

FANTASTIC

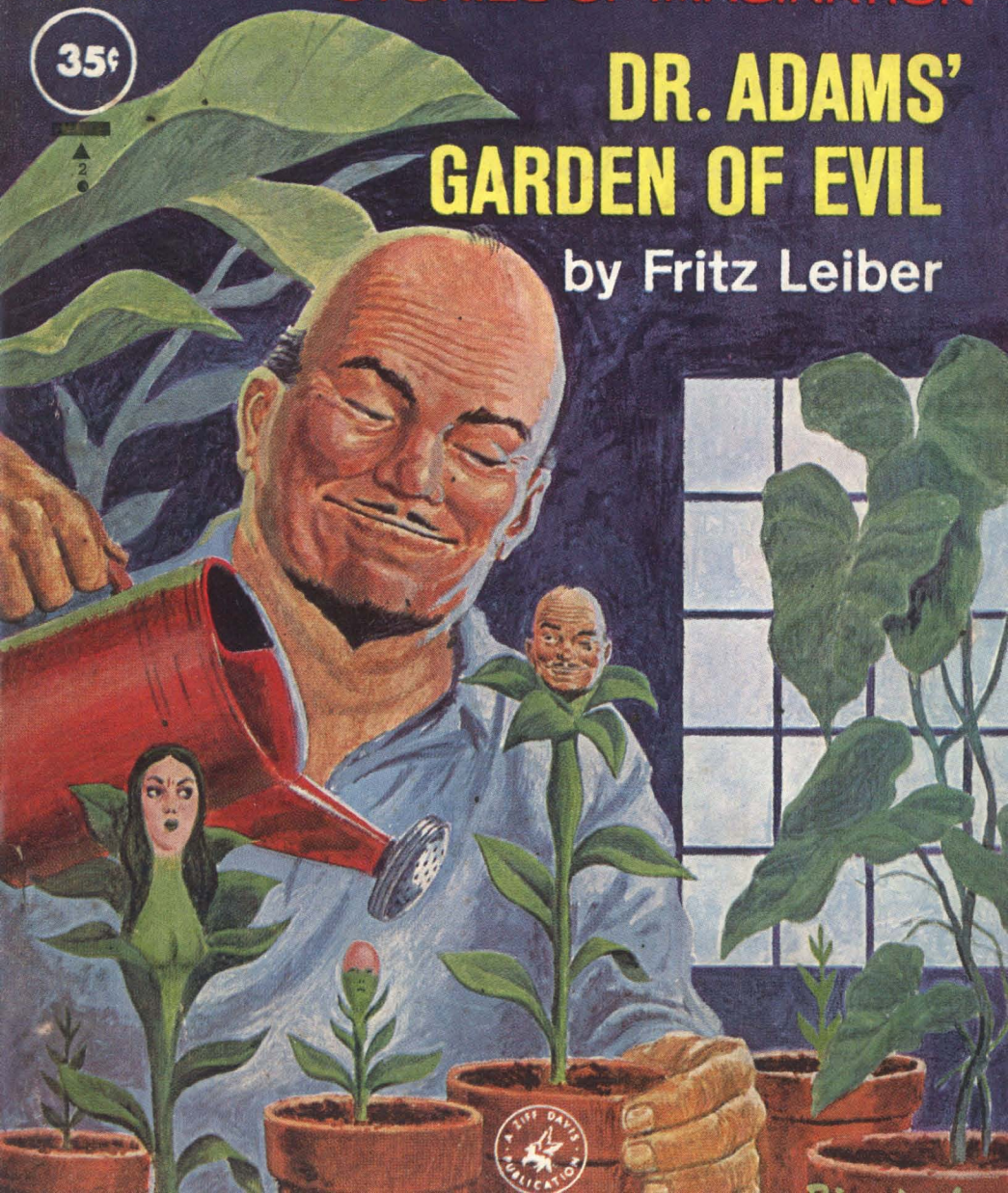
FEBRUARY

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

35¢

DR. ADAMS' GARDEN OF EVIL

by Fritz Leiber



FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

FEBRUARY 1963

Volume 12 Number 2

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

William B. Ziff, Chairman of the Board
(1946-1953)

William Ziff, President

W. Bradford Briggs, Executive Vice
President

Hershel B. Sarbin, Vice President and
General Manager

M. T. Birmingham, Jr., Vice President
and Treasurer

Robert P. Breeding, Circulation Di-
rector

Charles Housman, Financial Vice
President

Stanley B. Greenfield, Vice President

Editorial Director
NORMAN M. LOBSENZ

Editor
CELE GOLDSMITH

Ziff-Davis Publishing Company
Editorial and Executive Offices
One Park Avenue
New York 16, New York
ORegoo 8-7200
Advertising Manager,
Martin Gluckman

Midwestern and Circulation Office
434 South Wabash Avenue
Chicago 5, Illinois
WAbash 2-4811

Western Office
9025 Wilshire Boulevard
Beverly Hills, California
CRestview 4-0265

NOVELET

- LET 'EM EAT SPACE (A Fantasy Classic)
By William Grey Beyer 44

SHORT STORIES

- DR. ADAMS' GARDEN OF EVIL
By Fritz Leiber 8
- THE TITAN IN THE CRYPT
By J. G. Warner 28
- FINAL DINING
By Roger Zelazny 77
- THE MASTERS
By Ursula K. LeGuin 85
- BLACK CAT WEATHER
By David R. Bunch 100
- PERFECT UNDERSTANDING
By Jack Egan 104

FEATURES

- EDITORIAL 4
- ACCORDING TO YOU 6
- COMING NEXT MONTH 27

Cover: Lloyd Birmingham

Illustrating *Dr. Adams' Garden of Evil*

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, 424 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.



