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LUENA of the GARDENS

by *Paul Brandts*

**A LOST EARTHGIRL FINDS
HERSELF AND HER WORLD
... AND A MAN, TOO.**

IN THE first moment that Luena closed the heavy iron gate behind her and entered the Garden, she sensed the presence of something alien. The rows of lettuce, carrots and tomatoes, generally so noisy and unruly at this hour of the morning, were entirely too quiet. None of the flowers were doing their giddy, foolish little dances. Even the savage Virginia creeper, usually strain-

LUENA OF THE GARDENS



ing so insanely at the heavy wires that bound it to the garden wall, was quiescent.

Her first thought was that one of the giant cabbages had broken from its cage and was doing harm to whatever was nearby. She pushed aside the black feedbag suspended from her waist, touched her hand to her Carnac for reassurance, then mounted the orange causeway that led into the heart of the Garden . . . But an inspection of the cages revealed nothing amiss. Each of the fat monsters was safe inside, and asleep as usual, its strange body concealed by the protective mantle of leaves.

But when she came to the open space beyond the cages she noticed motion for the first time, near the far wall of the Garden in a lonesome clump of maize which was weaving about in indignation and distress. At the same moment that she caught her breath in alarm, the cornstalks were thrust violently aside and a man burst forth.

He was very different from any of the men she had seen in the city or in the temple grounds; his body tall, his face white and hairy, and his clothes odd-looking and tight-fitting. He came forward, his eyes fastened upon her, and called in a hoarse but penetrating voice:

"Now, don't you move, and

don't make any sound, and nobody's going to hurt you."

He was plainly an intruder and it was her manifest duty to destroy him, but her instinct as usual was to help rather than to harm. "Go back! Go back, whoever you are! It is very dangerous for a stranger here!"

"Don't you think I know something about that?" He was brushing yellow grains of corn from his arms and shoulders in a casual manner. "Sean Tulley doesn't go into a strange place without finding out something about it first."

"I insist that you leave at once!" To emphasize the urgency of her words she turned into a branch of the orange causeway and came toward him, gesturing imperatively. "The plants in this Garden are ones Tes Kempak imported from a far-off place called Earth, and crossbred them with our native varieties! They all have strange properties, and many are very dangerous!"

"So that's the reason behind it." He nodded wisely. "Well, lady, a smart man is one who makes good use of his warnings." In demonstration of his superior sagacity, he made a careful detour around the ugly, menacing branches of a bramble bush, and approached by way of the cleared space near the creeper-clad wall.

His actions served only to bring home the true extent of his ig-

norance. The bramble bush, as any child knew, was as harmless as a swamp-puppy. While the Virginia creeper . . . ! No Taalite in his right mind would venture within ten feet of a tendril of the creeper, while he — he was walking beneath it!

To her vast relief he turned away almost at once from the hard, clear ground near the wall, vaulted with lithe sureness over a row of squash and stood in the ditch at the foot of the causeway, staring up at her.

“Now, surely you wouldn’t go chasing me away so soon? After I lay there for an hour, with that crazy corn pecking at me and swatting me, and just to get a look at you—. Surely you wouldn’t be chasing me away so soon?”

There was an odd, half-humorous twist to his mouth that disarmed part of her fear, and curiosity vanquished the rest. “At me? You came here to look at me?”

“And why shouldn’t I? After I heard men talking about you in every port along the Oberara—and after I said to myself, ‘Sean Tulley is the man who is going to find out for himself?’”

“The Oberara?” His words together with his appearance put a wild theory into her head. “Surely you are not one of the Earth-pirates of the Oberara?”

“I am that.” He sounded quite satisfied with himself. “And now

you know me to be one of those monsters, are you going to give the alarm and claim a reward?”

“No, I won’t, not if you promise to leave at once! You—. What do they say about me in the ports along the Oberara?”

“I’ll tell you.” He was studying her as closely as if to memorize every detail of her features. “They’re saying that in the experimental Gardens of a man named Kempak, a girl works who does not look like a Venusian at all but like an Earthgirl. They’re saying that maybe she was captured from Earth parents when she was very young, and brought up by the Venusians.”

“Oh, that sort of story.” She was disappointed. “They say those things because the girls in the city sometimes call me disgusting names, like Earthgirl, or white-faced worm. They do it because they hate me.”

