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# SUPER SCIENCE STORIES



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VOL. 7 JANUARY, 1951 NO. 4

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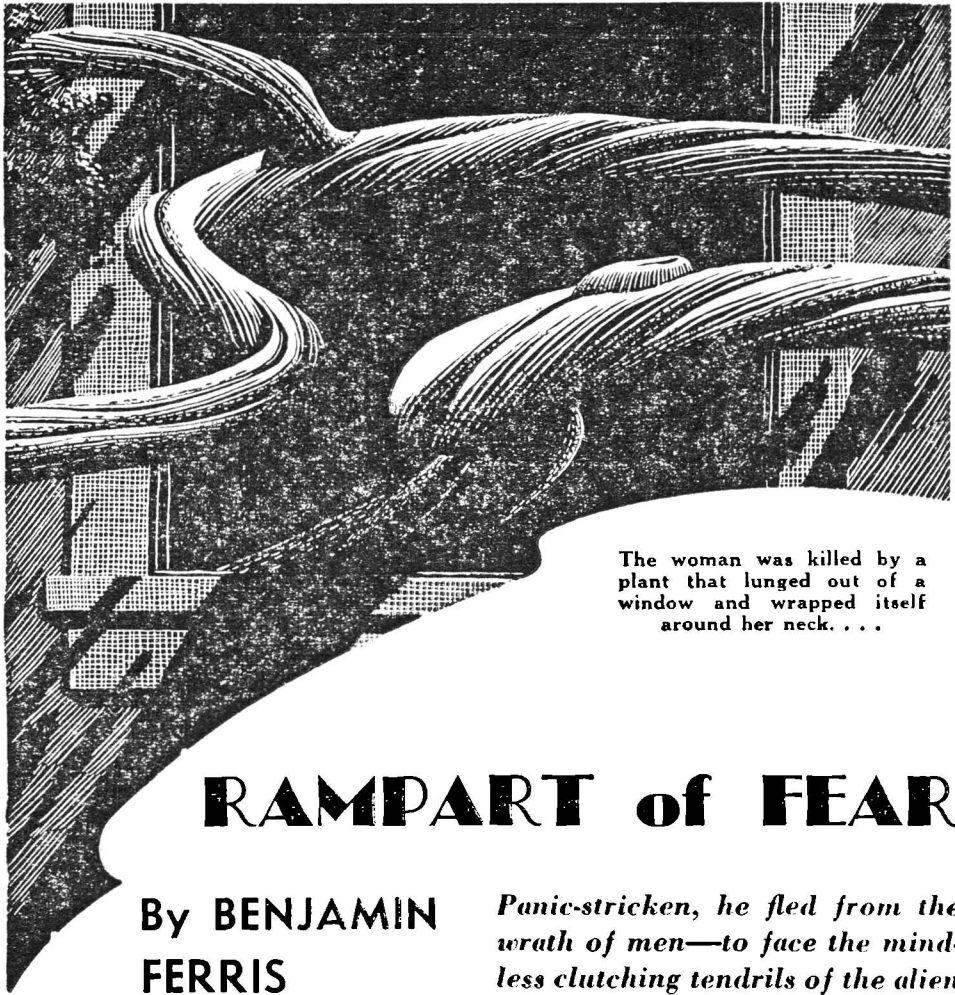
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The woman was killed by a plant that lunged out of a window and wrapped itself around her neck. . . .

## RAMPART of FEAR

By BENJAMIN  
FERRIS

THE Office of World Information gave one explanation. Perhaps they were right; perhaps their decision, under the circumstances, was best. It was soothing. It satisfied most people. It took the pressure off the International Board. The IB, as you remember, had plenty of other things on its mind in its early years.

The unsatisfied few were loud and persistent in their demands for more information. But time, as it always does, drew a heavy blanket over their cries. Those lone, insistent voices fell silent. The matter was forgotten.

*Panic-stricken, he fled from the wrath of men—to face the mindless clutching tendrils of the alien hunger-things—that demanded his life—for the life of the Earth they fed!*

Many years have passed. This story may well be suppressed. It will probably not be believed. But I am telling it for the sake of those minds that cried out, those minds that were not satisfied with glibness.

Amos Abbott had one. A mind like a naughty child, that burst through tradition and custom and experience, with no thought of effects or consequences. You never heard of the man. I doubt if six people in the world ever knew him well.

It was my lot—my privilege—to be one of them.

I grew up with Amos Abbott. We were neighbors in a small and dingy city, sharing the experiences common to boyhood in lower income surroundings. Even there, Amos was a nobody—small, underweight and timid. His scholastic record was mediocre. I suppose he stole and lied as much as the rest of us, and was as afraid of the police. He was, I am trying to say, a fairly normal product of his environment. . . .

Amos' father was a harried, unsuccessful insurance salesman, and his mother had three younger children to watch over. They didn't recognize what was happening to Amos any more than the rest of us did. I suspect that at first they were glad he'd found something to keep him from under their feet.

I doubt if he himself could have told what started him off. A newspaper paragraph, a comic magazine, a radio bit—somewhere, somehow, a vagrant phrase reached out to him, gleamed magically, caught him fast.

He was not brilliant. He was not even bright. He was a mental pedestrian, who took one path and stayed on it. God above, how he stayed on it!

THE telecom sounder, that first evening, had to go through its whole range to pull me away from my book. It progressed through the tinkle, the purr, the buzz, the clear ring, to the final unyielding stridence of "Urgent!" Somebody meant business.

"Leonard Johnson?" It was a young woman's voice.

"Yes."

"I'm Elaine Abbott. Amos Abbott's sister. We were children together in Pearlville. Do you remember?"

"Of course," I said slowly, while my mind went back through the years. "You were the little one with the curly hair. The pixie." She must have been five or

six at the time. As an adolescent boy, I hadn't paid much attention to her.

"That's right." But the old nickname brought no answering lightness in her voice.

I switched on the vision. You may remember that those early installations weren't too satisfactory. But the blurry image was enough to let me feel that I recognized her, and to decide she had grown up very nicely indeed.

"I just got in from Denver," she went on with a kind of desperate sincerity. "I'm calling you because I don't know where else to turn. Amos is in trouble."

"What's the matter?"

"May I come to see you?"

"Well—"

"Please, please, may I come?"

I couldn't argue against such pleading. "All right. I'm at the Wellington Arms, on—" But she had already hung up.

I shook my head and went slowly back to my easy chair. I didn't pick up my book. I was busy being a boy again, back in Pearlville. . . .

**I**T WAS early summer. The vacation days stretched ahead, gloriously empty and free. I whistled in front of Amos' house, then wandered around to the back. His mother looked out of the kitchen window. "He's upstairs."

In the musty attic room, Amos was flipping through the pages of a cheap encyclopedia.

"What you looking up?"

He pointed to a chunky "How-to-do-it" magazine open on a chair. The page had pictures of plants growing in liquid. Hydroponics, they called it.

With the easy enthusiasm of youth, I fell in with the idea. I'd grow plants like that, too, make a magnificent garden right in my room, and earn enough to buy a plane.

"This thing's no good," Amos said. "Let's go to the library."

It was a tribute to the way the idea had gripped him that he sensed what he wanted. "Books on plants," he said to the attendant. "On the way they look inside. On what makes them grow."

A pile grew on the counter: botany, agronomics, soil chemistry, hybridization. Amos staggered away with all the books our combined cards allowed him to draw. I could see in the librarian's eyes the incongruity of a thirteen year old boy lug-ging those forbidding tomes away.

In the noonday heat, my enthusiasm dwindled. "Dump that junk," I said. "Let's hitch a ride out to the river and go swimming."

Amos blinked and shook his head.

"But it's vacation!"

"I gotta read."

I couldn't reach him. He was already in a world apart. I finally shrugged and walked away.

Amos had scratched the tiniest bit on the surface and he was lost. He scarcely knew what he was after. He had years of groping and fumbling and frustration ahead before he could even handle the tools of his study. He was like a savage, picking curiously at the rim of a dynamo.

He turned his back on boyhood, and went up to that hot little attic study with his books. . . .

THE telecom vision screen hadn't done Elaine Abbott justice. She was lovely, slim and graceful in gray. But she looked dead tired and her brown eyes were haunted.

"You're awfully kind to see me like this."

Forget it. I'm only too glad to help, if I can." Trying to put her at ease, I added lightly, "Maybe I can get a good feature out of it."

She sank into a chair. "You're—you're not a reporter?"

My smile faded at her tone. After all, very few men were fortunate enough to

get on with the World Combine. I'd had more than my share of bylines. And I was still young enough to find it hard to believe there were people who had never heard of me.

"Amos never mentioned your work," she went on with an odd sort of helplessness. "He just wrote of you as a friend."

I took a deep breath and changed the subject. "Is Amos here in the city?"

Elaine shook her head. "He's in Pearlville. I came here to see you. I don't think there is another person in the world who understands him."

"Look," I said gently. "I want to hear about Amos. I'll do anything I can to help. And I assure you my interest is personal—not professional. But how about a Picup first?"

She nodded. I pressed the stud on my living-room unit and two steaming mugs slid out. Those of us whose work takes no heed of rest or regular hours never cease to bless the man who invented Picup—that savory, strength-giving blend of vegetables, meat juice, and alcohol.

As Elaine started sipping, color stole back to her cheeks. I didn't hurry her. I was not anxious to hear about Amos' trouble. I was afraid I knew what it was.

