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Shotgun Cure

Clifford D. Simak

The clinics were set up and in the morning they'd start on Operation Kelly - and that was something, wasn't it, that they should call it Kelly!

He sat in the battered rocking chair on the sagging porch and said it once again and rolled it on his tongue, but the taste of it was not so sharp nor sweet as it once had been, when that great London doctor had risen in the United Nations to suggest it could be called nothing else but Kelly.

Although, when one came to think of it, there was a deal of happenstance. It needn't have been Kelly. It could have been just anyone at all with an M.D. to his name. It could as well have been Cohen or Johnson or Radzonovich or any other of them - any one of all the doctors in the world.

He rocked gently in the creaking chair while the floor boards of the porch groaned in sympathy, and in the gathering dusk were the sounds, as well, of children at the day's-end play, treasuring those last seconds before they had to go inside and soon thereafter to bed.

There was the scent of lilacs in the coolness of the air and at the corner of the garden he could faintly see the white flush of an early-blooming bridal wreath - the one that Martha Anderson had given him and Janet so many years ago, when they first had come to live in this very house.

A neighbor came tramping down the walk and he could not make him out in the deepening dusk, but the man called out to him.

'Good evening, Doc,' he said.

'Good evening, Hiram,' said old Doc Kelly, knowing who it was by the voice of him.

The neighbor went on, tramping down the walk.

Old Doc kept up his gentle rocking with his hands folded on his pudgy stomach and from inside the house he could hear the bustling in the kitchen as Janet cleared up after supper. In a little while, perhaps, she'd come out and sit with him and they'd talk together, low-voiced and casually, as befitted an old couple very much in love.

Although, by rights, he shouldn't stay out here on the porch. There was the medical journal waiting for him on the study desk and he should be reading it. There was so much new stuff these days that a man should keep up with - although, perhaps, the way things were turning out it wouldn't really matter if a man kept up or not.

Maybe in the years to come there'd be precious little a man would need to keep up with.

Of course, there'd always be need of doctors. There'd always be damn fools smashing up their cars and shooting one another and getting fishhooks in their hands and falling out of trees. And there'd always be the babies.

He rocked gently to and fro and thought of all the babies and how some of them had grown until they were men and women now and had babies of their own. And he thought of Martha Anderson, Janet's closest friend, and he thought of old Con Gilbert, as ornery an old shikepoke as ever walked the earth, and tight with money, too. He chuckled a bit wryly, thinking of all the money Con Gilbert finally owed him, never having paid a bill in his entire life.

But that was the way it went. There were some who paid and others who made no pretense of paying, and that was why he and Janet lived in this old house and he drove a five-year car and Janet had worn the selfsame dress to church the blessed winter long.

Although it made no difference, really, once one considered it. For the important pay was not in cash.

There were those who paid and those who didn't pay. And there were those who lived and the other ones who died, no matter what you did. There was hope for some and the ones who had no hope - and some of these you told and there were others that you didn't.

But it was different now.

And it all had started right here in this little town of Millville - not much more than a year ago.

Sitting in the dark, with the lilac scent and the white blush of the bridal wreath and the muted sounds of children clasping to themselves the last minutes of their play, he remembered it.

It was almost 8:30 and he could hear Martha Anderson in the outer office talking to Miss Lane and she, he knew, had been the last of them.

He took off his white jacket, folding it absent-mindedly, fogged with weariness, and laid it across the examination table.

Janet would be waiting supper, but she'd never say a word, for she never had. All these many years she had never said a word of reproach to him, although there had been at times a sense of disapproval at his easy-going ways, at his keeping on with patients who didn't even thank him, much less pay their bills. And a sense of disapproval, too, at the hours he kept, at his willingness to go out of nights when he could just as well have let a call go till his regular morning rounds.

She would be waiting supper and she would know that Martha had been in to see him and she'd ask him how she was, and what was he to tell her?

He heard Martha going out and the sharp click of Miss Lane's heels across the outer office. He moved slowly to the basin and turned on the tap, picking up the soap.

He heard the door creak open and did not turn his head. 'Doctor,' said Miss Lane, 'Martha thinks she's fine. She says you're helping her. Do you think...'

'What would you do,' he asked.

'I don't know,' she said.

Would you operate, knowing it was hopeless? Would you send her to a specialist, knowing that he couldn't help her, knowing she can't pay him and that she'll worry about not paying? Would you tell her that she has, perhaps, six months to live and take from her the little happiness and hope she still has left to her?'

