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There was no fear now—no hysteria—as the thing opened its gleaming jaws—and swung—

Nightmare Island

Nature had gone mad on an island where one man was king

by Douglas Drew

DURING her past four terms at the university, Estelle Wolfe had received many letters asking her to select and send laboratory equipment and apparatus to some unheard-of address in the Caribbean, and always she had complied, promptly and willingly. But this letter was different. Although couched in terms of affection and congratulation, it was virtually a command.

The letter read:

After years of research and preparation, I am about to proceed on an experiment which is bound to be of worldwide importance. It will revolutionize and advance scientific comprehension of organic as well as botanical cell growth beyond your wildest imaginings.

Immediately after your graduation, you will please come to Anguilla. Bring full photographic equipment for recording certain interest stages of my subject. I have lived so long alone that I have no intelligent friend whom I may trust. Therefore try to bring a witness, a man whose discretion is dependable, whose scientific interests are sincere and who is not too ignorant to know phenomena from fake.

At the end of the month you will receive in the place of your usual remittance, a sum sufficient to cover the passage for you and for the witness.

Unknown to yourself, a member of the faculty of your university has kept me posted on your progress. He writes that your devotion to botany is genuine. On these islands you will find much to interest you in your special field. Order whatever apparatus and materials you wish from the Kraus laboratories on my account and have them shipped to Anguilla.

Estelle read and reread the letter, and sat tapping the envelope with pretty but nervous fingers. She was thinking of Rupert Seward, not that she called him that. She always addressed him as Mr. Seward. He was the new assistant chemistry professor. They had lunched together a few times, and although the conversations had been principally confined to the cold-blooded language of technicalities, neither of them was blind to the other's attractiveness. And yesterday they had even gone so far as to discuss the possibilities of sharing a small research laboratory, which with much labor and economy they might establish for themselves after her graduation.

Rupert Seward was considerably upset. His plans for the summer had included not only a laboratory, but also an attractive little bungalow. Furthermore, his intentions were strictly honorable. Foreseeing possible frustration of his hopes, he demanded a lot of explanation.

Who was this man? What sort of experiment was it? Must she go against her will?

Peter Wolfe was her uncle. At the death of her parents, he had agreed to educate her in the vocation of her choice. This he had done, and although he had no claim on her save her gratitude, she felt honor-bound to respect his wishes. She had never seen him, but knew from his occasional, though peremptory, correspondence, that he was both brilliant and eccentric.

In response to her frequent requests for books and supplies with which to carry on her work, his generosity had never failed. Could she then ignore his first real request of her?

"And you, Mr. Seward. Can't you see how I'll need you? Not just as a witness, but so that we may continue our work together. This morning I did a lot of checking up on the vegetation of those islands, and although they have never been carefully studied, it is well known that there are several species related to the plans we are working on."

It seemed to Rupert that she was trying desperately to make a dismal obligation look like an attractive adventure. He promptly swore that neither of them should go, yet in his heart he knew that if she would, she would—and he would follow.

PETER WOLFE had mailed the letter from Anguilla which was the nearest point touched by steamer routes. His own private establishment was on a little nameless island over thirty miles distant. He called it Wolfe's Isle. It was untenanted except by himself and his four native servants, three of them men, and one, a girl, who worshiped him, and who was therefore privileged to wash his clothes and prepare his meals.

Her name was Mermo. She was almost to be trusted, but even she was expressly forbidden ever to enter the two big stone rooms at the back of his house. Wolfe never left those rooms unlocked. For the past six months he had kept the cellar locked, too. The men couldn't imagine why. They had helped to mount the great door and nothing was in the cellar at that time except the twisted trunk of a tapan vine. It was rooted in the earth floor and passed through the ceiling by means of a hole cut for it by Wolfe. In the room above, which was Wolfe's inviolable laboratory,

the vine terminated in an ugly, gnarled lump of distorted vegetation.

No plant native to the tropics possessed more aggressive vitality, more speed of growth or more versatile adaptability than the tapan. But Peter Wolfe had discovered new things about the species.

Not only did it have in its sap tiny cells which were visible through his microscope, but he had completely proven that these served to feed the plant tissues exactly as red corpuscles feed animal tissues. Another distinguishing feature was that whereas most vegetation has one flow of sap, upward from the roots to the leaves each spring, and a return flow from the withering leaves to the roots each fall, the tapan had a *continuous* flow or circulation, up through the sap wood and cambium layer close under the bark, then back toward the roots through a porous and elastic core.

Peter Wolfe had written in his notes, "Tapan has actual blood stream akin to that of animal life." It had taken but little experimenting to prove the tales of the natives. He had captured a live swallow, plucked away its breast feathers, broken its wings so that it could not fly, and perched it upon a tapan twig to roost during the night. By daybreak green tendrils had coiled about the bird's tiny feet, and fresh young leaves, still sticky with their newness, had incased the little creature, and, despite its struggles to escape, were slowly drawing its life's blood into their own distended veins.

While Peter Wolfe watched, the leaves grew redder, and after some minutes they daintily abandoned the dead bird. The tendrils relaxed their hold and it fell to the floor. Wolfe examined the body; it was bled white. During the next hour he studied samples of the twig's sap at ten minute intervals. Then he wrote in his notes, "Tapan has true

digestive track, faintly resembling that of lower animals."

When he returned to the plant a while later, he noticed that the twig which he had nicked for sap samples had twisted several feet away from its previous position. He wrote, "Tapan has nervous system like that of lower Invertebrata."

Then began a long series of experiments on the tapan's blood stream. He was seeking to relate the circulatory system of the plant with the systems of living organisms. He tried a transfusion of blood from a rat. The results had been shocking, but interesting. The plant was a young seedling, scarcely an inch in diameter. It had begun to sway with a circular movement in slow rhythmic convolutions, becoming more and more rapid until, within five minutes, the motions became so short and so fast that the thing seemed to shiver. Then it was dead.

Wolfe, examining the tap, found it had clotted with a jellyfish consistency. He killed many of the young plants before he discovered that, after proper inoculation, he could give transfusions from any cold-blooded creature without apparently harming the tapan.

Obviously he was on the right track. He soon eliminated reptiles; that left fish. He had conceived a plan by which flesh should be made to grow, nourished only by the soil and the sun, a plan which should startle the scientific world and by which he, Peter Wolfe, would become the most famous man in civilization.

LONG MONTHS were spent in developing serums for injection into the tapan trunks, thus preparing the plant's veins for a perfect transfusion. He tried different varieties of fish, and, by making careful observations of the blood cells after the transfusions, he narrowed the field of his experiments to eels. They seemed the most hardy and the operation was more generally successful.

By now his serums were perfected to an extent whereby a transfusion of an eel's blood was taken up in the tapan's circulation as readily as its own sap. Furthermore, the corpuscles not only survived in perfect health, but multiplied, keeping a constant ratio of plant and animal cells.

It was at this stage that he began grafting. His first attempts were twelve bits of living muscle, inset beneath the bark and carefully sealed. At the end of twenty-four hours he opened two of them. Both had survived. One day later he opened two more. These were as healthy as the first. Some of the tiny capillaries had swelled and were carrying the pinkish sap which was now the tapan's own life fluid.

On opening two more the next day, he noticed that although the veins were enduring, yet the flesh itself was wasting somehow, while the cellular tissues of the plant gradually replaced it. He cursed himself and opened the remaining grafts, all of which showed an identical process. Nourished by one blood stream, the organic and the vegetable tissues were competing for growth, and the vegetable was winning in every case.

By now the vine planted in his cellar had developed a trunk several inches in diameter. Its serpentine branches encircled the ceiling of his laboratory. He inoculated it and gave it a complex transfusion, slashing the branches and bleeding it of its natural sap as he injected the blood from a moray eel into the trunk.

The tapan drank it up quickly. Wolfe doubled the treatment. That, too, was absorbed. He lopped off the branches in his laboratory and sealed the butts with wax. He estimated that the plant's fluid was approximately seventy per cent red blood. On the same day he performed a similar operation on a captured moray eel, leaving in its veins an identical mixture.

The following days were an agony of

waiting. The great eel fell into a stupor and lay quietly in the bottom of his tank. The tapan showed none of its usual vigorous budding and Peter Wolfe tore his hair and spent sleepless nights, half in desperate hope and half in miserable certainty of failure.