**W**E FORGET how much spare time boys have. The only demands on them are an occasional wash and presence at meals. The fact that Amos had time doesn't explain what happened, but it makes it a little easier to believe.

I kept in touch with him, more or less. He always appeared glad to see me. He answered my questions, haltingly, as he worked on his plant experiments. His table was laden with odd-sized jars, with pots and pans and boxes of soil. A collection of books was growing, piled in a corner. On the wall were one or two rudimentary charts.

I was not quite comfortable there. I

understood boyish hobbies like model planes, stamps, or chemistry sets. But this compound of grown-up books and filthy bottles and scrawny plants trailing weakly toward the light didn't make sense to me. This boy with a strange, set look on his face, who never stopped working or studying, made me feel awed and just a little bit scared.

The year he was fifteen Amos moved his plants and equipment out to a weather-beaten chicken house which remained from one of his father's short-lived enthusiasms. He put a high latch on the door, so his brothers and sister couldn't get in. He combed the city dump for odd pieces of metal and glass, for water-pipe, for wood for shelves.

Soon the shed was a weird labyrinth of steamy air, of murky tanks and trays filled with innumerable naked tendrils, of pale stalks stretching hungrily toward the light. Here Amos tended his foul apprentice mixtures, made his first real experiments, groped his way toward knowledge.

By this time his parents had taken notice and become actively concerned. It was all very well for a boy to have a hobby but this thing had assumed alarming proportions. Their well-meant efforts to pull him away from his studies, however, only intensified the stubbornness of his resistance.

They resorted to tricks. His mother—so sadly in need of rest herself—tip-toed upstairs after he had finally closed his burning eyes for sleep, and turned off the alarm clock he had set. His father—who wouldn't spank him—dragged him to baseball games. They tried to get the library to refuse him books. They invoked the help of the school principal. The boy listened politely, shook the man's hand, and went straight back to his shed.

Mrs. Abbott came to me. "Won't you please help us? You can talk to him better than we can."

Her appeal touched and embarrassed me. I went to Amos and did my clumsy best. I invited him to fishing trips, to school games, to help me work on my car. He stood in his shed, blinking. "Johnson"—he never used my given name—"I've got so much to learn it scares me. I can't stop."

He waved at the plants that looped from his shelves, sprouted from his army of jars. "You can't see the progress. You don't know the things I know."

I gazed at his disheartening jungle of wraiths. *No*, I thought, *I certainly don't*.

It was a small thing, that visit. It cost me little more than a jab in the conscience, yet later it was to save the world.

During my last year in school, I developed an interest in journalism. That summer I went to a city in another state and hung around newspaper offices till I got a job. With the help of this work I started college. By the time I graduated the World Combine was just being organized, and I was fortunate enough to get on.

During this period, of course, I heard little of Amos. He never finished high school. Almost literally, he dropped out of sight.

Looking back, it seems odd that someone at the school didn't appreciate the drive he had. Contact with a man who could talk his language might have channeled him into a scholarship, saved him years of lonely trial and error. He'd have become a foundation or corporation man, and achieved great technical stature.

But had this happened, I feel sure he'd never have accomplished what he did alone. His ultimate success lay in the wild unorthodoxy of his self-taught methods. Whether or not it was just as well is something you may be able to answer. I cannot.

I know now that Amos did nothing but work, those years, with a singleness of purpose and an indifference to his sur-

roundings that was inhuman. He was beginning to get results. By the time I saw him again, those results were almost beyond belief.

This was in the late Fifties. As you recall, the period of the Russian Fear was nearly over. The world was still churning from this and other after-effects of War II. The Transvaal incident had not yet occurred. Troubles of many kind swirled up and down the land. In Latin America, in Mongolia, in the United States, the first A-patriates were beginning to discover themselves.

**I**T TOOK Elaine a good half hour to tell me of the trouble Amos was in. But it can be summarized in a few stark words: Two people dead, Amos gone, and Pearlville in a state of panic.

In spite of the Picup, my throat was dry. "When did all this happen?"

"Day before yesterday."

"But it hasn't been on the newscasts, or the Combine tape."

"It's censored. The government man swore us to secrecy. But I had to come to you."

I wasn't sure I believed this. The Combine had a way of knowing what was going on, censored or not. "Just how," I asked, "were these people killed?"

"He said the first one, the woman next door, was strangled."

"How?"

Elaine shrugged helplessly. "They . . . aren't sure."

"And the other one?"

"A detective who went around to the house. People saw him go in. He never came out. The police found him dead, when they broke in." Her face twisted in sudden revulsion.

"Yes?"

"The government man said there were little plants all over him." She shuddered and put her face in her hands. Then she raised her head and added wearily,

"When they flew out to Denver to see us, all we could show them were the three or four letters Amos had written. Those and a few telephone calls were all we had ever heard from him. One of my brothers has gone to Pearlville to help. But we didn't know anything about his work."

"I saw him not long ago. It's likely I do know more than anyone else."

Elaine started up. I took her shoulders and pressed her back in the chair. "You just sit tight while I make a call. Then we'll get the car, pick up your things, and take off for Pearlville."

I hurried out of the room and called the boss. "The story of the century," I told him, and very little else. He grunted and grumbled, but finally he said, "Three days and expenses."

I set my apartment dial to "Absent. Indefinite. Please maintain." I adjusted recorders on my three phones, picked up my hat and traveling case, and went back to Elaine.

In the elevator, she gave my hand a squeeze. She didn't know it, but she gave my heart one, too.

Twenty minutes later we were boring into darkness on the three-hundred-mile journey to Pearlville. Elaine settled back with a sigh. "Will you tell me about the last time you saw Amos?"

I didn't want to, because I had tried to push that visit out of my mind. But now it was flooding back, clear as the day it happened. So I began to tell her. . . .

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Green World

**A**N ASSIGNMENT had taken me back to Pearlville, and afterward I had gone around to Birch Street, on an impulse to see how the old neighborhood fared. I remembered Amos, and

became curious to know what had happened to him. The Abbott house looked run-down, deserted. The shades were drawn. The porch was littered with leaves and advertising throw-aways.

I punched the doorbell. Many rings later, I recalled Amos' experimental shed, and headed around the side.

"You lookin' for somebody?" It was a woman, at the next-door window.

I touched my hat. "Yes. A family that used to live her. The Abbotts."

Her reaction made it apparent that she did know something about them. "Wait a minit," she said. A moment later she opened the front door and invited me in—a small, faded woman with protruding eyes.

I explained who I was, how I happened to know the Abbotts. Approaching people persuasively is a requirement in my profession. Reassured, the woman leaned back in her chair and started to talk. Mrs. Abbott had died some years before. The father had found it hard going to care for the little family.

"He wouldn't work!" the neighbor said, her moist eyes full of indignation. "Just stayed in the house, let the youngsters run wild. The Welfare people should've stepped in. But his father stuck up for him."

I nodded slowly, thinking of Mr. Abbott's old reluctance to discipline his son.

"Finally they shipped the three little kids out west. Relative there with money, I think. Best thing in the world for them. Him and his father lived on alone. The old man worked. They kept the place closed up and the shades drawn."

I saw the resentment in her eyes because the shades had been drawn.

"Then his father got killed in an auto accident."

The woman paused, to let this sink in. Then she tapped my knee. "Listen, his father had a whopping big insurance policy on his own life, payable to the boy.

The company paid it, too. But you know what I think?"

I nodded. I was a jump ahead of her now.

"I think old man Abbott done it a-purpose!"

The woman ran on. "Now he gets his checks, every month. Now he don't need to work. Some say he's makin' experiments, there in the house. But nobody really knows. Nobody can find out."

Her voice began to rise. It was easy to see that at least one neighbor couldn't be far from panic at the silence behind those drab, shuttered walls.

"He gets things," she said. "Big boxes that come by express. Bottles, great big ones in frames. Air tanks and things like that. That's the only time the door is opened. Lights at night, from under the windows. There's an oil tank out back, big enough for a factory. There's garbage cans like big-city restaurants."

She shot out an arm. I leaned, following the line of her finger. "See the size of that cable? The power company put it in six months ago. Can you tell me what that much electricity is doing in a residential house?"

I said it must have been all right with the city.

"Oh, *they* wouldn't do nothin'!"

I might have guessed she'd gone into it. There were few bits of other people's business this woman hadn't missed. And the mystery of that silent house next door was damn' near killing her.

"Well," I said, "thanks very much." I felt her avid eyes following me back over to the Abbott front door.

I knocked some more, without result. I began to rattle the knob, and suddenly the door opened. I stood on the threshold, peering into dimness.

"Amos," I bawled, "It's Leonard Johnson!"

I heard a slam, then the sound of deliberate, slipped feet.



"Shut the door." The voice bore no relation to my memory of Amos. It was high, thin and *unused*. I became suddenly leery.

"Shut the door!" This time it was said with such urgency that I jerked to obey. I was surrounded by warm darkness. That is one thing I'll never forget—the thick, cloying warmth.

There was a click and a light came on. My eyes had trouble adjusting; the air seemed clouded, greenish. Then Amos Abbott was awkwardly grasping my hand. And as I looked into his pale blue eyes I felt reassurance. He was perfectly sane.

He led me out of the hall. I saw daylight, through a frosted pane.

"Here!" He shoved books off a chair.

"It's been a long time," I said, trying to put this lanky, uncomfortable man at ease. "Do I look as different to you, Amos?"

"Y-yes. But I'd know you." He gave a tentative, half-shy smile. "You're the only friend I have, Johnson. I wondered when I'd see you."