'I am sorry, doctor.'

'No need to be. I've faced it many times. No case is the same. Each one calls for a decision of its own. It's been a long, hard day...'

'Doctor, there's another one out there.'

'Another patient?'

'A man. He just came in. His name is Harry Herman.'

'Herman? I don't know any Hermans.'

'He's a stranger,' said Miss Lane. 'Maybe he just moved into town.'

'If he'd moved in,' said Doc, 'I'd have heard of it. I hear everything.'

'Maybe he's just passing through. Maybe he got sick driving on the road.'

'Well, send him in,' said Doc, reaching for a towel. 'I'll have a look at him.'

The nurse turned to the door.

'And Miss Lane.'

'Yes?'

'You may as well go home. There's no use sticking round. It's been a real bad day.'

And it had been, at that, he thought. A fracture, a burn, a cut, a dropsy, a menopause, a pregnancy, two pelvics, a scattering of colds, a feeding schedule, two teethings, a suspicious lung, a possible gallstone, a cirrhosis of the liver and Martha Anderson. And now, last of all, this man named Harry Herman - no name that he knew and when one came to think of it, a rather funny name.

And he was a funny man. Just a bit too tall and willowy to be quite believable, ears too tight against his skull, lips so thin they seemed no lips at all.

'Doctor?' he asked, standing in the doorway.

'Yes,' said Doc, picking up his jacket and shrugging into it. 'Yes, I am the doctor. Come on in. What can I do for you?'

'I am not ill,' said the man.

'Not ill?'

'But I want to talk to you. You have time, perhaps?'

'Yes, certainly,' said Doc, knowing that he had no time and resenting this intrusion. 'Come on in. Sit down.'

He tried to place the accent, but was unable to. Central European, most likely.

'Technical,' said the man. 'Professional.'

'What do you mean?' asked Doc, getting slightly nettled.

'I talk to you technical. I talk professional.'

'You mean that you're a doctor?'

'Not exactly,' said the man, 'although perhaps you think so. I should tell you immediate that I am an alien.'

'An alien,' said Old Doc. 'We've got lots of them around. Mostly refugees.'

'Not what I mean. Not that kind of alien. From some other planet. From some other star.'

'But you said your name was Herman...'

'When in Rome,' said the other one, 'you must do as Romans.'

'Huh?' asked Doc, and then: 'Good God, do you mean that? That you are an alien. By an alien, do you mean...'

The other nodded happily. 'From some other planet. From some other star. Very many light-years.'

'Well, I'll be damned,' said Doc.

He stood there looking at the alien and the alien grinned back at him, but uncertainly.

'You think, perhaps,' the alien said, 'but he is so human!'

'That,' said Doc, 'was going through my mind.'

'So you would have a look, perhaps. You would know a human body.'

'Perhaps,' said Doc grimly, not liking it at all. 'But the human body can take some funny turns.'

'But not a turn like this,' said the stranger, showing him his hands.

'No,' said the shocked old Doc. 'No such turn as that.' For the hand had two thumbs and a single finger, almost as if a bird claw had decided to turn into a hand.

'Nor like this?' asked the other, standing up and letting down his trousers.

'Nor like that,' said Doc, more shaken than he'd been in many years of practice.

'Then,' said the alien, zipping up his trousers, 'I think that it is settled.'

He sat down again and calmly crossed his knees, 'If you mean I accept you as an alien,' said Doc, 'I suppose I do. Although it's not an easy thing.'

'I suppose it is not. It comes as quite a shock.'

Doc passed a hand across his brow. 'Yes, a shock, of course. But there are other points...'

'You mean the language,' said the alien. 'And my knowledge of your customs.'

'That's part of it, naturally.'

'We've studied you,' the alien said. 'We've spent some time on you. Not you alone, of course...'

'But you talk so well,' protested Doc. 'Like a well-educated foreigner.'

'And that, of course,' the other said, 'is what exactly I am.'

'Why, yes, I guess you are,' said Doc. 'I hadn't thought of it.'

'I am not glib,' said the alien. 'I know a lot of words, but I use them incorrect. And my vocabulary is restricted to just the common speech. On matters of great technicality, I will not be proficient.'

Doc walked around behind his desk and sat down rather limply.

'All right,' he said, 'let's have the rest of it. I accept you as an alien. Now tell me the other answer. Just why are you here?'