After five days, the tapan began to break new buds, and by the end of a week its old vitality was entirely renewed. The moray eel returned to its normal habits and viciously circled its prison, feeding gluttonously and fully demonstrating its right to the title of most formidable and dangerous inhabitant of tropical waters.

PETER WOLFE was in ecstasy. He took samples from the veins of both and examined them beneath his microscope. The mixtures were unchanged. He had observed, with delight, how quickly the tiny wound healed on the eel, a property doubtless conveyed by the sap of the tapan, which had that power to a remarkable degree.

He prepared for a more daring experiment. The grafted flesh, he reasoned, had not actually died, but had been compressed and absorbed by the rank growth of plant tissue. This time there should be no crowding. He would not insert his graft in the trunk but would set a large one firmly upon the butt from which he had pruned the branches. In this way plant growth could not compress the graft.

Having familiarized himself thoroughly with morays by weeks of vivisection, he now attempted what the world would have called the impossible. He anæsthetized the prepared eel and cut its body in half. This left its digestive track undamaged. He then sealed up its mouth and gills with wax, and, opening its side, he severed the muscles of its heart, leaving that organ limp and powerless, yet permitting a circulation through itself.

Gathering the arteries together he set

them in the fluid core of the tapan. The surrounding flesh and skin he pressed to a lip of the freshly opened cambium layer beneath the tapan's bark. He sealed the connection with a heavy ring of wax and stood back to survey his handiwork.

What began as a branch, continued as the gray-green body of a moray, and terminated with the horrible head which hung motionless before him, its small eyes sullen and quiet. Wolfe tapped a pencil on one side of the creature to see if the anæsthesia had worn off. It swerved sharply in that direction, and a slight movement of the eyeball was discernible. Every day for weeks he tried it. The reflex action was always the same. He watched eagerly for some indication of growth. There was none whatever.

The tapan thrived as before, sending out new buds and branches so rapidly that Wolfe was obliged to cut them back every three or four days; but the moray eel merely existed. True, it was alive; it still reacted to a touch, and the operation had healed so completely that it was only by close inspection that he could see where the vine stopped and the eel began. But all growth within the tissues of the moray seemed to be at a standstill.

Peter Wolfe waited, watched, hoped and swore. He almost never left the laboratory. His anxiety for the moray left him no patience with his men. They wondered what great thing it could be which played such havoc with the master's health and temper. With the exception of rare, short-spoken orders, he addressed no one but the faithful Mermo. She adored him as always, but shuddered at the violence of his moods.

Although he lopped off the branches as fast as they sprang into being, there was no controlling the trunk; its diameter had tripled. Where it came through the floor, the boards were pushed aside like ribbons. Wolfe cut

a larger opening rather than risk damage to the plant's circulation.

The influx of red blood in its veins seemed to increase its carnivorous appetite. He frequently experimented. It devoured any small creatures, alive or dead, birds, insects, or mice. But still the eel hung changeless, yet alive. He watched the tapan devour its small prey. "Who shall say that you are inanimate?" he would mutter challengingly. "A blood stream, a nervous system and a carnivorous digestive track."

He wondered for the thousandth time why a union with the animate creature was not possible. Why wasn't the tapan already an animal? What remained to bridge the gulf? Only the ability to move from place to place. That was nothing to bar the tapan from a class of animate beings. There were many low orders of life which never changed their place of habitation. Had any one ever seen an oyster walk? Or a sponge? No, nor a hundred other creatures he could name.

He cursed and raved. "If only it had a quicker pulse. If only it were——" Then Peter Wolfe stopped short. He believed he knew. Yes, now he knew what was preventing the growth of the moray. Of course! Why had he overlooked it? The blood was right; the operation was right; only the circulation was too slow! Why had he ever depended upon the sluggish action of osmosis? The vital fluid must not merely flow through the veins, it must be pumped swiftly. Then it would truly feed growth of new cells and tissues and wash away the waste of those processes.

II.

HE IMMEDIATELY began to design a machine which would pump the sap. It was built on the principle of a heart, with one auricle and one ventricle to be connected with the upward and downward flows within the trunk. The

device was inadequate. It had to be powered by electricity, too little of which was available from his tiny lighting plant. However, during the two days before it broke down altogether, he saw the grafted moray show signs of movement. When he tapped it with a pencil, it struck at his wrist and loosened the wax which sealed its jaws.

Wolfe was mad with delight. Of course the artificial heart was short-lived, but now that he knew it would work, he threw himself feverishly into a new plan. The tapan should have a permanent heart, a real one. It should be grafted from a large fish, a shark. Perhaps his men could catch a big one; they were fond of fishing and were frequently threatened by such monsters.

This was when he wrote the letter to Estelle. He had given her an education; it was time she did something in return. There would be much for her to do. He wanted complete detailed records of every step in the operation and of every development which would follow. She would also reassemble in correct order all notes which he had made on his efforts so far. He knew she was capable.

The request for a reputable witness had been an afterthought. He believed that such a testimonial would clear his path if it were ever blocked by skepticism. Wolfe had no fear of letting them in on the secret, for he was certain that once they were here on Wolfe's Isle, both niece and witness would be virtually prisoners as long as he wished.

Even the few white inhabitants of Anguilla did not know where he was located nor what he did. He forbade the servants to leave his island and allowed them no craft suitable for the passage. He kept one heavy power boat entirely for his own use, and when he went to Anguilla for mail or provisions he went alone. In such places as Anguilla, people ask nothing save that a man's coins ring true.

From then on his days were filled with frenzied activity in preparation for the great experiment. Tapans grew densely in the jungle heart of the island. He inoculated many young ones and gave them transfusions from moray eels. In the trunks of these plants he made his first attempts at heart grafting. The technique was extremely difficult, and at first the hearts died in the labor of pumping the fluid into the nonelastic veins.

It took several weeks to overcome this difficulty, but at last he devised a scheme by which the heart pumped against a bubble, the bubble maintaining a fairly equal force at all times, and, by its contraction under pressure, cushioning the labor of the heart pneumatically, relieving it, much as the expansion and contraction of arteries and veins modify a pulse.

The arrangement was necessarily delicate and his first ones died, but he became more skillful, and by the time Estelle and the witness were due he had successfully grafted hearts into the trunks of several jungle vines. He was eager now to plant a heart within the great trunk in his house, the heart which he knew would put lusty life and growth into the savage moray.

No two specimens, he reflected, could more perfectly represent the hardihood and vigor of their two worlds, than the cruel, powerful, moray eel, and the tapan, king of jungle creepers and climbers. What an achievement then! What an honor that he, Peter Wolfe, should be the one man in the world to unite two such powerful specimens into one living, growing organism—the mind, the flesh of a brute with the vitality and furious growth of a tropical vine. Perhaps it was to be a forerunner of a race of animated vegetation which would be man's food and man's slave.

Wolfe's optimism was at its greatest height. To-morrow he would go to Anguilla to meet the ship which would

bring the newcomers. As soon as he brought them here, he'd commence the operation. Everything was ready, all necessary instruments and materials stood waiting. The great heart had already been taken from a big shark, and the powerful muscle was now throbbing in a solution which he had prepared for it. It could live in that a week if necessary. He had been lucky to get that heart. His men had rebelled against the task of landing the huge fish. One man was badly mangled, and might possibly die. They would not obey if he ordered another such capture.

But Peter Wolfe was not concerned with a native's life. He had the heart, and soon it would be throbbing in a new creation—his creation! He tried to visualize the amazement with which his niece and the fellow Seward would behold his monstrosity. He was so excited that sleep would not come to him.

RAIN pattered on the roof. He wondered if it would stimulate the tapans. The rainy season would be on in full by the first of July. The vines were now growing almost three feet a day. With the ground drenched it would not be unusual for them to triple that growth.

His thoughts raced. Sleep was impossible. He dressed and entered his laboratory, gathered the necessary articles and went to the cellar where the heart was beating beside the swelling trunk. By three a. m. the operation was completed; the great pump throbbed within the body of a new beast.

He went up to his laboratory and tapped the moray with a pencil. There was no reaction. Well, it would soon enough take effect. He was not discouraged, but he was frightfully weary. Setting his alarm clock to wake him lest he sleep too long, he threw himself upon a cot in an adjoining room.