His words shocked me. I'd known him casually as a boy. But I'd scarcely thought of him for years. A lump rose in my throat, at his incredible loneliness.

"I'm sorry about your father and mother, Amos. Are your brothers and sister all right?"

"I guess so." He stared at me. "I guess so," he repeated.

At my expression, he became apologetic. "Nobody but my father ever understood. And he didn't, really." There was an awkward pause, then Amos shook himself. "Well, tell me what you've been doing!"

I told him. He kept nodding, but he obviously only half heard me. His eyes flickered around the room. Twice he jumped up to look at a meter set near the door. This study had been a bedroom, originally. The shelves that lined the walls were crammed with hundreds of

books and pamphlets, with binders and plant presses. The table, the floor, the filing-cases were so loaded you had to pick your way along.

Amos coughed diffidently and pointed to weatherstripping around the door. "I had to shut this room off for my records. The heat and moisture, you know."

He wore stained, unpressed trousers and a sort of smock, out of which his thin neck protruded. He was an inch or two over six feet. His chin and cheeks were covered with fine down; I don't think he had ever shaved. Already, in his late twenties, he was nearing baldness.

I realized suddenly that my inspection had been too frank. Amos began to pick at his smock and brush at his trousers. "I don't pay much attention to how I look. The neighbors think I'm crazy. But they leave me alone."

**R**ECALLING it now, so many years later, I can still feel the impact of that afternoon. In this squalid house, with crude, home-made equipment, Amos Abbott had been quietly redesigning the world.

I didn't absorb it all. Perhaps I never really got the comprehensive picture. I'm not a plant physiologist. I can only give you some of the impressions that flooded my startled consciousness. The minute Amos led me into that hallway again, I lost contact with the familiar outlines of reality.

I bumped into a damp, swaying object the size of an umbrella and recoiled with a grunt of surprise. Amos' thin, strong hand gripped my arm. "It's just a leaf."

I made out the trunk of the thing, as large as my thigh, snaking around a corner ahead. Other huge leaves depended from the ceiling, some of them as wide as the hall. My mind thrashed around and caught onto something. "The warmth! It's a tropical vine."

I followed Amos into a room filled with

tables, rising shelf-like one above the other. The air was steamy, with a greenish tinge. I peered through the opalescent gloom at hundreds—thousands—of jars and bottles crowding the tables. Tubing ran everywhere, from tanks high along the walls.

In one corner a group of lamps was focussed on a row of thick-sided battery jars. They were filled with a twining, viscous mass that looked green from one angle, brown from another. Amos scooped up solution from one of these containers, took it to a workbench, fixed a microscope slide and inspected it.

"You know what photosynthesis is?"

I nodded. That was the process by which plants grew, through the action of light on the stuff called chlorophyll in their tissues.

"This is chemosynthesis. The energy is derived from chemical changes."

Amos in his element was a different man. No longer did he seem awkward and clumsy. He strode with quick purposefulness between the tables. His long fingers moved dextrously among test tubes, tweezers and bell-glasses.

I carried away from that first room an overwhelming picture of roots, millions of roots, filling their liquid media like pale, streaming hair. Roots like cotton fluff, roots like gnarled rope, roots like iron wire, like children's balloons, like writhing worms.

Amos pointed out one plant that seemed all root, with only a faint hump rising above the surface of the jar in which it lived. "When root plants go above ground they waste their energy in support."

We went on to other rooms, always in the same steamy warmth, always surrounded by tanks of solution, with tubes dropping slow blobs of nutriment.

One room I found devoted to grasses. Amos had achieved wonders with the tough, quick-growing monocotyledons. He showed me hundreds upon hundreds of

varieties, growing in serried ranks. Fescues and oats and barley, timothy and foxtail and bunch grass, blue and rye and bent—all the kinds of grass that ever grew, it seemed.

I made some kind of sound and he turned and smiled. "Just playing with them," he said. "Testing, learning. Grass has been overlooked. It's capable of almost anything."

He showed me one growing in a jar devoid of liquid. Tiny horn-like roots clutched at the smooth bottom and strange furry leaves pushed upward.

"This one has never been watered, never known soil. It takes food directly from the air." Amos pointed to a small tube discharging a faint cloudy stream above.

He indicated a platform which held a three-foot cube of concrete. I went over. "Little crack in it at the top. Am I supposed to see anything else?"

Amos reached under the table edge and switched on a light. I got down beside him and saw a heavy quartz slab inlaid in the base of the concrete. Through its opaqueness I saw a knot of shiny, yellowish fibers.

Grass," Amos said, "blocked from three directions. Its upward growth has made that crack. Does that give you some idea of the power of osmosis?"

To me, osmosis was a dim memory from high school biology: the movement of fluids within plant and animal tissues. Dumbly I gazed across at a vat with a wire covered top through which blades of grass were pushing—blades that were eight feet tall.

Amos smiled faintly and took my arm. "That's common millet, not bamboo. Come along. You'll enjoy the next room."

Vegetables. I saw cabbages the size of wash tubs. I saw tomatoes like basketballs, grapes that had to be supported by metal frames. String beans six feet long. Carrots, grown in molds, two feet square.

When I started babbling Amos shook his head. "These aren't important. There's no progress in this room. Let's go upstairs."

He shrugged at my disbelieving face and took me upstairs. The first room we came to was comparatively bare. On a center table were some glass trays with unimpressive green lumps in them. They were set up in rows. Going closer, I saw that each tray had a different contraption facing it.

The first growth seemed to be flickering. It took me a moment to realize that polished metal discs were spinning on a tiny machine in front of it.

"Hypnotism," Amos said.

I shook my head, beyond speech. He pointed to the next tray. The solution in it had a restless, roiling appearance. The plant was squat, globular, with a few thick flaps—rudimentary leaves. The root was a thick pad. It had elaborate veining and a hairy surface, was a dark, congested green in color.

"These plants," Amos said, "I call *magma*. They're a generalized type I've bred for toughness and stability. They have easily measurable tropisms."

So a little farther on when I saw an ingenious whirling device that kept a *magma* and its solution in a constant spin, I didn't even smile.

Nor was I any longer capable of surprise when Amos led me to a cupboard which emitted the strains of music. Inside, a stocky *magma* shared the space with a record player endlessly repeating a minor symphonic arrangement.

I cleared my throat. "That's stretching things, isn't it, Amos?"

He shook his head. "I've altered cells by vibratory combinations. Nothing really significant yet."

"You don't overlook anything at all, do you?"

"I don't think so," he said, and he was completely serious.

AT THE head of the cellar stairs Amos paused. His lips twitched. "Maybe you'd better light one of your cigarettes." He hurried to the bottom ahead of me, and if he was waiting for my reaction, he wasn't disappointed.

The cellar was an unearthly sea of color. Greens, purples, yellows in every conceivable shade, glowed and faded, pulsed and died before my eyes. Then there was a click, and clean electric light wiped it all away.

"Fungi," Amos said matter-of-factly. "All phosphorescent." But his eyes sparkled; he was suppressing a smile. Giving me such a start had been a capital joke to him. How long had it been since he had played his last joke?

I knew there were stranger, more wonderful things on the floors above. But the unnatural growths in that cellar haunt my dreams yet. They were only primitive blobs of matter. Had I touched one it would have crumbled, or collapsed into mush. But to see them flaming out in crimson, azure, orange, violet, chartreuse, russet, was almost too much. It strained one's sanity.

"My recreation," Amos said simply. "I relax down here when I'm tired or discouraged. I'm used to the smell."

My cigarette hadn't helped much. The air was thick, rotten—the repulsive odor of decayed plant life.

I suddenly wanted to get out of that hole. The growths that covered every inch of its walls and beams seemed malignant. They were too far from reality. A dwarfish, rust-colored one on a pier a few feet away began to wink at me, like a blotched and evil eye. A huge pink one with ragged brown spots looked too full for its skin, ready to burst and spray its matter over us. I shivered and backed up the stairs.

Amos shut the door. His manner was abruptly impatient. There's more to show you, Johnson. But I've got readings to

make, adjustments to check. Can you make yourself busy till dinner? Perhaps the grasses?"

"Dinner?"

His brisk manner faded. His face turned pink. "That is, if you care to stay. I don't know if—"

"Of course I'll stay," I told him heartily. "I've just seen so much I'm dizzy. But if you don't mind, how about waiting in the office?"

I'm sure he was disappointed; he expected me to wander around the plant rooms. But he led me to a corner and pointed. "Mind the ivy. It's thick at this end."

"The . . . what?"

"Common ivy. You remember those leaves in the hall."

*Common ivy!*

It was an unimaginable relief to see the plain, familiar forms of books and furniture. I realized I was soaking wet from the humidity of the plant rooms. I hung up my coat and took off my shirt, lifted a filing case off a chair so I could sit.

I lit another cigarette and blew out my breath and tried to regain my perspective.

**I**T WASN'T an experience I could grasp all at once. Vivid pictures kept popping into my mind: Minute algae, living on the surface of a boiling vat. The rippling sheets on one tray, not recognizable as plants at all, just amorphous quantities of green that trembled, trembled. The strawberries that had matured in four days. The breeding cages, alive with flies for the carnivorous plants. The four pale plants like octopi, with knobby tentacles that reached out and in, out and in. . . .

I had seen too much. I couldn't bring order into the picture. I kept trying to remind myself that this was just an ordinary two-story frame house. But I couldn't reconcile that knowledge with

the warm maze I had just experienced, with its ever-present greenness and the creeping feel of growth.