“There could be another reason for the stories.” His voice was almost a whisper. “It could be that—. By all the moons of Jupiter, it’s true!” he interrupted himself explosively. “It’s true, every word of it! Your complexion is not yellow at all! It’s dyed! It’s dyed. You’re a lost child of Earth!”

If he had expected her to react in some fashion, or even to pay heed, he was doomed to disappointment, as her mind was suddenly engrossed by a new worry.

The Virginia creeper on the wall. While they had been talking, a stray coil of the vine had managed somehow to squirm free from the heavy bands of wire, and was poised in the air, the antennae of the beautiful red flowers quivering with curiosity, the blue-black berries pulsating angrily. At this point the branch of the causeway was perilously near to the wall—and she was well acquainted with the rubbery quality of the body of the creeper. Was it only her fancy, or was the stray tendril rearing to strike?

"I haven't made you understand, girl." He was watching her in a puzzled fashion. "You don't belong with the Venusians. You're not of the breed. You're a flower blooming in alien soil. You—."

At this instant the arm of the creeper was a gray blur as it slithered through the air, and in a simultaneous motion Luena pulled up her Carnac and fired.

The arm of the vine evaporated within the core of a brilliant white light, and the Earthman bellowed with astonishment as he flung himself aside. There was a sudden motionlessness that pervaded the entire Garden. Tulley was quiet for so long that she feared the vine had actually reached him, or he had been injured by the explosion.

Then he turned over slowly and warily.

His expression was almost ferocious, but he made no movement of any sort until he had carefully appraised the situation. He looked at the gun in the girl's hand, and then at the wounded creeper, which had gone into a silent but terrible fury down the entire length of the garden wall, all of its coils squirming and straining insanely against the heavy metal bindings. He glanced also at the trail of the berry-juice on the ground, a smoking, stinking trail that bit deeply into the soil itself.

His face grew calm, and he pulled himself to his feet.

"I owe you my thanks, girl. You've done me a great favor."

"I've done a terrible thing!" she cried despairingly. "The Virginia creeper is Tes Kempak's especial pet! He values it above everything else in the Garden! Now I don't know what he'll do!"

His face darkened. "I wouldn't care to see a girl hurt because of something I've done," he said grimly. "I will lie among the trees and wait for this Tes Kempak. When he comes I will kill him."

"No, no, you must leave at once! It is only a minor offense to harm the vine! But it would be treason if I were discovered with an alien in the Garden!" As he still stood stubbornly, she went on beseechingly: "Your words are strange and disturbing — but you

will only do me harm if you stay!"

"I think you are right," he agreed thoughtfully. "It is my great fault that I am too courageous. However, before I go we must make an arrangement."

"What do you mean?"

"Lost flower of Earth, I have many things to speak to you about. I must awaken in you something you may not even know is there. Is there no place near here where we can meet, and where no one would see us?"

"In back of the temple is a grove of trees which the priests call sacred, and where the common people of Taal never enter. It is very lonely there. But it would be folly for us to meet there. We—."

"I will expect you there at nightfall." Even as he spoke he turned, and before she had time to catch her breath was off with quick sure steps among the variegated rows of flowers and vegetables. When he came to the rear of the Garden he clambered into an apple tree, ran out on one the limbs and, after a brief tussle with some of the more unruly of the branches, disappeared over the garden wall.

For some time after that Luena stood stock still, her mind a fever of strange new ideas and sensations. Telling her she was indeed an Earthgirl! The Earth-pirate had said such an unkind thing, of

course, because her appearance was so unprepossessing and homely. But somehow the mere look of him had seemed to open up new worlds before her, and lay siege to her imagination with vivid, almost spectral pictures of faces and vistas she had never seen in the real world—or perhaps had seen many long ages before. One face in particular swam before her, that of a middle-aged, kindly woman who looked toward her with a calm, self-denying love such as she had never known among any in the city of Taal. And her body suddenly yearned toward that face, with a longing so intense and painful it left her amazed and trembling all over . . .

A movement of the injured creeper recalled her to herself, and with an effort she banished the disturbing thoughts from her mind. Tes Kempak had taught her what to do in an emergency. Even her morning task of feeding the vegetables must be foregone. She must summon help at once.

But when she came breathlessly into the foreyard of the House of Kempak a few minutes later, in search of the head gardener, she received an unpleasant surprise. She was confronted by Tes Kempak himself. His narrow face was darker than usual, his little black eyes very bright, and it was obvious that he was in a rage.

