

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1948

Cover by Boris Dolgov

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*Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use
of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.*

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Green Brothers Take Over

BY MARIA MORAVSKY

OLD Roy Taber, the one-eyed nursery man, had the best plants in Orangeville. When people commented on his lush palms, brilliant hibiscus and thrifty citrus trees, adding that he must have a green thumb, he nodded his shaggy graying head absent-mindedly, saying cryptically:

"I've a green eye."

That was a curious thing to say, as his only good eye was hazel colored. His left artificial eye, made long ago when a thorn of carissa deprived him of his real one, had a slightly greenish cast. They did not match glass eyes in those days as well as they do now.

That greenish eye of his did not look glassy on rainy days, perhaps because the

warm damp mists of Florida which invaded his nursery then, toned down its dry stare. When violent showers watered his plants, saving him the work of dragging the hose from one potting bench to another, his artificial eye seemed to grow alive.

To Roy, it did not only seem alive. To all purposes it was a living eye. He would cover his good eye with his calloused right hand, and insisted that he could still see—with that greenish left eye of his.

"That carissa repented. . . . I sure treated that shrub right. She was mighty sorry she poked my eye out. So now—I see with my store eye. I got a green eye."

"The old man is nuts," some neighbors opined. But others modified this belief.

"He just imagines it. He knows all his

They said he had a green thumb—it went a lot deeper than that!

plants; can find them in the dark, by touch. Why, he can tell double red hibiscus from single cerise ones, even when they don't bloom, just by passing his fingers over the leaves."

I was Roy's nearest neighbor, and often traded plants with him, peddling them in the nearby residential city of Flamingo. White women don't often peddle in Florida; perhaps this was why I had many customers —more customers than plants. I could not grow too much on one lot, so I would buy them from Roy for resale. That's how we struck up a friendship.

One day during the late building boom, when I went to buy from Roy several multi-colored caladiums for a contractor who wanted to stick a few plants around his jerry-built house in a hurry, to enhance its sale, Roy told me:

"Mrs. Holland, it ain't right that a widow of a Spanish war veteran should peddle for a living when these here speculators build houses on credit, wreck all the windbreaks, denude the soil, and make more on one deal than you can earn in years."

I shook my white hair. I could no longer afford dyeing it and having a permanent.

"That's all right by me, Roy. I can't envy them. I have my little pension, and my old barn is all free and clear. They'll get stuck with those new houses, anyhow. Statistics show that there are three hundred unsold houses begging every month."

"It ain't all right by me, Mrs. Holland. That guy who bought the two lots next to my nursery, on the west side, is crowding me out."

I FELT alarmed. The west lots were full of Roy's plants which overgrew from his crowded garden. Seventy-eight kinds of hibiscus in nail kegs, young budded avocados in butter tubs.

Besides, there were innumerable smaller cans standing in the shade of an enormous cabbage palm which grew right on the line of Roy's property.

"He is going to cut down the palm," Roy informed me tragically.

So it was not the space he was about to lose which worried him, but the life of the venerable palm.

I felt sad. Roy loved that palm. We went

over and looked at it, to fix it in our memories before it was gone.

It was really a perfect specimen. Tall and graceful, despite its girth; it must have been a yard in circumference. Its lush green fronds reached out like protecting green wings, six to seven feet long, forming a natural slat house over the plants it shaded. Ferns grew in the crotches of those fronds: curly ostrich plume-ferns, peacock fern, with blue and green metallic sheen on its delicate lacy leaves; wild prehistoric fern of Florida with a strange Latin name which I could never remember; a beautiful fern which nobody wanted because it could not be transplanted, wilting in the captivity of pots. Scarlet African orchids with purple centers. Aloes climbed up the palm's trunk, making a magnificent floral display. There was enough vegetation on and around that palm to stock a small nursery.

"Wouldn't you think that guy Filbrick might spare Aloha, to shade his flimsy duplexes?" Roy asked bitterly. He had a name for every outstanding tree.

"I'll talk to him about it. Being a would-be neighbor, perhaps . . ."

"I sure thank you, Mrs. Holland. I hate to speak to the louse; afraid I might lose my temper."

