

# B L O O D D I S E A S E

This is probably how it happened: William Clack-Herman, the anthropologist (popularly known as 'Congo Bill') was doing field research on the kinship

systems of the pygmies of the equatorial rain forest. One afternoon he was sitting outside his hut of mongongo leaves, writing up his notes, when a mosquito bit him. It is only the female that makes the blood meal, for she needs it to boost her egg output. From the thorny tip of her mouthparts she unsheathed a slender stylus, and having sliced neatly through Bill's skin tissue, pierced a tiny blood vessel. Bill noticed nothing. Two powerful pumps in the insect's head began to draw off blood while simultaneously hundreds of tiny parasites were discharged into his bloodstream. Within half-an-hour, when the mosquito had long since returned to the water, the parasites were safely established in his liver. For six days they multiplied, asexually, and then on the morning of the seventh they burst out and invaded the red blood cells. Within a relatively short period of time Congo Bill was exhibiting all the classical symptoms of malaria. He was delirious; he suffered from chills, vomiting, and diarrhea; and his spleen was dangerously enlarged. He was also alone—the pygmies had deserted him, had melted deeper into the gloom of the rain forest. An essentially nomadic people, they could not wait for Bill to recover, nor could they take him with them. So there he lay, shivering and feverish by turns, on a narrow camp bed in a dark hut in the depths of a chartless jungle.

How he made it back is a fascinating story, but not immediately relevant to the events that concern us here. Make it back he did; but the Congo Bill who docked at Southampton one morning in the summer of 1934 was not the vigorous young man who'd left for Africa a year previously. He was haggard and thin now, and forced to walk with a stick. His flesh was discolored, and his fingers trembled constantly. He looked, in short, like a man who was dying. When at last he stepped gingerly down the gangway, one steward was at his elbow and another close behind, carrying a large bamboo cage. Huddled in the corner of the cage was a small black-and-white Colobus monkey that the anthropologist had befriended before leaving the Congo for the last time. He intended to give it to his son, Frank.

Virginia Clack-Herman was considerably shocked at her husband's frailty; and the fact that he could speak only in a hoarse whisper certainly added pathos to their reunion. Frank, then aged nine, did not recognize his father, and accepted with some unease the monkey; and then the three of them, with the monkey, made their way very slowly through the customs shed and out to the car. There were at the time no strict regulations regarding the quarantining of monkeys.

The journey from Southampton was uneventful. Virginia drove, and Bill sat beside her with a rug over his knees and slept most of the way. Frank sat in the back; the bamboo cage was placed on the seat beside him, and the little monkey sat hunkered inside it, alert but unmoving. From time to time the boy's eyes were drawn to the monkey's; they were both, clearly, perplexed and slightly alarmed. Congo Bill muttered as he dozed, and Virginia, stony-faced, kept her eyes on the road.

It was a warm day, and in the sunshine of the late afternoon the cornfields of Berkshire rippled about them like a golden sea; and then, just as Virginia began to wonder where they would break the journey, from out of this sea heaved a big inn, Tudor in construction, with steeply gabled roofs and black beams crisscrossed on the white-plastered walls beneath the eaves. This was the Blue Bat; since destroyed by fire, in the early Thirties it boasted good beds, a fine kitchen, and an extensive cellar.

Virginia pulled off the main road and into the forecourt of the inn. Servants appeared; suitcases were carried in and the car taken round to the garages. Some minutes later, a cream-colored roadster

pulled in beside it. The owner of this car was Ronald Dexter. He was travelling with his valet, an old man called Clutch.

Ronald Dexter was a gentleman of independent means who had never had to work a day in his life. He was an elegant, witty chap with sleek black hair, parted high, brushed straight back from his forehead, and gleaming with oil. Half-an-hour later he stepped out of his bathroom and found Clutch laying out his evening clothes. He slipped into a dressing gown, sank into an armchair, lit his pipe—and sighed, for Clutch was running a small silver crucifix with great care along the seams of his garments. A curious-looking man, Clutch, he had a remarkable head, disproportionately large for his body and completely hairless. The skull was a perfect dome, and the tight-stretched skin of it an almost translucent shade of yellowy-brown finely engraved with subcutaneous blue-black veins. The overall impression he gave was of a monstrous fetus, or else some type of prehistoric man, a

Neanderthal perhaps, in whom the millennia had deposited deep strains of racial wisdom—though he wore, of course, the tailcoat and gray pin-striped trousers of his profession. He was stooped and frail now, and Ronald had long since given up interfering with the bizarre superstitions he practiced. When he was finished, he tucked the crucifix into an inside pocket and turned, nodding, to his master.