"Never since I emerged from

the egg have I been faced with such effrontery!" he roared at her. "After I brought you up in my own house, with the careful severity I would accord one of my own children!"

She was amazed that he had found out so soon, and very fearful. "It—it was because you have placed too great a responsibility on the most worthless of your servants, Master," she stammered. "One of the coils of the Virginia creeper succeeded in freeing itself, and I was overcome with panic. I am such a coward. I—"

"Not until Venus sees a month of sunny days will I forgive this! I will pull his yellow beard for him! I—." He broke off, and as if with an effort fastened his attention on her words. "What is this nonsense about the creeper?"

"You are right to be angry, Master. I should merely have paralyzed the coil of the creeper, not destroy it. But I was so frightened—."

"Pooh! Do you think I am talking of so trivial a matter? Suppose you have burned one of my plants — the medicines of Canna will mend it in no time. I am talking about the bulletin which Ankatta has posted in the foyer of the temple—and which you have certainly heard about."

"Master, I have not been in the temple. And the kitchen girls refuse to gossip with me—."

"You would do well to acquaint yourself more fully with the affairs of the temple, and the palace, as well. This, as it happens, concerns you. Ankatta, the old fool, has placed your name among those of the girls he wishes to serve before the altar of the Flame." When she stood dumbly, not understanding, her silence served to whet his fury to a keener edge: "After I brought you up in my own house, fed you, clothed you, protected you from the sons of the Haakon families! And at the whim of an old idiot you are to be taken from me! I will not tolerate it!"

"I am afraid I do not understand—."

"You are not asked to understand!" His face was almost purple. "You are asked to do only one thing! Go! Go to the high priest, Ankatta! Tell him that, entirely of your own will and without influence from me, you have decided to decline his request! If you disobey me you will spend a month regretting it! Go!"

She found Ankatta in the room adjoining the altar of the Flame, reclining on a window seat with a closed book in his hands, in an attitude of meditation. He composed his features into a look of benevolence as she approached, and even rose, which was a great honor.

"Ah, Luena! I see my request has been brought to you! Your promptness is commendable! Sit here on the seat beside me! . . . Very well, if you wish you may stand! Do you think an—um—older person has no understanding of the fears and hesitations of a young woman?"

"My lord, I am not worthy of the honor you have planned—."

"Now, now, Luena, I have watched you for a very long time. Do you know I have taken a more personal interest in you than in any of the giddy daughters of the noble families?"

"I decline to serve before the altar of the Flame." Not having the least idea how to say it, she had brought it out in a rush and with unforgivable bluntness.

But the old man was not angry, merely grave and interested. "You are being impulsive and not wise. You have lived so long in the hard, stern household of Kempak, you cannot even imagine what the life of a temple girl is like. You will dress in splendid, many-colored robes, Luena. You will lie on soft couches. You will—."

"I cannot be a temple girl."

His face was suddenly bleak. "Have you heard of what happens to those who defy the will of the Flame?"

She had. In fact, she had once by chance caught a glimpse of one of the victims of the Beast of

the Flame, and the memory seared her with fear and rendered her speechless.

His expression became mild as the wise old eyes studied her. "There is something in back of this. You yourself would not have the courage to beard me like this . . . I have it! The voice is yours but the words are those of Tes Kempak! Is it not so?"

"My master forced me, by a threat, to tell you of this."

"Of course! Tes Kempak has risen so fast in the world, he is emboldened to subject me to a test of strength! Of course!"

A silence fell, during which Luena did not have the courage to raise her head. When it finally grew unbearable, she looked up and saw with surprise that Ankatta had again stretched himself out on the window seat, in an attitude of meditation.

"What do you wish me to do, my lord?"

"Do?" He roused himself with an effort. "Why, there is nothing to be done, my dear. Ankatta has requested a girl to serve at the altar. Tes Kempak has seen fit to decline the request. And there the matter rests." He made a gesture of dismissal.

When Luena was troubled of mind or frightened, or when the company of the other servants in the House of Kempak had be-

come unbearable to her, there was one place to which she was accustomed to go. The sacred grove was shunned by the people of Taal because of unholy night-mysteries the priests were reputed to perpetrate in its depths, and today she found it as silent, solemn and deserted as usual.