The thought of Amos in his cellar enjoying that fetid stable of grotesqueries—relaxation, he'd said—was almost laughable. At the same time it was pathetic. Had there ever been a man as lonely?

Twilight came. Switching on the light, I discovered that the office had a small bathroom off one side. There was a cot, almost hidden behind a bookcase. There was—surprisingly—a telephone.

Strange, how I lingered over these familiar objects. They told me that Amos was a human being. He had the same homely little needs and appurtenances as the rest of us. Somehow, that was the kind of reassurance I needed . . . when I knew that outside the door hung leaves as large as tablecloths.

I discovered a control panel beside Amos' cot. When I turned on the hooded light, I was deeply impressed. He'd not only taught himself to be carpenter, glass-blower, plumber and chemist; he was also a skilled instrument man. I saw voltmeters, time-clocks, gauges, thermostats, kymographs, and a dozen others whose purpose was lost to me. By the use of this panel, Amos kept his laboratory world within reach even when he lay down to rest.

I stopped wandering, sat down again, and tried to examine the impressions that flooded my mind. Frankly, I had no desire to linger over some of them. The odor of rotting plant matter, for instance. There were cans under the workbenches, and Amos had several times tossed out slushy masses of material so rank I gagged.

There was another odor pervading the house, seeping past the weatherstripping into the study. In small quantities it was unpleasant. At times, during the tour, I had found it so heavy as to be unendurable. I can only say it was the rich

green smell of growth. The aroma of naked plant tissue—the musky juice of cell fluids—the breath of stagnant water and carbon dioxide. Add to these the pungence of chemicals, heighten the whole by warmth, and you have an approximation. It is a difficult thing to pin down in words, yet I will never forget it.

There was one room I hadn't been allowed to see. I reached for the door knob, innocently enough, but Amos stopped my arm. "Delicate experiment going on in there, Johnson. Even the air currents would disturb it."

It had meant little to me at the time. But now it returned to plague me. The more I thought of that forbidden room the stronger my curiosity grew. After all, I thought, I was a man to report things. I was a gatherer of news. And—though it had not struck me forcibly until now—this house was a bulging bag of headlines!

I speculated. The room had been on this floor. I decided it must be the one next to the office. Quickly I got up to press my ear against the farther wall. I heard a faint, insistent humming which made me think of water running, though it was slower, thicker-sounding.

A sudden scraping sound interrupted it. Then there was a sharp snapping, many times repeated. The humming sound faltered, surged up strongly, then faded again. The snapping went on steadily for some minutes. When it stopped the scraping sound was repeated. There was a heavy thump, and silence.

Into that silence crept the humming again. But it was faint and uneven. It sounded disturbed, fretful. I listened to it till my neck got a cramp, but I heard nothing else.

I had just turned away from the wall when Amos entered. He smiled. "I didn't forget you, Johnson. Dinner is ready."

HOW shall I describe that dinner? There was nothing I had ever tasted be-

fore—nothing I'd ever considered as food. Yet it was as rich and satisfying as any meal I ever ate.

We sat down in a nook that served as a storeroom, out of sight and smell of Amos' fantastic plants. We ate from shallow stainless steel pans, piping hot from a steam cabinet. We drank a greenish brew from laboratory beakers.

As he sliced thick chunks of the "roast" Amos explained it was the seed of common mallow—the "cheese-weed" of the children—bred to gigantism. It actually seemed to have the texture of meat, along with an appealing nutty flavor.

There was a side dish of bleached roots, tangily spiced with the ground-up seeds of some obscure grass. There were bowls of pulp, prepared from the culm of a water plant—*Naiadaceae*, Amos called them—that had the consistency of ripe persimmon and three times the taste.

My host, I am sure, got pretty tired of my oh-ing and ah-ing. He ate little; mostly he watched me. His efficient laboratory manner had dropped away, and with it his self-confidence. Whenever I looked at him he ducked his head and gave a small, pleased smile. I reminded myself that this was probably the first dinner he had shared with another human in years. Watching the flush that came so easily to his pallid face, I felt a resurgence of the pity that the wonders of his unorthodox lab had driven clear out of my mind.

When I had cleaned up my plate I sighed, shook my head in wordless appreciation, and took out my cigarette case. Amos put up his hand. "We'd better go back to the study," he said apologetically. "Tobacco smoke affects some of my plants."

I wasn't offended. More and more, I was coming to realize what a rare and thrilling experience this was. Amos shut the study door firmly, looked at his control panel, then sat on the cluttered bench.

I lit my cigarette and took a long, contented puff. In that quiet second I heard again the fretful humming from the room next door.

"Amos, what is that?" I asked, pointing toward the wall.

He gave me a startled glance. "What do you mean?"

I rose to show him. "Over here, by the wall. I was listening to it before dinner."

Amos shook his head. He muttered something about a compressor. He looked so uncomfortable that I said quickly, "Look, I'm not trying to pry. If it's something you'd rather not tell me about, that's all right. It really doesn't matter. I was just curious."

He didn't answer. He got up and fiddled with the dials on the wall.

"Maybe," I went on, "you don't realize that this house of yours would make a whale of a story just as it is, without any new wonders."

Amos jerked around. I was young then, with more push than prudence. I should have been warned by his expression. But I let the idea carry me along. "Do you realize we could amaze the world? What you've done here would be the greatest sensation since the moon-rocket!"

The color faded from his face. He took a slow step toward me.

"Amos, what's the matter?" I found myself becoming frightened.

Thickly, he said, "I don't understand you."

"Don't you remember? I told you I was a reporter for the World Combine. I was just—"

His hand shot out. I would never have believed such strength lay in that thin arm. My biceps shrieked with the unexpected pain.

"You'll not say a word! Do you understand, Johnson? Never! *Never!* NEVER!"

## CHAPTER THREE

### Growth Gone Mad

**D**RIVING through the silent night with Elaine asleep at my side, his words returned with all their vehemence. Even now the back of my neck went cold, at the memory of his strange, high voice.

I had left his house hurriedly, after a series of solemn promises to seal my lips. I'd have given anything to retract my naive outburst. But it was too late. He was too upset to reason with. He watched me go, standing in that leaf-draped hall—a grim, unyielding figure, driving out the only human being who had come to visit him in years.

As I drove away, I told myself bitterly that I hadn't handled him right. I'd let my enthusiasm outrun my common sense. I reproached myself for losing the story of the century, after I had it right in my grasp. The thought of going ahead anyway occurred to me, of course. But though I was no model of integrity in those days, I couldn't bring myself to do it.

Pearlville lay just ahead, now. The sky was beginning to lighten in the east. Elaine moved, stretched, yawned. Then she jerked up in the seat, as awareness returned.

"Nearly there," I said.

"What are we going to do?"

"That will depend on what we find."

We were not kept indecisive long. I had to slow down for a red light and a road block. We saw a number of parked cars, uniformed figures, and in the distance a thin searchlight probing the sky.

The man who came up to us wore the black and gold chevron of a government security man. He had a ray gun—one of those early Stelling models which were so undependable it took real courage to use one.

"Your business?"

I handed over my Combine card. "This girl is Elaine Abbott. Amos Abbott's sister."

The man gestured, and a blinding white light found our faces, detailed every pore. Then he raised his hand and it cut off. I heard the cover of the rear storage compartment slam shut—they must have opened it with duplicate keys.

The security officer gave us a long look. Then he strode off and had a conversation over a field telephone or short wave radio. He returned with two younger officers. "The girl can proceed, escorted."

My own objection was overridden by Elaine, who leaned across me and said urgently, "But Mr. Johnson knows Amos! He went through his house just a short while ago!"

The officer started to shake his head. Then he stopped and thought for a moment. He handed back my Combine card. "All right. Try your story at the next blockade. You might get through."

I started the car. With a young security officer on a powerwheel in front of us, and one behind, we proceeded toward Pearlville.

"He went back to make another call," Elaine reported.

I nodded. They'd really thrown a cover over this place. It was a new experience to fail to gain automatic entry with my Combine card.

We went about three miles before being stopped again. This officer had several more service bars than the other. He listened to our story just as politely as if he hadn't already heard it. Then he looked off at the sky, which showed the rosiness of approaching sunrise.

When he turned back he smiled a little. "The girl, yes. And you could go, too, if you had no pencil, no paper, no tongue, no eyes, and no memory."

Earnestly, I explained my relationship to Amos.

"True," he replied. "But you're a member of the shrewdest, sharpest news-gathering group on the planet. I have difficulty forgetting that."

Having worked with security men before, I knew a little of their operating pattern. Already I could see this situation was regarded with the gravity reserved for events as serious as armed invasion. I wouldn't get in as a correspondent. It would only be on the basis of what help I could be otherwise.

I made a good case of it, starting with Amos and me as boys together. And I was completely sincere. The officer only shook his head sympathetically.

Then I noticed a man walking nearby. My heart jumped. "Arthur!" I shouted.

He came over, grinning. "Well, if it isn't 'Seven-card' Johnson!"

"Tell your colleague here I can be trusted."

Arthur's grin widened. "Not in a poker game, brother." He turned to the officer. "Johnson and I spent a week together in Cincinnati."

The officer blinked. Elaine looked puzzled, but no one explained it to her. Only a handful of people in the world knew of the Cincinnati Incident—that horrifying, unforgettable preview of chain reaction.

It was all that I needed. The officer turned to our powerwheel escorts. "Show Johnson the way to the City Hall." He waved us on, and beside me Elaine gave a long sigh.