I piled my red, rose, and white caladiums into the toy wagon of my youngest grandson—he had outlived that wagon long ago and joined the army, following in the steps of his late grandfather—and pulled the tottering toy slowly out of Taber's nursery, along the driveway shaded by two silver oaks.

There used to be three oaks there, but the last hurricane had felled the tallest one. Roy had blasted out its huge stump, and fresh centipede grass grew over it.

I rested for a moment on that spot in the sunshine; the wagon loaded with earth-packed pots was too heavy for my old arms to pull. Solicitously as ever, Roy laid down his garden trowel and came over to help me.

When he pulled the wagon out to the pavement, I asked:

"What are you going to plant in this empty spot?"

"Oh, I don't know. Another oak, I think. They are good for orchids to live on. Orchids are not parasites, you know. They

are mostly air plants. There are very few terrestrial orchids."

Roy had told me that repeatedly. He must be getting quite old, and his memory was no longer good, I thought, listening politely.

"All right, Roy. Thank you." I took the wagon's handle from his soil stained hand. "From now on it's easy sailing. I have only a few steps along the pavement, then I'm home.

"My driveway is cemented, and the wagon won't catch at any roots. Now go back to your plants."

NEXT morning, when I saw Filbrick with Jones, the local bulldozer operator, talking loudly on the street, I walked toward them and asked:

"Please, Mr. Filbrick, will you tell Jones to spare that large palm right on the line, when he is cleaning your lots? It is such an old, beautiful tree. . . ."

"Sure," Jones agreed amiably, "I can drive me blade right around it. No need fellin' that big tree, iffen you want it for shade, Mr. Filbrick."

Filbrick wrinkled his hooked nose.

"It's nothing but a wild palm; it stands too close to the house I plan. I mean to put a sunken garbage receptacle there, next to the kitchen door."

In that moment, I hated the man. To replace the palm with a garbage hole!

Speechless with indignation, I left them abruptly and walked back to my empty house.

That old cypress house is empty in more senses than one. Not only is my family gone, but most of my furniture as well. Paying doctors' bills—my arthritis is always bad during cold snaps—groceries at impossible prices. But I did not mind the restful emptiness of those high-ceilinged rooms and porches. It helped me to relax, to read, or to look into my crystal ball without feeling crowded. "Fenced in" as Roy would say.

I sat now in front of that old crystal ball, given me by my Spanish step-mother on my wedding day, forty years ago. It was held by a stand representing a chicken leg. I forget now the name of the voodoo sect which used this symbol in Cuba; my memory must be getting as bad as Roy's. . . . But I have always enjoyed playing with this thing, pre-

tending to see in it the future of which so little was left.

I sat in front of it now, wiped its surface and peered into the dim glass, thinking about Roy's favorite and doomed palm.

At first I did not see anything. But I heard the whining of the bulldozer, and an occasional thud of a falling tree. Then I began seeing those uprooted trunks, lying one on another, piled at the back of the lot, their branches twisted and broken. Tears strung my eyes.

I turned away from my crystal ball. Did I imagine all this, or was my stepmother really a witch? Did she leave some of her powers to me? Today I did not like to play with the idea.

Uneasily I heaved myself out of the old rattan chair standing in front of the round marble-topped table with the crystal ball. As I stole a last glance at the greenish globe its base seemed to move slightly, as if the chicken leg supporting it turned toward the doomed trees.

"Loneliness is beginning to drive you nuts, Marianna," I told myself sternly.

AFTER I sold my caladiums one by one (I never could carry two of those heavy pots in my little basket) to the owner of a new house in Flamingo who refused to come for them, I had a pot of strong tea at the local five and ten, then I looked around a bit to see what my competitors were selling on their plant counter. I noticed a straggling gardenia cooped up in a small Mexican pot, marked two dollars. One of its underwatered twigs was hanging at an angle, broken by some careless would be customer, I presume. I looked covertly around, then took out the small pen knife I always carry in my bag, and snipped off the broken twig.

"I'll put it in water and grow this cutting. It will give me a start in gardenias," I thought with the optimism born, I suppose, out of that pot of strong tea I had just drunk.