'Do you imagine, Clutch,' said Ronald, 'that I shall be set upon by vampires?'

'One cannot be too careful,' replied the old man. 'We are not in London, sir.'

'No indeed,' said Ronald, as the put-put-put of a tractor came drifting across the cornfields. 'This is wild country.'

'Will there be anything else, sir?'

Ronald told him there was nothing else, and Clutch left the room, closing the door softly behind him. At precisely the same instant, just down the corridor, Virginia Clack-Herman, who was a tall, spirited woman with a rich laugh and scarlet-painted fingernails, was sitting before her mirror clad only in stockings and slip, the latter a silky, sleeveless undergarment with thin shoulder straps and a delicate border of patterned lacework at the breast. A cigarette burned in the ashtray beside her, its tendril of smoke coiling away through casement windows thrown open to the warmth of the early evening. She was plucking her eyebrows with a pair of silver tweezers, and in the bathroom that connected their rooms she could hear her husband shuffling about and talking to himself. With her head close to the glass, the fingers of her left hand splayed upon her forehead, she clamped the twin pincers about a hair. Her lips parted, her teeth locked; all at once she plucked out the hair; her eyes fired up and a single tear started from the left one. Simultaneously, Congo Bill dropped his hairbrushes, and as they bounced on the tiles Virginia cast a glance at the bathroom door. She turned back to the mirror and prepared to pluck a second hair. Bill's mumble rose and fell like the distant drone of public prayer. Oh, to come back to her so utterly ruined, like one of the walking dead! Out came another hair; the eyebrows arched thin as filaments, flaring a fraction as they neared the nose. Satisfied, she dabbed at her left eye with a small handkerchief and then, still facing the glass, she closed her eyes and clenched her fists and sat rigidly for a moment in an attitude of bitter mortification. But when Congo Bill came in, several minutes later, with his shirt cuffs flapping pathetically about his wrists and asked her to fasten his links, she displayed only warm concern. 'Of course, darling,' she murmured, as she rose from her dressing table and pecked his cheek, leaving a very light impression of red lips upon the yellowing skin.

'I wonder,' whispered Congo Bill, 'how that monkey's doing.'

In point of fact the monkey was not doing at all well. Even as his father asked the question, young Frank had his face pressed flush to

## from BLOOD AND WATER AND OTHER TALES by PATRICK McGRATH

the bamboo cage, in a corner of which the monkey lay curled up and very still. 'Are you sick?' he whispered. He inserted a finger through the bars. 'Little monkey,' he cooed, poking it. There was no response. Frank straightened up and turned away from the cage with his lips pressed tight together. From the public bar below came a sudden gust of laughter. He opened the door of the cage, reached in, and retrieved the monkey. It was dead. He laid its little head against his shoulder and stroked the matted, scurfy fur for a moment. A flea hopped onto his wrist and bit him. He opened a drawer and took out the sheet of tissue paper lining it; in this he wrapped the little corpse, then tucked it down the front of his shirt, crossed the bedroom, and opened the door. The corridor was deserted, and he stepped out.

Ronald Dexter had already ordered when the door of the Blue Bat's shadowy, wood-paneled dining room swung slowly open and an attractive woman entered with a shuffling figure whose evening clothes hung like shrouds upon his wasted body. Ronald, who hated to dine alone, assumed they were father and daughter, and wondered if he could tempt them to join him. There were no other guests in the dining room; in fact, there were no other guests in the Blue Bat at all.

'Excuse me,' he said, rising to his feet with a charming smile. 'Good Lord! Virginia!'

Bill and Virginia paused, turned, and scrutinized him. 'Ronald!' cried Virginia at last. 'Ronald Dexter! Darling, you remember Ronald Dexter?'

Congo Bill did not remember Ronald Dexter, with whom Virginia had been friendly before her marriage. The two were in fact very distantly related, on her mother's side, and in the few moments of theater that followed, Virginia recapped the rather tenuous blood relationship they shared. Congo Bill participated minimally in all this, his appetite for 'extraordinary coincidences' much dampened by the malaria. Ronald was altogether delighted, and his pleasure was shot through with an undeniable charge of sexual excitement—for despite their consanguinity the two were instantly, and strongly, attracted to each other.