Copyright © 1963 by Ziff-Davis Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

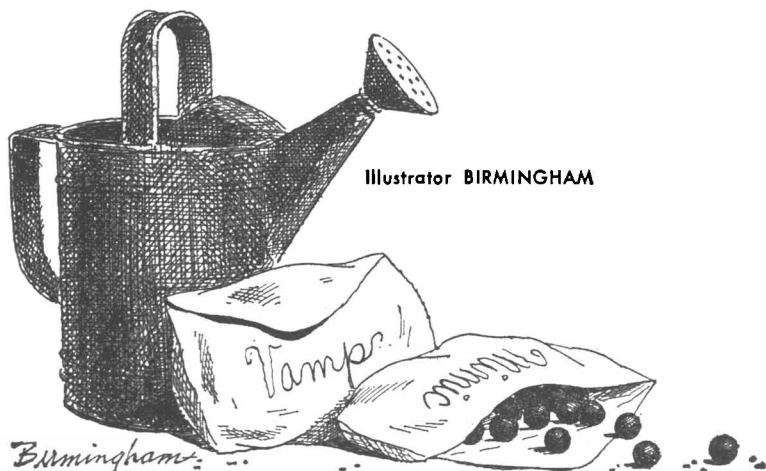
*Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
wrote Alexander Pope.*

*What witchery gave him the foresight to know
about the secret cellar in which was planted . . .*

DR. ADAMS' Garden of EVIL

By FRITZ LEIBER

TAGGART ADAMS—Tag to a few other millionaires in the magazine world and to the top echelon of his staff—glared across the jade parquetry of his desk and ten yards of tiger-skin-



Illustrator BIRMINGHAM



carpeted publisher's office at the jasper-inlaid pneumatically-snubbed door which Erica Slyker had nevertheless just now managed to slam on her exit.

From twelve frosted rear-illuminated glass panels in the walls, eleven superb Kittens-of-the-Month in penultimate stages of undress ogled down at him eagerly, but they might as well have been in neck-to-toe Mother Hubbards or black shrouds and executioner's masks for all the notice they got from Tag.

A deep flush of rage and shame suffused his normally leering stout-Satan's face as his memory replayed the last side of his conversation with Erica:

ERICA SLYKER: Being Kitten-of-the-Month ruined my sister! I would no more consider—

TAG ADAMS: Ruined? Ridiculous! No one laid a hand on Alice while she was here. I still offer you—

ERICA: (*fiercely*): Perhaps it would have been better if they had! This six-story pad of yours is plastered with sex, but there's not an ounce left of the genuine man-woman article. Power-drive and fear-drive have seen to that.

TAG: I'll overlook those bad-tempered remarks. Miss Slyker, I'm sorry as you are that several weeks *after* she was resident here, your sister suffered some sort of illness that—

ERICA: Alice went into a five-

day coma! She awakened from it with an empty child-mind, eaten with vanity, all talents lost, fodder for the mental hospital! Lobotomized mind! Vegetable mind! (*Rises from leopard-upholstered chair and points at a Kitten resembling herself.*) And you still dare flaunt her picture? (*Seizes a massive silver ashtray and hurls it at the offending panel, which shatters, the flesh-pink shards clinking softly down on the wall-to-wall tiger-skin and inside the illumination recess.*) Ha! Witch Queen's curses on you!

TAG (*coolly*): I trust you've entirely discharged your infantile angers and will now hear wisdom. Your criminally destructive action I pardon—I like Kittens to have a *little* tiger in them. I *still* offer you—

ERICA: Pah! Sooner than be photographed for *Kittens* magazine with one shoulder strap slipped, I'd make love to you! Ah! That frightens you, doesn't it? I rather thought it would. Good day, Mr. Adams! (*Exits, slamming jasper door.*)

TAG ADAMS took a very deep breath, slowly let it out, then looked down at the seven large glossy color prints neatly spread on the finely-morticed jade of his desk. Each showed Erica Slyker in a pearl-worked pearl-gray suit that beautifully set off her long

lustrous blue-black hair. Each was posed against a background of jungle-leaved indoor greenery. In each the long pale face bore an expression of infuriating haughtiness, the short, bee-stung lips puckered in smiling contempt, the high-arched brows lightly pinching between them a queenly frown.

He selected the photo that seemed haughtiest, then methodically crushed the other six in his gardener's left hand, as a first-beard adolescent crushes beer cans, and tossed the jagged balls into a tiger-skin wastebasket.

Then he hurried to the chair Erica Slyker had occupied, scanned its fabric at close range, and finally with a grunt of satisfaction picked up something from the leopard skin between his middle finger and thumb.

Returning to his desk, he deposited in a small white envelope a single long lustrous blue-black hair, closed the envelope and clipped it to the uncrumpled color print.

"She prate of witchcraft?" he breathed softly. "Ho!"

