

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

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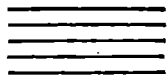
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Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.

COVER BY EMSH symbolizing a close finish in the "Race Into Space"

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Novelet



illustrated
by
FINLAY

crash program

by Bill Wesley

Suddenly, Ellen Harlow complained that movies flickered; and Hans Stauffer screamed in agony when a needle pricked him — it felt, he said, like a thousand separate stabs. Then John Harlow remembered that others who had been investigating this Martian fern had suffered from the same complaints ...

DR. JOHN HARLOW had just made a startling discovery when his wife, Ellen, returned from the movie. That was why his greeting was not as enthusiastic as it might have been. He said simply, "Oh, ... home already?"

Ellen smiled and came over to the table where Harlow was

examining a sample of fern under a low-power microscope. She had only been married to the botanist for a few months, but she had learned not to be offended by his apparent brusqueness. When he was busy on a project it became his entire life, and she might as well be a wooden Indian.

It had bothered her at first,



What was the connection between the Martian ferns and the strange ecstasy and madness?

until the day she had come into his lab wearing a bikini. He had grabbed his microscope and pulled her over to the corner where there was a full-length mirror. Then, holding the microscope alongside her, he had made her look into the mirror. "Seriously now," he had said, "can you possibly be jealous of a thing shaped like that?" From then on she had not worried about him.

"The movie kept flickering and gave me a headache," she explained now.

Harlow continued pushing the fern around under the microscope and didn't reply. Ellen could see from the set of his jaw that he was on to something. She had suspected it earlier when he had sent her off to the theater alone.

"Look at that," he said suddenly, stepping back from the microscope and nudging his wife toward it. "What does that look like to you?"

ELLEN looked and caught her breath. She was no botanist, though she had been assisting her husband in studying the adaptability of the Martian ferns for several

weeks. Now she saw at a glance that one of them was about to germinate.

"Well, it's about time. I was beginning to think they were all going to die here. How'd you do it?"

"I told those Brass Hats to have a little patience," Harlow said triumphantly. "You see, as soon as I got the atmospheric chamber I requested—zoom! All they needed was the right environment."

Ellen beamed at him happily. "Is this sample from Box C?"

Harlow bent over the microscope again, examining the fern for the twentieth time. "Those are sporocytes as sure as I'm alive," he muttered. "Now the question is, will they take root? We need an acre of the stuff to do this job right. If the other boxes... What did you say? Oh, yes, this is from Box C."

Ellen glanced at him strangely. She wasn't accustomed to seeing him so excited. True, it was an important event, but...

"You say you had a headache? Want me to mix you a sedative? Or a brandy? How

about a brandy? I could sure use one."

HE STARTED toward the kitchen, changed his mind, and came back to the microscope.

"John, for goodness sake, calm down," she said, laughing at his restlessness, but feeling a little uneasy too. "You act as if you had just discovered radium or something."

Harlow glared at her for a moment, then relaxed sheepishly. "Guess I am overdoing it, huh? 'Course it's too early to get excited, but we've finally got something tangible to work with. Now if we can get a little more time. . ."

Ellen went to the kitchen herself for the brandy. Then she reminded her husband that they couldn't have more time. "This is a crash program, remember? You should know that as well as anyone. Hasn't Col. Voigt been hounding you every day for your report?"

Harlow winced and started pacing the floor, but she made him sit down.

"He'll *have* to give us more time—that's all there is to it," he exploded. "I'm sick of crash

programs. That's what's the matter with us today—too many crash programs. Everybody's on a crash program, and nobody's exploring the by-products. Science used to move along at a reasonable rate, and there was plenty of time to evaluate an advance before the next step was taken. Now we go by leaps and bounds, and nobody's examining the areas underneath. We could upset the whole balance of nature before we even knew it."

His wife said simply, "Yes, dear. Tomorrow you can ask Col. Voigt for more time."

THE NEXT day, when Harlow called his project chief at the Pentagon Building, he thought for a moment that lightning had hit the telephone line. Col. Voigt raved about expenditures and priorities and deadlines until Harlow was tempted to hang up on him.

"That was supposed to be a simple little bug hunt," the space officer shouted. "All you had to do was sprinkle water on a few plants and see if they lived or died. What's so big about that? I expected your report a month ago."

Harlow made an effort to keep calm. He had awakened with a headache himself that morning, and Ellen's had been worse, so he had made her stay in bed. He was in no mood to struggle with red tape—nor with red-faced project officers.

"How could I give you a report when I've just managed to keep the blamed things alive? Now I have to nurse these spores along and see if I can make them reproduce. They might just dry up and blow away."

"I wish they would," Voigt growled. "What else can they do? They'll either dry up and blow away, or they'll produce more ferns. Isn't that the size of it?"

Harlow remained silent. That was only the first phase of his project, keeping the ferns alive. His main assignment was to find out if they were of any use to mankind, and if they were harmful—and for that he needed more time.

COL. VOIGT finally gave in and said, "All right, how much more time do you need? There's a full-scale mission to Mars in three months, and the

space force wants to know all they can about that plant life before blast-off."

"Then that's it. I'll need three months."

Harlow hung up and turned to find his colleague, Dr. Hans Stauffer, standing behind him.

Stauffer was a heavy-set, normally cheerful botanist who had been more than willing to move in with the Harlows—not only to complete his cataloging of the Martian ferns, but to get away from the hectic life in a government research center. The fact that Ellen Harlow was a good cook was not completely irrelevant to his decision.

Harlow told him of his discovery of the spore sacs, then of his conversation with Voigt.

"Now let's get out to the lab. I want to examine every box thoroughly. See if there's a general improvement. If not, we'll concentrate on Box C. We'll gather more samples and see if we can plot a germination rate. Maybe we can find out..."

His voice trailed off and he began pacing the room nervously. "Damn it, I don't feel good today either, and there

are a thousand things to do. You were on the original flight to Mars, Hans. Are you sure there were no other forms of life? No flowering plants at all?"

Before Stauffer could answer, Harlow was peering into the bedroom to ask his wife if she felt better. Ellen babbled something that he didn't understand, so he assumed that she was still asleep. He left a note telling her that he would be in the lab, then half-dragged Stauffer out the door.

THE LABORATORY was a small building on the back of Harlow's lot. At one time, it had contained just about all the scientific apparatus a spirogenensis specialist could wish for; but when the environmental chamber had been installed for use on the Martian project, most of the other equipment had been moved out. Now John Harlow was almost sorry that he had insisted on working on his own property in Connecticut, instead of taking over one of the government labs.

He had hoped to be able to continue his independent re-

search at the same time, but that had proven to be wishful thinking. The Martian project had taken up all of his regular time and most of his spare time. At first there had been two technicians assigned to the project; but one afternoon, when Harlow found them drunk, he had fired them—though they both swore they hadn't touched a drop. From then on he and Stauffer had handled the project alone, with occasional typing assistance from Ellen. Maybe this latest development would be the beginning of the end, he thought hopefully...

"Had a strange experience last night," Stauffer said, breaking into Harlow's thoughts. "Reminded me of something that happened on the spaceship coming back from Mars. We were watching a movie one night, and Dr. Peterson, the Swedish biologist—I think you knew him—complained that the picture was flickering. He wanted the operator to stop the film and see what was wrong with the projector. Well, no one else noticed anything, so we outvoted him and went on watch-

ing the movie. He finally left the room—said he was getting a headache. Well, guess what? I went to a movie last night and, by golly, it seemed to me that the picture was flickering, though no one else noticed it. What do you make of that, John?"

HARLOW said, "Huh? Oh, yeah, Ellen mentioned that last night. You must have gone to the same theater. Probably need a new projector."

Stauffer stopped in mid-stride and stared at his fellow-botanist seriously. "You mean Ellen said the picture flickered for her too?"