And he was surprised beyond all reason that he could approach the situation as calmly as he had. In a little while, he knew, when he had time to think it over, he would get the shakes.

'You're a doctor,' said the alien. 'You are a healer of your race.'

'Yes,' said Doc. 'I am one of many healers.'

'You work very hard to make the unwell well. You mend the broken flesh. You hold off death...'

'We try. Sometimes we don't succeed.'

'You have many ailments. You have the cancer and the heart attacks and colds and many other things - I do not find the word.'

'Diseases,' Doc supplied.

'Disease. That is it. You will pardon my shortcomings in the tongue.'

'Let's cut out the niceties,' suggested Doc. 'Let's get on with it.'

'It is not right,' the alien said, 'to have all these diseases. It is not nice. It is an awful thing.'

'We have less than we had at one time. We've licked a lot of them.'

'And, of course,' the alien said, 'you make your living with them.'

'What's that you said!' yelped Doc.

'You will be tolerant of me if I misunderstand. An economic system is a hard thing to get into one's head.'

'I know what you mean,' growled Doc, 'but let me tell you, sir...'

But what was the use of it, he thought. This being was thinking the self-same thing that many humans thought.

'I would like to point out to you,' he said, starting over once again, 'that the medical profession is working hard to conquer those diseases you are talking of. We are doing all we can to destroy our own jobs.'

'That is fine,' the alien said. 'It is what I thought, but it did not square with your planet's business sense. I take it, then, you would not be averse to seeing all disease destroyed.'

'Now, look here,' said Doc, having had enough of it, 'I don't know what you are getting at. But I am hungry and I am tired and if you want to sit here threshing out philosophies...'

'Philosophies,' said the alien. 'Oh, not philosophies. I am practical. I have come to offer an end of all disease.'

They sat in silence for a moment, then Doc stirred half protestingly and said, 'Perhaps I misunderstood you, but I thought you said...'

'I have a method, a development, a find - I do not catch the word - that will destroy all diseases.'

'A vaccine,' said Old Doc.

'That's the word. Except it is different in some ways than the vaccine you are thinking.'

'Cancer?' Doc asked.

The alien nodded. 'Cancer and the common cold and all the others of them. You name it and it's gone.'

'Heart,' said Doc. 'You can't vaccinate for heart.'

'That, too,' the alien said. 'It does not really vaccinate. It makes the body strong. It makes the body right. Like tuning up a motor and making it like new. The motor will wear out in time, but it will function until it is worn out entirely.'

Doc stared hard at the alien. 'Sir,' he said, 'this is not the sort of thing one should joke about.'

'I am not joking,' said the alien.

'And this vaccine - it will work on humans? It has no side effects?'

'I am sure it will. We have studied your - your - the way your bodies work.'

'Metabolism is the word you want.'

'Thank you.' said the alien.

'And the price?' asked Doc.

'There is no price,' the alien said. 'We are giving it to you.'

'Completely free of charge? Surely there must be...'

'Without any charge,' the alien said. 'Without any strings.'

He got up from the chair. He took a flat box from his pocket and walked over to the desk. He placed it upon the desk and pressed its side and the top sprang open. Inside of it were pads - like surgical pads, but they were not made of cloth.

Doc reached out, then halted his hand just above the box.

'May I?' he asked.

'Yes, certainly. You only touch the tops.'

Doc gingerly lifted out one of the pads and laid it on the desk. He kneaded it with a skittish finger and there was liquid in the pad. He could feel the liquid squish as he pressed the pad.

He turned it over carefully and the underside of it was rough and corrugated, as if it were a mouthful of tiny, vicious teeth.

'You apply the rough side to the body of the patient.' said the alien. 'It seizes on the patient. It becomes a part of him. The body absorbs the vaccine and the pad drops off.'

'And that is all there's to it?'

'That is all,' the alien said.

Doc lifted the pad between two cautious fingers and dropped it back into the box.

He looked up at the alien. 'But why?' he asked. 'Why are you giving this to us!'

'You do not know,' the alien said. 'You really do not know.'

'No, I don't,' said Doc.

The alien's eyes suddenly were old and weary and he said: 'In another million years you will.'

'Not me,' said Doc.

'In another million years,' the alien said, 'you'll do the same yourself, but it will be something different. And then someone will ask you, and you won't be able to answer any more than

I am now.'

If it was a rebuke, it was a very gentle one. Doc tried to decide if it were or not. He let the matter drop.

'Can you tell me what is in it?' he asked, gesturing at the pad.