He rummaged rapidly through a couple of drawers until he found the color print of a rising red-headed young female off-Broadway dramatic talent who had recently refused to become America's Crown Princess of Sex Kittens for thirty days and he

checked the envelope clipped to it to make sure three green nail clippings were still there. Next he thrust both prints in a large manila envelope, tucked it under his left elbow, and hurried through the jasper door. Then he was hastening along the deluxe vari-colored corridors of what one recklessly irreverent columnist called "Kitten Kastle" and, eschewing the gilded openwork antique elevator, down the rainbow flights of stairs with their shadowed kiss-niches and half curtained woo-booths, which were strictly off limits to both visitors and personnel except for publicity photographs.

It was 7 A.M. and tonight's party was approaching its aseptically orgiastic climax. Two widely-placed jazz bands racketed Dixie and twist towards each other. The corridors were filled with hordes of beautiful girls with daring décolletages and other carefully-calculated anatomic exposures and with hosts of sharply-dressed, worried, watchful men.

Yet despite the rapid writhings of the dancers and the posturings of the comedians and the chattering rushes of the self-appointed party-energizers, no member of one sex ever touched a member of the other except for the minimum permitted contacts of the dance and the fleetingest finger-touches.

Ever present was the fear that someone would do something the papers or the police could seize on, something *gauche*, like becoming naively romantic or drunkenly ribald.

AS the Lord and Master of Kitten Kastle came trotting along, manila envelope under elbow, each man drew aside respectfully, with a fawning manly smile ready to pop if the ruddy, bald, sharp-bearded Satan's face should glance his way, while each girl assumed her meltingest ready-to-please-milord expression and thrust forward invitingly, but not at all pushingly, her lips, throat, bosom, hip, dimpled knee, or whatever other portion of her anatomy she considered her *chef-d'oeuvre*.

But Taggart Adams looked neither to the right or to the left. Men irritated him, and as for girls his hypnotist had been trying for the past three years to revive his aggressive male interest in them, with little success. He was hardly the bold lusty wastrel indicated by his beard and tiny mustache, which were merely his variant of G.I. standard for publishers and editors of "magazines for men."

At the moment the only girl who interested him in any way was one with blue-black tresses draping a pale mask of contempt, and she would soon be

taken care of in a rather special fashion.

As for the stuff crowding the corridors . . . well, the jeweled sex-puppets—*poupeés de l'amour*—were jiggling around the well-disciplined dark-suited male marionettes, the tombstones were jumping at an hour when squares went to work . . . it was sufficient.

Downward and ever downward trotted Taggart Adams. Past the turquoise swimming pool with its bevy of bikinied beauties, each with her invisible guard rail. Past the pool's 25-foot-deep "basement," where a lone girl with aqualung and with silver-blue hair streaming like the beautiful long iridescent deadly filaments of a Portuguese man-of-war glided among the living corals behind the 2-inch-thick view window—and in front of which a boy and girl in passionate embrace jumped apart tremblingly at Tag's approach, blenching at the merciless frown he shot them. Finally he was alone in the somber oak-paneled pale-tapestry-shrouded corridor below even the watery basement.

A quick glance either way assured him of privacy. He proceeded to tap an oaken rosette in a quick three-one rhythm. A silvery-tawny panel slid silently aside yielding moist warmth and flower odors. A kind of tangible night billowed out, and Tag

slipped inside. The panel closed swiftly behind him.

HE was in an extensive room that was in deep darkness except for a dab of bluish light forty feet away dimly illuminating four photos on a wall and silhouetting just in front of it a table set with a few small earthenware pots, a phone, and hand-size gardening tools. But although the rest of the room was black-dark at first sight, there pressed from it an intense aura of femininity.

As ones eyes got fully adjusted, there was the barest suggestion of ranks on ranks of thick-stemmed, leaf-hooded flowers—flowers giving ghostly disturbing gleams of russet and gold and auburn and ivory and rosier hues . . . or perhaps the suggestion was more of rows of slim living, sleeping dolls hung by their hair deep amid greenery . . . or . . . at any rate, most tantalizing and strange and disturbing.

With a confidence born of perfect knowledge of the room's contents, Tag walked briskly to the potting table and went to work. He set the phone aside. From a tiny shelf below the photographs and their bluish night-light he took a brownish bulging envelope labeled in spidery hand and brown-faded ink "Mimics" (after quickly setting back one

labeled "Vamps" which he'd first picked up).

From the almost crumbly-old envelope he carefully withdrew a round black gleaming seed a little larger than a plum's, wrapped around it eleven times Erica Slyker's hair, thrust it two inches deep into the moist grainy soil of one of the pots, and patted the surface flat.

"*Requiescat,*" he said solemnly as he dusted the gritty loam off his fingers above the pot, "but not *in pace.*"

He carefully leaned the color print of Erica face-inward against the pot and drew a second seed from the envelope, but then he grew lazily pensive and his stern expression softened as his gaze went to the four large old photos affixed to the wall. The one figure common to them all was that of a tall elderly lady in the chin-high, wrist-and-floor-long dress of the last century, with a piercing-visaged aristocratic face, the thin beaky nose and narrow jutting chin pointing a little toward each other like those of a story-book witch.

A genuine soft affectionate smile came to Tag's lips, instead of the tight Satan's-grimace he invariably showed the world. It was always so nice and relaxing to be, even fancy-wise or photo-wise, with truly elderly women—sprightly, gossipy, thankful old girls, wittily waspish at times,

even vastly malicious, but totally devoid of the insolence of the sex-urge. And then Tag had so many reasons, including the supreme one, for feeling friendly and grateful toward his brilliant Great-aunt Veronica, world-famous as a biologist in certain mystical and un-stuffy scientific circles, who ten years ago had bequeathed him much more than her monetary riches.