"Yes, what of it?" Harlow scowled. "Good Lord, man, we've got more important things to worry about than a jerky motion picture projector."

"But don't you see? *Nobody else* noticed it. Only Peterson on the spaceship, and Ellen and I last night."

"You've probably got sensitive eyes. Come on, Hans!"

"Then why didn't I notice it when Peterson did? No, John, I think something's happened to our eyes. Peterson

worked with that plant life constantly, and so have Ellen and I lately. I think it may have some adverse physiological effect—contain a drug of some kind maybe."

"How about me? I've been working with it as much as anyone, haven't I?"

Stauffer started to say, "Yes, and you're acting peculiar yourself," but he held his tongue.

II

THE MARTIAN ferns had been set in three different soil boxes, each in a separate compartment of the environmental chamber. Box A had been maintained at Martian atmospheric conditions. Box B had been exposed to the natural climate of a Connecticut spring, and Box C had been subjected to a simulated tropical climate.

The ferns in Box A had shown some life, but not much. This was right in line with what the expedition had reported from Mars. By Earth standards, the ferns were a sturdy breed. On Mars they

put up a desperate struggle to live.

The ferns in the other two boxes had shown a little more willingness to develop, but not until the night before had there been any significant progress. Then the sample from Box C suddenly produced some spore sacs and the project took on new life for John Harlow. Now, as he opened the lab door, his eagerness got the better of him and he ran to the environmental chamber to peer inside.

At first he was disappointed. All the ferns appeared to be dead. Their fronds had turned brown and were drooping sadly. Then he looked again and changed his mind; they were not dying, and they hadn't turned brown. They were drooping because of the tremendous sporangia, or spore sacs, hanging from the underside of each frond. The clusters of brown spores, each one seemingly on the point of discharging into the air at the slightest disturbance, gave the ferns their brown color.

"Hans, we're in!" he shouted, whacking his associate on the back. "They're going to pop any minute now—even

those in Box B. Set up a magnifier and we'll watch them through the wall of the chamber. How do you like that! We'll witness the entire reproduction process."

STAUFFER jumped to get a magnifier. He had learned to act first and argue later when working with Harlow. But he protested as he jumped.

"Releasing spores isn't reproduction. They might not take root—and even if they do, I feel the same as Voigt does about it. So what? We'll just get more ferns."

Harlow growled at him and jerked the magnifier out of his grasp. "Maybe so, but we won't know till we see it. This is the time for observation, not speculation. Get some more soil boxes ready—I'm going to jiggle one of these fronds and see what happens."

FOR THE next six hours, they worked rapidly, transplanting ferns into newly-prepared soil boxes, giving each plant as much living space as possible. Then they took everything out of the environmental chamber, opened its doors,

turned up the controls, and converted the entire laboratory into a hothouse. By mid-afternoon they had a semi-tropical jungle of ferns growing around them. Their hands were covered with sticky brown stains from the sporangia, they were hungry, but, surprisingly, neither of them complained of being tired.

"I feel pretty good," Harlow said as he locked the lab door. "I think I'll come back after a while and play around some more. How about you, Hans?"

Stauffer didn't answer. He was staring into some bushes at the edge of the garden where a cat was playing with a grasshopper. Although it was still bright daylight, the cat was almost in darkness, due to the thickness of the foliage. What had aroused Stauffer's curiosity was the fact that he had just glanced at the sun, yet he could see into the shadows clearly. He tried it again. This time forcing himself to stare at the sun for several seconds. Then he looked into the shadows. He could see everything easily—with no eye-strain.

"It—it looks like a—like we might have a storm," he said hesitantly. "We'd better get back to the house."

He walked on ahead, not wanting to face anyone just then. Something had happened to his eyes, and he didn't know what. He didn't know if it was good or bad, but he suspected that in some way the Martian ferns were responsible...

HARLOW made two complete tours of his house looking for his wife, then he spotted the note on the telephone stand. *Gone to the drug store for a pill. See you at dinner. Ellen.*

He fixed himself a fried egg sandwich, then tried to take a nap. He was too excited over the new developments in his project, however, so he went back to the lab. He was surprised to find Stauffer already there.

"Couldn't rest either, eh?" he chided him.

Stauffer didn't reply. He was setting up a blink-microscope and staring into it with a worried expression on his face. Finally he called Harlow over to have a look.

"I don't see anything. Your slide must have slipped. Anyway, you've got the frequency set too low. A blink-microscope isn't supposed to blink, you idiot."

"So it isn't," Stauffer agreed. "At least not at two hundred cycles a second."

"What! You're crazy!" John Harlow checked the oscillator feeding the microscope. It was set for two hundred cycles, yet he could definitely see the neon light blink. He couldn't believe it.

"I didn't tell you this," Stauffer said, "but out there in the garden a while ago my eye retained no blindness effect after being exposed to the sun directly for several seconds. John, we've lost our persistency of vision."

HARLOW gazed at him in surprise for a long moment, then began pacing the floor. He stopped suddenly when he realized that it was a habit he had acquired only in the past day or two. Little by little, the significance of what was happening to them crept into his brain.

"First Peterson on the space-

ship," he said slowly. "He could see the projector flutter at forty-eight cycles per second. Then you and Ellen last night..."

He shot Stauffer a worried look and grabbed for the telephone. He flipped a switch marked "Inter-com" and dialed a number to clear the line. The telephone in the main house rang, but no one answered.

"Well, she's probably all right. She went to the drug store for a sedative."

Again he started pacing the floor. "Why was it Peterson who came up with the symptoms first? Didn't all of you handle the ferns?"

Stauffer said, "Not exactly. We all helped gather it, but Peterson studied it all the way home. He kept hoping he'd find some microscopic animal life."

"Well, find out what happened to him—he's the key to what we're getting into. Have you heard from him since you returned to Earth?"

"No, I've been too busy to contact him. We were all quarantined, and I'm positive that Peterson was still in the hospital when I left."

"Well, put in a call to Washington and find out where he is now—and—and how he is."

STAUFFER picked up the telephone and called the telegraph office. While he was sending his message, Harlow prepared a stiff tranquilizer solution and gave himself an injection.

"Now sit down, Hans, and let's recapitulate."

He took a sheet of paper and drew a vertical line down through the middle of it. At the top of the left hand section he wrote, "*Loss of vision persistency*". On the same line, but in the right hand column, he wrote, "*Los of vision persistency*". On the same line, but in the right hand column, he wrote, "*Stimulation of cells in retina of eye*". He thought a while, then added, "*or in brain*".

Stauffer was watching closely and said, "Stimulation? I'd say deterioration."

"No, Hans. Think a moment. What causes persistency of vision in the first place? The inability of the cells in the retina of the eye—or in the brain—to recover instantane-

ously from an impulse of light. A powerful stimulant might increase the elasticity of the cells to the point where there was virtually no hysteresis at all—to use a borrowed word."

He jumped up suddenly and ran to a cabinet where he kept a bottle of brandy. He took a quick shot, then held the bottle out to Stauffer, but Stauffer shook his head.

"Now, what's next?" Harlow asked, as he came back to the table.

For the second item under symptoms he wrote, "*Head-aches*."

HE LET HIS pencil hover over the paper while he considered the probable causes.

"Suppose there was a general stimulation of all body cells," he said. Then he slapped his leg with his open palm and shouted, "That's it! Those two lab technicians that I fired for being drunk—they had been working with the growth for days. That's probably a later symptom, drunkenness. We ought to find them—see what condition they're in now. And apologize, too.

"Don't you see, Hans? A

general stimulation would increase brain activity, resulting in the headaches that Ellen and I felt. Later, when the brain cells have taken all they can stand, fatigue will set in, followed by a pseudo-drunkenness. And the nervousness—might as well admit it," he said self-consciously, as he wrote "*nervousness*" down as a symptom— "I realize now that I've been on the verge of hysteria for a couple of days. That could be due to over-stimulation too."