In the very heart of the grove was the tallest and grandest tree of them all, its great trunk entirely concealed by a veil of white which hung from its branches like an old man's beard. Luena crossed over to it, passed swiftly through the surrounding mantle of white—and collided rather violently with the large chest of Sean Tully.

Instantly his big hands connected themselves behind her. "Many girls have come to a rendezvous with me in the past," he smiled, "but none so eager."

"Let me go! You have hurt me! Let me go!"

He made a little comic face.

"The reward of virtue. Like an impatient lover, I came early. And behold—"

"I was very lucky to find you—because it gives me the opportunity to tell you to leave Taal at once, and never return."

"Leave Taal?" he echoed with great disappointment. "We men of the sea have so few opportunities to get our hands on a pretty girl—and you wish me to leave?"

"It is not merely because there is danger for you here. You have come, you say, because of your belief that I am an Earthgirl. It is not true. I have thought about it carefully, and it is not true."

"You are so sure?" He was studying her very intently.

"I am sure. It is true that I have strange memories of my childhood, when I lived among people far away from Taal. But they were not Earth-people."

"How do you know?"

"Because I have heard tales of the Earth-people on the islands of the Oberara—the pirates. They are a violent and warlike breed, and the women with them are healthy, strong and very brave. I am not like that at all. I am very weak, and I am a pitiful coward."

"But that isn't so at all!" he remonstrated. "Could anyone have been calmer or braver than you were, when you saved me from that monstrosity?"

"It is true that my face may have appeared calm. But my face is a mask, like the yellow paint I put on to make me look like the women of Taal. Inside I was shriveled up with fear . . . I have lived too long in the House of Kempak, Sean Tully. I have seen too many things, and suffered too many things. I—I—." Her voice faltered, and she could not speak.

"Perhaps I have come just in time, little lost flower," he said

tenderly. He again placed his arm around her. "Now listen to me, flower of Earth. There is a road before you. It is an easy road. It is the road to a new life. Inside the great red flowers that rim the bay, I have a boat concealed. It is a boat swifter than those of the stupid Venusians. It—."

"What an invaluable piece of information," said a new voice, cold and clear as ice. "Taal will be very grateful."

They wheeled about simultaneously. Tes Kempak was just stepping through the mantle of white, behind him one of the white-uniformed members of the palace guard. Both men held Carnacs on the ready.

Tulley made a sound deep in his throat, and thrust her aside. He reached toward his coat, and for the first time it occurred to her that he might be armed. But his action was far too slow. His whole body was bathed suddenly in the cold blue-white flame of the Carnac, a violent tremor seized him—and Luena turned away.

For a fleeting moment she had dared to hope, because his voice had been so confident, the arms that had held her so sure and strong. But now without looking any further she knew what was happening. The fire of the Carnac! While it wreaked no apparent harm to the body's casing, inside his organs were being dis-

solved in raging, insatiable acids.

Tes Kempak did not deign to glance at his fallen enemy. "I knew you had permitted an alien to enter the Garden. One of my flowers told me. Some of them possess powers even you do not know about." He continued in a musing tone: "It is amazing how the spark of rebellion flickers within the breast of even the meanest and humblest serf."

He took her hand and led her away from the tree, and she obeyed as always in the past, her head bowed, every line of her body eloquent with submission.

"Of course, the whole incident should prove of advantage to me," he said. "A boat captured from one of the Earth-pirates. An invaluable prize. It—." He broke off as there was a sound behind as of scuffling feet, then a half-choked scream. He pushed her violently aside as he turned.

When by his action she was forced to raise her head, she beheld a sight that amazed her. Tulley had been resurrected to sudden and savage life. He had grappled with the guardsman, and even now was holding the other's smaller body over one of the great roots of the tree. The struggle had thrust aside much of the beard of white that surrounded the tree, and every detail of the scene was revealed as the body of the guardsman jerked convulsively,

then slid lifelessly to the ground.

During all this the astounded Tes Kempak had been busy with his gun, but the pirate walked into the very heart of the blue flame. "You've played with your toys long enough," he grinned. "Now it's my turn." The cylinder he was holding was so small his big hand almost concealed it, and there was no sound or any flash of light; but Tes Kempak was thrown to the ground as violently as if struck by lightning.

