

# Weird Tales



MAY, 1953

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(Copyright 1936 by Popular Fiction Publishing Company)

**THE EYRIE**

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor





Heading  
by  
W. H. Silvey

*Trees, plants, vegetables had mysteriously developed will power of their own, had cast off dominance of man.*

**T**HE sun had scarcely risen when Al Meiers shoved himself away from the breakfast table and lumbered to his feet. A big, powerful man even for the Shawtuck County region of husky farmers, he had a face like tanned leather and arms whose hair lay swart over muscles like cables. He was all bone and solid flesh. Though past fifty, he strode with the ease of youth.

"That was a good breakfast, maw," he drawled to his almost spherical wife. She smiled out of eyes that had smiled through drought, storm, plague of locusts, and depression.

"Get along with you. Them apples 'll never get picked with you aloafin' around here all day."

"Them apples 'll be down by night. Hank!" he roared. The harvest hand, drip-

# HARVEST

*Donald Wandrei*

ping of suds and rainwater on the doorstep, hastily smeared his face with a towel.

"There ought to be over two hundred bushel," said Al.

"Maybe more." Hank, a wiry drifter, slouched beside Al as they passed the chicken-coops. Roosters crowed, hens squawked out of their way, and the spring chickens beeped in alarm. Al made a splendid figure even in his dirty overalls, a bronzed giant of the soil.

They passed the pig-sty where sows and porkers squealed over a sour-smelling trough. The sun stood just above the horizon, and the warm air held that peculiar scent of late summer—smell of cattle and manure, of clover, hay, and wheat, of baked earth and ripening vegetation.

A wagon loaded with empty bushel baskets stood by the barn. Al hitched the horses and took the reins. The team of Belgian Grays ambled down a dirt road.

"It's been a good year for crops," said Al. He jammed tobacco in an old corncob pipe and lighted it without loosening the reins.

"Yeah. Only there's something funny about 'em this year."

"Yeah. They're bigger. Biggest ever."

Hank spat out a hunk of plug. "That ain't all. They kind of shake even if there ain't no wind. As I was sayin' yesterday, I got to feelin' pretty queer when the tomato patch kind of shook when I was hoein' it."

"Giddyap!" Al bellowed. The team clattered faster. He inhaled and blew out a cloud of fragrant smoke. "Uh-huh. I don't know what's got into things. Best weather and best crops we ever had but something's wrong. Last fall the crops started growin' again about harvest-time. The damnedest thing. It wasn't till October we got all the spuds in and the corn-crib full."

Hank looked uneasy. "I don't like it. There been times when I, well, I just didn't feel right."

"Yeah?"

Hank lapsed into moody silence.

"Yeah?" Al prodded.

"There wasn't any wind yesterday but I swear the north clover patch flattened out when I started to mow."

"Yeah? You been seein' things." Al was noncommittal. Hank kept silent.

"I never saw corn grow like this year," said Al after awhile. The horses clopped along. "Ten foot high if it's an inch. Fred Altmiller was sayin' the other day that he figured on gettin' a hundred fifty bushel to the acre. Nary an ear less'n a foot long."

Hank moped. "Last time I went through your corn was the damnedest racket you ever heard. You'd of thought a storm come up. There wasn't a cloud nowhere. Wasn't any wind."

"Lay off the corn likker," Al jibed.

"Wasn't corn likker," Hank protested. "It's the crops are queer. I'd of bet there was somebody around when I weeded the melons last week. Sounded like voices."

"What did?"

"Why, just everything. Whispers, like the corn was talkin'."

Al snorted. "You're headed for the bug-house. I been here for thirty years an' I never hear tell of such a story."

"It's so! It's been goin' on all summer!"

The wagon bumped through fields of ripe wheat and oats, lurched around an immense boulder, and rattled up a hill where cows munched at grass strewn between stones and scrubby trees.

Al agreed with Hank but he wouldn't admit it. The first principle of stolid people is to deny the existence of what cannot be explained and does not harmonize with the run of experience. Ever since the phenomenal post-season growth of vegetables and fruit last fall, he had been wondering. The spring planting, the perfect weather, bumper crops, truly miraculous yields—these blessings were offset by certain evidence that had made him increasingly uneasy. There was the matter of waving grass on still days. He hadn't yet gotten over the way the trees hummed one hot afternoon when he was spraying the apple and cherry orchards.

"Anyway, it's been a good year," he repeated. "Them apples are prize winners. The trees are bustin' with 'em."

The wagon bumped across the hill-top and the horses plodded down. "Just look at 'em, just look—well—uhh," his voice petered out.

Yesterday an orchard of Jonathans had occupied this acre between two small hills.

