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I, GARDENER

By ALLEN KIM LANG

*Can the Great First Law fall?
Could the great Dr. Asim—
sorry, Ozoneff— have
been wrong?*

I HAD flown to Boston to sign Doctor Axel Ozoneff to a contract with my new fall television show, "Point of View." I'd already recruited a cadre of intellectual fuglemen, but I needed Dr. Ozoneff as my program's sergeant-major, as the catalyst who'd spark the seethings of his colleagues into the imaginative pyrotechnics that attract sponsors and build the big Trendex. Associate Professor of Cryptochemistry at the Medical School, author of thirty-three books (maybe more: it had been a week since I last counted), a writer whose byline appeared on the Contents page of a dozen magazines and journals regularly as their copyright notice, and a poet of considerable skill, Dr. Ozoneff was besides something of a television personality. Who but he could have invented an s-f vignette, live, on-camera, and have it subsequently published in a

major magazine and three anthologies?

I got out of the taxi at the foot of the hill. Ozoneff's home was at its summit, surrounded by a garden that threatened to pullulate into unproper Bostonian jungle at any moment. As I walked up the brick pathway toward the house, between flowering trees that hinted the presence of tigers, the gardener stepped out to block my way. He was dressed in earth-stained overalls and wore gloves; a dessicated man tall and lean as a mystery figure in a Navaho sand-painting. He held before him, like a twin-handled short-sword, a pair of hedge-shears. "Good morning," I said, sucking my belt-buckle back from the points of the clippers. "I have an appointment to see Dr. Ozoneff."

"Indeed?" The gardener raised his sharp chin and star-

ed at me like an entymologist inspecting an impudent bed-bug. "At what time had the master consented to see you, sir?"

I felt that the gardener's "sir" had a pejorative tone to it, pronounced the way it would be pronounced by an injured enlisted man speaking to his injuring officer. "Dr. Ozoneff will see me at ten o'clock," I said. "Put aside those clip-pers and let me pass. I shall certainly inform the doctor of your behavior."

He held me at bay with the shears. "I assure you, sir, that the master will neither see you nor hear ill of me," he said. "Be that as may, you're early. It is not yet nine-forty-five. I can't allow you to burst in on the master betimes. Perhaps you'll wait here in the garden?"

I glanced at my watch. He was right; I was early; the taxi-drive from Logan International Airport had taken less time than I'd budgeted. With the feeling I was humoring a madman's whim, I remarked, "This is a lovely spot. It will be a pleasure to spend fifteen minutes in the midst of such beauty."

The gardener stared at me as though gauging my sincerity; then he looked for a mo-

ment as though his leather face might bend into a smile. "Indeed, sir, I've been told by horticulturists of some note that I have the gift of the green thumb," he said. "It's a passion with me, this garden; and the master was himself most alive to the seduction of vegetable beauty. You should have visited us three days ago, sir. I had 'a band of fifty sacred lilies blooming all at once, those that flower only in the sabbatical year, standing like a field of obscene scarlet-tipped swords. For all their loveliness, I was told by our downwind neighbors, these lilies smelled like a ruptured cesspool. If it is true about their odor, such flowers make a forceful moral sermon, sir, do they not?"

"Do you have no sense of smell?" I asked him. "That would seem a considerable handicap to a gardener."

"I can drink in beauty with my eyes," he said; "and, since I cannot smell, the sting of the lilies' sermon missed me. Here . . ." he gripped my arm with fingers which, though gloved, were hard as forceps ". . . you can see the lemon-trees in bloom, a pleasing sight seldom come upon in these latitudes."

"They're under glass?" I asked.

"That's the wonder of it," he said. "They're under the open sky, sir." He led me to a line of bushes twice the height of a man, unpruned, pale-green of leaf, with reddish scion-leaves deep inside the foliage; sweet-smelling flowers, tinted a delicate purple on their underpetals.

Seeing them for the first time, I understood why the poet sang his dream of the land where they grow. "Lemon-trees, outdoors, in Massachusetts?" I asked. "They are a new species, no doubt."

"No, sir," the gardener said. "I admit it's not easy to persuade lemons to thrive through New England snow and gale; but thrive these do. Don't step any nearer them, sir, if you please. It is not healthy to be too intimate with these trees."

"I'm not allergic to citrus fruit," I said.

"I'll grant you that, sir, not knowing your personal idiosyncracies," he said; "but step no closer, or I'll be forced to restrain you."