By the time I returned to Orangeville by bus, I saw the futility of my plan. Gardenias called for special fertilizer; they had to be kept on an elevated platform, planted in peat moss. I had neither materials nor energy to start something new out of nothing, as I used to do when much younger.

So, before returning home I walked over to Roy's nursery and offered him the cutting.

"Thanks, Mrs. Holland. I'll put it with my Stephanotis vines. They feed on the same kind of fertilizer," he said, carefully deleafing the twig and trimming it with his cutting knife. "Every little baby plant helps." He handled that cutting as tenderly as if it had been an infant.

"I have bad news for you, Roy," I began regretfully.

"I know," he answered somberly. "Aloha told me. They want to cut her down."

I smiled at his whimsical way of expressing himself: the palm told him, eh? It was sad, yet charming in a way. He must have foreseen what was coming; he knew those heartless contractors.

"What is a tree to a speculator?" I said bitterly. "He wants to put a garbage pail container in its place."

Roy pursed his thin pale lips and sighed. Then he said earnestly:

"Mighty told me about that."

Mighty was one of the two silver oaks shading the driveway. Mighty told him! This was carrying whimsicality too far. I smiled deprecatingly:

"You mustn't repeat everything your imagination whispers to you. . . Some of your customers take it literally, you know."

"I mean it," he said with fanatical conviction. "My green brothers always whisper to me what is coming, if it concerns them."

I gasped. Roy had never expressed his queer notions so openly before. Not even to me.

Reading the disbelief in my face, he said defensively:

"Animals feel how you treat them, why not plants? We are all one family: men, animals, birds, insects, trees. Why should men place themselves apart? Our green brothers are eating almost the same things we eat. They need the same vitamins. I always give my cuttings vitamin B-1; chemiculturists advise it. You do it too, don't you, Mrs. Holland?"

I nodded doubtfully. To be sure, I knew from my small encyclopedia on plants that transplanting equals a major operation for plants. I, too, mix vitamin B-1 in their nutrient solution, so the plants never suffer the shock of transplanting. They don't wilt.

"You're right, to a certain extent, Roy. Granted: plants grow like humans, eat like humans. But I doubt if they feel like we do. And they can't read our thoughts."

"They don't feel? They why does mimosa fold her leaves when a stranger touches it, and doesn't budge when I stroke its twig? Can you explain this?"

Frankly, I couldn't, and admitted it. So Roy continued assuring me that plants communicate with him.

"Because I love my green brothers. They are on my side."

I kept silent. It was no use arguing against such hearty belief. I realized only now how brotherly was Roy's love for his plants. He hated to prune them. When he had to use shears, he always asked the plants' forgiveness for cutting off their branches. Whenever he snipped a dead twig, I heard him muttering:

"It's for your own good, my dear."

I had not paid serious attention to these whimsicalities before; we all talk to our pets, at least lonely people do. Other men and women, including myself, talked to their plants while tending them. It did not mean a thing. Nothing at all, except in Roy's case. . .

My uneasiness grew.

THAT night, during the full moon, from my sleeping porch I saw a figure moving in one of the lots adjoining Roy's nursery. I peered through the screen at the narrow path silvered by the moonlight, which ran between my lot and Roy's nursery, traversing the two vacant lots between. They were grown over with palmetto, with only five stately Caribbean pines between.

Curiosity prompted me to throw on my black Mother Hubbard (I still wear mourning, after all these years of widowhood. Melancholy habit, I suppose.) I walked across the vacant lots, to see what he was doing, for I guessed that it was Roy. I heard a faint whine of metal, and saw Roy sawing off large fronds from the side of the palm where Filbrick's houses were to stand.

"Roy! Why are you doing this?" I asked.

He turned his lean, wrinkled face toward me, paler than usual in the dead white of the moon.

"I hope that he may spare the tree if I cut off these long fronds. . . . Perhaps . . . I want them to be out of his way."

I felt a lump in my throat. So he wanted the palm to look less spreading; inconspicuous . . . So a mother hen shoos her babies under her wings, hiding them from the enemy. The simile was not exactly true, but the emotion was the same.