Stauffer was having trouble keeping up with the fast-talking Harlow. "How do you come to that conclusion?"

"Elementary, Hans, as the old master used to say. A stimulant supplies energy in the form of an impulse to the receptive end of a nerve. In the normal state, it takes a second or two for this impulse to reach the brain. In the state we're in now, the impulse is passed along the nerve to the brain almost instantly. The receptive end recovers immediately and is ready to pass another impulse to the brain—possibly before the original impetus is re-

moved. From an impulse of very short duration, you might—if the nerve were elastic enough—receive a number of messages at the brain. And this unaccustomed twanging of the nerves would soon produce a nervous condition in the body. Here, I'll show you."

H HE GRABBED Stauffer's hand, and before his assistant knew what was coming, had jabbed a needle into his palm.

Stauffer let out a yelp. The pain was sharp, and was over in a second; but in that second Stauffer felt what seemed like a thousand needle pricks—as though the needle had stabbed him many times rapidly, instead of only once.

Stauffer was speechless. He had never thought of the persistency of pain; now he had lost that, too. What did it mean? Without persistency of vision, the television and motion picture industries would fail. Maybe that wasn't so bad. But what else could the harmless appearing ferns from Mars do to them? He didn't know, and the uncertainty gave him a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach.

HARLOW jumped to his feet and started pacing the floor again. He gave himself another injection of the tranquilizer solution he had mixed, forgetting that he had just had one. "Hans, there are too many questions," he said. "We need time. We need a biologist, and a chemist, and some more lab equipment, and some mice and guinea pigs. Do you realize that if all organic cells became highly elastic, there would be no such thing as a lasting impression? Memory itself would fail. We might forget how to perform the most basic human functions. It's stupendous! And we don't even know how the contamination is passed. Is it something on the surface of the fronds that scrapes off onto our skin? Is it a vapor exuded from the sporangia?... Good heavens, Man! The spores!" he thundered. "If they should scatter they could cover the whole county in a matter of days."

They bot'h stared out the laboratory window as if with the same thought. Even as they looked, the leaves on the nearby trees and bushes began to dance in the wind.

"You were right," Harlow shouted. "We are going to have a storm. We've got to check this building for leaks. Don't open the door, or any of the windows. We've got to keep these spores trapped. I'll call Col. Voigt, then we'd better install a fan over the door so we can use it without letting spores escape."

STAUFFER had ceased paying attention. He was looking at the brown stains on his hands, and twitching foolishly, as if afflicted with a case of St. Vitus Dance.

"What's the matter with you?" Harlow shouted, pausing in his step toward the telephone.

Stauffer staggered a few feet toward one of the soil boxes and grabbed a handful of fronds, scattering spore sacs all over his clothes and onto the floor. Harlow grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, but instead of shouting at him, he had to laugh. Hans Stauffer, who had never taken a drink in his life, was now drunk.

"Sit down, you ass, and let me give you a shot," Harlow said.

Stauffer tried to push him away, then held up a handful of fronds to Harlow's face and said, "Pretty little things, aren't they? Yknow, I've nevr really looked at 'em before. Havvvvyou?"

He tickled Harlow's nose with the ferns, then tickled his own. Both of them laughed.

"Oh, you're crazy," Harlow said, but he didn't really mind. It was pleasant to relax...

Stauffer rose to his feet unsteadily and said, "I'm gonna get you somfrrns to playth."

He moved toward one of the soil boxes and fell across it clumsily. His hand struck the sharp edge of the box and he screamed in pain. Harlow tried to help him up, but had trouble with his own sense of balance.

"Now you've got me doinnt," he laughed. "Here, I'llll get youfrrrn."

"I want onefthse."

"You canve mine," Harlow said, but when he extended his hand he no longer had the fern. "Oh, sgone," he said sadly.

THE PHONE rang and John Harlow fumbled for it. It

was a reply to the telegram that Stauffer had sent to Washington.

"Dr. Peterson confined to mental hospital. Diagnosis: space fatigue. Early symptoms: loss of persistency of vision, self-induced intoxication. Later symptoms: loss of speech coherency and sense of balance. Present condition: no physical coordination, no mental processes."

Harlow cocked his head to the side and tried to listen carefully, but it was no use. He couldn't make out what was being said. Somebody couldn't talk—or was too drunk to talk. He wasn't sure. Anyway, somebody was still in the hospital; he understood that much. "Well, thassspity. Thanksmuch."

"Will there be any further message?"

"No. No message. Thanksssmuch. Gbbbbb..." He hung up.

Stauffer handed him a shot of brandy and he held it for a long time, looking down into it. Finally he let it slip from his fingers and fall to the floor.

Stauffer was still holding the bottle, but then he let it fall

too. "We were go look forrrr techncsn," he said. "You think-weeeshoooo?"

"What tchnncns? Oh, those I fiiiiirrrrd? No, they'll com-afthrrrr pay." Harlow swayed about the room happily, turning over bottles and emptying soil boxes onto the floor. "Hanssss, dyou know an-songgggs? How about 'MWild IrshRssss'? No, you'reGermnnn. You woun't liktht. Howbt..."

THE PHONE rang again.

"What wastht?"

"I don't knnnn. Thlst time tht happnd you talkd ththg."

"Welll, you talkths time."

"What'llllsaaaa?"

"I don't knnnn. What'dl-saaaa?"

Stauffer stumbled toward the phone, dropped it, and picked it up again. "Hloooow," he said.

Col Voigt said, "Let me talk to Harlow."

"Whoooo? Whooodsaaaa?"

Harlow turned over more bottles and emptied more soil boxes. He threw one of them across the room and it broke a window. He screamed in pain as a sliver penetrated his skin.

Then he threw a soil box at one of the other windows, laughing gleefully as the glass shattered.

"Harlow!" Col. Voigt shouted. "Let me talk to Harlow. What the hell's going on up there? Are you drunk?"

"Oh, I can'tundstnd you," Stauffer said. He let the telephone fall from his fingers and joined Harlow in emptying soil boxes and breaking bottles. He tripped over the telephone cord and fell. Harlow laughed and pushed a bookcase over on top of him. Stauffer screamed and Harlow began to sing, "MWiiiiidlrrrrrhRssss, Th-Sweeeetst Flrrrr..."

Outside, the wind picked up velocity and created a swirl inside the laboratory. Bits of ferns and spores began dancing in the air. Some of them flew through the broken windows...

III

SIX DAYS later, John Harlow opened his eyes and stared at the white walls of a hospital room. An attendant beside his bed arose immediately and pressed a

wall button. Then he leaned over and said, "How you feelin'? Can you understand me all right?"

Harlow squirmed uncomfortably, not caring much for having anyone standing over his bed, and said, "I feel fine. Of course I can understand you. Why shouldn't I? You're speaking English, aren't you?"

The attendant shrugged and sat down again.

"Where the devil am I?" Harlow asked. "In a hospital? What happened? I pass out or something?"

"Your doctor'll be here in a minute," the attendant said. "He'll answer your questions."

Harlow struggled to a sitting position and flexed his arms a few times. He was about to ask more questions when the door opened and a doctor and a nurse came into the room. The doctor came over to the bed and raised Harlow's eyelids one at a time, then started to take his pulse. Harlow opened his mouth to speak, but the doctor held up a restraining hand.

After a quarter of a minute he said, "Well, I guess you're back in the fold now. My name is Larkin. I'm a neurologist.

You seem to be suffering from a nervous condition which, I am embarrassed to say, we have found quite baffling. Now that you're conscious, maybe you can help us. What do you remember of the last few minutes, or the last few hours, before you passed out?"

HARLOW glared at the doctor, then suddenly threw the bedclothes aside and jumped to his feet. "I remember everything, of course," he shouted. "Why shouldn't I? You think I'm some kind of mental case? Call Col. Voigt at the Pentagon Building. I've got to talk to him at once."