HE gently rubbed the second seed between his fingertips and touched the still-bulging envelope with a miser's tenderness as he rested his eyes and his feelings on the four photographs.

First, his Great-aunt, not so elderly, standing with Luther Burbank in a cactus garden.

In the second, very elderly indeed, she was accepting in Tiflis the reverent handclasp of Trofim Lysenko, Soviet proponent of the theory that environment shapes genetic heredity, at some time before that rogue-scientist's nominally voluntary resignation as head of the All-Union Academy of Agricultural Science.

In the third she stood alone and grimly smiling in front of the shut doors of what a brass plate identified as the headquarters of the American Botanic Society. That was the one signed "Veronica Adams, D.S." in the same large spidery script as that on the old brown envelopes.

The last showed her in a Parisian dining room together with a group of quaintly bearded men in full evening dress—all the faces almost flat white from an overly-powerful magnesium flash. She was receiving from them the Meta-Lamarckian Medal for her paper, "Seventeen Verified Instances of the Shaping of Plant Development by Thoughts, Symbols, Pictures, and Exodermal tokens."

Tag's expression grew more pensive still and he began to tug gently and rhythmically with the hand holding the seed at his wide-based sharp-pointed chin-beard. His eyes closed and his face grew tranquil. He began to snore very softly.

His hands did not fall asleep, however. After a bit, although his face did not change at all, they went busily to work, planting the second seed without more ado in the second pot, over which he was leaning closely, extracting from its envelope and planting a "Vamps" seed in a third pot just beside the second, finally replacing both envelopes on their shelf.

Then his hands grew still and his face woke up with a shake and a start. For a moment he was frightened, then he realized he'd simply been dozing standing up—he'd been driving himself lately and Great-aunt Veronica was such a pleasantly

soporific topic for reverie. Strange, though, he thought, the dazed abstraction he'd felt for a moment had been very like the states of mind he used to experience when his hypnotist had implanted some particularly strong suggestion—but he hadn't summoned the man for the last three months.

He'd had a flash of the same sort of feeling sometime earlier today, he recalled. Yes, it had occurred during the first part of his interview with the abominable Erica Slyker.

But *she* was well taken care of now. In fact *all* his work here was done, he decided after the quickest of glances, and it would come to fruition in due course.

Meanwhile he had no business loitering away a moment more at this time of the month, he reminded himself as he spun around and trotted through the dark toward the secret panel.

There was a sharp *bzzz* behind him. It made him jump—for an instant it activated his old fear of bees, a fear most unsuitable in a gardener, but so deep that even his hypnotist had never been able to counteract it.

Then he realized it was only the phone . . . and he kept on toward the secret panel. In a flash of intuition he'd know it had to be his Executive Managing Editor and that for once the bumbler had a thoroughly ade-

quate reason for calling him at his secretest number.

There was grueling work to be done for the next five days, and not one moment to delay.

Specifically, *Kittens* had to be put to bed—not stupid pushy cuddle-crazy girls, but something really important . . . the next issue of a stunningly successful national magazine!

DURING that time Taggart Adams hardly thought once of his secret garden or of the incidents leading up to his last visit there.

During these periods when he couldn't spare time himself, the garden was cared for by an elderly Sicilian deafmute of sub-moronic intelligence but absolute trustworthiness with growing things—his ancestors had trained vines and coaxed hedges for the ancient Romans.

But now at last the next *Kittens* was abed on its whirring ink-acrid presses, the first run mercilessly checked and rechecked, and Tag had a full recovery-week to do exactly what he wanted—no parties to appear at, no avidly hopeful new girls to check over, no boringly protracted undress photography sessions, no new geniuses to give a grudging hearing, no V.I.P.'s to bully and charm . . . and only one or two members, if that many, of his house-or-magazine-

staff knowing what he really was up to or even where he really was.

He could canoe-copt through Canada's hiddenmost lakes, submarine the West Indies in his technically-illegal private submersible, dig London, take a whirl through the Continental capitol, shoot Africa with the seventh wealthiest man in the world, study the Swiss banking system from the inside, or simply tend his secret garden . . . quietly vegetate . . .

Well, in any case he would start off with a look-see at the last, he decided.

This time when the panel closed behind him, it was "day" inside. Great glowing checkerboards of window-simulating, sunshine-shedding panels in ceiling and walls made him squint. He patiently let his eyes accommodate and after a minute he saw his garden in its full glory.

To either side of the aisle between him and the potting table, row on row of potted plants went back in rising banks of the walls of the huge room. Each plant was like a large jack-in-the-pulpit or love-in-a-mist or fever-tree flower, in that each thick-stemmed bloom was canopied and bowered by great dark green leaves of the sort botanists called spathes and bracts.

But these must be jills-in-the-pulpit, for each green alcove en-

shrined a flowering slim girl about twelve inches high. Many showed only their faces, though with swellings in the stem indicating where bosoms and hips were developing.

The less developed showed just a tassel of blonde, brown, reddish, or other-colored hair above a green head-bulge, or perhaps the green husk opening enough to reveal pale forehead and tiny darting eyes.

In the more developed the sheath of the stem had split down the front and peeled back, like a bolero jacket or green dressing robe, half revealing a delectable torso, baby pink yet an anatomically perfect replica of some celebrated figure.