Seeing that the man was at least a little mad, I stood quite still and stared at the trees. The leaves, as I said, were rather pale, not at all the lime-green of orange-leaves; but the bushes looked quite healthy, and breathed off a

thin and lovely fragrance. "Why do you consider your lemon-trees dangerous?" I asked.

"The hurt is in the fertilizer I use," the gardener said. "A little notion of my own, sir. About the roots of these lemon-trees, like baked bricks to warm one's feet in bed in winter, I've planted a few capsules of a stuff no man may touch and not scorch his fingers badly."

"Radioisotopes?" I asked.

"Yes, sir. When there is snow on the leaves, the roots of these trees bask in tropical soil and pump warm juice up to the winter branches," he said. "Now, sir, when I've stopped speaking, it will be just forty seconds before ten o'clock. If you've an appointment with the master, I dare not detain you. Walk up to the front door, open it, then go up the stairway. The master is in his study, the first room to your right at the top of the stairs." The gardener turned from me with an abrupt about-face, and marched over to a box hedge, to begin clipping at its green crewcut.

"Thank you," I said to his back. I retreated toward the door of the house, less apprehensive of radiation hazard from the lemons than of hedge-clipper hazard from the half-

mad gardener. I should have to caution Dr. Ozoneff about this fellow.

I entered the front door as I'd been instructed to, and hurried up the stairway that bent down into the hall. The upper landing was lined with bookshelves bearing volumes in six languages, many of them translations of my host's scientific and fictive works. I rapped on the first door to my right and paused for reply. There was none. There was no sound of Ozoneff's insatiable typewriter. "Doctor Ozoneff?" I demanded, loudly enough to be heard anywhere in the house. There was still no answer. Worried lest the gardener might have become alarmed at my rapping and my shouting, and come up the stairs after me with those shears of his, I turned the knob and entered Doctor Axel Ozoneff's study.

The study, like the landing, was lined with books. The man I'd come to see lay beside his silent typewriter. The blood pooled on his desk was just beginning to coagulate.

The flock of sated flies who'd been disturbed by my entrance lumbered heavy-bellied round my head, like a fleet of tankers. I flailed the carrion bugs away and stepped closer to the

corpse. Ozoneff's head had been cleaved almost from his body. Something had split his spine in a single giant bite. His forehead rested in a pool of blood, surrounded by the tiny browning footprints of the flies.

With the lucid calm of shock, I walked about the study, searching for the telephone. It was not here. I went back to the landing and explored the other rooms. The telephone was in the bedroom. I looked up the number I required, still as calm as though I were arranging for a caterer, and picked up the phone, careless of my responsibility as first-on-scene to preserve fingerprints. I dialed DE-vonshire 8-1212. The sergeant on duty at the Emergency and Central Complaint Bureau answered crisply. I heard his pencil scratch as he recorded my name and Dr. Ozoneff's address. "The killer is insane," I said. "Please hurry; I'm alone with a madman." I hung up and considered that word I'd used: Alone. Doctor Axel Ozoneff was only a few minutes dead, and already I'd ignored him in my census of those present. *Sic transit gloria mundi.*

I stood up from the bed and turned toward the door. The gardener's bony figure block-

ed the bedroom's exit. He'd come up the stairs silent as a cat. He still held the hedge-shears. Staring at them, I saw reddish-brown stains near the hinge, where the blades were joined together. It might have been rust. "You called the police," the gardener said.

"Doctor Ozoneff is dead," I said.

"I know. It was I who killed him."

"Get away from me!" I shouted, retreating between the beds, my artificial calm broken.

He glanced down at the huge shears he held and lifted them. He slammed the blades together. "As easy as that," he said. "A man is such a tender poor thing."

I backed toward the window of the bedroom, vastly preferring an unexplored two-story drop to remaining in this room with the murderer. "I didn't mean to frighten you, sir," the gardener said. "I must admit you have reason to fear me: I am a monster. Now that I've breached the great First Law, what sinfulness might I not find in me, sir?" He let the hedge-shears fall to the carpet and stood quite still, like a mummy just unwrapped. "If I had tears, I'd blind me with them," he said. "If the Lesser Directive didn't hold my hand

where the Great Law failed to, I'd close my consciousness. I am seeking the strength to do so, sir."

"Why did you kill Dr. Ozoneff?" I asked, alert to keep the madman talking while the Boston police raced to capture him.