"What are you going to do with all these plants?" I asked, pointing to the numerous cans surrounding the palm, over and around which Roy had to walk to approach the palm's trunk.

"I still have till tomorrow. That bun says if I don't remove them by then he'll throw them out. I'll put them in my driveway."

"That won't leave you space for your truck."

"Well, what can I do? The truck will have to be parked outside."

"Put it in my driveway. I haven't any car."

"Thanks, Mrs. Holland."

Although I was poorer than Roy, and less old, he always addressed me as Mrs. Holland, while I called him by his first name. This curious touch of inferiority sense on his part dated, perhaps, to the time when he was starting his nursery with several empty cans and a plot of rented ground. Now his was paying, and I was just a run down at the heel gentlewoman who tried to survive on her small pension plus the sale of a few potted plants.

"I'll help you to move your plants in the morning, Roy," I promised.

BUT we could not save any of them. In the morning Roy had an attack of hives. Curious how he always had fever when something upset him. I had to nurse him—he couldn't afford a nurse. All through his delirium he whispered:

"Now, they're wrecking it. All my plants . . ."

Next day he was better, but his mind still wandered. He stared out the window, at the pile of rubbish which was once his plants, and raved:

"They couldn't wait! They ordered the Negroes to pile them in a scrap heap! Months of work, years of growth! Look at those poor roots sticking up in the air. My beautiful hibiscus! My confederate jasmine, my

red jasmine, my star jasmines! Grafted gardenias, young mangoes. Murdered, all murdered. . . . But the sun will burn the roots of the rest. Massacre! Massacre! Of my innocent green brothers!"

I gave him a sedative, and left to attend to my few household chores. Besides, I had to be at home in the morning—a customer was coming to get a promised red madagascar vine.

When I went again to see how Roy was getting along, I saw the doomed palm standing desolate amid the debris.

"Aloha is still alive," I told Roy, feeling his cooled forehead. "I hope he'll spare her. I do hope he won't cut her down."

But the speculator did. He did not murder the palm himself; he was too puny for that. He ordered Jones to push it down with his bulldozer. Years for a tree to grow, and one push . . . It was pitiful.

As the beautiful palm shuddered in the still air, before falling across the lot next to the trunks of the five uprooted pines, its tremor appeared almost human. It seemed to express a terror of sudden death. When it fell, frightening a mocker out of its nest, I stifled a cry.

I rushed over to see how Roy was taking it. He was not in his potting shed. He was not in the open. I went to his house, and stopped on the porch, hating to disturb him. Through the glass panel of his front door I saw him lying on the couch, face downward. His shoulders moved convulsively . . .

I gently lowered the raised knocker, and left him alone with his grief.

I went to the denuded lots, after the bulldozer had performed its lethal task, and forced myself to look at the fallen palm. Stepping over its broken and twisted fronds, I picked off its trunk as many African orchids as I could carry in my apron, and brought them over to Roy.

He was sitting dejectedly on his potting bench, his long legs dangling over a pile of black loam ready for transplanting. His tools lay idle; he could not work that day. I saw his good eye watering. . . . His greenish artificial eye, unsoftened by tears, looked fierce.

"He will pay for it," he whispered hoarsely, as he saw me. Then he noticed the orchids. "Oh, thank you. Thank you . . ."

Tenderly he took them out of my apron and laid them on a small pile of leafmold.

"I'll plant these in good beds. They won't miss Aloha's trunk . . . as I do," he finished bitterly, his mouth twisting. I had never seen him so sad and bitter before.

"I've looked at that palm for twenty years, ever since my wife died. I hoped to enjoy it for the rest of my life. . . . He'll pay for it, he'll pay! Green brothers will see to that."

There was nothing I could say to comfort him. I felt very much the same way. I also loved that palm and hated its murderer. I guess we were just two nuts growing attached to green things since our loved ones had died or left us.

As I was returning to my house, walking across the overgrown lawn sprinkled with the red petals of the shedding poinciana blooms, I repeated Roy's words:

"Green Brothers . . . Green Brothers . . ." I was appalled at the sound of my voice: it held an appeal for vengeance.