How long he slept will never be known. Soothing fingers stroked his

eyelids, his lips and throat. He tried to open his eyes, but something enveloped his face, tenderly, but with tremendous strength. He could not lift his head. His hands groped in space. He was miserably weak. Then he realized! The vine! He had left the door open and the heat or the rain had produced creepers to devour him.

He found a knife in his pocket, fumblingly opened it and slashed away the parts which had seized him. Then, peeling the sticky young leaves from his eyes, he watched blood drip from the stems—his blood.

There were several of the long creepers in the room beside the one which had found him. One had encircled the clock and crushed it so that it was no wonder he had not been awakened. Hastily, he lopped off the branches, leaving only the moray. That creature was so much revived that it struck at him viciously whenever he approached it, the long jaws working convulsively and the tiny pig eyes glittering with hatred. Wolfe believed its body had become longer and weightier, but wasted no time on further examination.

Twenty minutes later he was chugging across smooth ocean swells, toward Anguilla. He was grateful for the thirty-some miles which lay ahead, for much had happened and he wished to think undisturbed.

III.

ESTELLE no longer called him Mr. Seward. He was Rupert now and sometimes just Bert. It was all settled—they were to be married as soon as they returned to civilization.

It had been a beautiful trip, the first sea voyage for either of them. They were passing little mysterious islands that looked like long gray clouds when you first sighted them, and became deep-blue, then purplish as you came nearer

and then, if you passed close enough, they were green with glistening white beaches.

Life here looked good. Sunshine seemed to be especially intended to bathe these waters and these islands. Estelle and Rupert laughed like children. Did they like the Caribbean? Were they glad they came? They'd tell the world they were glad to be here, and as for liking it—well, they were wondering why they'd ever wasted so much of their precious time locked up in a dismal university.

To-night they would be put ashore at Anguilla, where the mysterious uncle was to meet them. What would he be like? Estelle imagined he would be a fussy little man, needing a hair cut, and wearing thick-lensed spectacles and baggy trousers, and that he would be very enthusiastic, very absent-minded, very good-natured, and very eager to receive his guests.

As soon as they reached Anguilla they realized that the characterization had been correct, except that he was neither absent-minded nor good-natured. He was, however, so eager to see them that he sulked angrily at their arriving so late. There was a storm coming, he said, and he was afraid to make the passage by night in bad weather. Now, they'd all have to wait at the insect-ridden little hotel until morning.

But next day, the waves were wild, so the little boat remained in harbor. Peter Wolfe was furious. He would tell them nothing of his experiment, save that it was imperative for him to return to his laboratory lest something go wrong. "Years I have labored," he growled, as the wind-driven rain slapped the rickety tavern walls. "Yes, years, and I grow old, older than need be, because I work so hard, and now the stage is set for us, and, through us, for all the world. Yet, because it chooses to storm, we must sit here in a hovel, while

things happen in my laboratory which would make your eyes bulge."

Next day the waves were higher and the rain fell faster. The barometer promised no cessation of mean weather. Day after day they waited and watched for a change. In spite of the flattening effect of the constant downpour, the whitecaps raced madly across the ocean from dawn till dusk. The local weather prophets merely wagged their heads and shrugged sympathetically. They thought it looked like a long-timer. It might blow over in a week, but they doubted it.

Peter Wolfe lapsed into silent contemplation of the sea. His imagination was afire. He pictured the possibilities. What he had seen resulting from a few hours of the great heart's stimulus, and what he knew of the effects of rain on tropical vegetation, made him shiver to think of Wolfe's Isle.

The great tapan in his laboratory, without its daily pruning, might crush the grafted eel, destroying it. Its creepers would be overrunning the house. He had wanted to keep them cut, not just to preserve order in his laboratory, but so that the moray eel might get the full benefit of the sap flow. He thought of the tapans scattered about outside, those with the hearts grafted in and the blood circulations. How they must be growing! How he wished he were there! What irony! Years and years of striving for all this, and now to be deprived of the sight.

AFTER exactly twenty days, agonized ones for Peter Wolfe, the restless ocean calmed and, although rain poured from gray skies, the little party put out to sea toward Wolfe's Isle.

Now they were by themselves, Wolfe had no hesitation about telling them of his work. He bragged of its originality, its tremendous importance as a future industry, its scientific significance. He described it step by step, from its original conception in his mind years before,

to his leaving the island and coming to meet them just twenty-one days ago. Estelle was completely awed. Rupert was frankly skeptical.

The old man explained his anxiety lest the plants got beyond control, but the wind was rising and the boat demanded his whole attention. As they neared Wolfe's Isle they could see the towering plumes of foam where the huge seas flung their force against the surrounding reef. They must make the little harbor before dark, else it would be almost impossible to find the passage through. "Perhaps the wind will go down as night comes on," he told them, but, as if to mock them, there came a blast with doubled fury.

The island loomed ahead like a shadow on the sea, fortified against the world by the white hell of the coral shoals. The wind was at their backs, and the engine was doing its utmost to make steerage possible; yet they bounded, and lurched like a mad thing, ever nearer to the flashing teeth of the breakers. A curtain of solid black was being drawn across the sky. Three frightened humans fled before it, yet it overtook them and stretched swiftly onto the farthest horizon, shrouding the sea with the darkness of night.

Sheltering their bodies against the stinging rain and spray, they peered anxiously into the gloom ahead. "I don't see the light," said Wolfe.

"Have you a beacon?" asked Seward.

"There should be a light in my house. My servant keeps it burning. It is her primary duty, while I am away." He strained his eyes tensely. "It should appear any instant."

But there was no light, and Peter Wolfe became utterly confused. He wondered if he had lost his bearings completely. Nothing was visible now save the lurid phosphorescent swirls in the wake and ghostly glow of the surf upon the reef. It was impossible to tell

how close they had come. Words half uttered were snatched away and absorbed by the shrieking wind. Speech became almost impossible.

Suddenly Estelle was pointing and gesticulating wildly. They stared in the direction she indicated and saw a tiny flicker of light which died away as quickly as it had come. Peter Wolfe spun the wheel and bore toward it. The little craft was now beamwise to the sea, and rolling dangerously. Its small cabin was so filled with the baggage and photographic apparatus that it afforded no shelter for any of them. For several mad minutes they ran toward the light which reappeared sometimes brightly, and sometimes as a dull glow, through the driving rain.

They heard surf pounding on both sides of them now. "We are entering the harbor," Wolfe shouted to his niece. Then, for a moment, the force of the rain was arrested and they could see about them. Immediately ahead giant waves rose and exploded in clouds of white spume. At their right and left were maelstroms. It was no passage they had entered, but a mere pocket in the outer reef.

WOLFE knew where they were now. He swung the little boat around and pointed her seaward once more. The maneuver was perfect, but it came too late. Caught in the lift of a monster wave, she was lifted bodily and carried more than thirty feet backward, and set gently but solidly upon the jagged reef of coral.

Next moment they were enveloped in a seething mist of white. As the wind dashed it away, a gray mountain rose toward them, loomed like a wall, curled above them and descended. Estelle, watching in round-eyed horror, flung up both arms defensively, then felt the crushing weight and relentless power of the mass.

Next moment she was swept from

her feet. She groped hysterically for her companions. Then something seized her legs, and for a few seconds she was again submerged in the thunderous tumult. When her head broke the surface again she was being lifted to the little cabin top. Some one was shouting in her ear. "Grab rail! Grab the hand rail!"

Bert was clamping her fingers upon it. "Hold tight!" Automatically, she clung, sobbing for breath between clenched teeth. Rupert's arm was still tight about her waist. "You a good swimmer?" he yelled. She nodded. He left her and consulted Wolfe, who was desperately struggling to open a small hatch in the bow deck.

Estelle felt her strength returning. She was being continuously drenched by the wave tops which foamed over her, but she met them stubbornly, with a grim determination to live. Bert returned to her side. "Hold on tight," he shouted. "I'm taking a line to shore as soon as Wolfe gets it on deck."

They could see the light distinctly now. It was a bonfire on the beach, within a couple of hundred yards of them. Bert stripped off his clothes, and gestured for Estelle to do likewise.