'I can give you the descriptive formula, but it would be in our terms. It would be gibberish.'

'You won't be offended if I try these out?'

'I'd be disappointed if you didn't,' said the alien. 'I would not expect your faith to extend so far. It would be simple minded.'

He shut the box and pushed it closer to Old Doc. He turned and strode toward the door.

Doc rose ponderously to his feet.

'Now, wait a minute there!' he bellowed.

'I'll see you in a week or two,' the alien said.

He went out and closed the door behind him.

Doc sat down suddenly in the chair and stared at the box upon the desk.

He reached out and touched it and it was really there. He pressed the side of it, and the lid popped open and the pads were there, inside.

He tried to fight his way back to sanity, to conservative and solid ground, to a proper - and a human - viewpoint.

'It's all hogwash,' he said.

But it wasn't hogwash. He knew good and well it wasn't.

He fought it out with himself that night behind the closed door of his study, hearing faintly the soft bustling in the kitchen as Janet cleared away from supper.

And the first fight was on the front of credibility.

He had told the man he believed he was an alien and there was evidence that he could not ignore. Yet it seemed so incredible, all of it, every bit of it, that it was hard to swallow.

And the hardest thing of all was that this alien, whoever he might be, had come, of all the doctors in the world, to Dr. Jason Kelly, a little one horse doctor in a little one horse town.

He debated whether it might be a hoax and decided that it wasn't, for the three digits on the hand and the other thing he'd seen would have been difficult to simulate. And the whole thing, as a hoax, would be so stupid and so cruel that it simply made no sense. Besides, no one hated him enough to go to all the work. And even granting a hatred of appropriate proportion, he doubted there was anyone in Millville imaginative enough to think of this.

So the only solid ground he had, he told himself, was to assume that the man had been really an alien and that the pads were _bona fide_.

And if that was true, there was only one procedure: He must test the pads.

He rose from his chair and paced up and down the floor.

Martha Anderson, he told himself. Martha Anderson had cancer and her life was forfeit - there was nothing in man's world of knowledge that had a chance to save her. Surgery was madness, for she'd probably not survive it. And even if she did, her case was too advanced. The killer that she

carried had already broken loose and was swarming through her body and there was no hope for her.

Yet he could not bring himself to do it, for she was Janet's closest friend and she was old and poor and every instinct in him screamed against his using her as a guinea pig.

Now if it were only old Con Gilbert - he could do a thing like that to Con. It would be no more than the old skinflint rightly had coming to him. But old Con was too mean to be really sick; despite all the complaining that he did, he was healthy as a hog.

No matter what the alien had said about no side effects, he told himself, one could not be sure. He had said they'd studied the metabolism of the human race and yet, on the face of it, it seemed impossible.

The answer, he knew, was right there any time he wanted it. It was tucked away back in his brain and he knew that it was there, but he pretended that it wasn't and he kept it tucked away and refused to haul it forth.

But after an hour or so of pacing up and down the room and of batting out his brains, he finally gave up and let the answer out.

He was quite calm when he rolled up his sleeve and opened up the box. And he was a matter-of-fact physician when he lifted out the pad and slapped it on his arm.

But his hand was shaking when he rolled down the sleeve so Janet wouldn't see the pad and ask a lot of questions about what had happened to his arm.

Tomorrow all over the world outside Millville, people would line up before the clinic doors, with their sleeves rolled up and ready. The lines, most likely, would move at a steady clip, for there was little to it. Each person would pass before a doctor and the doctor would slap a pad onto his or her arm and the next person would step up.

All over the world, thought Doc, in every cranny of it, in every little village; none would be overlooked. Even the poor, he thought, for there would be no charge.

And one could put his finger on a certain date and say:

'This was the day in history when disease came to an end.'

For the pads not only would kill the present ailments, but would guard against them in the future.

And every twenty years the great ships out of space would come, carrying other cargoes of the pads and there would be another Vaccination Day. But not so many then - only the younger generation. For once a person had been vaccinated, there was no further need of it. Vaccinated once and you were set for life.

Doc tapped his foot quietly on the floor of the porch to keep the rocker going. It was pleasant here, he thought. And tomorrow it would be pleasant in the entire world. Tomorrow the fear would have been largely filtered out of human life. After tomorrow, short of accident or violence, men could look forward confidently to living out their normal lifetimes. And, more to the point, perhaps, completely healthy lifetimes.