At the Pearlville City Hall we found a scene familiar enough to me. I had seen many a disaster headquarters. There were the same hurrying, haggard people. The same hallways full of cots, some with slumbering lumps on them, others with empty, rumpled covers. Local police and highway patrolmen lounged around or drank coffee at an improvised serving table. A few security men were in evidence, quiet except for their eyes.

Elaine and I were conducted to a table where a perspiring middle-aged man questioned us with a sharpness due more to fatigue than to ill temper. Elaine he dispatched to the hotel where her brother was staying. The chief of the investigation would be anxious to talk to her later.

Before she left she stepped close to me and pressed my arm. I gave her a hug, and then a gentle push. She was very tired. She needed what sleep she could get, before the questioning began.

"Well," the man said to me complainingly, "they let you past the inner blockade. But I don't know what the hell to do with you. Can't have you wandering around loose."

"Maybe," I suggested, "you could assign me to somebody, till we know if they want to question me."

He looked relieved, and beckoned to a man nearby. "This thing's got me down. Got us all down. Why a nice little town like Pearlville. . . ." He rolled his eyes, as though it were past all patience and understanding.

"Jim," he said, "Johnson here is a Combine man. I haven't had any official word, but he apparently knows Abbott and I'm sure the Committee will want to talk to him. Will you look after him? See that he can wash up, and eat, and so on. . . ."

**A**S FAR as I was concerned, Jim Blaisdell was a good companion. He was a lanky, unexcitable man who belonged to the local National Guard unit, and was a technician for the Bell Communications System. His duties in the emergency were indefinite—he was to stand ready for action, and in the meantime help out at the City Hall.

"What do people think about all this?" I asked over a second cup of coffee.

Jim thought a moment. "Well, some are mad and some are scared. But mostly they figure the government wouldn't be

payin' all this attention to Pearlville unless something mighty important was involved. They're kind of proud of the attention. Puts Pearlville on the map."

"Don't be too sure of that," I said dryly. "These blockades work both ways. This place is really bottled up."

He hadn't thought of that.

I went on, "It's not enough that two people died. Something else must have happened, to set all this off."

Jim shrugged. "See that big door down the hall? That's where all the dope is. That's where the brass is keeping it." His white teeth flashed. "You can ask them, if you ever get in there."

I did just that, about three hours later. I found five men facing me—the mayor of Pearlville, the chief of police, the governor of the state, an agricultural expert from an eastern university, and a high-ranking security officer. I had met the latter once three or four years before. He remembered and nodded at me.

Governor Wingate was presiding, and started after me like the attorney he was. I had nothing to hold back. They listened in fascination as I told them what I knew about Amos Abbott.

I described his boyhood, his young manhood. Room by room, I led them through his remarkable house, letting them sample his wonders. Though I tried to be objective, I found my throat getting tight as I reviewed his lonely, driven life.

The Emergency Committee was obviously impressed. There was silence for a full two minutes after I finished. It was a lot for any group of men to swallow all in one gulp.

Lee, the university specialist, was the first to speak. He had a cold, slightly arrogant manner. "Gentlemen, as a plant physiologist, I say most of this story is sheer fantasy. Mr. Johnson undoubtedly did see some unusual plant forms. But many of the things he describes are commonplace to us in the field. Prolonged



breeding control can bring results that are startling to laymen. The other things: those so-called *magma*, the use of music and hypnotism, plants with animal characteristics, this matter of chemosynthesis, the refrigeration experiments, and so on—they are plainly ridiculous!"

Lee gave me a patronizing look. "I'm not blaming you," it said. "Naturally, you were swept off your feet."

Then, since no one answered him, Lee went on, "Gentlemen, I ask you to consider Abbott's background. He was ignorant, untrained, didn't even finish high school. To think he might have found new principles that have escaped the best academic minds in the country—it's foolish. He was only a poor amateur, and probably deranged as well."

Pearlville's mayor and chief of police sat with their mouths slightly open. They were out of their depth. This was a battle of experts.

Governor Wingate looked at Lee and at me, in turn. Lawyer-like, he was waiting till he had more to go on. Jacobson, the security officer, cleared his throat. His face was hard and homely. "Johnson, the government is in on this because of something Lee refuses to credit. Nobody knows about it but this committee. If you hadn't been at Cincinnati, you wouldn't be hearing it either. That woman neighbor of Abbott's was killed by a plant that lunged out of a window and wrapped itself around her neck while she was snooping."

Lee gave an irritable twitch.

"It's true," the police chief put in heavily. "I helped pull the thing off her."

Jacobson said, "If plants are going to start acting like that, then the government's interested."

"There was also the detective," Wingate said.

"Yes. He was killed by little red plants, that sank their roots into his skin. Again, we're interested."

Jacobson looked at me a moment. "You understand, Johnson, that plant literally jumped out of that window at the woman."

I nodded. I had no difficulty appreciating his point. But I was still not convinced I had heard everything. For the Security Board to bottle up Pearlville under maximum provisions, something much more drastic or widespread must be involved. They were still hiding something—just as I might have done in their place.

So I told them about the strange noises I had heard from Amos' office: the humming or buzzing, like a live thing crooning, fretting over confinement; the scraping sound as though a door were opened; the sharp snapping which, on reflection, I had decided was pruning. Then the slam of the door and the humming again, upset now and peculiarly uneven.

The mayor and the chief of police looked sick. I felt sorry for them. Honest, uninspired men, they had been thrown into the midst of a nightmare. They were being asked to confront things their whole experience rejected.

The governor scowled at the table. Lee, the university man, was frankly disdainful. To him, this was piling superstition on top of myth.

"How about the house?" I asked. "There must be a lot of stuff left there. Amos couldn't have taken a fraction of it away. Can't some of these things be verified?"

"We tried," the chief said. "What we found was mostly mush, or little dried up wisps. Abbott turned everything off and drained the tanks. There was a lot of smelly junk we threw out ourselves. Little round things and blobs like jelly and all kinds of roots. Shouldn't 'a done it, maybe, but we got excited."

"No one's blaming you a bit," Jacobson said quietly. "If everybody acted as

sensibly as you people, our job would be a thousand percent easier."

"What did you think of his lab?" I asked Lee.

"By the time I saw it, there was scarcely anything left. The man worked hard. He had an amazing setup. But at least some of his projects were covered fifty or a hundred years ago."

"Any correspondence?"

"Damn' little," Governor Wingate said. "Mostly letters to botanical societies and universities and big businesses, telling them about some of his discoveries. Every one had a letter of rejection pinned to it. No one took him seriously. The poor devil got the brushoff every time."

I looked at Lee. He fidgeted, then said with a scowl, "Yes, he wrote us about some of his wild ideas. We treated him the way we treat any obvious fanatic. Among other things, we asked for his credentials. We never received an answer."

A telephone on the big table buzzed. The mayor started to reach for it, then looked at Jacobson. The latter picked it up, listened for thirty seconds. Then he slammed the handset down while the voice was still talking.

"Something's happened at Crabb Hill. Lee, you and Johnson come along. The others stay here. Hurry!"

**WE** TOOK off for Crabb Hill in a command car, one of the new models with an impermeable plastic top and giant wheels. We sailed along at high speed with the growler on, halting any cars that came within a hundred feet of us by cutting off their ignition.

Crabb Hill, I remembered, was several miles west, a heavily wooded hump above the road that followed Crabb Creek away from Pearlville. We passed the inner blockade, then zoomed by the outer one. There was a long line of stopped cars.

People stared open-mouthed at the command car—there were as yet only a half dozen in the entire country.

Jacobson rode with the mobile telephone in his hand. He called out the Pearlville Fire Department's hook-and-ladder and chemical truck, the county chemical fire apparatus, and various emergency units of the security force. He ordered the Crabb Hill area surrounded and searched in concentric rings a half mile, a mile, and two miles apart. He spoke as if this were a simple thing, a matter of minutes rather than hours.

Lee noticed my puzzlement. "Personnel detectors," he muttered. "Something new. They work by registering heartbeats, or body electricity—something like that. Don't need many men to sweep an area."

We entered the canyon, roared around several curves, and then with heart-stopping suddenness came upon the scene of the trouble. A few utility vehicles were stopped in a parking area. Several men were running excitedly around. But behind them, up the hill beyond, was the sight that caused even Jacobson to cry out.

It was a towering mass of vegetation eighty feet high, rippling and waving with a life of its own. Here and there plumes of green burst upward, stretching and curling, then fell back. On either side of the outbreak the normal scrubby brush was stirring, trembling, beginning to swell.

As we gaped, there was a sudden flurry across the road. Several tendrils ran out, tips swaying, testing the surface of the pavement. A man shouted and ran forward, chopping savagely with a machete. Other tendrils surged out to replace those he cut. And suddenly he began to shriek—one of them had him by the ankle.

Another man hurried from a truck with a portable flamethrower. The fantastic growth disappeared in a gush of red and orange. The victim frantically plucked at the vine around his leg and ran in circles,

howling. Whether it was from pain or fright, I could not tell.

All of this we saw in a few seconds as we piled out of the car. A heavy carrier rumbled up beside us, the landing ramp banged down, and the first of four bulldozers descended. Jacobson ordered them out on the slope nearest Pearlville, where the vegetation still looked normal. Spaced in a line, their scraper blades cut and turned a broad band of earth. A heavy-duty flame thrower, mounted on a carrier, followed them, turning the foliage above the cut into charred crisp.