"I've already put in a call for Col. Voigt," Larkin said. "He'll be here in about twenty minutes. I suggest you lie back on the bed and wait for him."

"Twenty minutes! How's he going to do that? Is he up here in Connecticut?"

Larkin smiled patronizingly. "No, he isn't up here in Connecticut. You're down here in Washington."

"Washington? How'd I... Say, how long have I been here? I mean, how long ago did I pass out?"

Larkin told him, and John Harlow sank back onto the bed in bewilderment. Six days! Anything could have happened to the ferns in six days. They could be growing somewhere on the outside, right now. There was no time to waste. He'd have to get back to the lab and replace the broken windows. Then get a small army and scour the countryside, destroying everything that even resembled a fern. What if it was too late? Thousands of people already contaminated—losing their minds—like Peterson. And how about him? Why had he been spared—if he was spared?

"How's my wife?" he asked excitedly. "Did Ellen get a touch of this too? And Dr. Stauffer—is he all right?"

"Your wife is fine," Larkin said. "She's in a room down the hall. But Dr. Stauffer is in a very serious condition. Temporarily, at least, he's out of his mind. That's why we hoped..."

A GAIN HARLOW jumped to his feet. "Give me my clothes," he demanded. "This is serious—deadly serious—and I've got things to do."

Larkin and the attendant both sprang forward to force him back into bed, but Harlow shrugged them off easily, dodging their out-stretched hands like an elusive halfback.

"Let me have my clothes, I said. And sign me out of here. There's no time to waste."

He stood in the middle of the room and glared at the two men and the nurse defiantly. He didn't understand his new feeling of competence, but it was wonderful. He felt healthy, all over. Super-healthy, as if he had been dreaming all the time and had only now come to life.

Then the effect was still with him—but in an arrested state, he assumed. The drunkenness had only been a phase, from which he had recovered—though Stauffer had not. The tranquilizers! That was it. He remembered the injections now—stiff ones, both of them—mostly morphine. Apparently they had been strong enough to protect his brain, but not strong enough to neutralize the effect entirely. Then what condition was he in at the moment? He felt—how *did* he feel?

He felt sensitive. That was the word for it. Sensitive and quick. His reflexes were sharpened too; he sensed it. Of course they would be. Reflexive action was simply nerve response in reverse—the reflection from the brain of an afferent impulse sent to the brain...

He watched the attendant moving toward him and had an almost overwhelming urge to try a left jab. He was confident that he could hit the attendant a dozen times before the man could duck once. But he'd have to watch out for sharp objects, and not bump his head, or bang a kneecap. He remembered the experiment he had worked on Stauffer with the needle. Good thing he didn't have a toothache, or rheumatism...

THE DOOR opened again, and Col. Voigt and another man came in.

"Harlow! What the hell happened?" Voigt bawled at him from the doorway.

"Plenty," Harlow said. "I'll explain it while I'm dressing. Tell these people to bring me my clothes, will you? I've got to get back to my lab."

The colonel looked at Larkin, but Larkin only shrugged. Then Voigt turned to Harlow and said, "Slow down a minute. There's no hurry for you to get back to your lab. We moved everything down here to one of the government research centers. Your place is pretty much of a wreck. As a matter of fact, you're no longer on the project."

Harlow spun on him. "What do you mean, I'm no longer on the project? Who else knows anything about it? It isn't my fault that Stauffer got an overdose of whatever it is that's in those ferns. If you hadn't pushed us so hard..."

"Wait a minute," Voigt broke in. "You mean to tell me that this—this—whatever it is you got, was brought on by those skimpy little ferns?"

"No doubt about it. Those skimpy little ferns probably contain the most powerful nerve tonic Man has ever known. Apparently, the effect can be fatal—but doesn't have to be. Witness me, standing here arguing with a roomful of boneheads. I'll tell you the whole story if somebody will give me my clothes. Otherwise,

I'm running out of here just as I am."

Dr. Larkin threw up his hands in resignation. "Let him have his clothes," he told the attendant. Then he said to John Harlow, "I think you need more rest, but go if you want to."

Harlow said, "Good. Glad that's settled."

THE MAN who had come in with Voigt was an FBI agent, Hal Rafferty. He had been called in because of the security classification of the project. Harlow told the two of them as much as he could remember of what had happened at the lab, concluding with his own idea of a plan of action.

"First we want to isolate all the ferns that we know of. Then we'll have to look all over Connecticut for signs of new growth—places where the spores could have taken root. Third, we'll look for indications of contamination among animals and people."

"How about treatment?" the G-man asked. "Will you know what to do if we find contamination?"

Harlow shook his head slowly. "We'll have to experiment. I used morphine, but maybe a milder drug will do just as well. I have a feeling that timing may be important. Catch the effect before it goes too far..."

He started to add, "Maybe just far enough to improve nerve response," but he decided to hold that information back for a while. He wasn't sure yet if super-nerves were a good thing or a bad; and until he found out, he decided not to let anyone know that he wasn't normal.

WHEN HE was dressed at last, he asked Voigt and Rafferty to wait for him while he stepped into his wife's room. He was eager to run some tests on her, too, but didn't want to take the time right then. He could only hope that she was all right.

He tried to be light-hearted as he walked toward her bed, grinning, and saying, "Hi!" Then he kissed her.

Her lips were soft and sweet, and she returned his kiss warmly. But her lips had always been soft and sweet; now

they were so much more. They were luxuriously alive, caressing his mouth with a thousand delicate flames, sending wave after wave of ecstatic sensations coursing through him. Never had a kiss been so tender, and yet, at the same time, so full of passion.

He stared at her incredulously as he moved back a few inches. She smiled, and wrinkled her nose at him, and he knew that it had been only a kiss to her. It was his own lips—his own heightened senses that had transformed the simple kiss into an exciting experience. His wife was a normal—he was a super.

In a way, he was glad; there might yet be complications that he didn't know of. At least she was safe. But he was disappointed, too; imagine, if he could have thrilled her the way she had thrilled him! If only a kiss could. . . . He forced himself to think of something else.

"I'll see you soon, dear," he said hurriedly. "There are a thousand things to do now. Be good."

HE FELT cruel, leaving her so abruptly, but he had a

tremendous compulsion to get out into the world and see what challenges it had to offer a man with super-sensitive nerves and reflexes. The ferns held no terrors for him now; in fact, they were beginning to seem too trivial to bother with. He could cope with any problem now. Big stuff. The entire Martian project perhaps—and not as a lowly botanist. No, sir! He was going to get over to the Pentagon and tell those Brass Hats what was wrong with the way they had organized the whole thing. They'd beg him to take over when they had heard a few of his ideas. Let somebody else play with the ferns for a while; he had bigger fish to catch.

He came out of his wife's room and saw Col. Voigt and Rafferty waiting for him. He walked right past them. Voigt called to him, and Harlow ignored him. The G-man stepped forward quickly. John Harlow turned and walked around him. Rafferty and Voigt both reached for him, but Harlow slipped through their fingers easily. He laughed at Voigt's wide open mouth as he ran past him and down the hall

to the stairway. He took the steps three at a time. In a matter of seconds he was on the sidewalk. He sprinted easily for two blocks, dodging curious pedestrians as if they were trees in a park.

When finally he slowed to a walk, he wasn't even breathing deeply. Instead of being exhausted, he felt exhilarated. The flow of oxygen into his lungs was like a taste of champagne. He could actually feel it. And he could feel the blood flowing through his system, making him seem alive all over. His senses had sharpened unbelievably. He could hear, and see, and smell with a sensitivity that he had never imagined. He was impatient to try his taste buds. Sink his teeth into a medium-rare New York Cut. Or feel a sip of dry burgundy trickle down his throat. Or try a rich dessert. Would he be able to stand it? Could a man's senses be too sharp for his own sanity? There was only one way to find out. He began searching for a restaurant.