There was no question now but that they must eat together, and so, in a flurry of small talk, and continuing expressions of pleasure that they should meet again in such odd circumstances, they sat down. Behind Congo Bill's chair the empty fireplace was hidden from view by a low woven screen, and above the mantelpiece the eyes of a large stag's head with sixteen-pointed antlers glittered glassily in the gloom of the encroaching dusk. Food arrived, and wine, and Ronald proposed a toast to homecomings and reunions. Congo Bill's hand trembled as he lifted a glass of claret to his bloodless lips. They drank, and there followed a brief, slightly uncomfortable silence. Ronald turned to Congo Bill, fishing for a conversational gambit. 'See much cricket in Africa?' he said.

'None at all,' whispered Congo Bill, dabbing his lips with a starched white napkin and staining it with wine.

'I don't suppose they have much time for cricket, do they darling?' said Virginia, brightly, 'what with all the hunting and gathering they have to do.' She turned to Ronald. 'They're quite primitive, you know; practically living in the Stone Age.'

'That must have been refreshing,' said Ronald. 'One grows so weary of decency and good manners, don't you agree, Virginia? Don't you sometimes wish we could indulge our impulses with unrestrained spontaneity, like savages?' His eyes flashed in the candlelight; Virginia took his meaning all too clearly.

'Oh, but we must have manners,' she said; 'otherwise we'll return to a state of nature, and I don't think we'd do terribly well at it.'

'Bill would,' said Ronald. 'He can cope in jungles.'

'You must be mad!' cried Virginia. 'Just look at the state of him! I'm sorry, darling,' she added, laying slender, red-nailed fingers on Congo Bill's bony wrist. 'But you must admit, equatorial Africa did get the better of you this time.'

'Malaria,' began Congo Bill; but Ronald cut him short. 'On the other hand,' he reflected, 'I suppose even the savages have manners, don't they? Rather different from ours, of course, but the same

principle—which wife you sleep with tonight, who gets the best bit of the elephant—'

'Pygmies,' whispered Congo Bill, but Ronald had not finished.

'Manners are what distinguish us from the animals,' he said, 'so I suppose the more of them we have the better. What?'

Virginia laughed aloud at this. She opened her mouth and gave full, free tongue to an unrestrained peal of mirth that rang like clashing bells through that dusk-laden dining room. How lovely she was! thought Ronald. Exquisitely made up, perfectly at ease. Her dress was of dead-white satin and cut extremely low. She was wearing a rope of pearls; her face was as white as her pearls, and her lips a vivid scarlet. Quite spontaneously, as her laughter subsided, she leaned across the table and pressed Ronald's hand. At the touch of her fingers his blood turned hot and rapid. He promptly suggested that they take their brandy in the saloon bar. Virginia agreed, rose gracefully, and linking one arm in her husband's and the other in Ronald's, shuffled them off toward the door.

Clutch, meanwhile, having left his master's room, frowning, uneasy, conscious of some subtly malignant influence at work in the inn, had made his way downstairs and into the public bar. He took a seat at a small table in the corner and nursed a bottle of Guinness. There were perhaps twenty people gathered in the bar—local farm laborers they appeared, fat, sallow people, many with a yellowish tinge to their pallor. They were clustered about a wooden trapdoor in the center of a flagged floor, a trapdoor which stood upright on its hinges, a chain on either side stretched taut to hooks in the opening. The ceiling was low, and spanned by thick black beams, and though the air was thick with tobacco smoke a rising moon was visible through the uncurtained window. And then a weak and ragged cheer erupted as from the cellar beneath appeared the head of the landlord of the Blue Bat, Kevin Pander, a young man but, like his customers, very fat, and pale, and sallow-skinned. Wheezing badly, he ascended the cellar stairs with a hogshead of ale on one shoulder and a wooden crate containing two dozen bottles of beer dangling, clinking, from his white and hamlike palm. His wrists and ankles were bagged and swollen with accumulated body fluids, but he came up like a god, an asthmatic Bacchus ascending from the netherworld, and paused, breathing heavily, at the top of the steps. Then he kicked the trapdoor down behind him and it slammed shut with a great bang. Congo Bill, sunk in a black leather armchair in the saloon bar, sat up in considerable distress. 'Darling, what is it?' said Virginia.

'Must go up,' he whispered. 'The noise...' Clearly, the sounds from the public bar had awakened some African memory, a memory profoundly disturbing to the fragile nervous system of the debilitated anthropologist. Virginia, glancing at Ronald, helped her husband to his feet and led him off toward the stairs. At precisely the same instant, Clutch realized with a thrill of horror what was wrong with the people in the public bar: pernicious anemia.