In a strangled voice, Lee said, "But what's he going to do about the hill itself?"

It was an unbelievable sight. Like green fire, it bloomed up into the sky. No trees were identifiable, no separate plants—just growth, rank and delirious, bursting upward and outward. Like fire, it rustled and crackled, a steady ominous undertone to the shouts of men and the throb of pumps and motors.

By now Jacobson had the chemical trucks lined up, spraying the slope of Crabb Hill that faced the road. The growth writhed and twisted away from the biting fumes. But as soon as the spray left its vicinity, it seemed to surge right up again. Along the shoulder of the road, men were still chopping to keep the wild green fingers from crossing.

I felt Lee's hand on my shoulder. "I saw it grab that man," he said huskily. "I saw it grab him." The man's cold self-possession was gone. Hysteria lay just beneath the surface.

"It wasn't after him," I said flatly. "It was simply seeking a hold, like any pea."

"Johnson, I saw it grab him!"

I walked away. I couldn't help Lee, but there must be something I could do for Jacobson. I ducked as I heard a shattering roar overhead. Planes were swooping down on the hill, trailing chemical clouds that settled on the seething greenness. It

was becoming an all-out battle, the putting down of a savage rebellion. I hurried down the road, but no one paid the slightest attention to me. The situation, while not under control, was in conspicuously good hands.

I wished desperately for a portable TV set, or at the very least a camera—even though either one would have brought a dozen security men on my neck immediately.

Finally I came upon Jacobson, standing with his hands on his hips. After a moment he noticed me. "Well, Johnson, that's the first phase. We'll soon know if we can contain it."

A rabbit made a high, looping jump over a restless fringe of underbrush, scuttled between two of the men guarding the roadside, and dived across the pavement into the normal growth on the other side.

"I'm glad I saw that," Jacobson said.

There was an odd quality in his voice. I looked at him questioningly.

"What if that rabbit had been six feet tall?"

I thought about it, and my back went cold. Slowly, I said, "There was another outbreak like this. That's what pulled you government men into Pearlville."

Jacobson nodded. "But that was a small one."

Then, at a smothered roar, we both jerked around. Far up the hill, a huge section of the new growth had collapsed on itself in a roiling sea of green.

Jacobson gave me a quick, hopeful glance. I shrugged.

"Still," he said, "it can't keep on growing like that forever. Where will it get the nourishment?"

"For centuries leaf mold has been accumulating on that hillside. Might take a long, long time to burn it all up."

"Lee should be able to tell us."

"Perhaps. If he's coherent yet. This thing has pulled his world out from under his feet."

Jacobson looked over at the command car. The plant man was leaning against it, head in his hands. Jacobson gave a sympathetic mutter.

"Do you really expect to find Amos Abbott in this vicinity?" I asked Jacobson.

He sighed. "I doubt it. But I don't see how this could have started from remote control." He shook himself and started for the car. "Don't forget, we're starting from scratch. That other outbreak was tiny compared to this, and they had it nearly crushed by the time we got there. So there's no precedent. We don't know how to handle it. I've got a research team gathering samples—if they can hang on to them. We're not plant specialists, but we've got some of the best lab men in the world."

As he entered the car and took up the short-wave transmitter, I stepped over to Lee. His face was haggard. "Yes, Johnson," he said, "I was wrong. I can't believe it. But how can I refute the evidence of my own eyes?"

"We were wondering if it would burn itself out."

Lee brooded at the nightmarish mountain of growth. "I would think so. But there's an entirely new factor here. Somehow, that madman has removed the limits of growth. What it has done to the cells, the oxygen requirements, the mineral intake, and so on, I can't begin to know till I get it under a microscope." He gave a weary sigh. "I'm not even sure I want to find out."

A new sound attracted my attention. The first bulldozer was approaching on the right, having completed its circle of Crabb Hill. The outbreak was boxed in now. The smoldering track left by the flame thrower was clear; apparently it was effectively stopping the growth. Planes were still buzzing the hill, their acid clouds billowing downward. The men patrolling the road were idle. Though on

the crest of Crabb Hill the greenness still seethed in a soaring frenzy of growth, it looked like the battle was won.

Jacobson called and motioned to us. I climbed in, but Lee hesitated. Interest was beginning to wipe the slack look from his face.

"I want to see more of this," he said. "I think I'll stay."

**M**Y EYES jumped to Elaine as Jacobson and I entered the small conference room in the City Hall. The few hours' rest had done her worlds of good. She gave me a warm, shy smile, and I tried to look optimistic and encouraging. Two security deputies entered with us, one of them carrying a micro-recorder.

"We've already drained your brother Ed dry," Jacobson said to Elaine. "Get comfortable. This will be thorough."

It was the first time I had seen him in action. I soon realized they hadn't even scratched the surface in my interview. They spread a map of Pearlville on the table, along with public records on Amos from the day of his birth. Patiently they traced and retraced every recollection that Elaine could supply. It was all recorded.

I thought of the corps of security men busy outside, in Pearlville and the country surrounding—in every community within miles—searching, probing, missing nothing with their trained unemotional eyes. And I felt a wave of pity for Amos—who wanted only to be left alone.

Jacobson's interrogation covered every possible avenue. Two themes seemed dominant—Amos' loyalty to his country, and whether he harbored any resentment against people because of their failure to accept him.

Where was he now, I wondered. What was he thinking, away from his home and his laboratory? How had he felt watching the work of his life go down the drain pipes and into the slush cans? How had he loosed this thing on the world? Had it

been deliberate, born of his rage and frustration—or had it got away from him, even as he was trying frantically to restrain it?

There in his lonely lab, Amos had learned the ultimate secret. Through some fortuitous combination of heat, light, chemical stimulation, the right solution, music—God knows what—he had stumbled over the final threshold.

With trembling fingers he had fixed a slice of tissue on a slide, then watched with pounding heart through the eyepiece of his microscope as the cells swelled and stretched and grew . . . How had he felt as he watched that bit of plant inch away, flow off the slide and down to the table? Before long, I am sure, he became frightened, and hacked off its burgeoning growth.

I thought of that room next door to his office. Was that where Amos kept his piece of living dynamite? Like a dangerous animal, it had to be caged, lest it get away and infect the thousands of others with its delirium. It must have been a frightful worry, swelling and stretching there in its prison, humming with impatience to get out and away. It must have made his life a hell, this burden that he bore alone.

No wonder he had reacted as he did to my innocent question. No wonder he had been filled with a terrible anger when he realized that I could bare his secret to the world!

What had really happened that last afternoon, when the woman next door had her curiosity satisfied at last? Had the plant escaped through a crack? Had it gotten into the lab and transmitted its frightful capacity to the others, till the whole place was out of control, and Amos found himself fighting desperately for his very life?

A knock on the door of the conference room interrupted my thoughts, and Jacobson's questioning.

"Come in," he called, turning impatiently toward the door.

It was Lee, the scientist. His hair was mussed. His tie was gone; his shirt hung loose and unheeded over his middle-aged pouch. "Seeds!" he said hoarsely as he staggered in.

We stared at him.

"Don't you realize what that means? Every inch of soil those bulldozers turned over is sprouting. There are millions—billions—of seeds. Trees and shrubs and weeds and grass. The earth is saturated with them. And they stay dormant for years. You could turn that ground a hundred times and still not manage to exhaust them!"

Jacobson tried to speak, but Lee overrode him. "Turn your head, and the ground is covered with green fuzz. Two minutes later and it's knee-high. Now the flame throwers can't even begin to keep the strip cleared off!" Abruptly, Lee dropped into a chair.

His exhausted body began to tremble, uncontrollably.

Jacobson grabbed the communicator and shouted for the man in charge at Crab Hill. After a couple of minutes that seemed like hours he reached him. We heard the man's voice, high and excited, "It's got across the road, too. One of the trucks must have scraped some grass and carried it across. There's a funny-looking cloud over the hill. Kind of a haze—and it's green, too. We need more of everything—men, fuel, chemicals. And we need it quick!"

Jacobson looked questioningly at Lee. "That cloud."

Lee raised his eyes. His voice came jerkily. "Spores. Millions upon millions of microscopic spores from fungi. They're everywhere, drifting in the air." He lunged to his feet. "If it's got to those, we're lost!"

And as Elaine began to scream, he ran from the room. . . .

## CHAPTER FOUR

## The Howling Death

I FINALLY managed to calm her in the sunny garden behind the City Hall. Jim Blaisdell, the deputy, came up to the bench where we were sitting. His good-natured grin helped us both; that and the fact that the sky above us was still clear.

Jim was restless. He and the others had heard fantastic rumors about what was happening at Crabb Hill. The security men wouldn't talk. But their obvious worry had communicated itself to the citizens of Pearlville.

I was trying to sound reassuring without actually telling him anything when Elaine seized my arm. "Leonard! Those questions stirred up things I haven't thought of for years. And I just remembered something else. A place where Amos might be!"

I forgot all about Jim.

"A little resort," she said, "that Daddy took us to when we were kids. There was a little lake, and trees, and a swamp. It was old and run-down, but pretty. Amos loved it. He talked about it for months afterward. He always said he was going to go there to live."

"Do you know how to get there?"

Her brow wrinkled. "It was called something like Gardenwild. It was south of here. Oh"—her small hands gripped mine—"it's a wild guess. But there's a chance, Leonard!"

I jumped up. "It's good enough for me. Let's get a map? How about you, Jim? Going to give up any trouble?"

He gave us his slow grin. "Run along. I'll hold the fort. If you can get out past the Security Men, you'll be too smart for me to have kept track of, anyway."