FOR as one studied these flower-girls, it became apparent that they were not some exotic genus unlinked to individual humanity. One began to recognize faces and forms.

Here were the opulent or sweetly up-tilted breasts of some reigning screen star. *There* was the profile of a celebrated society beauty, or winsome junior member of a royal family. A few of the more memorable Kittens-of-the-Month were represented, but on the whole the social trend was upward. Not every plant was unique, however. There were several groups of identicals, including three full blooms in a front

row which resembled Erica Slyker just enough to make one realize they or their plant-ancestor must have been grown with the help of photos and exodermal tokens of her sister Alice.

A very few of the long-stemmed girls bulged with seeds. These had their eyes closed, but most of the rest were peering about, chiefly toward Tag.

And although they were armless they clearly had more than ocular powers of movement, for a small rustling went through the ranked flowers now, as if a tiny breeze were sifting through the subterranean hothouse, troubling the canopy leaves; stems twisted just a little toward Tag; minute lips parted and there was the faintest shrill sibilance in the air, as of voices almost too high to be sensed at all.

Tag took deep languorous breaths of the varied girl-scent, feeling utterly content.

This was the place where the world was perfect for him, he decided for the thousandth time: the place where girls were not big troublesome bounding meaty things with rights and ideas and desires, but fragile blooms with just enough consciousness and limited life to make them interesting; fragile blossoms, blooms to be potted and repotted, tenderly nurtured, watered and fertilized and sprayed, brought to the acme of perfection, and then

carefully hand-pollinated and set to seed, or ruthlessly snapped off and extirpated forever as the whim took him.

Pinning up girls in a million-copy magazine was pretty good, admittedly. But potting them in a garden . . . oh, how much he owed to his Great-aunt Veronica and her patient largely-unappreciated research and her mimic-seeds! What stretches of bliss he'd enjoyed during the seven years since he'd chanced on the black spheroids in her effects and stumbled on their purpose!

ALMOST his sole regret was that he couldn't regrow his Great-aunt herself. He'd tried—he had a daguerreotype of her as a 17-year-old and a lock of her girl-hair—but it had turned out that the process wouldn't work for dead women. Else he'd have had not only his perpetually blooming row of "Veronicas," but his Cleopatras, Madam Dubarrys, Nell Gwyns, Lola Montezes, and Jean Harlows—granting he could locate authentic pictures and/or genuine exodermal tokens, even if only a pinch of ashes. But apparently for a girl-plant to develop properly it needed to "draw on" the living original girl in some obscure vampirish way, telepathic or sub-etheric, who could say?—since even his Great-aunt had had no wholly satisfactory theory.

The effect on the girl whose seed had been planted with proper picture and token varied greatly. Frequently there was none at all, so far as Tag could discover. Sometimes she would be reported as confined to bed or sent to hospital with a mild undiagnosed fever or in a light (or occasionally heavy) coma, especially during the period of blooming. Such symptoms generally terminated, and the girl returned to her normal life, with the withering and/or seeding of her plant. If Tag continued to re-seed her, as in the case of Alice Slyker, there might be rumors of protracted depression together with periods of retreat in some mental hospital.

Once a Swedish beauty queen he'd terminated (with a hedge shears) had died the same night (decapitated in a traffic accident), but Tag was inclined to attribute that to coincidence. What the devil, he wasn't trying to work black magic or hurt anyone, he was only satisfying an aesthetic impulse, using tools supplied by a very high-minded old lady. No, he wasn't trying to hurt a soul.

Of course condign punishment, as now of the abominable Erica Slyker, was something else again! That thought stirred him from his delightful lethargy and he trotted to the potting table, past rows of Alices and Brigittes

and Margarets and Sophias and a single Jacqueline.

He started grinning before he got there. His "Erica" had developed with commendable rapidity. Clearly Anselmo had remembered the vitamin and hormone supplements. Already the face was in full bloom and the bosom had begun to bulge nicely. The haughty archings of the minuscule eyebrows as she glared at him and the petulant poutings of the tiny lips were balm to his injured psyche—and as much so was the thought of her twisting and moaning now on some hard couch or hospital bed while doctors bent over her baffledly; he'd asked one of his earlier victims about her coma and she'd told him it had been filled with horrid half-formed dreams of being buried alive and bound to a stake and subjected to nameless indignities.

"And serve you right, Slyker," he said now to the flower, lightly flicking one pale cheek with a fingernail.

THE resemblance was perfect. The eleven-looped hair and the inward-facing color print had done their work well.

But something was wrong: the second pot he'd planted had no photo tilted against it. Automatically he glanced to the floor and here was the manila envelope, where it must have slipped

from under his elbow five days back. He stooped and drew from it the print of the off-Broadway red-head talent with the small white envelope still clipped to it containing the three green nail clippings.

What the devil had he buried with the second mimic seed?

His eyes came up over the edge of the potting table and he looked for the first time at the plant rising sturdy-stemmed from the second pot.

It was topped by a walnut-size replica of his own head, leaf-ruffed. The face, in full bloom even to the wide-based pointy beard, was staring at him anxiously and gaping its mouth, as if shouting an inaudibly shrill message.

His first impulse, an instant one, was to rip it out by the roots and stamp on it.