Yesterday.

Today there was only torn soil and furrows stretching toward the opposite hill.

Al gaped and his face turned a mottled red. Hank's eyes popped. He opened his mouth and closed it. He stared as if at a ghost. He ran a finger around his neck. The sun slanted higher. The field lay bright and newly ploughed. But there were no apple trees.

Al blasted the morning air with a howl. "Some dirty thief has swiped my apples!" he yelled.

Hank looked dazed. "There ain't any trees, ain't any apples, ain't nothing."

Al sobered. "Not even roots."

"No stumps," said Hank.

They stared at the bare ground and at each other.

"The orchard walked off," Hank suggested.

The horses whinnied. The red in Al's weathered face died out. It became a study in anger and bewilderment.

"Come on!" he choked and flicked the horses' flanks with a whip. They plunged

down-hill, slewed onto the field, and followed the furrows over the looted soil, across undulating mounds, and straight through a field of wheat. There was a swathe like the march of an army.

"It can't be. I'm dreamin', we're both crazy," muttered Al.

Hank fidgeted. "Let's go back."

"Shut up! If someone's swiped my apples I'll break him in half! The best crop in thirty years!"

Hank pleaded, "Listen, Al, it ain't only the apples. The whole trees 're gone, root an' all. Nobody can do that in a night!"

AL DROVE grimly. The horses galloped over a hill to the road and followed it as it wound down toward a small lake between terminal moraines. There they jerked to an abrupt halt under Al's powerful drag.

Al glared. Hank's eyes roved aimlessly around. He fumbled for a chew which he bit off and absently spit out. He tried to loosen an open shirt. He didn't want to see what he saw. "So help me God," he mut-

tered, "so help me God," over and over, like a stuck phonograph record.

Here stood the orchard of Jonathan apples grouped around the pond; a half-mile from its accustomed place, but otherwise intact.

Al leaped out, a peculiar blank expression on his face. He walked with the attitude of a cat stalking prey.

The orchard of Jonathans wavered.

There was no wind.

The orchard looked for all the world like a group debating. Whispers and murmurs ascended, and the branches shook.

Hank leaned against the dash-board. Tobacco juice dribbled from his gaping mouth and watered his new crop of whiskers.

"Come on!" snarled Al. "Get them poles and nets. We're gonna pick apples!"

~~But he did not need to pick apples.~~ He reached for a luscious red Jonathan hanging low on the nearest tree. The branch went back, then forward, like a catapult. Al ducked. The apple smacked the wagon. Both horses whinnied and raced off. As if that were a signal, the orchard launched into violent motion. A noise like a rushing wind rose. The tree-tops bent and lashed as in a gale. Apples showered the farmers, darkened the air, bounced and squashed painfully from faces and shins and bodies.

The ungodliest yell ever heard in Shawtuck County burst from the throat of a hired hand whose terrific speed carried him after the careening wagon out of the picture, and the county.

**L**ARS ANDERSEN was walking along a path with a scythe on his shoulder to mow some odd plots of hay, early that morning. His Scotch collie bounced beside him.

The path went around a vegetable garden and then paralleled a wind-break of elms. Now it is a well-known fact that any intelligent dog will have nothing to do with grass or mere vegetables.

The collie, being a dog of rigidly conventional habits, made a bee-line for one of the trees. Whatever he intended to do was postponed. The lowest branch of the tree curved down and not only whipped his rear smartly but lifted him a good dozen

feet away. He yelped and tore home like mad.

Lars had a thoughtful expression on his face as he turned around and headed back. He guessed he didn't feel much like mowing today.

Old Emily Tawber fussed with her darning until mid-morning before laying it aside. "Jed can wait for his socks," she muttered crossly. "I can't cook and sew and tend to the crops all at once, and them watermelons ripe for market."

She put her mending back in the big wicker basket, pulled a vast-brimmed straw hat over her head, and went out in an old rag dress that she used for chores.

She stomped across the yard and through her flower garden to the melon patch. There were about fifty big melons ready for picking. She would pile them up alongside the path for Jed to load and take to market in the morning.

"Land's sakes, I never see such melons in all my born days." Old Emily stuck her arms on her hips and surveyed the green ovals. These were giant watermelons, three and four feet long, weighing a hundred pounds or more. She had been surprised throughout the summer by their growth.

"Well, the bigger they be, the more they'll fetch," she decided and went after the first one.

It must have been on a slope for it rolled away as she approached.

"Well, I swan!" said old Emily. "Things is gettin' to a pretty pass when you can't get at your own seedin's."