Frank tiptoed out of his bedroom with the wrapped dead monkey stuffed down his shirt. He did not make for the main staircase, for he was quite sure that his parents would veto the ceremony that he had decided privately to conduct. Instead he went to the other end of the corridor, to a door with a large key protruding from the lock. He turned the key and pushed open the door, and found himself on a dusty, uncarpeted back stairway. A small high window filmed over with cobwebs admitted what dim light was still to be had from the day. He crossed the landing and began to descend the stairs, which were steep, narrow, and, in the gloom, quite treacherous. Reaching the lower floor, he found a long passage at the far end of which stood another door. But barely had he begun to advance along the passage when he heard footsteps on the stairs he had just descended. He stood for a moment frozen in an agony of terrified indecision. As luck would have it, the wall of the passage was not entirely without a place of concealment: there was a shallow, rounded depression, no more than two feet high and two feet deep, quite close to where he was standing. He rapidly squeezed himself into this depression and huddled there like a fetus in a womb, with the dead monkey tucked

in his lap like a second fetus, a fetus of the second order. Thus he waited as the descending step grew louder on the stairs.

It reached the bottom and paused. It was like no ordinary footstep; rather, a slow, heavy clump-clump-clump. To the small boy crouched in his womblike hiding hole, with his little heart hammering fit to burst, it was a very terrible sound indeed. It began to advance along the passage. Clump-clump-clump. Closer and closer. Eyes wide, fists clenched, Frank waited. He needed to go to the bathroom very badly. Clump-clump. Go past! Hurry! screamed a voice in the boy's head. Clump. It stopped. Frank glanced sideways in terror. He saw an orthopedic boot, an ugly big black one with a pair of metal braces ascending either side of a slim white ankle to a stout belt buckled halfway up the calf. And then a head, upside down, dropped into view, its red hair fanning out in waves upon the dusty boards. 'What are you doing in there?' it said from an upside-down mouth.

'I'm hiding,' said Frank.

'What from?'

'You.'

Late that night, when Congo Bill lay heavily sedated in sleep, and the moon hung suspended like a silver ball over the black bulk of the Blue Bat, and a susurrus of night breezes whispered through the palely gleaming cornfields like a ghost. Ronald Dexter, in silk pajamas, rustled softly along the corridor and tapped on Virginia's door. Farther along the corridor, in the deep shadows, another door creaked open just a crack; it was Frank's. 'Come,' came a voice, and Ronald slipped into Virginia's room. Frank frowned, and then tiptoed away in the opposite direction, to the door at the end of the corridor. He carried in his trouser pocket the large key that opened that door. A moment later he was on the back stairs, and lit by the moonlight glowing through the cobwebbed window over the staircase, he quickly descended.

He was on his way to meet the girl in the orthopedic boot. She was eleven years old and her name was Meg Pander; she was the landlord's daughter. 'What's that?' she had said, earlier, pointing at the lump under Frank's shirt as he scrambled out of the depression in the wall of the passage. Frank had pulled out the bundle and folded back the wrapping to show her the dead monkey. She had taken it from him and cradled it in her arms, cooing gently.

'I want to bury it out in the fields,' said Frank.

'I know a better place,' said the girl.

'Where?'

'In the cellar.'

Frank thought about this. 'All right,' he said.

'We can't go there now. Meet me here at midnight.'

'All right.'

'You better let me keep the monkey,' she said.

Frank was not the only one to see Ronald Dexter enter his mother's bedroom. Two men from the public bar, flabby men with waxy skin and big, soft faces as round and pale as the rising moon, and a predisposition to breathlessness, were lurking in the shadows. They said nothing, as the minutes passed, but they were not silent: the corridor was filled, like a living thing, with the wheeze and gasp of their laboring lungs. Nearby lay Congo Bill, who had returned in the depths of his sleeping mind to the eerie twilight of the rain forest, where huge trunks of mahogany and African walnut reared two hundred feet over his head to form a densely woven canopy that effectively blocked out all sunlight, while underfoot, moldering gently, the forest floor deadened all sound, and a heavy, ominous silence clung to the place, a silence broken only occasionally by the manic chatter of a troop of Colobus monkeys.... But even as Congo Bill relived in dream his last fevered journey through that dim and silent forest, Ronald Dexter was rising from his (Bill's) wife's bed and slipping on his silk pajamas. With a few last whispered words, a few caresses, he left Virginia's bedroom and with a soft click! carefully closed her door. The soft click was succeeded by a crisp crack! and a brief ringing sound, as one of the fat men emerged from

the shadows and hit him very hard on the back of the head with a length of metal piping. The pipe bounced off the skull and Ronald wobbled for a moment and then collapsed into a limp heap on the floor. The first man lifted him by the armpits, the second from under the knees, and then they shuffled rapidly off down the corridor, panting heavily, as Ronald's head lolled on his shoulder and his fingers dragged limply along the carpet.