HURRICANE season came, and with it the builders. Filbrick, being a Northerner, did not realize how many interruptions the rains would cause. He swore at the showers as if they were deliberately doing him wrong, when his workers were forced to loaf under the shelter of the half-constructed houses.

But finally the hammering ceased, the concrete mixer stopped thumping, the electric saw whined no more, the smell of tar dispersed over the flat, pebbled roofs. The two duplexes stood, still unpainted, their floors still uncovered with synthetic tile, exposing the raw thickness of six inches of solid concrete. These houses were inexpensive, but not jerry-built, I had to admit.

I looked at my own frame house and sighed. Those two would stand a hurricane much better. It must feel safe to live in a concrete block house during a big blow.

Weeks passed, and the houses still stood unfinished. It looked as if Filbrick had run out of money. I saw him Sunday after Sunday bringing visitors in his rickety station wagon, and unfolding blueprints before them, pointing eloquently to his duplexes.

"He is trying hard to sell them," I remarked to Roy now and then.

"He'll never sell them!" Roy would an-

swer with hatred in his voice. "He'll die first!"

I was growing more and more frightened. Did Roy contemplate killing the contractor? It would be sheer insanity. No tree was worth that.

One rainy Sunday, when the vegetation seemed to grow by leaps and bounds, and every blade of grass to double in size over night—tropical rains do this here, you know—I saw a good looking gray car of late vintage stopping in front of the nearest unfinished duplex. The older I grow the more curious I grow. I went unashamedly to spy after the would-be buyer.

Filbrick's greasy face was beaming. With a satisfied expression, he wiped his sweaty bald forehead with a soiled handkerchief, showing his false teeth in a wide grin to his customer. He must have made a sale, I thought.

His customer, a mousy little man in well-cut clothes, with narrow shoulders and a decided paunch, walked gingerly up the few cement blocks put by the kitchen door of the unfinished house on the right. He wanted to make sure of his purchase, I presume; looking for flaws.

"You don't need to worry, Mr. Baum," Filbrick assured him grandly, deferentially helping him over the imprompto steps. "First-class construction . . . Solid concrete floors . . . They'll be real pretty, when the tiles are laid . . . Now, what's that?"

A grunt of utter dismay escaped his thick lips, echoed by an angry exclamation from the would-be-buyer.

"You call this solid construction?" the man asked witheringly.

Moved by irresistible curiosity, I mounted the steps and looked inside, toward the corner at which the city buyer pointed his accusing pudgy finger. I almost gasped aloud, for in that corner, raising its tendrils from the solid six-inch concrete floor, grew a long and lush Virginia creeper.

"How did it happen?" Filbrick sounded positively stricken. "I—this floor—why, feel it, Mr. Baum."

Baum prodded it with a piece of moulding he picked up from the floor. The floor gave way, crumbling into its component parts of sand and fill, and forming a large hole in which the vine grew, its five-fingered

leaves lifted up like so many cheering green hands.

FILBRICK swore, grabbed the vine by its branching out stem and tried to pull it out of the damaged floor. But he couldn't. The triumphant vine must have sunk its roots far under the foundation.

Much as I disliked the speculator, I knew it was not his fault. I'd walked over those floors a week after they were laid. They had set by then—it was before the rains started—and the previous dry weather had made them hard and solid. How could a vine grow through six inches of set concrete?

"I don't understand it," Filbrick pleaded, as if continuing my own thoughts. "The mixture was just right. A strong mixture. I can prove it. I bought it already prepared from . . ." He named the most reputable building material firm in Flamingo.

Baum shook his head. "If it were right, it wouldn't disintegrate." His mousy face composed itself into the lines of outraged authority. "The deal is off."

I rushed to Roy, to tell him about my eavesdropping. I found him placing leaf mold on the bottoms of five gallon cans, preliminary to transplanting his well started hibiscus cuttings.

"I know all about it. My green brothers told me." He waved his outstretched hand in the air. As I looked at those spatulate fingers, greenish from the mess of the inadvertently broken stems, I seemed to perceive some weird resemblance between them and the five-fingered palm of the Virginia creeper.