"These Venusians think we Earthmen are barbarians without knowledge of science," said Tully contemptuously. "One of the first things our scientists discovered was a defense against the rays of the limpak."

He turned to the trembling girl and surveyed her with an almost humorous expression. "Your decision has been made for you. We are partners in crime. We must flee together."

"Don't you realize what you have done?" she cried despairingly.

"You don't mean you're sorry for what happened?"

"No, no, that isn't it! But don't you see that Kempak was wearing his uniform of an officer in the palace guard?" As his expression remained blank, she continued: "Every officer in the guard has a protective device in his coat! When he is hurt in any fashion,

an alarm is automatically flashed to the other members of the guard!"

"But how would they be able to find us here?"

"Their audio devices will bring them to us in minutes! More than that, every gate in the city will be closed until they discover the murderer of Kempak!"

"And when they examine the body, they may guess that an alien killed him," he said, after long thought. "You are the only one who can help me, lost flower. Have you friends who can hide me until the alarm blows over?"

She was amazed to find him relying on her in an emergency, even more amazed to discover her brain responding. "No, I have no friends in Taal. But I know something that may help. There has long been bitter hatred between Kempak and the high priest Ankatta, hatred which the other guardsmen share. The bodies are lying in the sacred grove. If I go first to the soldiers, I may be able to convince them one of the priests committed the crime—."

"And maybe they won't even close the city gates!" he finished swiftly. "An excellent idea! Meantime, I know of only one place to hide!" With his usual swiftness of decision he turned, and before she had the chance to say another word was running silently as an

animal into the gloomy depths of the wood.

When he was gone, she was conscious of so heavy a weight of misery in her breast that it threatened to stifle her. Did he not realize on how weak a reed he was leaning? Could she, and she alone, be a match for the minds and cruel strength of the soldiers? Yet he had trusted her, and after moments of painful indecision she forced her lagging feet to the head of the grove.

When she came there a new and unpleasant surprise was in store for her. As she had anticipated, a little company of soldiers was approaching on the double, headed by a man named Calatta, whom she recognized because he had visited now and then at the House of Kempak. But, as she had not expected, another group of men was also in view, dressed in the green robes of the temple novitiates, and headed by none other than Ankatta himself. They, too, were approaching at an unusually rapid pace, and she guessed that the priests with their secret devices had intercepted one of the messages of the soldiers, and were determined to find out for themselves what form of mischief was afoot in the sacred grove.

The two companies arrived at about the same time, each carefully ignoring the other. It was

Calatta who spoke first, his voice gruff and very unfriendly:

"I just saw you come from the grove, girl. Speak up! What have you seen there?"

"I have been a witness to a terrible thing! I—I—" The unforeseen advent of Ankatta had confounded her completely, and she was unable to continue.

"This shows the result of the military training," interposed the high priest in a sharp, authoritative tone. "You have the manners of an animal, Calatta. Was it necessary to frighten the girl?"

"Tell me what you have seen there," repeated the soldier, this time more moderately.

Because she had not wit enough to think of anything else, she burst forth with the story she had already prepared: "I was walking near the grove, when I saw my master Tes Kempak and one of his men enter. I followed curiously. Two men were waiting there, dressed in the robes of the temple novitiates—it was like a pre-arranged meeting." She did not dare look toward Ankatta, or any of them. "They talked. I saw Kempak shake his head violently, and it seemed to me he was growing angry. Then one of the green-robed men drew forth a strange device from under his coat, raised it—and I saw the bodies of both Kempak and the other convulse suddenly, and fall

to the ground. I turned and ran."

Her story had sounded awkward and insincere to her own ears, but when she gained the courage to raise her head, there was a look of eagerness in Calatta's eyes.

"I have heard stories of strange weapons the priests carry under their robes," he said. "Indeed, it is common talk. Yanna, Garn—." He turned to two of his men. "—search the grove."

Ankatta's face held no anger, merely great wonder. "There is something in this I do not understand," he muttered. "It is entirely beyond belief that two of the novitiates would do such a thing without—without—."

"Without authority from you, would you say?" interrupted Calatta smoothly. "I could hardly disagree on that."

"I can see that it will be necessary to have the girl questioned by the servants of the Flame," continued the old man reflectively, "in order to weed out the kernels of falsehood from the truth in her story."