"I'm alive," he said over and over to himself. "I'm the first man who's ever really been alive."

IV

FOR FOUR days, John Harlow roamed the streets of Washington D. C., looking, listening, smelling, tasting, and feeling. There were almost as many disappointments as there were thrills, but it was all new and exciting. He tried to listen to a symphony orchestra, but the musicians could not satisfy his sensitive ears. He heard little squeaks and scratches and slurs, instead of the pure tones that held the rest of the audience spellbound.

He went to a baseball game, but found the crowd noises and the smells unbearable. The fragrance of powder and perfume at the concert hall had been pleasant enough, though it had all been mixed into a heterogeneous scent without character—but the odor of beer and cigar smoke and perspiration at the ball park nauseated him. There wouldn't be many baseball fans among supers, he suspected.

Twice in the four days he was almost picked up by FBI agents, but managed to elude

them both times. The first instance he caught on to the tailgate of a fastmoving furniture van and swung himself aboard as easily as if he had been playing on parallel bars in a gymnasium; the second time he simply walked across the street. Automobiles came at him from both directions, and pedestrians screamed, expecting to see him smashed to pulp. But he found that he could judge fast-moving objects almost as accurately as slow-moving ones. Nothing touched him.

THEN, ON the fourth day, as he was crossing a busy intersection, an automobile fender brushed against him, almost knocking him down; a second or two later he felt a dull pounding in his leg. For the first time in four days, his body had not recovered instantly and completely from an injury. Even more important, he had seen the car and had tried to dodge it—but had not been quick enough. Slowly the truth worked its way into his consciousness: the effect was beginning to wear off. He was

about to become a normal again.

He had suspected all along that the condition would not be permanent, but it was disappointing now to feel the change taking place.

So that was that, he thought sadly; the party was over. He'd have to go back now and take his punishment. Well, he had lived up to the great tradition of science, he mused. He had been his own guinea pig—even if not intentionally. That afternoon he reported to Col. Voigt at the Pentagon Building.

He spent two hours trying to convince Voigt and Rafferty that he was not a criminal, and that he could still be useful on the Martian project.

Finally the colonel said, "All right, I have to take your word for it, whether I like it or not, because this thing is getting out of hand. Let me tell you where we stand. We tried to put that program of yours into effect, but it isn't running so smoothly. We isolated all the ferns that we could find, and we think we've prevented further spread. So far so good. Then you said that we should look all over Connecticut for

signs of new growth. Right?"

HARLOW nodded. He was beginning to fear the worst.

"Well, Connecticut was only the starting point," Voigt said bitterly. "Already we have found those damn ferns in Labrador, Cuba, Texas, and a dozen points in between. There are twenty cases of contamination that we know of—and that means there are probably two hundred that we don't know of. We have those twenty cases under observation, and they've all been given sedatives of one strength or another; but instead of curing them, the drugs seem to pep them up. They all think they're some kind of supermen. They want to run the whole damned planet, and I'm not so sure that they couldn't. They've shown unbelievable powers..."

Harlow gestured for him to stop. "I know," he said wearily. "I've been there. We've got to develop a more positive cure. Meanwhile, you'll have to keep those people confined, and grab anybody else who develops the symptoms. If we can catch a few in the earliest

stages we might be able to work something out."

Voigt agreed reluctantly to reinstate him on the project, and John Harlow took over a small lab in one of the government research buildings. Raftery stationed one of his G-men in the outer office.

THAT NIGHT at Madison Square Garden, a five-to-one underdog put on an amazing display of boxing and knocked out the lightweight champion of the world in the first round.

The next day, a thief stole a hundred thousand dollar bracelet from a Fifth Avenue jewelry store simply by picking it up and dashing into the street with it. At least a dozen pedestrians made a grab for him, but he eluded them easily. Police officers, reluctant to fire into the crowded street, tried to chase him down; he evaded them, too, and escaped into a subway station.

An unknown jockey brought in three long shots in one day at Laurel Park, and sports-writers agreed that it was the jockey who won the races, not the platers he was riding. The *New York Daily Telegram*

said, "...his skill at judging the pace and threading his way among horses to find almost imperceptible holes was as expert a display of riding ability as trackriders had seen anywhere."

By the end of the week, the entire eastern seaboard was alerted against a mounting wave of burglaries, purse snatchings, and sex assaults. Jails were overflowing with drunks, most of whom developed into mental cases within twenty-four hours. Doctors reported an incredible increase in hypochondria — persons screaming with pain from tiny scratches or light muscular strains, imagining their afflictions to be much greater than they actually were. A bus driver was arrested for driving a loaded bus seventy miles an hour through a suburban area of Boston. The driver laughed at the charge—said he had full control of the vehicle at all times; then he eluded the arresting officers by running, "...wildly, and with amazing speed between a row of apartment buildings."

THERE WERE many such reports and Harlow read

them with increased anxiety. He had hardly slept for a week; he had experimented with every patient whose relatives gave him the necessary permission, trying to find a nerve to counteract the effect of contamination. At the same time, Rafferty had been busy trying to track down the sources of contamination.

Neither of them had met with much success. Harlow discovered that the introduction of a strong drug immediately after contamination was effective, but it was a meaningless cure. All of his subjects had been exposed to the deadly secretion from the Martian ferns for at least six hours before he got to them; and after the first six hours there was only one course for the affliction to take—a complete breakdown of all mental processes.

The main thing that kept gnawing at his insides, however, was the suspicion that someone on the outside was working on the project, too. Someone not connected with it legally, but who knew, nevertheless, how to control the effect—and who, no doubt, was getting rich off the proc-

ess. The evidence was too great to be attributed to coincidence.

THE NEW lightweight champion of the world did not lose his mind. Eight days after his upset victory, he held a press conference. Harlow attended it, and had to admit that the man appeared normal. Where had he been for eight days? His manager only smiled and said, "My boy needed a rest. He earned it, so I saw that he got it."

The unknown jockey at Laurel Park failed to show up for his riding assignments for a few days. When he did, he finished up the track, just as he had done consistently before his one big day.

Most of the purse snatchers who were identified, turned out to be habitual petty criminals who had never before shown any remarkable finesse in their trade. Most of the sex crimes were committed by people with no criminal records at all. Many of the women involved said they had been out with their regular boyfriends who, after a little necking, simply went wild and started mauling

them and tearing at their clothes.

The drunks were different; they were the most pitiful of the lot. They were people who had come into contact with the ferns accidentally and had had no treatment at all. Harlow was able to save only a small number of them. The others followed the example set by Peterson—within twenty-four hours they were hopelessly insane.

Then one morning Harlow received a call from Rafferty to come over to the FBI building. There he was introduced to a mousy little man named Johnny Carlotta who had come into the office voluntarily with information on the "Hormone Racket", as he called it.

"Look what he brought with him," Rafferty said, handing Harlow an envelope with a tip of fern in it. "He says he paid five hundred dollars for it. It was supposed to make him more masculine or something. It didn't work, so he wants us to get his five hundred back."

HARLOW looked at the fern. It had been squeezed almost to a pulp, but it was

unmistakably Martian. Then why didn't it work? Why wasn't the little man either a super or a blubbering idiot?

"What made you think that this fern was worth five hundred dollars?" Harlow asked him. "Isn't that a lot of money to you?"

Carlotta squirmed uncomfortably. "Course it's a lotta money. That's why I'm sq... That's why I want it back. The guy that sold it to me, he said it was worth a fortune. Said he squeezed a little of the juice outta that weed and in a few hours he was like superman. What's more, he proved it."

"How did he prove it?"

"Well, for one thing, he showed me that he could see in the dark—or almost in the dark. He read license plates more than a block away, up a

dark street. Then he gave me a flower to hold in my hand and he told me which hand I had it in just by smellin'—he did that one from ten feet away."