Meg had finished dressing the body of the dead monkey when Frank reached her room shortly after midnight. It was a small, low-ceilinged servant's room, massively dominated by the bedstead, a vast Victorian contraption of dark, lacquered wood with an extremely thick mattress and a Gothic headboard all crockets and gargoyles. High in the wall above the bed was a single small window, and upon its broad sill burned a candle by the wavering flame of which Frank could see, on the bed, the monkey stretched out in a tiny gown of white lace such as an infant might have worn for its christening or, as in this instance, burial. Meg herself was sitting very straight in a hard-backed chair beside the bed with her hands folded on a small black prayer book in her lap. She turned to Frank with a solemn face.

'God took your monkey away,' she whispered.

Frank grinned, rather uncertainly.

'He's in Jesus' bosom now.'

Frank absently scratched his wrist where the flea had bitten him. A small crusty scab, reddish-black in color, had begun to form there. On Meg's washstand stood a large jar full of clear fluid, and something floated in the fluid that he could not quite identify in the candlelight, but it looked organic.

'We have to go to the cellar now,' said Meg. She stood up and stamped her orthopedic boot four or five times on the floor. 'My leg keeps going to sleep,' she said. 'Will you get the candle down?'

So Frank climbed onto the bed and retrieved the candle from the windowsill while Meg laid the monkey gently in a cardboard shoe box lined with the tissue Frank had taken earlier from the drawer in his bedroom.

They made their to the door at the end of the passage, then out into the yard at the back of the inn. Clinging to the shadows, they crept around the building; the walls and outbuildings of the Blue Bat glimmered in the fullness of the moonlight, and from far across the fields came the muted barking of a dog on a distant farm. Meg held Frank's hand firmly in her own as she edged down a flight of worn stone steps at the bottom of which damp grass and moss struggled up through the cracks between ancient paving stones. Directly before them stood a very low green door with peeling paintwork and rusting studs. Meg lifted the door on its hinges and it slowly scraped inwards; a moment later the pair were crouched in the musty darkness of the cellar, the door pushed firmly closed and the candle flickering on the ground between them and throwing up a strange light onto their pale, excited faces.

Congo Bill meanwhile was blindly crashing through the jungle in a state of deep delirium. He had lost his quinine in an accident on the river two weeks previously, and now the fever roiled and seethed unchecked within him. Delicate screens of misty lichen hung from the branches, and through these he clawed his wild way as brightly colored birds shrieked from the foliage high overhead, and the Colobus monkeys chattered derisively from dappled tree trunks wreathed with vines. On through the damp gloom of the forest he charged, till his strength at last started to flag. It was then that he saw Virginia. She was standing beside a sunlit pool some thirty or forty yards from him, wearing a simple summer frock and waving a large straw hat with a tilted brim and a cluster of bright fake cherries fastened to the band. Congo Bill stared at her for a few seconds, clutching the thick tendril of a climbing liana that twisted about a huge-trunked ebony tree smothered in flowering orchids. Upon the pool the few shafts of sunlight that penetrated the foliage overhead picked diamonds of light which trembled and shimmered in such a way that Virginia seemed to evanesce momentarily and then rematerialize, more clearly than before, still slowly waving her straw hat at him. Then she turned and moved round the pool and into the

trees, and Congo Bill, stumbling after her, cried 'Wait!' as her dappled form danced away among the shifting shadows of the forest. 'Wait!' cried Congo Bill, as he staggered toward the pool.

And even as he did so, Virginia was drifting into sleep, her limbs languid and heavy, her whole drowsy being suffused with the lingering glow of deep and recent sexual pleasure. She sank into sleep, dreamless sleep, and as the curtains stirred slightly in the warm night breeze, a single broad shaft of moonlight drifted languidly across her bed and touched with silvered fingers the ridges and hummocks of the white sheet spread over her now-slumbering form.