His second impulse, which was so violent it rocked him back on his heels and sent his clutching hands flying up into the air, was to nurse and protect and watch over the thing as if it were a hundred-thousand-gulden Dutch black tulip—at least!

Veils fell from his mind's eyes. He suddenly saw that only a blind idiot would have blithely attributed to coincidence the Swede's grisly traffic death on the same night he'd snipped her stem at the neck. No, he must cherish the Taggart-plant in ev-

ery way! My God, what if a blight suddenly struck the garden?—some horrid creeping purple mold . . .

Or what if he went into a coma now? He'd no sooner thought that than he was blinking his eyes, taking deep breaths, slapping his cheeks hard, and rapidly stamping his right foot on the concrete. Clearly he'd almost gone into a coma a minute before, back at the secret panel. Probably only the high pitch of tension involved in putting *Kittens* to bed had saved him from blackout during the past several days.

The atmosphere of this damned place was soporific! Maybe he should flee to the Canadian North Woods with its clean bracing air—yes, but it puts you to sleep, they say . . .

And if he were away, people could get at the garden—get at the Taggart-plant! Kidnap it, hold it for ransom, torture it, take a great big shears and . . . He'd never really trusted Anselmo!

GRADUALLY sanity returned, especially when it struck him that his deep breathing, hyperventilating his lungs, was all by itself about to throw him into a faint.

He shifted his mind into gear and set it to work under a careful throttle. Dimly he could recall

now tugging his beard in the moon-blue dark while the second mimic seed had still been in his fingers. Evidently he'd loosened a hair or two and then buried them along with the seed. His body bending over the pot and thereafter its close presence in the same building, had been the equivalent of a picture or more. In any case Great-aunt Veronica herself, according to her papers and notes, had never been certain whether the pictures or the exodermal tokens were the most important factors in the cultivation process.

THINKING about the thing this way, scientifically, began to put it into perspective for him and he grew calmer, though it remained most disturbing to realize that he had been absent-minded enough (or conceivably hypnotically influenced?) to pull such a trick.

Still, the thing was done, and nothing now remained but to see the Taggart-plant through its relatively brief flowering-span (that thought elicited from him a residual shiver) and then just let it wither away normally. Reasonable care should easily do the job. After all, who in the world now Great-aunt Veronica was dead knew more about mimic-plants than he? He would be his own best caretaker. As for coma, many girls never seemed

to suffer it, even during the blooming period. Why should a strong man?

And, what the devil, didn't all truly great research doctors and physiologists try their serums on themselves? He was one of their lion breed now!

He looked down at the Taggart-plant, which—all shouting anxiety gone—returned him such a brash Satan's-grin that he felt greatly bucked up, positively exhilarated . . . to such a degree that for an instant, but an instant only, he imagined himself down there smirking up at his own moon-big face.

What the dickens, if that brave little guy could keep up his spirits, so could he!

Whistling, he fetched a small red can and carefully watered himself—and as an after-thought, Erica. It occurred to him that he might try an experiment in cross-pollenization when the stems were fully opened. Normally he self-pollenized all his flowers to keep strains true—girl-girl crosses tended toward mediocrity beauty-wise, he'd discovered by repeated experiments. And of course he wouldn't want to produce any true seeds of himself—he'd never feel safe if any such were in existence, no matter how tightly locked up. But his pollen on Erica's gynoecium—it was a tantalizingly attractive thought!

IN his bemused high spirits he even watered the nameless little plant growing in the pot between his and Erica's, but nearer his own. There was a sharp *bzz!* He dropped the red watering can. Damn that phone, he thought as he stooped and righted the trickling can. It had no right to sound so much like a bee coming in for the kill. He must have the tone altered at once—would have had it altered before, except he'd been reluctant to admit his fear of bees was so great.

But that was silly. Bees were his great ineradicable dread, and he might as well face up to it, just as he'd faced up now to the existence of the Taggart-plant. Why, if it weren't for his dread of bees, he'd have long ago tried experiments in insect pollenization. It was titillating to think of bees crawling all over his flower-girls, buzzing lazily from one of the next.

But who the devil could be calling him here? Not more than a dozen people knew this number—the last person he'd given it to had been the President.

A charming voice said, "Erica Slyker here. Hello, Taggart-blaggart - waggart - haggart - sleep - sleep-sleep! Now that I've given you the cue we agreed on, you will answer any question I ask. You will do whatever I tell you. Can you hear me clearly?"

"Yes, I can," he replied in a sing-song voice.

"Good. You're in the garden?"

"Yes, I am."

"Excellent. Place a chair by the table so you can watch both our plants. Then sit down in it."

He managed to face the chair away from the table, but it turned out this only meant he had to straddle it, resting his forearms and the phone on its back.

"You're sitting in the chair watching our plants? How's the vamp doing?"

Obediently Tag focused on the little plant next his own, only now learning what it was. He'd planted two of those horrors six years ago and decided never again—the tendrils of the one of them had strangled a promising Gina, while those of the other had whipped out and caught a little finger he'd brought incautiously close, inflicting tiny but nasty wounds with their microscopic suckers.

"It is doing quite well," he reported into the phone. "The forehead is showing and I can count six . . . no, seventeen pale red tendrils. They are about an inch long and have begun to wave a little."

"Bravo! Keep watching that plant too. Now hang up the phone and await further instructions."

TAGGART ADAMS obeyed and then Eternity set in for him. An eternity the passing of whose centuries were marked by calls from Erica only to repeat the "blag-wag-hag" formula, whose millennia were each signalized by an additional inch-growth of the red tendrils of the vamp.