Elaine went up to him. "I'll never forget this," she said softly. "After all, Amos is my brother. He's nice, and gentle

and kind. I know he didn't do these things deliberately."

Having decided to get away, our main problem was the security blockade. I was worried. I couldn't forget the armament on that command car, nor the Stelling gun that first officer had carried. Elaine guided me to the industrial section of Pearlville, then along a dirt road that crossed the waste land beyond.

"There's a service road through that farm ahead," she told me. "We may have to cut through some fences, but we can go for several miles before we cross to the highway."

"How," I asked, "did you know all this?"

She smiled, with a flash of that impish manner that had led us to call her "pixie." "You forget, Leonard. I was a little tomboy. We used to ditch school and go exploring."

We came to a ditch where people had dumped great numbers of tin and plastic containers.

"Stop," Elaine said suddenly. "There ahead! A car and a man in uniform."

I wasn't surprised. The Security Men missed mighty few bets. We could take to the ditch and try to circle around him. Chances were, if we succeeded, we'd only run into another one. And it seemed impossible that he could have missed our approach.

As we hesitated, that distant figure suddenly turned and jumped into the car. It started off, bucking and lurching over the rocks and sand, and rapidly disappeared from our view.

"He's seen us!" Elaine cried. "He's gone to get some others."

"I doubt that. I think he got an emergency call on his car radio." I didn't add that I also thought the call concerned the outbreak on Crabb Hill. I headed my car across the ditch and up the bank on the other side. We came out on a strip of packed earth and went along it.

Elaine told me where to turn, and little by little we picked our way across the countryside. We saw no more Security Men. And finally we reached the paved highway and were able to pick up speed.

We zipped through several small towns and much farming country before Elaine said, "Slower now, Leonard. I think we're coming to it."

A bridge took us over a wide river bottom. The road turned and we followed the heavy band of willow and cottonwood for several miles. Elaine sat forward on the seat, peering from side to side. At last she gave a little cry.

I followed her pointing finger and saw a side road, so overgrown it looked like a tunnel. The entrance was closed by a solid fence. A dangling, weathered sign said, "Glen-Wilde." A new, larger sign on the fence post read, "Private Property. Absolutely No Trespassing."

Elaine's voice shook with excitement. "Oh, let's hurry!"

I was in no mood to respect private property. I aimed for the fencepost and let the front bumper take the shock of its snapping. The car lurched ahead, whipped and scraped by branches. In a quarter of a mile we reached a clearing bordered by several resort buildings.

"This is the place," Elaine said breathlessly. "Oh, let's hurry!"

I found it difficult to share her hope as we poked around the buildings. They were quite definitely abandoned; spider webs and drifted leaves told a story of long neglect. There was a trail leading to the river, beyond a sign that read "Picnic Tables."

We started down the trail. I saw something in the dust and stopped so suddenly that Elaine bumped into me.

"He's here," she whispered, gazing at the footprint.

"More probably it's a tramp."

But my heart beat faster. We passed the

picnic area with its sagging tables. We saw two more fresh-looking footprints. Then we pushed through a fringe of brush and found ourselves on the shore of a placid lagoon.

It was about fifty yards across. A current was barely visible in the center. Water hyacinths and lilies made spots of color among the reeds that lined the shore. Dragonflies circled in sunny spot. The only sounds were the humming of insects and the occasional song of a bird. It seemed an idyllic place, tucked away and forgotten among the trees. No wonder young Amos Abbott had loved it.

**S**LOWLY, we began to explore it, crossing the sluggish stream on a rotten log at the end. As it was now grassy underfoot, we saw no more footprints. I was balancing on a hummock in a marshy spot when Elaine called sharply. She pointed at a bed of iris-like plants. Very recently, something had dug up several clumps, pulling the stems and roots apart.

Common sense cried that an animal had done it. But we looked at one another with wild excitement. Elaine's suit was rumpled; her shoes were scuffed and muddy. Her face was streaked with sweat and dust. I will never forget how beautiful she seemed at that moment, as hope made her radiant.

I filled my lungs and shouted, "Amos! It's Leonard Johnson and your sister Elaine!"

Startled birds splashed into the reeds, winged away. I shouted again. Then Elaine called. We kept it up till our throats felt the strain, but there was no response.

Finally I said, "Elaine, we may as well face it. If Amos is here, he can stay hidden from us forever. There isn't anything we can do about it, short of going back for the security men and their personnel detectors."

Tears filled her eyes. I put my arm around her; there was nothing more I could do to comfort her.

"I've *got* to help him!"

"But we can't spend any more time. The security men will have missed us by now. If they pin us down, we won't be able to do another thing."

"Wait."

The quiet voice came from behind us. For one shocked instant we couldn't move. Then we whirled. Amos stood ten feet away, his thin, stooped figure rising above a thicket of blackberries. Heedless of her clothing, Elaine ran to him. He put his arms around her, awkwardly.

I waited till they came over to me, then held out my hand. Amos ignored my gesture of friendliness. He looked at me steadily. His complexion still had its baby-soft look, but his round face had taken on lines of bitterness. I was disappointed but not entirely surprised. I had half-expected to find an even more drastic change.

"Amos," Elaine gasped, "Leonard dropped everything to come help you!"

He cleared his throat. "What made you think anybody could help?"

"Why, we know you! We can explain that it wasn't—"

But he wasn't listening. His eyes were on my face.

"Crabb Hill," I said.

Abruptly Amos turned from me, toward the quiet pool and its surrounding woodland. Following his glance, all I could think of was how it would look if it went wild—a fantastic cauldron, boiling with greenness.

"What's the matter with you?" Elaine cried.

He jerked and looked at her. His eyes dropped. He made a helpless little gesture.

I reached for his attention. "Amos, that outbreak at Crabb Hill. They can't stop it. Do you realize what that means?"

Slowly, he nodded.

I went on, "That room next to your office. You had a plant there, infected with this horrible virus of growth. You had to cage it so it wouldn't run wild. Finally it did get away, and that woman came along."

He plucked at a tear in the old shirt he was wearing and said nothing.

"Was it only that one, Amos?"

He opened his mouth to reply . . . and was interrupted by a rustle of dry leaves. A hard voice said, "Turn around with your hands up."

There were three security men. As we gaped, two more emerged from the brush beyond.

"All right," the leader of the group said. "Now let's go back to Pearlville."

I thought Amos would break and run. His unsophisticated face recorded his emotions—shock, dismay, despair, anger. But finally he clamped his lips, gave me a single, black look, and stepped out ahead.

Elaine stumbled, as though she were drunk. I took her arm grimly and we started back up the trail.

ONE security man drove my car and another sat on the rear seat.

Elaine dropped her head in her hands, inconsolable. Out in Denver, she and her brothers had never realized what was happening to Amos. They thought him queer, perhaps—an obscure, one-sided hobbyist. But they never dreamed of the fire that drove him—selflessly, irresistibly—toward the tightly locked mysteries of life. No more than the people of Pearlville, or the learned men in the universities, could they have imagined that in his clumsy, unprepossessing body lay such capacity.

Why had he released his discovery on the world? Was it a vindictive lashing-back at a society that had rejected him? Or was he a victim of circumstances that had snowballed beyond his control?



I had felt all along that Elaine and I hadn't escaped the security men. I had known better than to assume we were unobserved. I had worked with security men too often. When they covered an area, nothing was missed. There were no slip-ups.

And so they had let us lead them to Amos. Probably Jim Blaisdell had reported us. I couldn't find it in myself to feel sorry; he'd had his job to do.

We were escorted into the City Hall. I was placed in a side room with a guard, while Amos and Elaine went down toward the Emergency Committee room. Amos walked with his head high, his face stiff and remote.

I sighed. After a few minutes I turned to my guard and asked if Crabb Hill was still out of control. He gave me a pleasant look and shook his head. I tried a few more questions. He wasn't tough about it, but he just wasn't talking.

So, for about an hour, we sat in silence. I had plenty to think about. Finally there was a knock on the door. My guard opened it, nodded, and motioned me down the hall.

They were all there. I looked quickly at Jacobson. But there was no indication of his feelings, either way. I suddenly felt ashamed. His attitude toward me was a trivial thing, in this atmosphere of disaster.

Just by looking at the other faces, I knew the outbreak was worse. The mayor and police chief were slumped in fatigue. Governor Wingate looked shrunken. Neither Amos Abbott nor Dr. Lee was present.

"We've been at Abbott for an hour," Jacobson said grimly. "We've tried everything, from psychology to sadism. We had his brother and sister in, to beg him to help us. But he won't budge."

"And the . . . trouble?"

"No longer just Crabb Hill. The whole canyon is out of control now. We're

evacuating Pearlville in"—he glanced at his chronometer—"forty minutes."

His eyes bored into mine. "All I want to know is, can you reach him before this thing spreads over half the continent?"

"I don't know. But I can try."

"All I want to know is whether or not he can stop it. If he can't, we'll call in Defense and atomize the area."

There was silence in the room. Atomization was the final expedient. It meant the end not only of Pearlville, but all human settlement for fifty or a hundred miles around.

In a high, strained voice the governor said, "Then we *can* stop it ourselves!"

Jacobson shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe atomization will spread the virus all over the world, through the stratosphere."

"What," I asked, "does Lee think about that?"

"He doesn't know. All he will say is it's a matter of conditions of growth. Factors in the environment have been heightened somehow." Jacobson paused. "Will you talk to Abbott?"