Frank and Meg had penetrated the membrane of the cellar. With their feebly glimmering candle they crept forward from post to post toward the center, where they could hear a low murmur of human voices. Toward the source of the murmur the two children crept with stealth and trembling. They extinguished the candle; Meg still carried the dead monkey in its cardboard coffin. They ascended a shallow wooden staircase and squirmed forward along a damp planked platform between big-bellied barrels reeking of tar and ale; reaching the edge of the platform, they gazed down upon the men and women from the public bar, who were seated about a screened lamp, waiting. Barely had the children settled, side by side on their bellies with their chins cupped in their hands, to watch, when the trapdoor in the cellar roof was hauled open and voices heard from the public bar above. For a moment there was confused bustle in the cellar; and then, with fresh lamps lit, two men descended carrying between them a supine form in silk pajamas.

'What are they going to do with him?' whispered Frank.

'I expect Daddy wants his blood.'

'Oh, crikey!' breathed the boy, and in his mind a series of images rapidly unfolded of opened sarcophagi and ghoulish creatures neither dead nor alive. In fact, the explanation for the events in the cellar was quite straightforward, in scientific terms. Clutch was right: these people suffered from pernicious anemia, a disease which, if untreated, produces a chemical imbalance in the organism that can manifest in a craving for fresh blood. It has this in common with malaria, that in both diseases there is disintegration of the red blood cells, though malaria for some reason has never produced a sense of group identity among its victims. This is not true of pernicious anemia. The Blue Bat was in fact both haven and refuge to a small cell of untreated anemics, and had been for five years, ever since Kevin Parker had watched his wife sicken and die of the disease. This trauma had brought about what is clinically termed an *iatrophobic reaction* in the young innkeeper, a pathological dread of doctors, with the result that when he detected the first symptoms in himself he did not seek treatment, but instead began to gather about him a cadre of anemics who, like him, were prepared to live and die beyond the pale of contemporary medical practice; beyond, indeed, the law. For five years these committed anemics had maintained a sporadic supply of fresh blood in the cellar, and there they were to be found, outside normal licensing hours, sipping the good red corpuscles their own bodies so desperately lacked. The Blue Bat's clientele being what it was, almost all of this blood came from members of the upper classes. The fall of the Roman Empire had been attributed in part to malarial epidemics, and also to the effects of pernicious anemia caused by lead in the plumbing. Whether these facts played any part in Pander's elaborate delusional system is not known; the psychopathology of that disturbed young man is fortunately beyond the scope of this narrative.

And so the limp Ronald Dexter was stripped of his pajamas, and then—after his pale, naked body had aroused a spontaneous gasp of appreciation from the assembled company—his ankles were lashed together with a length of stout twine, and the twine slipped into an iron ring attached to a rope which ran to a pulley block fixed to a hook set into a thick beam overhead. Several of the men then took up the rope hanging from the pulley block, and with no small effort managed by a series of heaves to hoist Dexter aloft, and there he hung, quite comatose, and twisting gently, as Kevin Pander lashed the end of the rope to a pair of thick nails driven into an upright

post for that purpose. A trellis table was then positioned beneath the dangling man, and upon the table was set a wooden keg bound with hoops of steel.

All this work had produced a greatly intensified respiration among the anemics, and even those who had not participated were panting in short, hoarse, shallow gasps, such was the excitement that now crackled almost palpably in the depths of the body of the inn. To young Frank, on his platform, the whole nightmarish scene had assumed a distinct patina of unreality; as the bulky figures moved about in the lamplight, their shadows against the stacked barrels and massy beams took on huge, monstrous proportions, and he watched like a spectator of cinema, suspended in the darkness in wordless captivation. He was barely conscious of the mounting excitement in the girl beside him as she followed her father's activity. Then Kevin Pander suddenly seized Ronald by the hair and sliced open his throat; and as the young man's blood came pumping out, young Meg trembled all over and rose onto her knees and gazed with wide, shining eyes, her palms pressed together at her breast as if in prayer. Kevin Pander released Ronald's hair and stepped back, lifting high the dripping razor then bringing it to his lips while two of the other men took hold of the violently convulsing body so as not to lose a drop, and the rest looked on with little piggy eyes that gleamed in the lamplight, the only sound now the hiss and pant of their flaccid lungs.

At length Ronald ceased twitching, and the spurts dwindled to a thick drip, faintly audible amid the wheezing. The keg was tapped, and now, his gestures inflected with theatricality, Kevin Pander drew off a small amount of the contents into a glass and, to a subdued murmur of approval, held it up before him. In the obscurity the blood was black. He tossed it down his throat; then, his heavy eyelids sliding over his eyes until he resembled a latter-day satyr, lacking only hoofs and horns, and his blood-smeared lips parting in a voluptuary's grin, he said something that produced a perceptible twitch of ardor in the assembly's collective body. And where, you may wonder—though now, of course, it was too late for him to be of any assistance to his master—was Clutch all this time?