After about thirty-five hundred years the face of the vamp became fully visible. As he'd long since guessed from the color on the tendrils, it was that of the off-Broadway red-head talent—evidently the picture and the three green nail parings had been able to do their work from the floor, as being the nearest picture-and-tokens available and otherwise unoccupied.

She had a great talent for the evil eye, Tag decided after a thousand years of being glared at. And for writhing her lips back from her tiny white fangs. And for waving suggestively close to the Taggart-plant those wire-worm tendrils that arched around her face like the hair of a Medusa.

Meanwhile the Erica and the Taggart were developing their proper bulges and finally splitting their green stem-sheathes down the front: the slowest and least titillating strip-tease in the universe.

The Erica looked back at him with a contempt that only be-

came more smiling as the ages passed.

The Taggart, on the other hand, grimaced and grinned and winked its left eye at him unceasingly. Tag became dully infuriated with the little idiot's irrationally high spirits—and bored, horribly bored. If that was the way he'd looked all his life to other people . . .

He felt the ache of thirst and the sickness of hunger, but they were dulled by a titanic listlessness.

A million times he told himself that a man couldn't be held hypnotized like this against his will, surely not after a one-session indoctrination into which he'd somehow been tricked by a mere abominable girl. Not one of the most powerful men in the world, not the sex-puppet master, not the publisher of *Kittens*, not Veronica's Grand-nephew, not the Lord of Kitten Kastle, not the girl-gardener . . .

A million times a little voice from a dark high corner of his mind replied only, "Blag-wag-hag."

Thrice there were "nights" lasting for many centuries.

AFTER twelve thousand years he heard the secret panel open and footsteps drag up the aisle. Someone stooped and retrieved the red watering can. It was Anselmo, he could tell from

the corner of his eye—no mistaking that hand like a bleached ham, that face big as that of a white horse, for in addition to being a submoronic deafmute, the ancient Sicilian had acromegaly.

Tag tried to shout, to whisper, to beckon with a finger, just to lift one—to no avail. Without even a single curious glance toward his employer, so far as Tag could tell, Anselmo went about his chores.

For decades and scores of years his big shoes scraped the concrete and there came the periodic gush of the tap as he patiently watered and fertilized and sprayed. Twice the phone *bzzed* for a repetition of the inevitable formula, but there was no alteration in the sound of Anselmo's movements. Both times Tag tried to drop the phone on the floor—and only set it the more carefully back.

A third time the phone *bzzed*—much sooner than the once-a-century rhythm called for. A brisk grating voice said, "Tag? George. All ready to pop those lions, boy? Rhodesia's waiting for us." To Tag's horror all he could say was, "No, thanks," and all he could do was hang up.

Finally Anselmo arrived at the potting table and began methodically to care for the three plants there, insensible to Tag's mental screams, even when Anselmo's

sprinkling reawakened Tag's searing thirst and they became the inward shriek, "For the love of God, pour some of that in my mouth!"

Anselmo finished with the Erica, the vamp (a bit cautious with his huge hands there as they moved around the foot-long tendrils), and finally the Taggart. Only then did his behavior alter. He stood ox-still and stared for an interminable time at the smirking walnut-head of the Taggart. Hope rekindled in Tag.

Then Anselmo turned and stared for almost an equally long period at his life-size employer. Tag's hope flamed. If only there were some readable expression in that white face big as a wash-bowl . . .

Then Anselmo looked back at the walnut-head, puzzledly shook his own in three wide horse-like swings, shrugged his sloping shoulders, and dragged off down the aisle. The secret door opened, then closed behind him. A trap-door opened in the corridor and Anselmo plummeted into the hottest room in hell—in Tag's imagination.

A mere thousand years and ten phone-calls later, Erica added, "I know the garden's under the pool. How do I get in?"

Tag focussed his will and thought, "Sooner than tell you, I'd see myself in Hell. I'd become a pauper. You're the evil woman

my Great-aunt Veronica always warned me against. You're the Witch Queen. No."

What he said into the phone was, "Turn right at the foot of the main staircase. The seventh vertical molding to your right. The seventh rosette from the floor. Press three-one."

"Thanks. I won't be long. Incidentally, you are in Hell and there is no pauper-alternative. Oh, by the way, it's about time you were getting out of that body—it won't live much longer, even with you in it. Don't look at the me-plant any more, don't look at the vamp, just look at the you-plant . . . and project . . . project . . . project . . ."

TAG complied. After a century the walnut-head began to bob and smirk in exact time with his own blinking. Then suddenly it grew moon-huge. Looking down, Tag saw that he had grown a large green ruff around his neck.

His first reaction to his realization that he was now in the Taggart-plant was to try and project himself back into his rightful body.

One glance at it changed his mind. That gray-faced elephantine hulk, that moon-topped mountain, looked *dead*.

This tentative information didn't depress him perhaps as much as it should have. He felt

a vivification, an unreasoning cockiness, a confidence in his own powers, although he could only move his head and wriggle his torso a bit. Perhaps it was because he was no longer thirsty—Anselmo had watered well and cool moisture pervaded his every tissue.

Also, time had speeded up for him again—minutes no longer dragged like years.