He tied the rope about his waist and watched Estelle with some anxiety. "You'd better strip. Get your clothes off! You may have to swim before I come back!"

She raised desperate eyes, but still clung tight to her handhold on the boat. Bert understood. "I daren't let go," she said.

But he was already busy, first her shoes, then the little jacket and a blouse which he ripped by main strength, then the skirt.

"Chin up!" he commanded, and kissed her. "We mustn't die yet. I've got some swell ideas. Tell you later." He grinned and vanished in the frothing chaos.

Never in Rupert Seward's life had





The thing was hideous—mad! Cold-blooded creatures—deathless creatures—physical changes—

he been so completely at the mercy of the elements. He was no sooner in that seething cauldron than he was thrown in to the air and flung upon a sloping ridge of coral. He tried to gain a foothold, but was immediately flattened and dragged, face downward, across the jagged mound, his body lacerated with a thousand small cuts.

Then, for a few seconds, the water retreated. He sprang upright, unheeding the daggers which thrust into his feet, sprinted a few yards and dived sideways into a large wave which overtook him. Fighting his way to the crest, he rode with it until it broke, or rather dissolved beyond the reef, in the quiet water of the lagoon.

Swimming was easy now, but he began to feel the drag of the rope, more and more heavily. He rolled over on his back and floated a minute to gain breath, but realizing the menace to Estelle and her uncle, he again struck out for the light on the beach. Now the rain was lessening and he saw a girl silhouetted against the glow. He bailed again and she ran into the shallows toward him.

A MOMENT LATER a strong hand was in Bert's own and was speeding him toward shore with smooth, powerful strokes. Then she dragged him toward the fire and examined him. He was so out of breath that she could make nothing of his words, but when she saw the rope, she understood. While he panted beside the fire, she ran up the beach and made the line fast about a stout palm.

Returning to Bert she plied him with many questions in labored English. "Have seen Mr. Wolfe? Have come to take me away? Have come from Anguilla? Would Mr. Wolfe come drive away spirit devils? Why has Mr. Wolfe not——"

Bert explained the plight of Wolfe and Estelle, and started back to them,

but the girl ran up the beach, beckoning for him to follow. A moment later she plunged into the lagoon, and Bert heard her climb into a dinghy. Instantly he joined her. It was a small task to pick up the rope and follow it most of the way to the stranded craft.

At the inner edge of the reef, Bert seized the line and leaped upon the coral. Aided by the rope, half wading and half swimming, he reached the others. Wolfe had made fast his end of the line and was getting some watertight bundles up out of the cabin. He was in a towering rage, but seemed relieved to know Bert had brought the dinghy.

He immediately took command of the situation and ordered Bert to transfer the packages of supplies and apparatus to the small boat. Then the dark-skinned girl appeared over the gunwale, and cringed before him like a worshiper. Wolfe's temper blazed anew, he screamed curses at her. It was her fault the boat was lost! It was her fault that they were nearly drowned! It was her fault, for not keeping the light in his house; and if this photographic equipment was damaged, he would kill her.

She begged to make some explanation, but he struck at her savagely with a short length of stout rope. Dazed by the onslaught and wearied by her exertion, she would have fallen back into the sea, but she was firmly held by a restraining white hand on her coppery arm. She looked up into the face of a beautiful white girl.

She smiled childishly. "I am Mermo," she said, and, assisted by Estelle, climbed up beside her new friend.

Once more she plied questions. "Would Mr. Wolfe save them? Would he take her away?" She told Estelle that she had not made a light in the master's house because the master's house was all gone except the big stone rooms which were always kept locked.

Besides, those rooms were now inhabited by spirit devils.

The girls were interrupted by Peter Wolfe. "Get ashore! Swim!" he shouted at Mermo. "You," he said to Estelle, "get in the dinghy with Seward." Bert picked her up and carried her bodily across the reef. She huddled at his feet as he rowed across the lagoon. She might now have worn some garment to protect her from the storm, but Wolfe had taken everything available to bind about his precious equipment, and had spared her nothing.

She was mystified by the few things Mermo had told her. "Bert, that girl says the house is gone—all but the stone rooms. She says they're bewitched—spirit devils or something."

"You know," said Rupert, "I've thought all along that your uncle was a maniac and liar. Well, I still think he's a nut, and a darned ornery nut, but I believe he's been telling us the truth about all that blood stuff and heart grafting and eel business."

"Listen to me," said Estelle. "When he ordered Mermo to swim ashore, she had just finished saying that, of her four servants, she was the last alive. All three, she said, have been killed by the spirit devils. She thinks the spirits came because my uncle was gone, and now that he's back he can drive them away."

Bert looked at the girl. "Excellent logic, but I doubt if it's going to be easy. I wish we were somewhere else. She told me that the spirit devils have got into the tapan vines. That makes sense, doesn't it? I guess your uncle will prove his point, but I'm damned if I'm going to have any spirit devils get at you. As I said before, I've got ideas for you and me, and they don't include tropical spirit devils."

Rain had destroyed every vestige of the fire, but they found the beach and unloaded their cargo. Bert ripped an oil skin coat from one of the bundles and

threw it about her shoulders, just as Mermo came up and joined them.

"Watch out for spirit devils," Bert called, as he pushed off in the dinghy.

HE SOON RETURNED with Peter Wolfe and what they could salvage from the power boat. Wolfe carried a five-cell flashlight and, taking as many of the packages as could be carried, they followed his lead along the beach.

He turned inland at a clump of palmettos, but proceeded only a few yards before bursting into astonished wrath. Forming an impenetrable barrier across the trail was a fantastic, twining and intertwining tangle of tapan vines. Wolfe probed their depths with the ray of his flashlight, but as far as it could penetrate there was only a monotonous repetition of the sinewy, twisted creepers, extending into the air thirty feet or more.

Mermo had been whimpering and begging the master to go no farther inland. Now he turned on her in greater rage than before, and would have struck her down had she not dodged the blow and run crying off toward the sea.

"For the present," he said, "it is an impasse. We cannot reach the house to-night, but to-morrow, with machetes, the trail can be cleared in a few hours. The men have been careless and I shall see that they regret their laziness." He broke off a twig and called his companions to look. "Here," he said, "you may witness the first stage of my miracle. Notice closely."

They bent over the fractured vine. Drop by drop, red beads glistened on the bark. "Taste it, Mr. Seward." Bert took some on his finger, touched it to his lips and shuddered. Estelle watched him closely. He glanced at her and nodded in response to her mute inquiry. It was loathsome business, and he heartily wished it was all over and done with.

The rain had almost entirely stopped.

Wolfe made a brief survey of the beach and suggested that they make themselves as comfortable as possible until daylight. "For myself," he announced, "I shall sleep as well here, as elsewhere." Accordingly, he scooped a slight hollow in the sand and threw himself down to rest. "Remember, don't sleep too near to the vines. I was not joking about that clock. My tapans are strong, and"—he chuckled—"they are fond of flesh."

Bert did not allow himself to answer. He was almost overcome with nausea. He stepped to Estelle's side and, touching her arm, beckoned her away with him. Out of Wolfe's hearing, he asked her to join him in a search for Mermo. "Wolfe is a fool not to listen to the girl," he said. "She knows what has gone on since he left. Let's find her and get the low-down on this devilish mess."

"Bert, do you know what frightens me?" She held closely to him, and he bent an arm about her reassuringly.

"I see much to puzzle me," he answered, "but nothing to frighten us."

"It's this," she said quietly. "These vines are not the ordinary tapans. I have broken twigs from them all along the jungle front, and they all bleed like the one he showed you. Do you realize that he told us he had transfused only in the interior of the island? It means this," she went on, "that all this new jungle has grown, not from normal plants, but from those new, more powerful plants which have conquered their primitive, sluggish brothers."

"I follow you perfectly," said Rupert, "but still I see no terror in it for us, so long as we are not caught napping too close to the beastly things."

"Do you realize the speed with which these—these monstrosities are growing?" she asked. "And that they can't possibly be controlled? Do you realize that this is probably the one space on the island not yet buried beneath that mountain of vines? And do you sup-

pose they will cease growing in this direction out of special consideration for us?"

The vines presented a solid front along the entire stretch of beach. There was still a considerable area of bare sand between the high-tide marks and the jungle—perhaps an acre in all. They walked in silence. Mermo was nowhere to be found. Bert wondered if this desolate little patch of sand was to be their last stronghold, from which they must inevitably be driven into the sea to perish.