A cell without a nucleus is a ruin, and when Congo Bill stumbled into an abandoned pygmy camp there was nobody there to greet him but a ghost; and the ghost in the ruin was Virginia. She smiled shyly at him from the entrance to one of the huts, then disappeared into its dark interior. He managed to drag himself in after her, and collapsed in the cool gloom onto the floor. Illness, according to the pygmies, passes through the following stages: first one is hot, then feverish, then ill, then dead, then absolutely dead, and finally, dead forever. When a small hunting group came through late the following day they found Congo Bill dead. He was not, however, dead forever, nor even absolutely dead, and they set about nursing him with medicines derived from plants growing wild in the forest. At this time, the 1930s, these people enjoyed an existence which to most Westerners would seem utopian. Utterly at peace with the forest that sustained and sheltered them, they lived without chiefs and had no need of a belief in evil spirits. The state of nature was, for them, a state of grace—a functioning anarchy within benign and generous environment. Not surprisingly, they sang constant songs of praise to the forest that provided for them with such abundance. They were singing these songs when, having seen Bill through his crisis, they carried him into the *Station de Chasse* on a litter, and handed him over to the resident Belgian colonial.

Had he known what was occurring in the depths of the Blue Bat, Congo Bill would doubtless have wished to return to the paradise he had briefly known among the people of the forest. By this stage Ronald Dexter was no more than a desiccated envelope of flesh, an empty thing—*bule*, as the pygmies would have said; but the anemics were by no means satisfied. When, some time later, Virginia was awakened by the sounds of heavy breathing, she opened her eyes to find herself surrounded by large pale women whose eyes glittered at her with an unnatural brilliance. Without further ado she was dragged screaming from her bed; Congo Bill, deeply sedated and

ignorant of her plight, slept on in the next room, reliving the happiness and innocent plenty he had known among the pygmies. Help was in fact on its way, thanks to Clutch; the only question was, would it get there in time?

Yes, Clutch had known the anemics for what they were after only a few minutes in the public bar. He was an old man, and he had seen many strange things in his long life. He doubted he would have been listened to if he'd raised the alarm earlier; so he had hiked off toward Reading, where somebody at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, he felt sure, would take his story seriously. By a stroke of good fortune the physician on duty was a man called Gland who'd once read a paper on iatrophobia and sanguinivorous dementia (bloodlust) in pernicious anemia, and within minutes a small fleet of ambulances was racing through the moonlit countryside, klaxons wailing, toward the Blue Bat. But even as they did so, Virginia, in a filmy summer nightgown, was being hustled across the public bar toward the yawning trapdoor, where, in the darkness below, Kevin Pander awaited her with horrible relish.

It was when he saw his mother being manhandled down the cellar steps that the bubble of suspended disbelief in which young Frank had witnessed the atrocity perpetrated on Ronald Dexter was finally punctured. His whole body stiffened; he turned to Meg, and she immediately gripped him hard by the wrists. 'Don't make a sound,' she hissed, 'or they'll drink your blood too.'

'That's my mother,' he hissed back. 'I must help her.'

'You can't.'

'I must!'

'They'll cut your throat!'

'I don't care—'

Then suddenly Frank broke off, his gaze burning on the shoe box. Meg's eyes following his; in stupefied amazement they saw the lid move. Then it was still. Then it moved again, and this time it rose slowly, then slid off, onto the planks, and the dead monkey in its white lace gown sat up stiffly and turned its little head toward them. The two children were barely conscious of the scuffling, of the muffled screams, that issued from the cellar beyond, where the anemics were leering at Virginia and making vulgar remarks. She was not a person in their eyes, merely a blood vessel, a blood bank, to be plundered and consumed like all her kind. The monkey (which was dead but not, clearly, dead forever) rubbed its eyes with tiny paws, and with a small sob Meg seized it up and clutched it to her chest.

Frank saw his chance; he was on his feet and down the stairs, and running at the assembled anemics. 'You leave my mother alone!' he screamed. 'You take your hands off her!' Kevin Pander, chuckling hoarsely, seized the child, then passed him to another man, who held him still and smothered his mouth with a fat white hand. There was jocular murmuring among the anemics about this, all conducted in a rich, slurry Berkshire dialect, while Kevin Pander began stropping his razor on a stout strip of leather nailed to a post. Virginia had also been muzzled by her captors; her limbs jerked and her eyes blazed with desperation as she struggled in vain to get close to her son.