She walked after the watermelon. It rolled farther. Old Emily became flustered. She increased her stride. The melon bumped unevenly in a wide circle around the vine-root. Old Emily panted after it and it wobbled crazily always just ahead of her.

Old Emily began to feel dizzy. She guessed the sun was too much for her. She wasn't as spry as she used to be. The world reeled around. The melon kept going, while she paused for breath, then it rolled all the way around, came toward her, and crashed into her ankles. The blow sent her sprawling. This was when peril first entered her thoughts. She staggered to her feet and from the patch.

"Watermelon won't get me," she crooned. "Watermelon run along but he won't get me. Don't let old watermelon get me." This was all that anyone heard her say during the rest of her earthly existence.

THE harvester thundered as Gus Vogel gave it the gas and it clattered toward his wheat acreage.

Gus hollered, "With this weather we'll be done come night!"

"If the machines don't break down," bawled brother Ed above his machine's racket.

"Wheat is two dollar 'n' a quarter a bushel," Gus chortled. "I bet we get a hundred bushel to the acre this year."

The two machines rattled along a dirt road that was little more than weed-grown ruts until a tawny sea appeared beyond the brook and cow pastures.

A full half-section in extent, the field of ripe grain rolled away in a yellow-brown flood shoulder high, the tallest wheat within memory, headed by two-inch spears with dozens of fat grains.

Gus and Ed jockeyed the harvesters into the near corner of the field. Those long rows erect as soldiers would soon go down in a wide swathe. The three hundred twenty acres of wheat were worth over seventy thousand dollars.

Gus roared lustily as his machine lurched ahead and the blades whirred to reap, "Let 'er go!"

As if struck by a mighty wind, the wheat flattened against the ground in a great area that widened as the harvester advanced.

Not a breath of wind stirred. The air hung warm and fragrant, the sunlight lay mellow on ripe grain, meadowlarks carolled morning-songs, and the black crows cawed harshly high overhead. But the wheat lay flat, mysteriously, in a large strip. Beyond this strip, the golden ranks rose tall again, but a myriad murmuring issued from them like voices of invisible hosts. The hair prickled on Gus's scalp. He looked behind him. Not a stem had been cut by the reaper, and the full ears were intact. In a sudden vicious, unreasoning rage, he drove the combine ahead at full speed, and the blades sang a song of shirring steel, and the wheat

went down in a racing band farther ahead at a faster pace than he could achieve, and the slicing blades whirred idly over the prone grain.

Then Gus and Ed stopped the machines and climbed out. Gus knelt over and bent his face low to study this extraordinary field. A patch sprang upright like wires, lashing his face. Gus gaped, popeyed. The veins stood out on his temples in purple. Somewhere within him something happened and he pitched to the ground, his face livid, as Ed ran to his aid.

NOT least among the remarkable events in Shawtuck County that morning was the saga of the fugitive potatoes.

The potatoes were only a small planting of an acre or so that Pieter Van Schluys had raised. They should have matured in early August but they didn't. They kept on growing and their tops got bigger and greener and lustier. Pieter was a stolid Dutchman who knew his potatoes as well as his schnapps.

"Dere iss something wrong," he solemnly told his American frau. "Dey haff no business to grow funder. Already yet dey haff gone two weeks too late."

"Dig 'em up, then," said the bony Gertrude. "If they're ripe, they're ripe. If they aren't, you can tell quick enough by diggin' a couple out."

"Ja," Pieter agreed. "But it iss not right. Potatoes, dey should be in two weeks already."

"Maybe if you weren't so lazy you'd of dug 'em two weeks ago."

"Dat iss not so," Pieter began, but Gertrude tartly gathered dishes and pans with a great noise.

Pieter blinked and rose. It was hard to have such a shrewish frau. In this *verdammt* America, *frauen* were too independent. You could neither boss them, nor beat them.

He rolled to the door and waddled past a silo to the barn where he took a potato-digger from a mass of tools. He leisurely filled a well-stained meerscham pipe which had a broken stem, and lighted it. A couple of geese honked sadly as he passed in a cloud of burley smoke.

Pieter paused by the potatoes to wipe his sweating face with a kerchief bigger than a napkin. "Gertrude," he muttered, "she iss no better as a potato."

Having expressed his rebellion, he dug and heaved. The tubers did not come up. Pieter strained, struggled, perspired. The heap of earth grew larger, but no potato appeared.

"Dat iss some potato," Pieter muttered. "Himmel, vat a potato it must be."

Pieter looked at his planting. "Diss iss not right for a potato," he spoke in reproof, and shovelled more soil away.

Had his eyes deceived him? Or had the plant actually sunk? He looked at the vegetable tops with thoughtful disgust. It seemed beyond question that the leafy tops were considerably nearer ground level than when he arrived.