The night was quiet, for the children finally had gone in, giving up their play. And he was tired. Finally, he thought, he could admit that he was tired. There was now, after many years, no treason in saying he was tired.

Inside the house he heard the muffled purring of the phone and the sound of it broke the rhythm of his rocking, brought him forward to the chair's edge.

Janet's feet made soft sounds as they moved toward the phone and he thrilled to the gentleness of her voice as she answered it.

Now, in just a minute, she would call him and he'd get up and go inside.

But she didn't call him. Her voice went on talking.

He settled back into the chair.

He'd forgotten once again.

The phone no longer was an enemy. It no longer haunted.

For Millville had been the first. The fear had already been lifted here. Millville had been the guinea pig, the pilot project.

Martha Anderson had been the first of them and after her Ted Carson, whose lung had been suspicious, and after him the Jurgen's baby when it came down with pneumonia. And a couple of dozen others until all the pads were gone.

And the alien had come back.

And the alien had said - what was it he had said?

'Don't think of us as benefactors nor as supermen. We are neither one. Think of me if you will, as the man across the street.'

And it had been. Doc told himself, a reaching by the alien for an understanding, an attempt to translate this thing that they were doing into a common idiom.

And had there been any understanding - any depth of understanding? Doc doubted that there had been.

Although, he recalled, the aliens had been basically very much like humans. They could even joke.

There had been one joking thing the original alien had said that had stuck inside his mind. And it had been a sort of silly thing, silly on the face of it, but it had bothered him.

The screen door banged behind Janet as she came out on the porch. She sat down in the glider.

'That was Martha Anderson,' she said.

Doc chuckled to himself. Martha lived just five doors up the street and she and Janet saw one another a dozen times a day yet Martha had to phone.

'What did Martha want?' he asked.

Janet laughed. 'She wanted help with rolls.'

'You mean her famous rolls?'

'Yes. She couldn't remember for the life of her, how much yeast she used.'

Doc chortled softly. 'And those are the ones, I suppose, she wins all the prizes on at the county fair.'

Janet said, crisply: 'It's not so funny as you make it, Jason. It's easy to forget a thing like that. She does a lot of baking.'

'Yes, I suppose you're right.' said Doc.

He should be getting in, he told himself, and start reading in the journal. And yet he didn't want to. It was so pleasant sitting here - just sitting. It had been a long time since he could do much sitting.

And it was all right with him, of course, because he was getting old and close to worn out, but it wouldn't be all right with a younger doctor, one who still owed for his education and was just starting out. There was talk in the United Nations of urging all the legislative bodies to consider medical subsidies to keep the doctors going. For there still was need of them. Even with all diseases vanished, there still was need of them. It wouldn't do to let their ranks thin out, for there would be time and time again when they would be badly needed.

He'd been listening to the footsteps for quite a while, coming down the street, and now all at once they were turning in the gate.

He sat up straighter in his chair.

Maybe it was a patient, knowing he'd be home, coming in to see him.

'Why,' said Janet, considerably surprised, 'it is Mr. Gilbert.'

It was Con Gilbert, sure enough.

'Good evening, Doc,' said Con. 'Good evening, Miz Kelly.'

'Good evening,' Janet said, getting up to go.

'No use of you to leave,' Con said to her.

'I have some things to do,' she told him. 'I was just getting ready to go in.'

Con came up the steps and sat down on the glider.

'Nice evening,' he declared.

'It is all of that,' said Doc.

'Nicest spring I've ever seen,' said Con, working his way around to what he had to say.

'I was thinking that,' said Doc. 'It seems to me the lilacs never smelled so good before.'

'Doc,' said Con, 'I figure I owe you quite a bit of money.'

'You owe me some,' said Doc.

'You got an idea how much it might be?'

'Not the faintest,' Doc told him. 'I never bothered to keep track of it.'

'Figured it was a waste of time,' said Con. 'Figured I would never pay it.'

'Something like that,' Doc agreed.

'Been doctoring with you for a right long time,' said Con.

'That's right, Con.'

'I got three hundred here. You figure that might do it?'

'Let's put it this way. Con,' said Doc. 'I'd settle for a whole lot less.'

'I guess, then, that sort of makes us even. Seems to me three hundred might be close to fair.'

'If you say so,' said Doc.

Con dug out his billfold, extracted a wad of bills and handed them across. Doc took them and folded them and stuffed them in his pocket.

'Thank you, Con,' he said.

And suddenly he had a funny feeling, as if there were something he should know, as if there

were something that he should be able to just reach out and grab.