He pushed such thoughts from him as though they were phantoms from some nightmare. The woman beside him was real, was of his world, and he loved her. He would waste no thoughts elsewhere, even if he must die to-morrow.

IV.

A GOLDEN SUN rose from out the sea, to shine upon another Adam and another Eve. Her head rested beside his own, her black wavy hair was tumbled upon his chest. Hand in hand, without a word or motion, they greeted a new day—a new world.

Peter Wolfe was awakened by the stench of blood in his nostrils. Opening his eyes, he gazed at a ceiling of broad leaves, a few feet above his head. He sat bolt upright in alarm. When he had gone to sleep there had not been a creeper within five yards—now he was surrounded by them, and there on the sand beside him, sat Mermo. A big clasp knife lay open in her lap, its blade red. About them were strewn hundreds of wilting twigs which had leaned too close.

"Master," she said softly. "Master?" Her eyes asked more than he could understand.

He looked at her uncomprehendingly and stretched his stiffened limbs. "I'm hungry. Get something to eat. There's

a crate somewhere out there." He pointed to the beach.

She started to crawl out through the vines, but hesitated and turned back. "Master will come, too?" She eyed him anxiously, but he ignored the question. "If the master dozed without Mermo beside him, master might never wake again." She fingered some leaves significantly.

"Get something to eat," he growled impatiently and, grimacing at the annoyance, he followed her out into the sunshine. An ominous sight awaited him. The beach had diminished while he slept. He hastily estimated that, at the present rate of growth, they would be driven into the sea within a very few days, unless they took decisive action.

A little later he gathered them together to decide upon their first move. "There is one place on the island," he said, "which is safe, or is, at least, strong enough to resist any crushing or prying of the tapans. My stone rooms—they are my laboratory and an adjacent bedroom. Beneath them is a cellar, also lined with stone. The rest of my house might crumble and fall—and possibly has, during our delightful visit at Anguilla—yet those rooms would stand alone. They were built for such an emergency. Our trail would have been kept clear for us if my men had fulfilled their duties. However, they all seem to have disappeared." He turned to Mermo. "Perhaps you can tell us just what became of them?"

"Master," said the girl, "they are all dead. The spirit devils have destroyed them because you were not here."

"Idiot! Your head is too full of superstition. That's why I wouldn't listen to you before. Forget what you *think!* Tell us what you *saw!*"

Mermo listened attentively to the rebuke, then went on unembarrassed. "Emul—that was so wounded in catching the shark for master; you remember?—was the first to die. The day the

master left us, the sun came in the afternoon and Emul, too weak for work, lay down to rest in the grove near the great house.

"At sunset I carried food to him, but he was dead. Tapan leaves and tendrils were all about him, sticking fast, and devouring him as they do insects and small birds. I called Ramen and my brother. They told me the spirit devils had got into the tapan vines because the tapans had never killed a man before. And surely they spoke truth, for the vines began to grow twice a man's length each day, and my brother told me a legend about how a spirit can come into a plant or serpent or even into a man or woman. He said perhaps it was better to be destroyed by the spirit devils than to have them enter your body as they had come into the tapans, so we sent up prayers like we had been taught in the mission at Anguilla."

ESTELLE AND BERT were listening closely, but Wolfe showed impatience. "Forget your damn superstition! What happened to the other two men?"

"My brothers and Ramen, they worked every day with axes and machetes to keep the trail clear. Sometimes I helped them, but it was very heavy work. The rain came harder and the vines grew so much faster that it was terrible to keep up with them.

"We had seen that the bad vines all had red sap, and my brothers said if we could trail those creepers and cut the roots, we could destroy them. But it was already too late. The jungle was too thick with vines, and even if we had cut our way into it, our trail would have been closed behind us and we should have been lost. Master cannot imagine such growth. My brother said we could only do our best and pray for master's return.

"Then the clearing about the house began to close in upon us, but we had

no time to fight that. We were too busy keeping the trail open for master. And every night, as master had ordered, I made a light in the window of the north room.

"In a few days the clearing was all gone and our windows were darkened by the jungle. Creepers began to find places to get in around the sills and through the floor. We cut them off, wherever they appeared, but we forgot to watch the attic, and one day, when I went up for some provisions, I found that the creepers had come in under the eaves. Great twisting arms had already pried the timbers apart at the joints and the walls were bending under the strain. Vines were so thick that I could hardly make my way about.

"That afternoon the wind came and blew off the roof. It hung from the great vines back of the house. All night we listened to the straining of the timbers as they were pried and twisted in our walls, and the tapans inched their way in at every crack opened by the wind.

"One day there was no place left for sleeping. Ramen suggested that we try to get into the master's stone rooms, where we could at least be safe at night. We climbed over the vines to a point where we could see the big window in that part of the house. The glass was broken; near the window there were no vines. It was as though some one had been cutting them away."

Peter Wolfe uttered a startled exclamation and stared excitedly at Rupert and Estelle. "Then—but I supposed it would have been killed by the vines!" The man was rocking in hysterical joy. "Then it has not been stifled by the vines—but has been feeding on them! And why not? The tapans have blood as well as any other creature. Oh, I am lucky! I am lucky!"

But Bert and Estelle were urging Mermo to continue with her narrative.

"When Ramen saw the broken win-

dow, he wanted to get a ladder up there and look in. My brother tried to argue him out of it, but Ramen was always curious about master's secrets and was determined. Besides, as he said, unless we could get into the stone rooms we would have no place to sleep. So he got up a ladder and crawled inside.

"We waited and waited for him to come out. My brother was worried. He said he did not trust Ramen, and he reminded me how master had often made us promise not to enter that part of the house. My brother was afraid Ramen would be up to mischief and that it would make the master angry with all of us. So he climbed up the ladder and looked in. 'What do you see?' I called. But instead of answering, he threw a leg over the sill and started in. Then he cried out, and disappeared with a jerk.

"I screamed and started up the ladder. Then he was again at the window, struggling to get out. He fell down onto the vines below. He was a mass of blood. His leg was gone just below the hip, as if a big shark had done it. He was dying fast. No one could have staunched the blood.

He was crying in fright and pain, 'Sister, go! Go to the beach! Go and stay! I have looked on the great spirit!' My brother got yellower and yellower, till he was pale like you are.

"He knew he was dying and begged me not to wait, but to run down the trail to the beach and stay until master came back. He said he had seen the great spirit himself and was glad to die rather than have the spirit enter his body. He said the spirit was more terrible than the mission priest had thought.

"Then he was dead, and I ran to the beach as he told me, taking what food I could carry. I also took my big clasp knife, for I would rather die than let the spirit devils enter my body.

"There was not much that would burn, but I tried to keep a fire on the

beach every night, for the master. All my food had been gone for days, when you came. I have had to catch fish and crabs by hand."

PETER WOLFE was mumbling to himself. "There is no need for us to wait here on the beach until the jungle pushes us into the sea. Let us go to the house without delay. I am sure I can control the moray and we can live and work there with some degree of comfort. You must both see for yourselves exactly what I have done. We will make many microscopic examinations of blood cells and of plant tissue, and then we shall see if we cannot vivisect the moray itself. That, I am sure, shall prove the most revealing feature of all. Then, while my niece is assembling her notes plus the data which I have myself collected, we must busy ourselves with preparing some rockets. Otherwise, it will be impossible to signal a ship."

"But the trail—there's no trail now," stammered Bert. "I could kick myself for not thinking of it before, only isn't it a bit risky for the girls?"

"Nothing dangerous about it," said Wolfe. "We'll do it, all right. We've got the rope from the power boat. If each of us ties it securely about his waist and uses a modicum of common sense and keeps moving, we should be able to reach the house in one day. Certainly that is better than just waiting here until some creeper catches us asleep and drains the life from our carcasses."

It looked like a fearful undertaking, yet there seemed to be no choice. Everything but the most necessary supplies and the photographic equipment had to be abandoned, as the venture was obviously difficult enough without too great a load to carry.

Peter Wolfe was first. On his back was strapped his precious camera, and in his pocket was the big clasp knife. About twenty feet behind him was Estelle carrying lighter, less important

articles. Next came Rupert. His was the heaviest burden of all, but he was game and would not attempt less. Last of all came Mermo, with bundles of household provisions.