"Anything else?" Harlow asked. He knew that he was the only one in the room who believed Carlotta's story.

"Let's see. Yeah, he ran across the street and back, right through a bunch of wild taxis—they didn't even touch him."

RAFFERTY looked disgusted. "A guy performs a couple of tricks on a street corner and you think he's a superman. Is that what you're trying to give us?"

Carlotta shuffled his feet awkwardly. "There was more to it than that," he said. "I ain't so dumb. I seen those pictures of ferns you put in the



papers, tellin' people to send in any samples they found layin' around. And I saw a guy who became the slickest pick-pocket you ever saw, overnight, just from rubbin' one of them ferns in his fingers. So I put two and two together. I ain't so dumb."

"No, you ain't so dumb," Rafferty taunted him. "Then where's your five hundred bucks?"

Carlotta flushed and remained silent.

Harlow had been studying him intently and trying to figure what had gone wrong. Suddenly he had an idea. He jumped forward and grabbed Carlotta's coat, pulling it down off his shoulders. Carlotta was wearing a sport shirt, with short sleeves. One glance was all that Harlow needed.

"There's your answer," he told Rafferty, pointing to the tiny marks on Carlotta's upper arm. "He's an habitual user of heroin. Probably had a shot right after he used the fern, or just before. The toxic agent in the fern juice was neutralized as fast as it entered his system. That's why it didn't work."

IMMEDIATELY, John Harlow had another idea. Maybe he wasn't up against a clever opponent at all. Those people who developed super nerves could have been light drug addicts. They might have scraped against a fern accidentally... No, he had to reject the idea. The number three contender for the lightweight championship of the world wouldn't have been a dope addict. Some of the others might have been. Some of the petty crooks, and some of the sex criminals—they could have been accidental cases if they had happened to have a narcotic in their blood.

Where did that leave him? Nowhere, he had to admit. If anything, he was worse off than before. Now he had to face the likelihood that only some of the supers had bought their treatments—the question was, which ones?

He turned back to Carlotta. "You want your five hundred, don't you? And you want more than that. You want the guy salted away in jail who made a fool of you. Am I right?"

Carlotta nodded hesitantly. "I guess so. I ain't never squealed before, but after all,

when one of your own pals. . .”

“Sure, I understand,” Harlow interrupted him. “I’ll make you a proposition. You do me a favor, and I’ll give you your five hundred. Mr. Rafferty here will see to it that your double-crossing friend is brought to trial, and he’ll also forget to book you as a dope addict. Is it a deal?”

CARLOTTA was trapped. It had never occurred to him that the FBI would grab him on a dope charge. He hadn’t intended to come to the FBI office. Things just hadn’t worked out right at all. He decided that he’d better take whatever they offered him.

“What’s the favor?” he asked cautiously.

Harlow thought for a moment, then asked, “Does this friend you bought the fern from know that it didn’t work for you?”

“No, I ain’t seen him since—and I better not see him. I’ll slip a—I’ll sock him one.”

“I wouldn’t blame you,” Harlow said confidentially. “Then here’s what I want you to do. I want you to pretend that it did work. I’ll coach you

how to act. Then I want you to contact him and tell him that I’ve got five hundred dollars too, and that I want some fern leaves to squeeze. Will you do it?”

The plan was too subtle for Carlotta, but if it meant getting away from the cops, he was all for it. He agreed.

V

CARLOTTA turned out to be the world’s worst actor, and by nine p. m. that night Harlow decided that he wasn’t likely to improve, so he called off the rehearsals. An appointment was made for eleven o’clock at a cheap hotel on the west side of Washington. John Harlow put on his shabbiest suit and crushed his hat into a fair replica of what he thought a not-so-clever pick-pocket might wear; then he and Carlotta set out for their meeting.

When they arrived, they were met by Carlotta’s friend, another little man—this time of French descent. His name was Paul Davarre. Carlotta’s act was so corny that Harlow

sent him out for a quart of beer at the first opportunity, then settled down to what he hoped would be an enlightening conversation with Davarre.

Davarre was a super—Harlow was almost positive of that—somewhere between the sixth and eighth days, he guessed, though it wasn't easy to tell. A small man stayed under the influence longer than a larger man; he had learned that much from his experiments. That meant that if Davarre was anything brighter than a moron, Harlow would have to watch out for him.

Davarre wasted no time coming to the point. "You got the five hundred?" he asked.

HARLOW showed it to him. Davarre drew an envelope from his wallet and started to exchange it for Harlow's stack of bills.

"Not so fast," Harlow said. "I know a little something about this stuff, and I been readin' the papers." He was tempted to say, "I ain't so dumb," but he didn't. "I know that it don't always work. Some guys have gone crazy after usin' it. How do I know it

won't put me on the idiot list too?"

Davarre narrowed his eyes. "I don't know buddy. I'm only a peddler. Maybe those guys didn't have the right weed. You want the stuff or don't you?"

John Harlow had to decide what to do. Any more hesitation would arouse Davarre's suspicion. If he was a super—and Harlow was sure that he was—he would know that an injection was required to make the fern secretion effective. In that case, he would know that Carlotta had been putting on an act; but anyone would have known that, anyway. Harlow made up his mind to gamble. He reached into his billfold and took out another five hundred dollars.

"There's a bonus," he said, "just between you and me. I want you to make sure that I don't go all the way."

Davarre studied him for a full ten seconds, which was like an eternity to a super. Then he said, "Wait a minute."

He went into the hall and closed the door behind him. Harlow heard the noise of a pay phone—first the coins

dropping, then the dialling—but when Davarre began to talk he kept his voice low, and Harlow couldn't make out anything.

After about a minute Davarre returned. He took the thousand dollars from Harlow's hand and said simply, "Follow me."

Harlow followed.

DAVARRE led the way to an all night garage where his car was parked. Harlow didn't care much for the idea of riding with a super, but it was too late to turn back. He slid into the front seat and prepared himself for a wild ride.

Davarre fooled him; he drove at a fairly respectable speed. Harlow began to wonder if Davarre might have been fooling him all along. Maybe he was not a super—just the nervous type.

He studied the little man more closely—watched the shift of his eyes, and the action of his hands on the steering wheel. No—there was no doubt about it. Davarre was a super; but a highly restrained super—and that was a new one. Harlow began to wonder if he had

bitten off too much this time.

Davarre took no chances of being followed. He stayed on narrow streets and alleys for at least a quarter of an hour. Finally, when he was satisfied, he drove out of the city to the west, crossed the Virginia state line, and drew up in front of a house in a suburban area of Alexandria. Harlow felt like a lamb being led to slaughter as he followed Davarre up the walk to the front door. If things went bad he was willing to take his chances with Davarre; the man was small, and didn't appear to be as pepped-up as most supers. But if there was one more of them in the house, he was a dead pigeon.

THE DOOR opened and Harlow stood face to face with one of the technicians he had fired from his project for being drunk.

"Come in, Doctor," the technician said. "I've been waiting for you. Already got your drink mixed. A trichoma julip—that's what you wanted, wasn't it? Hope you don't insist on a chaser. I'm all out of cocaine—or do you prefer morphine?"

Harlow started to make a

break for it, but Davarre touched him in the ribs with the point of a knife. There was nothing he could do at the moment but accept the invitation to enter, so he did.

He did his best to remain calm, as he was led into the kitchen of the house. He tried to remember what he could about his ex-assistant. He knew the man's name was Ashley, and that he had lived in Alexandria, Virginia. He could have kicked himself. The clue was available all the time and he had muffed it. Now he was in a trap. Harlow knew that he would be no match for Davarre in a test of reflexes, and it was obvious that Ashley wouldn't settle for a mere thousand dollars. He could see bitter hatred in the man's eyes.

"All planned, I suppose?" Harlow asked casually, as Ashley motioned for him to be seated.

"Only since Mr. Davarre's phone call," Ashley replied. "All my operators were warned to be on the watch for you. But that little pickpocket you bribed is not a member of my team."