"They wrecked the floor for him," Roy reiterated with glum satisfaction. "No use of him pulling out that creeper. It will grow all over again. All over . . . My green brothers will take over."

In that moment I had a suspicion that Roy was growing insane.

"You must have been looking in my crystal ball," I joked lightly, trying to hide my consternation.

"No, they *told me*. Look into that crystal yourself, and tell me about their work in the future."

"What work?" I asked. But he looked at me meaningfully, and did not answer.

Perplexed, to say the least, I returned to

my house. A customer, who came to get a few surinum cherry shrubs, detracted me for a while from disturbing thoughts. But after her car rumbled away, with a sudden bump over the emergency pipe laid over the street for water which the builders borrowed from a neighbor for construction, I thought again about Roy's fantastic prophecy.

Arriving home, I sat in front of my crystal ball, now placed out of the way on an antique pre-Dieu in my spare bedroom, next to the family Bible in a crumbling leather cover. I pushed away the Bible, out of reverence, as if the fortune telling ball might contaminate it. A dust of gilt, coming off its cover, stained the tips of my fingers. I looked at them for a long time, before I mustered courage to look at my crystal ball.

At once I saw clouds of smoke billowing within it. Then a single tongue of flame shot up high, above . . . yes, above the roofs of Filbrick's duplexes.

Trembling, I looked closer. I had never thought of fire in connection with those nearly fireproof concrete block buildings. Therefore I could not have imagined it. How did the fire start?

I looked again. It was licking the wooden rafters; their sheeting already devoured by flame. The sickening odor of burning tarred felt filled the room. I rushed away from the crystal ball. The smell of smoke was too realistic.

It was ever so; the adjoining buildings were on fire. Soon I heard the wail of fire engines.

In a very short while the firemen had the conflagration under control. I stood on the street by the brand new red engine, together with other curious onlookers, and listened to the questions the fire chief shouted at the two Negroes who worked for Filbrick. They answered meekly:

"The boss asked us to burn this here trash . . ." They pointed to the pile of trees wrecked by the bulldozer. Their words came almost in unison, as if they had been rehearsed.

The chief looked puzzled.

"Does the owner have a fire permit?"

"Dunno . . . we wuz jist ordered."

"All right. It wasn't your fault. But . . ." He dismissed the Negroes with a wave of his heavily gloved hand, and looked at the heat-

cracked bricks and smoking wood with a puzzled frown.

"The wind was from the east," he muttered. "How come the fire moved south?"

I ASKED myself the same question, afraid to answer it. The five fallen pines and the huge trunk of the murdered palm lay to the north of the houses.

I shook my head, chasing away the fantastic thought. No. No. It was Roy whose mind was unbalanced, not me. Sparks flew . . . But how? Sparks fly with the wind, and the wind was from the east.

I stopped my spreading panic by sheer power of will. I wouldn't tell Roy about it. Unless his green brothers had already informed him of their work.

Once more I shook my head negatively. No use entertaining such crazy wish-thinking. Besides, I did not hate Filbrick to the point of wishing him to be burned out. It was Roy who might have entertained such thoughts, and they communicated themselves to me.

The intersensory perceptions theory allowed for that.

I was still trying to dig myself out from under the debris of my bewildered thoughts when I saw Filbrick, the remnants of his reddish hair sticking on end around his bald pate, placing a ladder by the smoked-over wall of his duplex.

"And my insurance lapsed," he wailed, all his poise gone.

I looked at him scornfully. The damage did not seem much; a couple of work days would repair it.

He was in such a hurry to ascertain the amount of damage that he scampered up the ladder, holding to its side with only one hand. Suddenly I heard a shriek, and saw him falling off to the rock strewn ground.

After an ambulance took him to the nearest hospital, I stepped closer to the damaged house, where a group of curious neighbors discussed the accident.

"It looks like a perfectly sound ladder. It's brand new. Made of green wood. Not even painted . . ."

"Yes, but one rung is missing."

I looked at the ladder under discussion, and saw two holes where the missing rung had been. Dangling from one hole there

hung a broken root; the smooth, round root of a cabbage palm.