It was as weird a trek as could be imagined. Not only was it difficult to reach the top of the swaying mass but it was equally difficult to remain there. First one and then another would slip down through the network and hang suspended by the rope, a dead weight upon the others. Then would begin the arduous climb all over again. Within an hour, the sea was out of sight, and there was no visible landmark to guide the way. Wolfe reckoned their course entirely by a pocket compass.

The sun rose high above them, and scorched them with such a glare that tears and sweat mingled in one flow upon their haggard faces. Lungs were laboring; muscles ached painfully and nerves were sharpened to a razor edge. But Peter Wolfe drove deeper and deeper into the jungle, taunting them and cursing them for laggards.

Rupert Seward regretted his brashness in attempting to transport such a heavy load, but, having begun, he grit his teeth and fought his way on. He kept a watchful eye on the girl ahead of him. "It would be so easy," he thought, "for her to injure herself on this nightmare journey." For that matter, any one of them might be disabled at any moment, and it would be almost impossible to carry them on. He shuddered to think of their fate if they should be overcome by heat or exhaustion among these tenacious creepers. He eyed them with hatred and disgust—these pallid, sticky young leaves which seemed to close about you as you touched them.

At noon Wolfe stopped by the top of a tall hardwood tree and waited for them to catch up to him. They slid to the ground, shed their burdens, and, for the moment, shaded from the sun's

glare, they rested and ate meagerly of the food supply.

With the exception of Peter Wolfe, all were too weary to talk. "I know the location of this tree," he told them. "The house is scarcely three hundred yards west of us. We could reach it in an hour, but I have a plan."

"If we can reach the house in an hour," Bert interrupted, "then we can afford to wait here until the sun gets a little lower, can't we?"

Wolfe ignored him. "I have a plan by which we can stop all this crazy growth, and there is no better time than the present." With the knife he scratched a rough map on the tree bark. "Here, you see, is the house, and here—are we. Between us and the house, in a semicircle—so—are the young tapans, in whose trunks I infused blood and grafted the experimental hearts. You understand that it is these hearts which provide this mountain of vine with its life fluid and which stimulate or, rather, force it in its continued expansion. It is my plan to visit now each of these trunks and, if possible, destroy the heart that beats within."

Estelle protested and so did Bert.

Bert said, "Let's get to the house, and get rid of all these things we're carrying and get a night's rest. To-morrow you and I can set out alone to kill those plants."

Wolfe calmly took up the pack which Bert had been carrying, opened it and withdrew a loaded automatic. "Perhaps I'd better carry this myself," he said significantly. "Of course you will not dispute my plans. Without my leadership you would be quite helpless, and I intend to be the leader. Remember that, Mr. Seward, and you, too, Estelle."

THEY again donned their heavy packs and continued their weary wrestling over the jungle. Long before they found the first plant, they knew of its

proximity by the presence of large pipe-like vines which seemed to be centering toward one point just ahead.

Sliding to the ground beside it, they gazed in amazement at the gnarled octopuslike trunk.

Wolfe placed his hands upon various parts of it. "There, feel that!" he said, pointing to a bulging area of the gray bark.

Mermo shrank away, but Bert and Estelle rested their palms upon it, quickly removing them as though touched by something foul, for they had felt the pulse of a beating heart. Naturally, they had half expected it, yet the actual contact was revolting.

With the knife, Wolfe chipped away a section of hard, scaly bark, and pressed the muzzle of his automatic upon the spot. "I have told you that the tapan has a sensory system. Probably this will reveal it." He squeezed the trigger twice.

Before he could remove the gun, a torrent of scarlet gushed from the trunk, drenching his hand and arm. Then a distant rustling grew audible, becoming nearer and nearer, until the very branches overhead trembled as with palsy. From a pack he drew a metal tube which he inserted deep into the wound. "I know too well the healing properties of this blood," he said.

For some minutes they stayed to watch the stuff spurting from the tube. It stood in pools and ran in rivulets along the ground. The quivering of the branches increased until a tremor seemed to shake even the great trunk. Then it began to expand and contract upon itself, spouting hissing jets of blood at each recurrent spasm. "You are now witnessing the death agonies," said Wolfe, "of a living creature."

On they went over the jungle, and again and again he performed the horrible rite. At last, weary beyond description and thoroughly sickened, Bert and Estelle by disgust and Mermo by

fear, they came in sight of the house. The stone part stood like a tower, unscathed save for its broken window. The rest of the building was a splintered chaos of vines and wreckage. Into that area they dropped, one by one, and, following Wolfe's guidance, they assembled before a great metal door in the basement foundations. "Drop your burdens here and rest," he said. "And do not fear the jungle, for I have killed it."

He turned a key and flung the door open. The surrounding vines darkened the entrance so that nothing could be seen distinctly, but after a moment he produced a flashlight and they surveyed the basement interior. Towering out of the musty earth, and passing through the ceiling above, was a monstrous, bulging thing, hardly recognizable as a tapan trunk. There was no need to lay hands upon it to discover the presence of the heart. The pulsing throbs were clearly discernible to the eye as that great muscle labored beneath the heavy bark.

Wolfe opened a medicine cabinet on the wall and removed a large bottle and syringe. "This, I believe, will render our subject quite harmless, while we examine him," he said, making a slow injection. "Come. The effects will be instantaneous and there is no danger."

He led the way up a wall ladder and pushed open a trapdoor with his left hand. There was a swish above, and a cry from Wolfe, as he was jerked from the ladder rungs and dropped to the floor below—to be still for a second and then reveal a ragged stump where his left arm had been.

His fear was immediately transformed to anger. "Mermo! A tourniquet! Hurry!"

But the terrified girl was too near hysteria to be of any use. Estelle ransacked a kit and found and applied the tourniquet to the mangled flesh.

The trapdoor had fallen open, and Rupert was cautiously working his way up the ladder when Mermo ran and seized his legs in an effort to pull him down. "Mr. Bert! Mr. Bert! Please, no! It is the great spirit! You will die like my brother."

"Dear Heaven, no!" screamed Estelle. "Bert! If you love me, stay here." She joined Mermo. Together they dragged him to the floor, and none too soon, for, at that moment, a gigantic gray-green head filled the entire opening.

Slowly, with serpentine grace, the hideous jaws and deadly little eyes came lower. It reached halfway toward them and hung swaying in mid-air. Its attention seemed to focus on Mermo, who had run and crouched beside Wolfe. Suddenly, she sprang upright with his automatic clutched firmly in her small brown hand.

She was not trembling now, and all hysteria was gone. The thing opened gleaming jaws and swung toward her, but she leaped back and emptied the gun in the side of its head. Purplish disks appeared where the bullets had entered the brute's skull. The thing disappeared back through the trapdoor.

A hellish confusion broke loose in the room above. The awe-stricken little group listened to the monster thrashing about, beating the walls, shaking the house with its thunder.

Peter Wolfe crouched on the floor, tightening the tourniquet on his arm and staring crazily up at the opening. "It must not die! It shan't die! It is my life's work. You hear me? You fools!" He glared at Mermo. "Give me that gun, idiot. If it dies—— If it dies——" He did not complete the threat, but his tiny gray eyes were dancing with hatred. Reluctantly, the girl returned the automatic. The tumult above grew less and less—became quiet.

"It must not die! It must not die!"

V.

BUT the great moray did die, and although Wolfe, in feverish pain, labored over the lifeless monster for weeks, he failed to restore it. The brain was shattered and a gradual decomposition spread from the head, back along the body. At last he realized the futility of further effort. He spent long, solitary days in silent concentration, sometimes going over and over certain papers which he kept in secret.

He made no effort to conceal his hatred for Mermo nor his distrust of Bert, who was now utilizing his time as best he could by repairing the building, gathering firewood and such chores. Oddly, the supply of matches had been lost, so he showed Mermo how to make a fire with the sun, by using a lens from the laboratory. She was as fascinated by it as if it were a new toy. He told her long stories about the United States and was grateful for her companionship, as Estelle was so completely busied with compiling Wolfe's notes and data that she had little or no time left over.