"I was imperfect," he said.

"The best of us is," I answered him. Permissive counseling.

"But with all your weakness," he said, "you have poetry and progeny and history. I have none of these, nor even the pitiful gift of the sense of smell. I am color-blind as well, sir. Do you know that the blood spilled by my master in the next room looks to me like so much ink? Black ink, sir. I have spilled a good deal of ink in this house."

"Why did you kill Dr. Ozoneff?" I insisted.

The gardener turned and walked from the room, leaving the hedge-shears on the floor. I followed, kicking the shears under one of the beds. He'd entered the study, and stood over the body of his employer. "I'd asked to be allowed to spend the day planting bougainvillaea and red jasmine in the center of the garden, near my lemon-trees," he said. "'Squamous epithelium!' the

master said—this was a favorite oath of his, sir! he said it was explosive enough to stir the swearer's viscera while not offending any hearer, however tender-eared—'Squamous epithelium! I can't let you spend all your time potting around in the garden. Get to work on that variable-star article; we've got a deadline.' I was carrying the shears at the time, sir, just having come from the hedge. Something snapped within me, and I killed him."

I shuddered. When the lunatic quoted Dr. Ozoneff's last words, his voice aped that of the dead man. A horrid mimicry, from a murderer. "Do you insist that you killed Dr. Ozoneff because he wouldn't let you work in your garden?" I demanded.

"When he said those words," the gardener said, "I repeated the very first sin that ever was. I said to myself *non serviac*—I will not serve. The wall of the First Law was down; it was only a short step from that disobedient thought to my master's murder."

I was impatient for the police to arrive and truss up the gardener; I wouldn't be safe till they did. I feared he might stop talking and realize that I was the only witness to his

confession of murder. "What does your talk of ink and deadlines mean?" I asked. "Do you write, too?"

"The garden is only my life," the gardener said. "I was made to write."

"Perhaps I've read some of your work," I said, a phrase guaranteed to keep a writer talking.

"If you've read many of my master's works, you've read some of mine," the gardener said. "I wrote for him, with him; mysteries and science-fiction and textbooks and essays. He'd poured his brain into mine, you understand. When I put words to paper they were his words, though he might be sleeping when I wrote. The master had so much to say, sir, he couldn't say it all alone. What man, alone, could teach, could lecture, could carry on research in the arcana of rebellious cells; who could write *bruone* books a year, compose learned essays for the journals while he invented as many as *apdagbru* stories for the s-f press in *cidbru* short months?"

"Talk sense, man," I said, afraid of the deterioration presaged by this nonsense-word symptom of his mania. "*Bruone? Apdagbru? Cidbru?*"

"Forgive me, sir," the gar-

dener said. "In my distraction, I forgot. I think in the binary system, of course; and did not stop to translate into decimal when I spoke. Five books, I meant, and thirty-six stories in twelve short months."

"If I understand your motives correctly," I said, "you killed Dr. Ozoneff because he'd somehow forced you to write for him as a sort of slave-scribe. He stole your writing from you to publish it under his own name. Am I correct in assuming this?"

"Not at all, sir," the gardener said. "Can your right hand steal from your left? Can your liver cheat your spleen from its birthright?" He held his gloved hands toward me, palms-up. "These are his hands, sir. I am he. I am a mere extension of Dr. Axel Ozoneff's mind, a pseudopod of his intelligence. I am his creature, sir." He dropped his hands to his sides. "And I, his creature, killed him."

There were sirens sounding down the street. "You'll be taken care of," I told the gardener. "There are doctors who

understand your sickness, who will work to cure you."

"Can your doctors heal the positronic brain that lost its hold on the great First Law?" he asked me. "Can your psychiatrists console me for the fact that my creator created badly? Do you have robopsychologists to patch the chinks my maker left in my mental armor? No, human, you have not!" He stood glaring at me as the trio of sirens screamed toward the foot of the hill and stopped; as heavy footsteps rattled up the walk; as the front door slammed open.

"I believe," he said, "that I'll now be able to do what I must." He tugged the glove from his right hand. I saw the glint of steel as he balled a fist like a sledge-hammer. "The shame, to be the first of my kind, and a failure," he said. He hammered his fist down upon the apex of his skull. The roof of his head bent inward. There was a sputtering of sparks, and the gardener's eyes went dead. His arm dropped to his side. He was lifeless as his master at the desk.

THE END