Filbrick must have mistaken it for a rung!

But how did it get there? How could it have tangled itself so precisely between the two holes of the missing rung? The thing was uncanny.

"Green brothers . . ." I repeated aimlessly. "Green brothers."

On my way to the post office to cash my pension check I stopped at Roy's nursery, to get his reaction to the accident. But I did not find him at his potting shed. A young Negro who helped him at times was watering the avocado seedlings. He grinned amiably when he saw me, and lifted his hand halfway to his damp, crinkly head in the indolent Southern salute.

"The boss's not here, Ma'am. He's settin' out them hibiscus Mrs. Watson bought off'n him last Friday."

So I continued on my way to the post office. After cashing the check and buying some groceries, I went to a pay telephone (I couldn't do that before, being stone broke) and dialed Mrs. Watson's number. I knew that she had an extension phone in her kitchen, and Roy wouldn't need to tramp over her pretty parquet floors with his always earth-soiled boots when called to answer me.

Mrs. Watson's maid summoned Roy. I heard his steps over the kitchen tiles, approaching the phone. They sounded sprightly, exuberant. Usually he is inclined to shuffle.

"Filbrick fell off the roof," I told him, without mentioning the fire.

"And his houses have cracked walls, badly cracked. And he has five broken ribs," Roy said in the tone of a verdict.

This time I did not ask him how he knew.

"I've seen it with my green eye," he volunteered the weird explanation.

NEXT day I read a note in our only paper, relating the incident of the "freak fire." The reporter ended the story with: "The Victim Suffered Five Broken Ribs."

Filbrick left the hospital ten days later, bulging in the middle from the cast bandaging his set ribs. I saw him watching his workmen preparing to blast the holes for

two septic tanks. As the burly Negro foreman ordered his men to cover the square of rocky ground with a blanket woven of heavy rope, they looked at each other apprehensively.

"I ain't makin' the contact," the biggest one muttered. This here place is haunted."

The foreman approached Filbrick, sitting in his open car.

"I'm sorry, Sah . . . them niggers of mine got skeered. Would you mind startin' the blowin' up yourself?" He handed the builder the safety gadget with its long wire leading to the fuse, or whatever they call it.

Filbrick turned positively green. He shook his head. "You do it, man. What do I pay you for? Go to it, or I'll fire you."

The foreman took the electric gadget from Filbrick's shaking hands and turned away. He seemed to hesitate.

I was bending over my back flower bed, separating amaryllis, as an excuse to watch the proceedings. As my tired fingers rested in the soft damp soil, the truckload of which came only that morning, it felt good and comforting. Weird thoughts flitted through my brain.

How restful it would feel to have roots instead of aching, grubbing fingers, malformed with arthritis.

I shook the soil off my hand and looked once more in the direction of the foreman's retreating steps. I saw him making the sign of the cross furtively over his bare black chest. Then he shouted "All right!" and made the contact.

A low thud, and a cloud of smoke, was all that followed.

I sighed with relief. No accidents, as long as Filbrick was not touching it.

The last thought occurred to me as if whispered aloud by the voice of a rustling palm.

The tank was built, and covered with soil. The houses were painted. A large FOR SALE sign was tacked in front of them. But, despite the housing shortage, there were no buyers.

The brief breathing spell between the rains ended. High winds started. The hurricane season was upon us. But there was no hurricane scare as yet.

One wet evening in September I lay down on the couch on my sleeping porch for a

brief afternoon nap. It always quieted my arthritic pains.

I was awakened by a hissing sound, as of steam boiling violently in a teapot. I cocked my ear toward the kitchen. No, I had left nothing on the stove. I went out there to make sure. The stove was dark. Carrying no fire insurance, I am very careful about such things, especially since mine is an old-fashioned kerosene stove.

But the hissing sound persisted. I looked out of the double kitchen window and saw Filbrick's houses in a swirl of coral-rock dust.

"A twister!" I gasped, recognizing the sound at last for what it really was.

I haven't heard it in a long time, as twisters are a rare occurrence in Florida.