"It's cruel," she told Bert. "It is horrible, yet it is wonderful. My uncle has truly performed miracles. It is all here, in these papers. When they are published they will bring the scientific world to its knees. As he says himself, he will be the most famous man on earth."

"Granted," said Rupert. "But I told you once I thought he was a nut. Well, I still think he's a nut, and I don't like him."

"He's a genius, Bert."

"He may be a genius, but he's still a nut," said Rupert. "And I still don't like him."

"I know you don't," said Estelle, "and he knows it. I can tell by his attitude. He doesn't trust you. Sometimes I think he's a little afraid of you. Oh, Bert, do please be careful. Don't do

or say one thing to rouse him. I should die if anything—anything—— We're so entirely in his power."

"Anything what?" asked Rupert. "Do you think I'm afraid of the old crab? He may be a whiz of a scientist, but he's a fizzle of a man. There's not one spark of humanity in him. Did you notice when Mermo told how her brother was killed? Was there any sympathy from him? Not much! The dirty beast sat there grinning like a monkey! Why? Because it was his, *his* little pet eel that had grown big enough to commit a murder, and he was tickled to death."

"I wish," said Estelle, "that Mermo hadn't fired those shots. My uncle says the eel would not have attacked her if she had lain quiet, and that the hypodermic would have paralyzed it soon enough without any injury. He hates her for what she has done and I am afraid for the girl. I believe he doesn't trust me as he did, for he won't speak plainly with me, but hints at horrible things. Please believe me—he is capable of any crime out of sheer malice toward her. And he's never without the automatic."

"Rot," said Bert. "Sweetheart, he's got you buffaloed, too." But secretly he believed Estelle's fears were well-founded; so, the next day, avoiding the eye of Peter Wolfe, he set out for the beach, hoping that he might, from some tall tree, get an idea of their exact geographical location or perhaps sight a ship and signal it. He no longer felt under any ethical obligations to this mad scientist, and wished heartily that he and Estelle might see the last of him.

A shocking change had overtaken the jungle. The myriads of vines were wilted and leafless; everywhere there was a faint but recognizable odor of decaying animal matter, sickening to the nostrils. His hands reeked of it after climbing but a short distance through the dying creepers.

He found the beach, climbed the tall-



"Now I die!" she thought. And then—instead of crushing her to death—

est tree and studied the ocean for hours, but saw no other land nor any ship nor sail, not even the smoke of a distant steamer. He turned his gaze on the cadaverous jungle behind him. A sense of horror, loathing, and isolation came over him. Well, he and Estelle were in it together, and somehow they'd get out of it together.

If he only had a map showing the steamer routes, they might attempt a get-away. He could build some kind of boat, on the sly, or, perhaps, if the currents were right, they could even escape on a raft. Estelle would welcome the chance, he knew, for her present devotion to her work was entirely inspired by fear.

Once before he had asked Wolfe for a map and had been curtly refused. Now, he grit his teeth with purpose and resolved that Peter Wolfe should deliver a map—or else—— Bert's nails bit into his palms in comforting contemplation. Nothing he'd like better than to smear that sour puss a few times. The more he thought about it, the happier he felt. Determined to have a good map or a good scrap—or both, he headed back toward the house.

He first entered the basement which had been arranged to serve as part kitchen and part workshop. "Mermo," he called softly, but no one answered. He listened for the clicking of Estelle's typewriter, the rustling of papers, or the monotone instructions of Peter Wolfe in the room above. No sound was audible. "Odd," he thought. "Perhaps the old devil softened up and gave her an hour off."

He had been ordered to stay out of the laboratory, but now he threw caution to the winds. If the big desk was unlocked, this might be his chance to secure a map undiscovered.

THE TRAPDOOR was no longer in use, so he went outside and climbed the stone stairway, paused on the steps to

listen, then opened the door and went in. A case of shelves was ranged across the center of the room. He walked around the obstruction and halted abruptly, his scalp tingling.

Mermo lay bound and gagged upon a workbench. On a near-by chair sat Estelle, also gagged. As Rupert entered, she raised her eyes toward him. He saw her rise to her feet and gesture frantically at something beyond him, then bright lights danced before his eyes and the world dissolved in blackness.

Shortly after that, a cup of water was thrown in his face. Bert opened his eyes. His head ached abominably. His ankles and wrists were tied securely. "You're a very unnecessary person, Mr. Seward," said Wolfe. "But since you are here to be a witness, a witness you shall be. And now," he went on, turning toward the bench, "let us continue from the point at which we were interrupted."

He cut the lashings on Estelle's wrists and tossed her some blank paper. "Take notes on each step in the procedure." He then placed a test tube over a burner. A brown liquid bubbled and steamed. "This fluid, sterilized and injected into warm veins, will have the power of reducing the body to conditions normal in those which we call cold-blooded."

He wrote the formula upon a slip of paper and handed it to Estelle, then turned to Rupert. "In order that you may have some faint comprehension of what you are to witness, let me explain that a cold-blooded creature, for instance, a fish or a tortoise, can be frozen in a chunk of ice, and at any time later it may be revived, in perfect health. Thus, you see, I have made it possible for a man to hibernate from one era to another, merely by using this injection, and then allowing himself to be frozen—chemically, of course—until the time of his preferred reincarnation. Consider those possibilities.

"Consider also the recognized fact that cold-blooded creatures almost *never* die of old age; and consider above all else"—Wolfe had reached so frenzied a state of excitement that he was almost screaming—"consider above all else that a cold-blooded creature can be nourished by the tap of my great tapan!"

With his one hand he nimbly filled a syringe with the brown fluid and inserted the needle beneath the skin of Mermo's thigh. "So," he shouted at the trembling girl, "you are afraid, were you? A afraid that the spirit devils would enter your yellow body? Well, here they come, Mermo!" He pressed the plunger home.

No sound escaped her gagged throat, but her body flinched and quivered; her eyeballs rolled in agony; then she lay still in a merciful coma. Estelle was white. Her eyes sought Bert's.

Wolfe removed the gag from Mermo's mouth and slid a thermometer beneath her tongue, then poured the remaining fluid from the test tube into a tiny phial, labeled it and placed it carefully in a rack. "For future experiments," he remarked, smiling.

Rupert met his look and shuddered.

"Temperature registers ninety-five," said Wolfe, bending over the prostrate girl. Ten minutes later. "Ninety-one." He placed his watch beside her and held her wrist. "Pulse normal." Ten minutes later. "Temperature eighty-eight," and then, "Pulse normal. Mr. Seward, within an hour this woman will have no more body warmth than that tapan." He pointed toward the grotesquely mangled butt of the huge trunk.

"The ungainly bulk of my moray eel has been removed only to make room for a more beautiful bit of grafting. You have probably observed that this girl, Mermo, has a strikingly handsome body? Please picture it then, one month from now, remembering, of course, that my moray weighed eight pounds when I

grafted it, yet its sections added up to almost three thousand pounds when I removed them this week."

RUPERT sat in frozen silence. He strained hopelessly at the lashings that held his wrists and commanded himself to think calmly. There must be some way to stop this man. He made no threats, nor did he plead for mercy, for he knew there was no chord of sympathy which he might touch in the selfish calculating mind of such a maniac.

Wolfe was deliberately planning a demonstration of the cruelest torture, to a woman who worshiped him. He was going about it with less feeling than Bert would have felt for a guinea pig or a white rat.

He was preparing now to give her a transfusion from the great tapan trunk. Mermo's eyes fluttered, and, regaining consciousness, she watched with terror as he opened the flow into a large vein. "Master," she breathed, a tremor passing over her.

He bled an artery to balance the infusion of sap. Her heart beat wildly. Wolfe watched her pulse and smiled. "Very inefficient—a human heart, far too much influenced by emotion." He gestured toward the tapan. "No fright could alter the powerful pulse of *that* creature."

Soon the transfusion was complete. He waited a while, then compared samples of her blood and the tapan's, beneath a microscope and pronounced them identical. "There's no need for further delay," he told them. "I shall now destroy her heart. She will no longer require it."

Bert lunged at the ropes which held him. "You murderous beast!" he screamed. "You torturing, crazy fiend!"

Wolfe came over to him and wrapped a strip of cloth tightly about his jaw, gagging him entirely. "I cannot afford to let you distract me, Seward. You are permitted to observe, but your

opinions are not invited." Addressing Estelle, he continued, "The girl has fainted again. That is good. I shall use no anæsthetic."