"Deliver the girl over to the custody of those who may be suspected of the crime?" asked the soldier contemptuously. "That would be clever indeed." As he spoke a communicator-device attached to his helmet began to sputter, and he listened for a time. From the look of rage and venom

that came over his features, Luena knew that the two soldiers he had sent into the grove had discovered the bodies.

"What the girl says is partly confirmed," said Calatta. "Two men are dead, one of them our leader—and the manner of their passing was very strange."

Ankatta seemed to waken for the first time to the gravity of his peril. "This is a scheme of the palace guard to provoke hatred against my loyal servants!" he exclaimed furiously. He reached inside his robe, and the guardsman in an answering gesture pulled a small-arm halfway from its holster.

For a long moment the two men stood there; and indeed the entire group was frozen into a silent tableau, pregnant with menace. The quarrel in the offing, had it been allowed to take its natural course, might conceivably have worked well for the fortunes of the girl. But it was her own weakness that marred the fulfillment of her careful plan. The past years of misery and subservience, combined with an overpowering consciousness of her present danger, took their toll. Losing her head completely, she turned and ran in panic.

Her action had the worst possible effect, as she discovered when a semblance of reason returned and she looked behind.

The two companies, after the first moment of mystification had passed, had united in the face of the common problem, and two men from each group had detached themselves and taken up the chase. They were moving along at an easy lope, making no effort to use their weapons or overtake the fleet-footed girl, as they knew the pursuit could have only one conclusion.

The feeling in her breast was one she had known only too often before. She was panicked completely due to an abject terror of the unfeeling, brutalized people around her, and she felt that she must run, run until her lungs burst and her legs failed beneath her. Yet she knew at the same time that her flight was a hopeless one, because there was no place of refuge.

She occasionally passed some of the citizens of Taal, as her path led near the parade grounds on the outskirts of the city. They looked after her curiously, but she knew that none would intercede. The people of Taal had long since learned to keep well away from any business the soldiers were engaged in. She was making instinctively for the Kempak properties, and after crossing a small bridge she turned into the first gate which looked familiar, which happened to be that of the Kempak Gardens.

She was at once confronted by a sight that was unpleasant yet welcome at the same time. Sean Tulley was there, crouched on his haunches beneath the dubious shelter of a bramble bush. On the instant he saw her he arose.

It was evident that he was totally unaware of the clamor outside. He said wryly, "When I stood up the bush pecked me. When I sat down the flowers pricked me. So I compromised."

When he had spoken of his "hiding place," it had not occurred to her to speculate concerning its location. Now by her cowardice she had betrayed them both. When she had regained her breath she told him what had happened, ending with the words, "It is as I told you. I am too much of a weakling."

"Now, don't you go worrying about it," he responded matter-of-factly. "It was a good idea—even if it went astray. Now it will have to be a fight—although I don't know where we can take cover in this stinking place?"

His words suggested a new train of thought, and she said suddenly: "I know of a way. Out of the Garden—perhaps even out of the city itself. But too dangerous for us to take."

"What are you talking about?" he asked eagerly.

"It is a pity that the way is closed to us. But come, I will

show you." She led him to one of the cages of the giant cabbages. Inside was one of the usual fat, sluggish monsters, but this one was leaner than its fellows, and its leafy mantle had a yellowed and decadent look.

"This is something I discovered only two days ago—and which I believe even Tes Kempak didn't know. You see that cabbage? The body inside the cloak of leaves has succeeded in eating its way down through the wire flooring of the cage. It is probably burrowing its way to join its wilder brethren in the swamps. I looked inside the cage—I know it is gone."

"Excellent!" exclaimed Tulley. "How do we get into the cage?"

"I have a key. I am one of the gardeners." She fumbled at her pouch, and the pirate at once took the sliver of metal from her hand, opened the cage door.

She was beyond making any further protest. She was well aware that Tulley's resolution and valor were founded upon his complete ignorance of the nature of the creature that might be in wait for them, somewhere in the ground below. Yet, since no path before her offered any hope for salvation, she might as well take the one as the other. She merely watched as the man ran swiftly along the causeway, opened all the other cages.

"That will give them something to think about—in case they get too anxious about us," he said, returning. "Come along now."

He locked them both in. The girl, standing before the sticky, noisome hulk of greenish-yellow leaves, was again irresolute. It was not until there were sudden noises at the gate of the Garden that she bolstered up the ragged remains of her courage, pushed her way through. Instantly she was falling, or rather sliding, down a warm, muddy incline.