Or perhaps his exhilaration was due to his increased sensitivity. Air-eddies intangible before now rippled against his bare flesh like brook water. A drifting bit of lint bumped him like a paper boat. Colors were brighter—he could see with the fresh-washed vision of a child. Odors were a symphony, chiefly of girl-scents, which he realized he had never properly appreciated before; now he could pick out each instrument in the orchestra.

And he could hear with exquisite precision and clarity. Why, he could even hear what the flower-girls were saying!

"We hate you, Tag Adams, we loathe and despise you," they were chanting, occasionally varying it with obscenities in several languages.

His chest swelled. Why, it was a kind of hymn. No wonder the little guy had acted so happy. Where was that little guy now, anyhow? Absorbed in his own larger consciousness? No mat-

ter, just listen . . . now what was that French girl calling him. . . ?

"Enjoy it while you can," the Erica-plant cut in sweetly.

"Shut up!" he snapped, swiveling his head toward her. My, my, she certainly was as handsomely constructed as he'd guessed she'd be when she'd first entered his office—he decided with an appreciative, quite involuntary whistle.

"How gallant," the Erica-plant replied with a shrug. "Give him a hug for me, Red."

THE vamp, far more supplemented than the mimics, thrust forward between them. The Medusa-face mopped and mowed. The eyes glared white-circled. The white fangs clicked and skirred. And then the inch-thick living tendrils whipped around him until they were like a red-barred cage, their tips not quite touching him, until one slowly dipped and drew itself stingingly across his chest . . .

"Cut it short, Red," the Erica-plant commanded.

There was a distant grating noise. The red tendrils whipped away. The grating noise continued.

The secret panel was opening. Then the tramp of giant footsteps—Tag could feel their almost painful vibrations coming up from the concrete through

the table and his pot and his earth.

Erica Slyker had entered the room: a girl as tall as a pine tree, bigger than a dinosaur to Tag, a colossal Witch Queen.

She was wearing a platinum mink coat over her pearl-worked, pearl-gray suit. To the left shoulder of her coat was pinned a big spray of white funeral lilies.

Under her left elbow she carried a small cubical white box, big as a piano crate to Tag. It hummed, as though there were several electric motors running inside it.

Halfway down the aisle she stopped to look at the three Alices.

"Save us, save us!" all the flower girls called to her.

She slowly and rather sadly shook her head. Then she jerked the three Alices screaming out of their pots.

"Kill or cure, my dear," she said in a voice that to Tag was like thunder. "Anything's better than the state you're in."

She stooped, swinging the three still-screaming Alices high in the air and smashed them against the concrete with a heavy thud, the vibrations from which made Tag wince, and left them there.

All the flower-girls grew silent. The pot-jarring footsteps resumed. Erica set down the white box on the potting table

and the electric motors added their different but painful vibrations to the others. Tag writhed. He was discovering why his flower-girls had never liked hi-fi the nights he'd played it to them hour after hour, full blast. Erica bent toward him. It was like a face leaning down out of Mt. Rushmore.

"It's not so much fun being a sensitive plant, is it, Mr. Adams?" she rumbled slowly.

"May my Great-aunt torture you in Hell!" Tag squeaked.

"You'll find Erica in Veronica," she replied cryptically. Then she slowly unwound a long blue-black hair from around the ear of his corpse. She dangled it in front of him and said, "There are many variants of the hair formula, Mr. Adams—and more than one way of applying an exodermal token."

Then she dug her fingers into the pot of her own plant, carefully loosened its roots, gently shook them out and wrapped them in a wet handkerchief, then tucked and fastened the she-flower in the center of her spray of lilies.

Then she looked at Tag across the white box.

"The Witch Gods do not love you, Mr. Adams," she whispered in a voice like distant thunder.

She took the cover off the box. A black bee, yellow-striped and big as a half-grown kitten, crawl-

ed out and up on to the rim.

"You signed your will and your death-warrant, you know, Mr. Adams," she continued, "within an hour of our meeting in your office. Signed them in more senses than one."

WITH the *bzzz* of a power lawnmower the bee took off and came circling widely around Tag.

"After all, you've had a long life," Erica went on. "About fourteen thousand years, wouldn't you say?—even if most of them were spent here during the last few days."

Tiny tears of horror trickled down Tag's face as he craned and craned his neck. He'd often wondered exactly what the drops of dew on the flower-girls' cheeks had meant.

"I'll be leaving soon, Mr. Adams," Erica said. "You'll have the place to yourself. The lock will be jammed. Anselmo will assume you've set it against him. I'm going to leave the sunlight turned on full—it's the kindest thing I can do for the others."

The bee lit on Tag's shoulder like a six-legged live helicopter. It stank acidly. Of the million screams inside him he dared not utter one.

"Don't be frightened," Erica rumbled. "Bees don't sting flowers—if they're quiet. And the scent of a male plant happens to

be irresistible to these bees."

Two more bees climbed to the rim and took off and came circling.

"It's really an honor to you, Mr. Adams," she continued. "Judging from your magazine, it's what you've always wanted to have happen. It should be an exquisite fate, from your point of view."

More bees took off. A second landed on Tag's neck. The first

walked slowly down his chest, its sticky hair-fringed feet pricking and tickling almost unbearably, its sting wagging in his face.

"Yes," she explained, standing up, "the bees are merely going to carry your pollen to all these beautiful girls." She spread her arms wide, then leaned forward and finished, "But before they can carry your pollen, Mr. Adams, they have to collect it."

THE END