"Team, you say! Got or-

ganized quick. How did you catch on, or would that be giving away classified information?"

ASHLEY shrugged complacently. "I've got nothing to hide from you—not now. I found out the hard way, same as you. I took a few tranquilizers when I began to feel on edge; the rest was automatic."

"How about the other boy who worked with us? Moreno, I think his name was. He in on this with you?"

"No. Moreno is trying to cut out paper dolls, along with your friend, Stauffer. I understand they're not too handy with the scissors. Which reminds me, Doctor—your drink."

He went to a sideboard and mixed a brandy and soda. Then he dangled a frond from a Martian fern in the liquid for a half-minute, eyeing Harlow all the while.

"More elegant this way, don't you think?" He held the drink out. "Of course if you prefer, Davarre here could rub a little on the back of your neck."

John Harlow's mind was

racing frantically, searching for an escape. What effect would the brandy have? He didn't know. He supposed that taking the secretion internally would hasten the process. He didn't see what he had to gain from postponing the reaction anyway. Ashley would undoubtedly keep him tied up, or locked in a room somewhere during the early phase. Later, when the deterioration period began, it wouldn't matter where he was...

"What say, Doctor? Not thirsty? Rather have a little scratching on the neck?"

HARLOW lunged at the sneer on Ashley's face, and at the same time tried to knock the glass from his hand. Ashley barely moved, but it was enough; Harlow shot past without so much as touching him. He could hardly believe it. Ashley showed none of the usual characteristics of the super, but there he was, as quick as a cat—and he had been contaminated more than three weeks before.

Harlow's spirit of resistance left him. He couldn't fight two supers, especially not two like

Ashley and Davarre. They appeared to have all the useful qualities of supers—and none of the disadvantages.

"I guess you win," Harlow said weakly. "But I don't see why you're sore at me. I had no way of knowing that you weren't really drunk; you sure as the dickens acted like it."

Ashley smiled and handed Harlow the brandy tumbler. "I'm not sore at you, Doctor. And believe me, I do understand how you made the mistake. Anyone would have done the same. But now you're in my way. I have a little deal cooking, and you're the man most likely to put the fire out—so you have to go. You understand my position too, don't you?"

Harlow held the glass but didn't drink. He wanted to stall as long as possible, though he didn't know what good it would do him. He had given up hoping that one of Rafferty's men had been able to follow him. In his heart he knew that if he got out of this trap he would do it on his own.

"By the way, you seem to have refined the technique," he said to Ashley. "You and

your friend here don't seem to be as jumpy as most of the cases I've studied."

Ashley motioned to Davarre and the Frenchman came forward and took the glass from Harlow's hand. A moment later, John Harlow felt something cool against the nape of his neck. It was followed by a light scratching. Davarre was rubbing a Martian frond against his skin.

"I didn't have to be quite as careful with my guinea pigs as you, Doctor," Ashley answered him. "And you're right. I have refined the technique. Watch." He picked up a needle and jabbed it into his palm. His eyes didn't flinch.

"See, no pain. After all, we can't have the future rulers of the planet over-sensitive to pain. They'd be too vulnerable."

HARLOW let his jaw sag as he assumed Ashley expected him to. "Rulers of the planet!" he exclaimed. "You have got a deal cooking. How do you plan to take over—by recruiting pickpockets at five hundred dollars apiece?"

Davarre scratched him a lit-

tle harder. Harlow was trying to ignore what was happening to him, but inwardly he was beginning to feel sick. He knew now that he should have let Rafferty handle the cloak and dagger phase. He wasn't cut out for it.

"There'll be a place for everybody," Ashley said, "and it isn't as melodramatic as it sounds. But to answer you truthfully—no, we don't expect too much from ex-pickpockets. Their five hundred dollar fees are helpful right now with the finances, and we'll need a rank and file, as the army says, but the key figures will come from higher levels, obviously. This is no beer-hall operation. Too bad we can't trust you. You could probably move our schedule ahead a week or two if you were with us."

HARLOW grimaced ruefully. "A few more passes across the back of my neck and I'll be on your side, won't I?"

Ashley laughed. "No, I'm afraid not. This hormone, or whatever it is—and I'll admit to you, Doctor, that I don't know what it is—brings out some of our traits, but it

doesn't really change our basic character. If you aren't a revolutionary at heart, we can't use you."

Davarre finally stopped scratching and Ashley told him to get a piece of rope from a closet in the laundry. Davarre went after the rope, leaving the door open behind him.

Now or never, John Harlow thought, as he sprang from his chair.

This time, he didn't try to grab Ashley on the first jump. He pretended to, but he stopped short just inches away. Ashley moved confidently to one side, dodging what he thought was Harlow's desperation lunge. Instead of being off-balance, Harlow was ready for him; he struck out with a sharp jab, hoping to catch Ashley in that infinitesimal moment before he could dodge again.

He almost succeeded; he felt his knuckles brush Ashley's chin, but it was only a glancing blow. It was enough to jar Ashley off-balance, however, and Harlow tried another jab. Unfortunately he was a little off-balance himself that time, and Ashley recovered first. Again

Harlow felt his knuckles graze the other man's chin. Then John Harlow felt Ashley's rapid jabs against his own face.

Ashley must have hit him a hundred times before he went down. He felt the blood gushing from his nose and heard a singing in his ears. Over the singing, he heard Ashley say, "Hurry up with that rope." Then the singing grew louder and he closed his eyes wearily.

VI

WHEN HE awoke this time, it was to find himself lying on the floor, securely bound and gagged. Not only were his ankles and wrists tied, they were tied together, and behind him. His back was arched painfully, and the gag bit into the corners of his mouth. He couldn't have felt more helpless if he had found himself falling from the top of the Washington Monument.

He was still in the kitchen of the house in Alexandria, but Ashley and Davarre were gone. The light had been turned off, but the room was

not black. The first signs of daylight came in through the window. That meant that he had been unconscious for at least four hours, maybe more. Less than two hours to go! If he didn't get a treatment within two hours, he was finished.

It might as well have been two days, or two weeks, he thought, as he tested the rope around his wrists. Then he heard the voices.

They were subdued, and obviously came from a distant part of the house, yet he could understand most of what was said. The discovery thrilled him; it meant that he was a super again.

ASHLEY was doing most of the talking.

"...there are almost two thousand of us now," Ashley was saying, "and it's time we got started. We've already got men planted in the cigaret factories and coffee companies. Here's a list of the brands that will be contaminated starting day after tomorrow—Thursday, that is. Pass the word along. Nobody smokes any of these brands, or drinks any of

this coffee, until you hear from me.

"Now the doses are mild. The first symptoms will appear in about ten hours. After that they'll have about ten more hours to buy a treatment. That means we have to start advertising by Friday. We'll hit the papers, and radio and TV, and the magazines with ads that won't mean anything except to the people who are beginning to feel our symptoms. A treatment costs five hundred bucks—more if you think the patient can go it, but five hundred is the minimum. It's five hundred or the booby hatch.

"We have enough doctors to handle the treatments, but each doctor will have to be well guarded. I figure six of your men can handle any number of G-men who might show up, in case they get curious—as I'm sure they will. Remember now, we know nothing about contamination. We just developed a treatment for an ailment that seems to be going around. Understand?"

THERE WAS a murmur of assent. John Harlow estimated from the murmur that in the room, maybe a few

more. Probably, the nucleus of the whole gang was right there in the house, and he was helpless to do anything about it.

"Then we sell to anybody, is that right?" a voice asked.

"We collect from anybody," Ashley corrected him. "But we'll be very choosy who gets the real treatment and who gets a drink of water. We don't want any scientists—they'd just give us trouble. There will be ample time to train our own scientists later on. We do want bright, healthy kids, between sixteen and twenty. They'll be most susceptible to the training program. We don't want any politicians, and we don't want any old people. Soldiers and sailors are okay, but no high-rankers. And, of course, we wouldn't be so brutal as to let a slick chick go to the nut house just because she didn't have five hundred bucks."

