

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a crowd of people walking. The image has been heavily color-graded to a monochromatic red. Overlaid on the faces of several individuals are white, hand-drawn scribbles that completely obscure their eyes, suggesting a loss of identity or a collective blindness. The overall mood is somber and unsettling.

Bitter Medicine

BY JAMES DODDS

Bitter Medicine

With a gracious belch and a contented sigh, Mallory Foster, MD, pushed his chair back from the table.

"An exceptional dinner."

It was his birthday, and his cook had made his favorite meal.

"I should certainly hope so," his cook chortled. "It's not every day a man turns 100-years-old!"

Foster contentedly surveyed the table. Fine linens, fancy china and silverware, and the cooling remains of meats and vegetables no longer available in the supermarket.

"Yes, a fine meal," he agreed with himself.

He picked up his snifter and swirled the contents under his nose, relishing the complex fragrance of a 30-year-old port.

"I don't know which is better," he sighed, "The nose or the mouth."

Eventually, he opted for the mouth, relishing the texture and finish on his palate.

Picking up the empty bottle, he examined it against the candlelight.

"Ah me," he said, "All things come to an end."

His dinner companion cleared his throat.

"Doctor, thank you again for letting me intrude tonight. As a self-invited guest, I have honored your request that I remain silent while we ate. However, the meal is over and I must speak with you. Tonight. Now. Again, my humblest apologies, but my request is crucial."

Foster looked mildly across the table at the speaker. Dr. Randolph Pembroke was a man easily overlooked. At 65, he was excessively thin in all ways. His spare frame supported a bony face with thin lips, beaked nose, and sparse hair scraped unconvincingly across a pale scalp. Even his voice was thin and reedy. It grated, which was why Foster had insisted on silence during dinner. It was one thing to allow an unexpected visitor to join you for a meal that was just then being served, but it was another entirely to let a social obligation ruin a perfectly good meal.

"Of course, doctor," Foster replied. "I know why you're here and I will listen to your request. I doubt you will like my answer. But let's do this in comfort."

He stood, graciously belching once more.

"Brandy and cigars are in order."

Foster led the way to his study and settled into his favorite chair. A fire crackled in the hearth. Pembroke stared at it.

"Is that real wood?" he asked in an awed voice.

Foster waved carelessly at the companion chair.

"Please sit down, Randolph. Yes, real wood. And not just any wood – that's California redwood. Impossible to come by now, of course. But, when the North Cali Conflagration was tearing through the last of them in '86, I was part of a group that harvested the last of them. Very dangerous."

Pembroke curled his lip and spat, "Ravagers! You condoned ravagers? YOU were a ravager?"

Foster sighed.

"No, Randolph. We were hoping to preserve enough material to someday recreate the redwoods. We still have that material, but finding a new home for it now...." His voice trailed off sadly.

Pembroke nodded.

"My apologies. Maybe things will get better."

He fell silent for a moment but then started up again hastily.

"And that's why I'm here. The New Mandate from the Department of Health Preservation changes everything. And we need you to..."

"Tut, Randolph. Calm yourself," said Foster, holding up his hand. "I see neither brandy nor cigars. Now sit and enjoy the fire until they arrive. There's really nothing like the aroma of a redwood fire."

He picked up a small hand bell and rang it sharply. After a moment, his butler stepped into the room.

"Brandy and cigars please, Jeeves. Oh, and don't forget my meds." requested Foster.

He smiled.

"Yes sir," replied Jeeves. He paused. "The new prescription? I'm not sure it should be taken with brandy, sir."

Foster laughed broadly.

"Dammit Jeeves! Who's the doctor here, you or me?"

Jeeves smiled back. "Yes sir. Coming right up."

Pembroke, looking on in disbelief, exclaimed, "Seriously? You have a butler named Jeeves?"

Foster laughed again.

"Well, it's not his real name. He's a huge P.G. Wodehouse fan – the name's his idea of a joke."

Jeeves returned, poured the brandy and lit the cigars.

As Foster reached for his brandy, Jeeves said, "Meds first, sir," and handed him a small tray with pills and water.