Then the trellis was being hauled over and a number of men took hold of the two Clack-Hermans to steady them over the keg when their bodies began the series of involuntary spasms that predictably ensue when the cartoid arteries are sliced. Close by, Ronald turned slowly on his hook. Kevin Pander touched the razor's edge to his tongue. Apparently satisfied, he stepped forward. He was not smiling now. It was a tense moment, for it very much looked as though Clutch had failed, that he was going to be too late.

Congo Bill was in pretty bad shape when they brought him out of the forest, and it was generally agreed that a few more hours would have seen the end of him. He had the pygmies to thank, then, for saving his life. Fortified with quinine, he was shipped down the Congo to Leopoldville (as it was then called), where he rested up for some weeks before going on to the coast to board a liner for home. It was in Leopoldville that he bought the monkey. His prognosis was

somewhat gloomy—periodic relapses were predicted, accompanied by general enfeeblement and, because of the large number of red blood cells destroyed in the successive paroxysms of fever, a chronic anemic condition. In fact, he could look forward to the life of a semi-invalid, and how Virginia would adapt to that was a cause of some anxiety to him as he crossed the Atlantic—though, as matters stand at this point, the question may well have been academic. He was also filled with deep regret that he would never again do anthropological fieldwork, never again set foot in the equatorial rain forest. Curious irony, he reflected, that the forest in which had known his deepest tranquility was the same forest in which he had contracted the disease that drove him out forever.

An hour later Dr. George Gland stood in the public bar of the Blue Bat with a small man in a gray raincoat. This was a detective from the Berkshire County Constabulary, a man called Limp, and he was smoking a pipe. The trapdoor was up on its chains, and policemen and forensic experts moved silently and purposefully up and down the cellar stairs. The anemics had already been led away to waiting ambulances, bound, first, for the Royal Berkshire Hospital, where they would begin a course of painful injections of liver extract, which was how the disease was treated in 1934. The two men were watching Clutch, who sat at a table nearby with his great brown head in his hands, mourning the death of his master, whose drained corpse lay on the floor beneath a white sheet. Sad to say, Ronald was not the only corpse on the flagstone floor of the public bar; beside him lay Virginia, also sheeted, and beside her lay the pathetic remains of little Frank. Clutch had, in fact, come too late, and the three white sheets bore silent and tragic testimony to his failure. Suddenly Limp removed the pipe from his mouth and, turning to the doctor, pointed it at him, wet stem forward. 'He had a girl!' he exclaimed.

'Who?'

'Pander,' said Limp. 'Pander had a little girl—a cripple—she wore one of those boots.'

'An orthopedic foot?' said Gland. 'A girl in an orthopedic boot?'

Upstairs, a uniformed policeman was knocking on Congo Bill's locked bedroom door. Slowly the anthropologist was roused from his dream, which was almost over anyway. 'Who is it?' he cried, irritably, in a hoarse whisper.

'Police. Open the door please, Dr. Clack-Herman.'

Congo Bill sat up in bed, his withered, yellowing face pouched and wrinkled with annoyance and sickness and sleep. 'What do you want?' he mumbled.

'Open the door please, Doctor?' came the voice.

'Wait.' Slowly he eased himself out of bed, sitting a moment on the edge of the mattress to get his breath. What on earth would the police want, in the middle of the night? He reached for his stick, and slipped his feet into a pair of slippers. His dressing gown lay tossed on a chair beneath the window. He levered himself up off the bed and shuffled across the room. Picking up his dressing gown, he glanced through the curtains. The moon had gone down, and it was the hour before the dawn, that strange, haunted hour between the blackness of the night and the first pale flush of sunrise, and the sky had turned an eerie electric blue. His eye was caught by a movement in the fields, and he saw that it was a girl, a young girl, far out among the glowing cornstalks and limping away from the inn toward a copse of trees that bristled blackly against the blue light on the brow of a distant low hill. Tiny as she was in the distance, he could make out, on her shoulder, the little black-and-white Colobus monkey. He frowned, as he tied the cord of his dressing gown. Why was she taking Frank's monkey to the trees?

'Doctor.'

'I'm coming,' whispered Congo Bill, turning toward the door, faintly disturbed; 'I'm awake now.'