But he couldn't, no matter how he tried, figure what it was.

Con got up and shuffled across the porch, heading for the steps.

'Be seeing you around,' he said.

Doc jerked himself back to reality.

'Sure, Con. Be seeing you around. And thanks.'

He sat in the chair, not rocking, and listened to Con going down the walk and out the gate and then down the street until there was only silence.

And if he ever was going to get at it, he'd have to go in now and start reading in the journal.

Although, more than likely, it was all damn foolishness. He'd probably never again need to know a thing out of any medic journal.

Doc pushed the journal to one side and sat there, wondering what was wrong with him. He'd been reading for twenty minutes and none of it had registered. He couldn't have told a word that he had read.

Too upset, he thought. Too excited about Operation Kelly. And wasn't that a thing to call it - Operation Kelly!

And he remembered it once again exactly.

How he'd tried it out on Millville, then gone to the county medical association and how the doctors in the county, after some slight amount of scoffing and a good deal of skepticism, had become convinced. And from there it had gone to state and the AMA.

And finally that great day in the United Nations, when the Ellen had appeared before the delegates and when he, himself, had been introduced - and at last the great London man arising to suggest that the project could be called nothing else but Kelly.

A proud moment, he told himself - and he tried to call up the pride again, but it wasn't there, not the whole of it. Never in his life again would he know that kind of pride.

And here he sat, a simple country doctor once again, in his study late at night, trying to catch up with reading he never seemed to get the time to do.

Although that was no longer strictly true. Now he had all the time there was.

He reached out and pulled the journal underneath the lamp and settled down to read.

But it was slow going.

He went back and read a paragraph anew.

And that, he told himself, was not the way it should be.

Either he was getting old or his eyes were going bad or he was plain stupid.

And that was the word - that was the key to the thing that it had seemed he should have been able to just reach out and grab.

Stupid!

Probably not actually stupid. Maybe just a little slow. Not really less intelligent, but not so sharp and bright as he had been. Not so quick to catch the hang of things.

Martha Anderson had forgotten how much yeast to use in those famous, prize-winning rolls of hers. And that was something that Martha should never have forgotten.

Con had paid his bill, and on the scale of values that Con had subscribed to all his life, that was plain stupidity. The bright thing, the sharp thing would have been for Con, now that he'd probably never need a doctor, just to forget the obligation. After all, it would not have been hard to do; he'd been forgetful of it up to this very night.

And the alien had said something that, at the time, he'd thought of as a joke.

'Never fear,' the alien had said, 'we'll cure all your ills. Including, more than likely, a few you don't suspect.'

And was intelligence a disease?

It was hard to think of it as such.

And yet, when any race was as obsessed with intelligence as Man was, it might be classed as one.

When it ran rampant as it had during the last half century, when it piled progress on top of progress, technology on top of technology, when it ran so fast that no man caught his breath, then it might be disease.

Not quite so sharp, thought Doc. Not quite so quick to grasp the meaning of a paragraph loaded with medical terminology - being forced to go a little slower to pack it in his mind.

And was that really bad?

Some of the stupidest people he'd ever known, he told himself, had been the happiest.

And while one could not make out of that a brief for planned stupidity, it at least might be a plea for a less harassed humanity.

He pushed the journal to one side and sat staring at the light.

It would be felt in Millville first because Millville had been the pilot project. And six months from tomorrow night it would be felt in all the world.

How far would it go, he wondered - for that, after all, was the vital question.

Only slightly less sharp?

Back to bumbling?

Clear back to the ape?

There was no way one could tell...

And all he had to do to stop it was pick up the phone.

He sat there, frozen with the thought that perhaps Operation Kelly should be stopped - that after all the years of death and pain and misery, Man must buy it back.

But the aliens, he thought - the aliens would not let it go too far. Whoever they might be, he believed they were decent people.

Maybe there had been no basic understanding, no meeting of the minds, and yet there had been a common ground - the very simple ground of compassion for the blind and halt.

But if he were wrong, he wondered - what if the aliens proposed to limit Man's powers of self-destruction even if that meant reducing him to abject stupidity... what was the answer then? And what if the plan was to soften man up before invasion?

Sitting there, he knew.

Knew that no matter what the odds were against his being right, there was nothing he could do.

Realized that as a judge in a matter such as this he was unqualified, that he was filled with bias, and could not change himself.

He'd been a doctor too long to stop Operation Kelly.