He set about the operation with no further preliminaries. Bert and Estelle watched the knife for several minutes as the one-handed man cut, pried, and sawed to make an incision through which he might reach the heart. He seemed more butcher than surgeon. Suddenly a gulping wave of red washed over Mermo's side and pooled across the bench. Estelle gave a sickened cry and fainted.

Peter Wolfe's arm was red to the elbow. Apparently it was a more difficult performance than he had anticipated. Furthermore, there was work to do with arteries and veins. He jabbered and raved while he worked, and cursed himself for having lost a hand. Nevertheless, within an hour he sewed up the long, ugly incision and announced that all was ready for the grafting.

Estelle, being unconscious, was spared the hideous scene that followed, in which Wolfe carried Mermo's limp body across the laboratory and laid it upon the broad stump of the tapan, then, after amputing her feet at the ankles, he set the shin bones deep into the sap wood, pressed the fleshy tissues against the cambium layer and, by means of slender metal tubes, he connected the principal arteries with the tapan's core.

"The circuit is complete," he said, and felt of her pulse. "Ah! Such a current was never before in mortal veins." Strutting like an actor, he paraded before his victim, applying wax to the wood about her ankles, thus sealing out all air.

Next, he plugged her nostrils with wax and sewed her lips together. "No longer a need for oxygen," he said. "Soon she will begin to grow fast like a tapan, nourished by the soil and the sun."

VI.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK was one prolonged nightmare for Bert and Estelle. It somehow pleased Wolfe's vanity to have them watch every step in the growth of his monstrosity. For twenty-four hours the bronze body lay motionless against the bark. Then it slowly straightened up, first to a sitting position, then standing, flexing the fingers from time to time, and weaving slowly to and fro.

Her eyes had not opened, and Estelle prayed that they would never do so, lest they should find reality in what they looked upon. By the third day, Wolfe fashioned a whip and came to stand beside her. "Open your eyes," he commanded. The girl made no motion. He lashed her twice—three times. "Open your eyes."

She did, and from that moment on her eyes were on him constantly, following him, unblinking, hour after hour. There was a slight movement of her cheeks and chin and Bert believed that she was trying to say, "Master."

Estelle was allowed more bodily freedom than Bert. Taking no risks of her escaping, however, Wolfe kept her chained in the laboratory. He rigged a bunk beside the desk and kept her moderately comfortable, though constantly at work during all her waking hours. He bullied her mercilessly, and seemed to enjoy it the more because of the rages it produced in Bert.

Physical changes began to be apparent in Mermo. A deeper red suffused her whole body, and on the fifth day she seemed to be swelling. By night that growth was accompanied by a gradual elongation of arms and legs. Next day she was growing as an entirety, growing rapidly. Within a week she had doubled in size. Throughout all this time she showed no animation beyond her ever vigilant watching of Peter Wolfe. He made every effort to compel her to

show some intelligent response, but his whip and his commands alike were treated with indifference.

Then she began to show a certain childlike tendency to play with small objects. Hour after hour she would fondle a bright pebble or a piece of paper, rumpling it and straightening it and rumpling it again, or else tearing it into strips. She watched Wolfe less closely now and devoted herself more to her "new toys," as he called them.

As a precaution, he moved all his apparatus and shelves out of her reach, lest she should do some unexpected damage. Then she happened to get hold of a stone mortar which Wolfe had been using to pulverize certain crystals. He did not notice that she had it, but Estelle watched, fascinated. It was a heavy thing, yet it looked small and fragile in the great ruddy, bronze hands. She fingered it a while, then with a sudden motion, she broke it apart like an eggshell.

That inspired Estelle to take a daring chance. For some days Rupert had been removed from the scene of events and kept as a prisoner in the cellar below. She was sure that he would be Wolfe's next victim unless something intervened. The chain which held her ankle was too strong to break without proper tools and she had been unable to secure any. Once she had secreted a small bottle of acid, and, during Wolfe's absence, had tried to damage a few links, but he scented the fumes, discovered her subterfuge, and beat her with the whip until she cried for mercy.

She now conceived the idea that if Mermo was to get hold of the chain she might play with the bright links and tear them asunder. Accordingly, she watched for a chance when Wolfe would be asleep or temporarily gone from the laboratory.

The surrounding jungle, exposed for weeks to a withering sun, had become a

bleached tangle of crackly, dry vines, and she listened as the *crunch, crunch* of his footsteps became more distant. Then she sprang up and, seizing a loop of the chain, waved it flashing back and forth before Mermo.

The huge form swayed toward her. Immense fingers extended and seized, not the chain, but the slim white hands that held it. Estelle screamed as she was gathered into the arms of the giantess and pressed in a clammy, cold embrace. She thought, "Now I die!"

But instead of crushing her to death, Mermo began to sway from side to side, cradling her like a babe in arms.

That caused the chain to swing and glitter. With one hand, Mermo gripped it and tugged. The desk toppled and fell forward with a crash. One more tug and the chain snapped. Yet Estelle was not free, for Mermo showed no intention of releasing her. Struggle as she would, the mighty arms incased her, gently, but irresistibly, and continued swaying.

If she could only divert the thing's attention—something bright, something glittery. Suddenly she remembered the lens, the one which they had taught Mermo to use in making fires. It was in Estelle's blouse pocket. In spite of the powerful restraining arms, she twisted herself so that she could reach it. At arm's length, she flashed it before the great brown eyes. Immediately, Mermo's face showed an expression of childish delight. She raised both hands and seized it, as the girl fell to the floor below unheeded.

MINUTES were precious now, so Estelle hastened to the trapdoor. It had been too heavily barred from above that it seemed hours before she could pry it open. "Bert! Bert, darling," she called, and as she heard his answering cry, she looked about her for something to cut his bonds. There was a knife on the bench. She snatched it up and turned

to face Peter Wolfe. He was in a black rage, his features distorted and cruel.

For one fatal moment she hesitated; then she was gripped by the one powerful hand, spun about and borne to the floor. He struck her two hard blows back of the head and, dragging her to the trapdoor, he tumbled her onto the ground below. "Fool! Fool!" he screeched. "Idiot! I had thought to let you live. Now you can rot—or better yet, I shall use you as I will use Seward." He laughed crazily. "Think of it! We shall have a whole forest of giant human vegetables! Then I shall take some very interesting photographs back to America—and forget where they were made." His laughter shrilled as he dropped the door, and Bert heard him replacing the bars.

Half rolling and half crawling, he reached Estelle's side. Searching for a wound, he found the knife tightly clenched in her small hand. She was still breathing, and presently she regained full consciousness.

"Are you all right, dear?" he whispered. He was glad she had not heard Wolfe's threats, yet the knock-out was only temporary.

She felt for the knife and in a moment she had the ropes cut and he was standing upright, flexing stiff muscles.

They could still hear occasional peals of insane laughter in the room above. Then an exclamation of surprise, followed by curses. They heard Wolfe's steps as he ran across the laboratory toward the door, then outside.

Bert and Estelle stood close in each

other's arms, uncomprehending. There came a faint snapping and crackling, then clearer and louder. It became a roar.

"The lens!" she breathed. "Mermo has it to play with. She is enormous now and can reach the dead vines outside the window. They are dry like tinder and she has made a fire."

Peter Wolfe's voice could be heard now, flinging vitriolic curses in the very teeth of the inferno outside. Somewhere in that raging furnace he was fighting flame with the same implacable hatred with which he had always fought during his entire frenzied career.

As his voice died on a hoarsely strangled oath, a new note rent the air, a scream louder than the voices of a hundred men. The walls vibrated to a blast like the trumpets of hell. The giantess, Mermo, in the teething oven above, had torn her sewn lips from their lacing; and the bleeding, burning flesh cried, "Master! Master!"

IT WAS thirty-six hours later that Rupert Seward and Estelle Wolfe emerged from their tunnel under the stone foundations, and walked by noonlight across a scorched and blackened plain to the beach. There on the sands they made a meal of shellfish, and lay back facing the eastward sea.

Her head rested beside his own. Waves of her black hair tumbled upon his chest. Hand in hand, without a word or motion, another Adam and another Eve greeted a new day—a new world.