"My thanks, Jeeves," replied Foster. He regarded the pills briefly. "Just what the doctor ordered."

Popping the pills into his mouth, he hoisted the glass to Jeeves and added, "To my good health!"

After Jeeves had left, Pembroke regarded his drink and cigar and said, "Alcohol. Tobacco. As of last week, these are pre-existing conditions. But it won't change consumption, will it?"

He drew gently on the cigar. Eyes widening in pleasure, he said, "My God, is this Cuban?" He looked at Foster in wonder.

"Correct on both counts, Randolph. Man will always drink and man will always smoke," said Foster. "And yes, you're holding one of my last Cohibas. One of the last in the world, I should think. Not any room left on that poor island for growing non-edibles."

He savored his cigar and drink and continued, "So, Randolph, get to it. Tell me why the AMA wants me take a stand against our new U.S. Department of Health Preservation."

"Well," Pembroke began, "You are a giant in medical history who has stood astride the last century..."

Foster snorted at this and then scowled.

"Dammit man! You just made me waste brandy. Did you write that crap yourself? Come now – you've sat at my table and you're drinking and smoking my best. Honor me by speaking plainly."

Pembroke looked down for a moment. Then, putting down both cigar and drink, he sat up, squared his bony shoulders and began again.

"Fine. These are the facts. *You* found the cure for cancer. *You* found the cure for Parkinson's. *You* found the cure for Alzheimer's. You've been awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine two times and you should have gotten it at least once more. You were the hand that steadied the nation during the Health Care Riots. You were the first Secretary of the Department of Health Care Equity that followed. And every Secretary since you stepped down has had you on quick-link. Last month, Congress replaced the DHCE with this damned Department of Health Preservation. We *need* a man with your gravitas to stand against its New Mandate ..."

"Stop there, please," said Foster.

"Too much?" asked Pembroke.

Foster paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. Then he began.

"About the 'curing this and curing that.' The grunt-level research for those cures had been done decades before I got involved. And I was just a team leader. Honestly, more of a cheerleader. I wasn't a brilliant lab magician – But I knew who was and brought them in. That was one of my true talents. Another was my broad vision. I never cared about the health of any particular man that much. I was more interested in the health of Man – our species as a whole. That's why I focused on species-killing diseases. And I could organize – a skill that is greatly under-estimated. The right group, properly organized, can do *anything*. They used to call me the Organizer Bunny!"

Pembrook frowned in puzzlement.

"The what?"

"Sorry. Before your time," Foster laughed.

Foster settled into his recliner and drank some brandy.

"The Health Care Riots," he mused. "Those broke out in the mid 60s. I foresaw them in 2050. They were inevitable by then, thanks to how the game was rigged. You must have just been starting out. What do you remember?"

Pembrook drained his snifter and looked askance at the bottle.

"Please help yourself," smiled Foster. "This is the last glass for me and that brandy should be finished, once opened."

Pembrook poured a generous amount and took a large swallow. Putting the glass down, he placed balled fists on his knees and leaned forward.

"I remember rage. Red, seething rage. There was confusion and fear too, but mostly just rage. At first, just enraged patients. But, as things truly began to spiral out of control, enraged doctors and nurses too. I'd heard stuff in med school, but I was too busy just trying to survive that to really pay attention. I grew up with all those catchy media ads about the "triangle of wellness" that the insurance industry kept cranking out. The wise and attractive doctor; the healthy, beaming patient; and the benevolent insurance company, represented by an envelope containing a fat check for the grateful family. Hell, part of my decision to go into medicine was based on those ads."

Pembrook took another drink.

"Looking back later, after the riots, I realized those ads were *everywhere* – And had been since I was a kid. Outstanding propaganda campaign. And it worked, unless you were ever that person who needed the coverage. Once I was actually in the healthcare biz, I quickly found out the truth. They covered nothing. When Congress passed the legislation allowing denial on 'pre-existing traits' a couple years earlier, it was open season to stop covering almost anything. Heart or lung issues? Have you ever smoked or even lived in a city with bad air quality? Claim denied! Cancer? Did your parents or anybody else in your family ever have cancer? Claim denied!"