She came down upon her hands and knees in semi-darkness and in mud. Fortunately there was enough space here, and the dark opening that bulked ahead, although uninviting, was ample. When Tulley came plunging down she was crawling onward.

She was dismayed to discover that it led downward. Had the tunnel been a smaller one, so that the warm mud with its suction-like powers could have attached itself to her entire body instead of merely to her hands and knees, progress would have been impossible. As it was, the going was heartbreakingly slow, and there were times when the stale air threatened to overcome her.

Later on she could not remember many of her thoughts during the nightmare journey. She did not allow her mind to dwell on what might be behind, and in-

deed no sound came from that direction, save once when there was a high-pitched screaming, very far in the distance. She did not speculate upon its origin. Her one clear recollection was the time when the tunnel took an upward slant, and that moment of wild hope when there was a glimmer of light ahead.

She pulled herself out moments later, and came to her feet on a surface that was blessedly firm and had many rocks in it. She was in a cavern. Tulley was at her side almost at once, and both of them realized their good fortune. There were dark openings in the side of the cave, and they had no doubt that the burrowing monster had created one of them in its search for freedom. But there was also the cave-mouth, round with light and barely fifty feet ahead, and they made toward it.

The danger that came was the more terrible because it was unexpected. It looked like a great rock at the side of the cave, immobile and dirty-white in color, with what might have been cracks along its surface but which were actually large veins. Its strange sensory system had no doubt given it warning of the approach of intruders, and caused it to remold its amorphous bodily organism into the semblance of a rock. Only when they were very

near did it bloat up suddenly, and fall toward them.

Luena screamed and stumbled backward. Tulley, who was not to be taken off guard, had his gun in his hand and discharged it in the same second. The cabbage, in the interest of its camouflage, had also caused its cells to take on the attribute of solidity, one which they did not normally possess — which was lucky, because otherwise the weapon might have had no effect at all. As it was, so great was the power of the monster that there was an awful moment when it seemed as if it would succeed in making its way through the tremendous aura of force, then it began to recoil.

Immediately afterward the two Earth-people witnessed a strange sight. The vegetable, in its effort to pierce the waves of energy, had literally been sliced to ribbons, and the many parts of its body were strewn about the floor. Luena, watching with trepidation, recalled descriptions she had heard of attributes of the curious creature. As if in answer to her thought, the segments on the floor bloated themselves ferociously and, all the parts exhibiting the same qualities of life as the whole, began crawling.

"Like shooting fish in a barrel!" said Tulley. And the entire cavern became filled with acrid, stinging smoke as he discharged his weap-

on again and again. Luena, too, pulled out her Carnac and fired wherever she saw movement. After several minutes of this both sprang forward and ran toward the mouth of the cave.

At the moment that they came to the opening the strain of what she undergone threatened to overcome the girl, and Tulley, sensing her need, put his arm around her. The last sight she recalled as he swung her into his arms was the floor of the cavern, which was literally covered with little blobs of different sizes, like little worms, all of them inching relentlessly forward.

Then she blacked out entirely.

When she recovered consciousness Luena was prone on a hard surface with rough edges to it, and her body was being rocked back and forth. Above her were tall red things, that waved about as if straining for a look at her. She lifted herself to her elbow and saw that she was in a boat, with Tulley crouched over a small engine, and that the red things were the flowers which rimmed the bay near Taal city.

Tulley, seeing that her eyes were open, gave her a sympathetic smile. "You don't have to worry any more. Soldiers, cab-

ages and priests—they're all far behind us."

There were still anxious moments, however, while the boat wrestled its way strenuously through the stubborn flowers. During this interval her mind went irrelevantly to an entirely new subject.

"Sean Tulley, when I am with your people will I be a free woman or a slave?"

"A slave, of course!" he said with surprise. "As a captured woman, you will be required to obey without question any orders I may give."

"I don't think I would ever obey you in that fashion!" she pouted.

"Now, that's peculiar," said Tulley, and although she could not see his face she guessed that he was smiling. "None of the other women slaves ever do, either."

At this moment the boat burst through the last of the flowers, and the unimpeded power of its engine carried them as swiftly and lightly as a bird into the free waters beyond. Luena was being borne into an entirely new world, to be the slave of an Oberara pirate — and she was wildly, gloriously happy. * * *