"Now you're talkin'," somebody said.

"Okay, it's almost daylight," Ashley hurried on. "Let's spread out. Remember now, we don't meet here any more. You have the new address. See you there Friday, midnight. Should have plenty to report by then.

And remember what I said about keeping your eyes open for guys who speak foreign languages—especially Russian. We want to get our overseas agents going before somebody beats us to it."

HARLOW was absolutely dumbfounded. In a space of three weeks Ashley had not only conceived of a plan to take over the entire planet, he had actually set up the organization to do it. And his plan was sound. Increasing large sections of the country would be at his mercy in a matter of days, if he succeeded in contaminating coffee and tobacco. Did Ashley actually have enough of the deadly ferns to do it? Harlow didn't know; he didn't know how much would be required. Maybe only an infinitesimal amount, given enough time, and no treatment. It was unbelievable—those skimpy little ferns, as Voigt had called them. . .

The scraping of chairs across the floor, and then the shuffling of feet brought him to the realization that now John Harlow definitely had to do something. He didn't have the

slightest idea what it could be, but it was life or death now.

The shuffling of the footsteps extended to the front of the house. He heard the first sounds of automobiles being started. One by one they drove away. He counted four. Then he heard Ashley's voice again, this time from outside.

"Get my bag from the bedroom. I'll check on the doc, then we'll take off."

HARLOW heard a door open and close, then another door, then the sound of footsteps approaching the kitchen. He tested his bonds one last time. He felt strong—stronger than ever before in his life—but the ropes wouldn't give an iota. The frustration almost brought tears to his eyes.

Ashley came into the kitchen and bent over Harlow, raising his eyelids one at a time, just as Larkin had done in the hospital.

"All right, Doctor, quit your kidding," he said. "I know you're awake. Open your eyes."

Harlow opened his eyes.

"I have to leave you now, Doc," Ashley said with mock sadness. "I want to thank you

for giving me this great opportunity. Someday, I'll erect a plaque in your honor. '*John Harlow, sucker*', I'll put on it. That okay by you?"

HE BENT down and slapped Harlow across the face several times. The blows stung, but not as much as Harlow thought they might. Apparently part of his system had developed an immunity—maybe the effect could be controlled completely—so people could have super-sensitive reflexes without the accompanying susceptibility to pain. These thoughts went through Harlow's brain in an instant; nevertheless, he was disgusted with himself for thinking of such things at a time like that. He forced himself to concentrate on Ashley. The sneering face was only a foot away, but that foot was like a mile. Then Ashley reached down to slap him again.

Harlow put everything he had in a tremendous lurch and caught Ashley's hand between his knees. Instantly he clamped his knees together fiercely and rolled over, dragging Ashley off balance. Ashley recovered

immediately and began beating his fist against Harlow's ribs. Harlow had no freedom of movement at all. There were only two things he could do: Hang on to Ashley's hand that was trapped between his knees, and roll about on the floor. Everything else was excluded from his mind. He pressed his knees together until they became bruised, and he thrashed about on the floor like a be-headed chicken.

His head struck a table leg and the pain made his eyes smart. His elbows became raw from banging against the floor. But he gritted his teeth and clamped his knees harder against Ashley's hand.

AFTER A while, he no longer felt any pain in his head or in his elbows; he no longer felt Ashley's fist pounding into his ribs. He felt nothing but Ashley's hand caught between his knees. Unexpectedly, he had discovered a new power of the super—the ability to concentrate all energy and all feeling in one part of the body. He was actually draining his system of every ounce of energy it possessed and forcing

it into the muscles of his legs.

He didn't know how long he had been dragging Ashley around on the floor when he finally realized that his opponent's body had gone limp. He strained his neck to look at Ashley's face.

It was horrible. His nostrils were dilated, and blood poured out from ruptured blood vessels. His mouth was drawn back in agony, baring his teeth. There was a deep cut on his cheekbone where his head had hit the sharp corner of the stove. Worst of all were the sickening noises coming from deep inside his chest as he tried to catch his breath. Even as Harlow released him, Ashley gave up the battle and rolled over onto his back. Harlow listened for his breathing, then for his pulse. Both were quiet. Ashley was dead.

SLOWLY, Harlow squirmed himself free of the man he had just killed. The sight of Ashley's hand almost nauseated him. The flesh was entirely gone from it. The fingers were mashed and broken as if they had gone through a press...

Again he heard footsteps ap-

proaching the kitchen. He had forgotten about Davarre. Apparently the entire struggle with Ashley had only taken a few seconds, and Davarre was only now coming to investigate.

Harlow had no plan for dealing with Davarre. It was too much to hope for that he would get another break as he had with Ashley—Davarre would be on his guard. Had it all been for nothing after all?

He lay on the kitchen floor and waited, his eyes focussed on the door.

When it opened the beam from a flashlight played about the room, paused on Ashley's body, then flipped over to Harlow.

"Well, look who's here?" a familiar voice called out.

The light was turned on and Harlow looked up into the faces of Rafferty and two of his G-men.

IT DIDN'T take Harlow long to rub the circulation back into his arms and legs, once he was freed. In a matter of minutes he felt wonderful. Better still, he didn't have the compelling urge to run around con-

quering people and setting up new world-orders that he had had before.

"I hoped you might have followed me," he said gratefully, "but I was afraid we lost you. Why did you wait so long? I might not have been so lucky, you know."

Rafferty looked at him with wide open innocence. "We did lose you. I didn't know you were within miles of this place until I opened this door a minute ago. We followed Larkin."

John Harlow was puzzled. "Larkin? What's he got to do with it?"

"Your case must have interested him more than we suspected," Rafferty said. "Shortly after you left the hospital, a large shipment of drugs was stolen. The evidence all pointed to Larkin. We knew he wasn't alone in whatever he was doing, so we began trailing him. When he showed up here this morning for a meeting, we waited until it broke up and nabbed the entire gang. Now suppose you tell me what you're doing here."

HARLOW told him, and also told him about the

coffee and tobacco scheme. A search of the men had already turned up several copies of the list of contaminated products, so Rafferty got on the phone and issued a stop order on all their shipments.

"Now what?" Harlow wanted to know. "Looks like you got the leaders of the gang—how do you go about catching the rest of the two thousand?"

Rafferty winced. "We don't have a single lead," he admitted. "Maybe one of these guys will talk, maybe not. You got any suggestions?"

Harlow shook his head. "I'm all out of suggestions. I just want to pick up my wife and get back to Connecticut. I'll take a ride in to Washington if somebody's going that way."

Rafferty gave him the ride, and tried to help him relax by not talking about the case. He turned on the car radio but Harlow couldn't stand it.

"One of the hazards of this affliction—I can hear too well sometimes. Would you believe it, I can hear that trombone player's lips move when he takes a breath between notes?"

"I believe it if you say so. You'd be a challenge to a Hi-

Fi manufacturer, wouldn't you? I don't think I want any part of..."

"*That's it!*" Harlow shouted excitedly. "Hi-Fi, that's the way we'll catch them. With high frequency sound—the way they run mice out of buildings. It'll drive them crazy."

Rafferty didn't need any more; he had once studied audio engineering himself. "Don't worry, we'll make it loud enough. I can be a devil when it comes to manufacturing noises."

AND THAT was the end of the threat from the Martian ferns—for the moment.

Secretly, Harlow made a super out of Ellen, and from then on—they stayed pretty much to themselves. During the debate in Washington he was called in to give his opinion, and he suggested that if the U. S. didn't legalize supers some other country might—but nobody seemed to worry about that. Harlow didn't worry about it particularly either. He was only too happy to get back to Connecticut to his lab—and to Ellen.