He continued.

"Of course, patients blamed us. I remember being grateful for every visit that didn't end in anger or tears. But when patients began shooting their doctors, I decided anger and tears were okay. The first patient/doctor murder/suicide was a terrible shock. But within just a few weeks, it had become a daily occurrence. The rage seemed to feed on itself, like dumping gasoline on a fire. I think that was what got the riots going."

Foster sat silently for a moment and then replied, "Well yes, that. And some well-placed social media influence. And some well-paid professional rabble-rousers. And some well-compromised civic authorities who said just the right things to fire up the populace."

He started to reach for his brandy, then changed his mind.

"You were part of the riots?" asked Pembrook.

"No, Randolph," Foster replied, "I wasn't part of it –I was *all* of it. It was my idea and execution. As I said earlier, the right group, properly organized, can do anything. The healthcare riots were the first step to making the changes necessary to protect the species. The insurance company healthcare model had started killing an unacceptable number and it had to be stopped. So I stopped it."

"But that would mean," Pembrook paused, his mind whirling. "That would mean that you... No, you *couldn't* have been part of..."

He looked at Foster in horror. Foster looked back, implacable.

"Finish your drink, Randolph."

Pembrook did so and then looked at the bottle.

"Damn," he muttered.

Grinning, Foster nodded towards a sideboard and said, "There's good bourbon in there. Help yourself."

While Pembrook fumbled for more alcohol, Foster continued.

"The insurance company was the most powerful social and political force this country has ever seen. They owned the media and they owned the government. That's an impossible foe to bring down, unless you step outside the rules. So, I did."

"That first riot was a warm-up, just to make sure our machine was ready. We fielded thousands of protestors in every major city in America. Most were just angry citizens, brought out by our media manipulation. But every crowd had several dozen of our provocateurs who specialized in baiting and instigating. They were the ones that got everyone whipped up to where it seemed logical to torch entire business districts. But it was the second Riot that did the trick. That night, as America burned again, we killed every corporate-level officer in every insurance company in this country. We did it humanely. We're not monsters, you know. But to make our point, we left a wad of cash stuffed down each throat," Foster chuckled. "Choked to death on their own greed! Poetic, no?"

Pembrook was numb.

"You're a doctor. Maybe the greatest man in medical history. And you could do *this*? Wait a minute! What about the Senators and Congressmen? Several of them disappeared that night too."

Foster smiled and shook his head gently.

"Randolph, it was *because* I was a doctor that I could do this. Horrible? Yes. But the consequences of doing nothing were worse. I swore an oath to protect man. The key members of the House and Senate who opposed changing the model were killed humanely and incinerated. Three days later, after the shortest debate in

Congressional history, the Department of Health Equity replaced the Department of Health and Human Services. Every citizen was granted full access to any medical care they needed. It was a revolution, Randolph. And, as revolutions go, a pretty good one. Low body count and major rewards."

Foster eased back into his chair and looked longingly at his brandy.

Pembrook drained his bourbon, stood up and anxiously paced around the room. Stopping at the fireplace, he picked up a piece of wood and started to add it to the fire. He checked himself and held the wood to his nose. A tear ran down his face as he inhaled the aroma of extinct hardwood.

"What the fuck," he said brusquely, and threw it on the grate.

He whirled to face Foster.

"Dammit! The New Mandate from the DHP is exactly what you fought against back then! Universal coverage has been cancelled. Doctors will be forced to deny care if the patient's history has even a whiff of anything unhealthy. Everything will be out of pocket. But nobody can pay for today's treatments! My god, man – death rates will skyrocket! I would think you would claw tooth and nail to shoot this down. What the hell is wrong with you? Have you become so old and stupid that you don't understand what's at stake here?"

Suddenly exhausted, and embarrassed for calling out this man, Pembrook flopped back into his chair.

"Oh Jesus, I think I'm drunk," he moaned. "God I'm sorry, but please, can't you muster one more fight to protect people?"

Foster regarded him for a long moment.