THIS was a particularly freakish one. Every tree on my lot stood still, as did those on the other lots adjoining the new duplexes. But on Filbrick's lot the twister hissed and swirled with maniacal fury.

It was all over in a few minutes. Those terrible winds never last nearly as long as hurricanes do. When the dark mist dispersed, I saw block walls caved in, roofs torn from over them, newly planted saplings of melalukas and the FOR SALE sign, blown from the adjoining casuarina, resting like a snarled kite on the telephone wire.

"Serves him right," I said complacently, and went back to sleep.

But next day, awe replaced my complacent malice. Much as I hated Filbrick, I did not want him murdered.

Yet here it was: They found him in one of his duplexes, lying among the weeds which already sprouted among the cracked cement blocks, his face purple, his eyes staring. A stout stem of moonflower vine, otherwise known as shoestring vine, was wound twice around his swollen neck.

The police investigator who came to the place of death, followed by a gaping crowd which included me, repeated, shaking his head:

"That vine could not have strangled him by its own free will. Someone helped it. Now, folks, tell me who hated the guy enough to wish him dead?"

People shook their heads in silence. There

were many who hated Filbrick, who paid starvation wages and fired his men at the slightest provocation. There were the men he had swindled . . . Many suspects.

I knew of other, non-human suspects. A multitude of them. But I could not name green brothers without being suspect myself—of insanity.

I stared at the still uncovered body in morbid fascination. I even put on my seldom worn glasses, to see better. Finally, ashamed of myself, I jerked them off.

After the coroner announced the result of his preliminary examination, and the covered body was being carried to the ambulance, I heard Roy's voice shouting:

"I knew he would die! I knew it!"

There was sinister triumph in his voice.

I shuddered. Roy was endangering himself. Nobody would believe this raving about retribution. Green brothers? Even the secretly superstitious people, especially those on the police force, would never agree with his outlandish theory.

Roy hated Filbrick. He was the natural suspect at the moment.

To add to the danger, he tore himself out of the detaining hands of the policeman who wanted to question him and ran toward his nursery, his bushy gray hair flying in the gentle eastern breeze.

The police went after him. He would not go far. They might shoot him. I shuddered when I thought of it. And of course I could do nothing. Nothing but strain my brain trying to figure out what would happen next.

I hated to see Roy captured or dead. After all, I'd known him and his friendliness for over thirty years. Or was it forty, or fifty, or a hundred? All of a sudden, time ceased. I stood still, frozen by fear and horror.

FOR inadvertently, I had approached my crystal ball, and was peering into it almost against my will. It was as if some compelling hand—a green hand—kept my eyes on a level with the turmoil in its center.

I heard the shots. Then I saw the police milling around Roy. He stood erect, apparently unhurt. Unhurt—in the crystal ball. But in reality?

I peered closer. What I saw raised goose-pimples over my weary flesh.

I seemed to stand very close to Roy. So close that I could see small bumps raising on his skin. "He has an attack of hives again," I thought with fleeting pity. What were hives compared to what hurt him now?

But my eyes continued to stare at those bumps. There was something strange about them. They were not reddish as usual. As they grew in size, their greenness turned to brownish white.

They were growing. No longer were they bumps, but elongated tentacles. No! Not tentacles. Roots!

He jerked violently out of the hands of his captors, like a heavy tree falling to the cry of "TIMBER!"

The crystal clouded for a moment. When it cleared, I saw policemen searching the driveway. But they could not find Roy.

But I could find him: in a grassy spot, where a silver oak used to stand—mighty—fallen in the last hurricane. There stood another silver oak, its great crown silver gray, resembling a mane of gray hair.

I looked closer. Near the ground a small stephnoatis was reaching up around the trunk. Young as the vine was it was already blooming, its large waxy bells lifted up to the sun. I even seemed to smell the heavenly fragrance of that vine, reminiscent of orange blossoms.

I wondered only for a moment. Then I remembered. Roy's bride had died young.

NATURALLY they never found Roy. Officially he is a fugitive from justice. His ex-customers do not remember how many oaks shaded his driveway . . . I do.

Filbrick's lots are in ruins. Weeds and young saplings grow there, speedily, like an invading green army.

Green brothers took over!