I nodded. I had no idea what I could say to him. But I could try. . . .

AMOS didn't look up as I entered the room. I sat down next to him, sighed, and started to talk. I suppose I rambled. I know I covered a lot of ground. I began by telling him I wasn't pretending to know how he felt, because I couldn't. I told him—with perfect truth—that his life had been unique. And I retraced it for him, from his boyhood.

Amos didn't stir. Head bent, eyes half open, he stared downward—at the floor, at his shoes, at nothing.

"You told me once," I said, "that I was your only friend. Did you mean that?"

No response.

"Well, the way things are, I can't blame you for trusting no one but yourself. But, for what it's worth, I want to say I'm still

your friend—that no other factor was responsible for my coming to Pearlville.

"You're the only one who can possibly understand and handle this outbreak. The rest of us—Lee included—are babies beside the knowledge you have. You're the hope of everybody in Pearlville. For that matter, if the growth doesn't stop, you're the hope of the whole damned world!"

No response.

"Maybe," I said, "the answer is very simple. Maybe tonight's cool air will slow it down."

Amos didn't look up. But ever so slightly, he shook his head.

"I know you're disturbed because I'm a newsman. And I'll be honest—I could never ignore the news value of a thing like this. If the security men okayed it, I'd break my neck to be the first to tell the story. But the world doesn't know about Crabb Hill yet. Maybe it never will."

Slowly, Amos raised his head.

"The last time I saw you, there was no news story involved. I was here on other business, and I remembered the old neighborhood. I wondered how things were with you, and I came around to see."

As I looked into Amos' troubled blue eyes, I saw that the bitterness was gone. I saw only loneliness, and confusion.

"That day in your house," I went on, "you showed me some carrots, grown in molds, that seemed to be all root. Do you remember that?"

He nodded.

"You told me that it was a waste for root plants to go above ground. Why did you tell me that? Why were you studying them?"

He blinked at me.

"I want to know why you did it, Amos."

"I . . . wanted to know all about them."

"With the idea of making them better?"

He studied his pale fingers. "Well . . .

yes. After I had learned all I could."

"What was the point of making them better?"

He made an impatient gesture. "So they'd be more useful to people!"

"And Crabb Hill is your idea of usefulness?"

He gazed at me in an odd, appealing manner. Then he lowered his head wearily. "Of course not, Johnson."

"Out there, you have started something that hundreds of men with the most modern equipment in the world can't stop. If it keeps on spreading, there won't be many people left to worry about. Is that what you had in mind?"

He didn't answer.

"Sure," I went on, "before they get crushed or smothered, they'll have time to think, 'Amos Abbott did this.' Is that what you were driving at? Is that the kind of recognition you want?"

In a low voice, he said, "What if I can't stop it?"

"Then the security men should know. We'll all pitch in and do what we can. It'd be a damned shame, but I wouldn't blame you for it."

"You're the only one."

"Jacobson wouldn't. Neither would Lee, I'll bet. There's a lot of intellectual honesty in the world, Amos. You just haven't bumped into it."

"No," he murmured, "I guess I haven't."

There was a long silence. Then he added, in a tone so low I could scarcely hear him. "There's no other way out?"

"Not unless you can tell me one."

He gave a deep, shuddering sigh. "I can stop it, Johnson. If you say so, I will."

When we came out to the Emergency Committee, Amos had regained his old brisk laboratory manner. First he asked for giant amplifiers, bigger than I even knew existed.

"Okay," said Jacobson.

"All the people out, in a ten-mile

radius. Cattle, horses and other livestock.”

Jacobson hesitated, then nodded to one of his waiting men. “Next.”

“The most powerful sirens made. They must be adjustable. If you get them, I can regulate them.”

“Right.”

“Heavy duty portable generators. Cable. A fast truck and a crew of men to set things up.”

Jacobson nodded.

“That’s all.”

The members of the committee stiffened in surprise. Jacobson glanced at me, and I nodded. I had remembered something Amos said in his lab: “I’ve had some success with vibrations . . .”

I told them about it. The right combination of sound waves, subjecting plant cells to intolerable strains, rupturing them. “Isn’t that right, Amos?”

He didn’t seem to hear me. He had stepped to the window and stood looking out.

**I**N A surprisingly short time the equipment—most of it flown in—was ready: huge disc amplifiers, great gray-painted sirens, reels of heavy cable. It was loaded on a six-wheeled utility truck, in company with a dozen tanned and husky young security men.

Pearlville was strangely quiet. Two or three hundred people stood on the lawn in front of the City Hall, looking apprehensively at the truck. Security men were everywhere, it seemed, their distinctive chevrons standing out sharply. Most of the eyes strayed to the west, where the green fire raged uncontrolled.

Amos stood, straight and lonely, a little apart from the rest of us. The pale sun gleamed on his blond head. His thin wrists hung far out of the sleeves of his shirt. I caught the uneasy glances that Jacobson and the others gave him, and knew what they were thinking. Could he do it?

Then I saw Lee, the university man, appear and head for Amos. He was dusty and disheveled. His glasses were cracked. He held out one dirty hand, and said, “Abbott, I feel humble before you. You’re in a class with Pasteur and Curie and Mendel. You’re one of the greats, and I’m going to see that the world knows about it. Maybe that will make up a little for the way you’ve been treated.”

With awkward dignity, Amos shook the other’s hand. I saw his lips quiver. And of all those who watched, I alone knew what this must have meant to him.

A moment later he stepped over to me and shook my hand, and gave me a last, shy smile. Then he nodded to Jacobson, turned to the utility car, and waved the driver on. With a growl and a lurch the vehicle gained momentum and sped away along the cleared and empty street.

With one accord, we headed for the dome of the City Hall. Here, where a balcony overlooked Pearlville, we gathered on the west side. There was a haze over the wooded hills in the distance. Jacobson’s eyes met mine; we were thinking of the spores Lee had told us about.

Coffee was brought up to us, and sandwiches. By the time we were through eating the utility truck was back. The leader of the crew came up to report.

“It’s awful. Going like wildfire. We found some clear ridges for the amplifiers, laid the cable with bulldozers. Abbott’s all set.” The man shivered. “I wouldn’t be in his boots for anything.”

We waited, while the tension grew. Jim Blaisdell escorted Elaine and her brother up to the balcony. He was a normal-looking young man, utterly unlike Amos, and appeared as shocked and bewildered as his sister.

I stepped close to her. “I had a long talk with Amos. He’s all right. He’s going to stop it.”

Elaine looked like she wanted to believe me. She even managed a smile.

Then the first sounds came. They were thinned by distance, chopped up by the jumbled terrain, but they made us jump. They started out unbelievably low and flat, like a monstrous quacking. Then they shifted to a thin, high whine that seemed to pass right up out of the range of hearing.

We looked at one another, startled and disturbed. As the sounds continued, I found myself restless, uneasy. The feeling became so overpowering I had to fight to keep from shouting at the top of my lungs. I glanced at Elaine. She had a look of horror on her face, and both hands were pressed tightly over her ears.

The sounds began to see-saw, from the top to the bottom of the range. They flipped up and down, so fast that our ears couldn't adjust and the effort made us dizzy and nauseated. They were terrible, unholy sounds that shouldn't have been heard.

Our bodies, our very minds, twisted away from them. Even now, so many years afterward, I become restless just recalling them.

The mayor suddenly began to groan. His eyes were popping and there was an odd, desperate look on his face. Blaisdell grabbed his arm and led him inside. Within a few seconds the others followed, even Jacobson. Elaine was the only one who looked back.

Alone, I listened to the weird cacophony swelling and fading. My hair rose and my nerve ends writhed as Amos played his symphony of destruction. Was it working? Was the super-growth shrinking, collapsing, sliding down to fill Crabb canyon with its foaming juice? I could only wait and hope desperately, while those waves of unearthly sound punished my eardrums.

I thought about Amos—his first fumbling experiments; his lonely boyhood, with only bottles and grown-up books and smelly solutions for company; his amaz-

ing laboratory, as he grew older and turned the whole house to his purpose. I thought about the huge ivy leaves in his hallway, the cellar full of fungi, the *magma* in their cupboards, the dinner he had served me and the shy pleasure he had taken in my coming.

It had all come to a head, now. Amos was still alone, out there in that shrieking, thundering wilderness, trying something no man had ever attempted. Waiting for him to succeed, crouched beside their private wires and receiving sets, were the best brains of the Security Force, of Defense, of the nation's government.

The distant sirens faded, then the shattering low notes swelled up again. They wavered, then abruptly died. In the humming silence, I held my breath. Somewhere in the waiting crowd before the City Hall, a child cried. Then over that thin little thread of sound came the slamming of a door. I heard running feet, Jacobson's crisp voice barking orders. I turned and hurried down the stairs to the street.

Somewhere along the way Elaine caught my arm. Her eyes were dancing; her face alight. There was no need for words. I patted her shoulder and hurried on. I had to be on the first command car that reached Crabb Hill.

Jacobson's face was grim as we sped along, but I had little doubt that Amos had crushed the outbreak. I had another worry, which grew as we raced along the canyon road. I couldn't forget the way Amos had acted—his preoccupied manner, his reluctance to give us an answer, the curiously lost and appealing way his eyes had met mine there in the room.

When we reached Crabb Hill, one look was enough to tell us Amos had succeeded. His sound waves had destroyed the plant cells. It took a little longer to locate the equipment and to learn—as Amos had known all along—that the vibrations were disastrous to animal cells, as well.