being into their midst whose thought processes would be so subtle and superior to their own. How do you feel about it, Toolls?"

"What would they have to lose?" Toolls asked with his penchant for striking the core of an argument.

"The right or wrong of such moral and philosophical considerations has always been a delicate thing to decide," Remm acquiesced reluctantly. "Go ahead if you think it is the right thing to do."

"**A**LL FINISHED?" Macker asked.

"That depends on how much you want me to do," Toolls replied. "I've substituted our 'heavy' substances for his entire body structure, including the brain—at the same time transferring his former memory and habit impressions. That was necessary if he is to be able to care for himself. Also I brought his muscular reaction time up to our norm, and speeded his reflexes."

"Have you implanted any techniques which he did not possess before, such as far-seeing, or mental insight?" Macker asked.

"No," Toolls said. "That is what I want your advice about. Just how much should I reveal about ourselves and our background? Or should he be left without any knowledge of us?"

"Well ..." Now that the others had deferred to Macker's arguments, he had lost much of his certainty. "Perhaps we should at least let him know who we are, and what we have done. That would save him much alarm and perplexity when it comes time to reorient himself. On the other hand, perhaps we should go even farther and implant the knowledge of some of our sciences. Then he could do a better job of advancing his people. But maybe I'm wrong. What do you think about it, Remm?"

"My personal opinion," Remm said, "is that we can't give him much of our science, because it would be like giving a baby a high explosive to play with. His race is much too primitive to handle it wisely. Either he, or someone to whom he imparts what we teach him, would be certain to bring catastrophe to his world. And if we let him learn less, but still remember his contact with us, in time his race would very likely come to regard us as gods. I would hesitate to drag in any metaphysical confusion to add to the uncertainties you are already engendering. My advice would be to wipe his mind of all memory of us. Let him explain his new found invincibility to himself in his own way."

Macker had no criticism to offer to this suggestion. "Does he retain any of his immunity to this world's malignant germs?" he asked.

"They are too impotent to represent any hazard to his present body mechanism," Toolls replied. "If and when he dies, it will not be from disease."

"He will be subject to the deterioration of old age, the same as we are, won't he?" Macker asked.

"Of course," Toolls said, "but that's the only thing that will be able to bring him down. He cannot be harmed by any force this 'light' world can produce; he is impervious to sickness; and he will live indefinitely."

"Indefinitely?"

"As his world reckons time. Their normal life span is less than a hundred years. Ours is over five thousand. He will probably live approximately twice that long, because he will be subjected to less stress and strain, living as he does on a world of lighter elements."

"Then we have truly made a superman," Macker's tones inflected satisfaction. "I wish we were returning this way in a thousand years or so. I'd like to see the monumental changes he will

effect."

"We may at that," Remm said, "or others of our people will. He will probably be a living legend by then. I'd like to hear what his race has to say about him. Do they have names with which to differentiate individuals?"

"Yes," Toolls said. "This one has a family designation of Pollnow, and a member designation of Orville."

"It will be necessary for us to leave in exactly ten minutes," Remm reminded them. "Our next stopping place—the red star—will reach its nearest conjunction with this planet by the time we meet it out in space."

"Then we will have time to do nothing more for him before we go," Macker said. "But as far as I can see we've forgotten nothing, have we, Toolls?"

"Nothing," Toolls answered. "No—we forgot nothing."

BUT TOOLLS was wrong. They had forgotten one thing. A minor detail, relatively...

On Toolls' world his race, in the course of its evolution, had adjusted itself to its own particular environment. Logically, the final result was that they evolved into beings best able to survive in that environment. As such their food—a "heavy," highly concentrated food—was ideally suited to supply the needs of their "heavy," tremendously avid organisms.

Orville Pollnow had no such food available. His body—no larger than before—had an Earth mass of one hundred and eighty thousand pounds. One hundred and eighty thousand pounds—the weight of twelve hundred average sized men—of fiercely burning, intense virility. Even continuous eating—of his own world's food—could not supply the demands of that body.

Twenty-four hours after the aliens left, Pollnow was dead—of starvation.

THE END

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