"Randolph, listen carefully. The reason I can't oppose the New Mandate is because I wrote it."

"Um ... what?"

Pembrook's face was that of a man who has had the ground yanked out from under him.

"Who the fuck are you? I mean, I grew up worshiping this God of Medicine, this paragon of sacrifice who found the cure for the

worst of humanity's plagues. And now you tell me that you've killed hundreds and are about to kill thousands more? And you're quite happy to do so. Seriously, WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?"

Foster drew a deep breath.

"I'll tell you exactly who the fuck I am. I'm the man who will do whatever it takes to preserve my species. And that species is racing towards the greatest die-off in history. In another 30 years, maybe sooner, there's going to be world-wide famine. And world-wide war. Mankind's two basic needs – food and shelter – are vanishing. We were warned, back in the 2020s, that this would happen. But climate change was a boogeyman who was always just around the corner. No need to be scared *now*. We'll get scared tomorrow. Turns out 'tomorrow' has a way of sliding right under the radar. And now here we are. Over the last 10 years a large chunk of this planet has become uninhabitable. Nothing grows within five hundred miles either side of the equator. And that dead zone shifts about fifty miles farther north and south every year. So far, most countries have accepted the population shift – most very reluctantly, but when five million hungry people show up at your door, what are you going to do? However, as the amount of land where man can live and grow food continues to shrink, we're going to have a Malthusian Correction of biblical proportions. When it comes down to 'either you starve or I do,' things will get very ugly, very fast. I believe if we can put that off long enough, some bright soul may figure out a solution."

Pembrook sat silently for a moment and then, "But your interim solution is to thin the herd. That's monstrous, you bastard."

"No, Randolph, that's letting natural selection work its magic. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'd like to spend the last few hours of my birthday in peace. Best let Jeeves call you a taxi. I don't think you should be driving. Would you mind ringing the bell for him?"

Pembrook peered over at Foster.

"I know I'm drunk, but you're the one slurring his words. And why don't you ring your own damn bell?"

Foster smiled, a bit crookedly.

"Unfortunately, I can't. My fine motor skills started shutting down about ten minutes ago. And it's starting to affect my speech. One hundred years is long enough, Randolph. Too damn long, really. So I've started my population reduction program with myself. Those meds that Jeeves brought will ease me painlessly out of this world in about another hour. Now please, ring the bell."

Pembrook stood up, unsteadily.

"I'll just go find him. I really can't spend another moment in your company."

He stalked out the door.

A few minutes later, Jeeves came in. "How are you, sir? No pain, I hope."

Foster did his best to smile, but his face only crinkled comically.

"No pain, Jeeves, thank you."

"Very good, sir. Will there be anything else?"

Foster said, "I think I can still swallow. A shame to waste the last of that brandy. Could you wrap my hand around the glass, please?"

Jeeves did, and Foster raised his glass a final time.

"To your good health."

THE END



James Dodds

A science-fiction fan since before he could read (thanks to his father for the bedtime stories of 40s and 50s SF), James Dodds spent the early part of his career as a technical writer, producing a shelf-full of software user manuals that nobody in their right mind would ever read.

For the last twenty years, he has worked as a system analyst in medical IT. An English major suddenly thrust into the clinical world, he had a rough start. Most of his team members are nurses who enjoyed how he pronounced words such as emesis ("uh-MEE-sis") and IV parenteral ("Ivy pair-un-TARE-ul"). He got his feet under himself in time to weather the withering anger of doctors and nurses as they went live with new electronic medical record systems at 2 a.m. ("Where are my orders?").

Years of working directly with clinical staff on the floor have shown him that technology's potential to improve patient care has barely been tapped. He is convinced that future advances in medical and computer science will give man tools to vastly improve health and well-being. He remains skeptical that America's current health coverage system will let those tools be available for all who need them.

From Jules Verne's submarines and flights to the moon to Arthur C. Clark's network of satellites providing instant global communication, science fiction has always predicted the future with amazing accuracy. James hopes his story remains just that – a story.

James has been writing fiction for the last few years. He lives near Spokane, WA with his lovely wife Robin and their amazing dog Ginger.