"So?" Pieter exclaimed. "Iss dat how it iss? So!"

He scooped again. He watched with a kind of bland interest at first, then a naive wonder, and finally anxiety. It did seem that the potato was getting away from him. No, that could not be. He must have taken too many schnapps last night. Or it was too hot. He wiped perspiration off his face with a sleeve of his blue denim shirt. The potato was as far below his digger as ever, and surely his eyes did not befool him when they registered that the potato's top-most leaf was now at ground level. Quite a heap of soil lay beside it. The rest of the potato patch stood as high as before. Only this one pesky tuber had sunk, unaccountably.

Pieter dug deeper.

The mound of dirt increased. The hole grew larger. The elusive potato continued to slide below his digger. It was maddening. There must be a cave as big as the Zuyder Zee under this vegetable. He might fall into it with the plant!

His slow brain, obtaining this thought, brought him to a momentary halt. But no. Ten years he had farmed here, ten years had harvested. It was very strange. Pieter did not feel quite so chipper as after breakfast, and he certainly had not been jovial then. Pieter became stubborn. The devil himself was in this potato. The devil was

leading him to hell. Or nature had gone crazy. Or he had.

Pieter shovelled and scooped,—but the tuber dug down like a thing possessed, a mole, a creature hunted. The pile of dirt had spread far by now, and Pieter stood in a deep pit with the potato still below him. He had reached sandy, thin, base soil. He was angry and stubborn. He dug till his arms ached. He panted in Dutch and cursed in English. He muttered, he swore.

"Something iss crazy or I am," he decided and made a half-hearted plunge at the vanishing vegetable.

"You seem to be having some difficulty. Can I be of help?" inquired a polite voice.

A stranger stood on the rim of the hole. The stranger wore old corduroy trousers, a stained work-shirt, and a slouch hat. He had amused gray eyes. A briar pipe stuck out of his mouth. He twirled a golden key idly so that the chain wrapped round and round his forefinger. His face was full of angles, and a peculiar mark, not a scar, possibly a burn, made a patch on his left temple. By that mark, Pieter recognized him from hearsay as a comparative newcomer. He had bought the Hoffman farm a mile out of Shawtuck Center on County Road C somewhat over a year ago. He paid cash, and claimed the odd name Green Jones.

Pieter scowled: "Danks, but I vill manage. De potatoes iss hard to dig diss year."

The stranger's jaw fell open. "You don't mean to tell me you're digging potatoes! Way down there?"

Pieter felt acutely unhappy. "Ja."

"You sure plant 'em deep! Why don't you try for those nearer the surface?"

Pieter stared glumly at Green Jones, then back at the potato plant, now a good five feet below ground level, and still going down in the crater he had dug. Damn the potato! Damn the stranger! Damn all this business!

"Ja," said Pieter. "Be so kindly as to help me out."

Green Jones lent a willing hand, heaved while the rosy Dutchman puffed, and helped him scramble up. "Dat vas very good of you," Pieter thanked him.

"Don't mention it."

Pieter marched to the next cluster of



potato tops, spat on his hands, and made a ferocious jab at the ground. His digger sank a foot. The tuber sank a foot and a half. Pieter glowered.

"Haw!" exploded the onlooker. Pieter glared murder. Green Jones chuckled to himself and blew out a cloud of pungent smoke.

"How you did it beats me, but I never saw anything like it!" Green Jones walked off in great good humor, a lank figure striding down the road, leaving behind him the aroma of fine tobacco, the echo of his chuckles, and a wrathful Dutchman.

"Potatoes!" Pieter muttered. "Himmel, everything iss crazy mit de heat."

Like the first, this second group of fugitive potatoes seemed to be burrowing into the earth. The magical submersion was too much for him. He reeled toward his farmhouse to drown his troubles in a sea of schnapps.

THE incident at Loring's farm was notable for its spectacular brevity. Mrs. Loring wanted to can corn. Lou Loring said he'd haul her in enough for the winter. Between other chores, he went to his sweet-corn field about ten o'clock with his daughter Marion.

Marion held a bushel basket and would have followed him down the rows if there had been any stripping.

Lou reached for an ear.

The ear moved around to the other side of the stalk. A weird caterwauling went up from the whole field and the stalks, standing ten feet high and more, seemed to shake.

Lou hesitantly pursued the ear. The cob returned to its original position. Lou batted his eyes. Marion gave a peculiar squawk and raced pell-mell for home.

Lou swore and reached for another ear. Did the whole stalk revolve? Or did the ear slide away? Was he out of his head? The furious sounds of the cornfield alone were enough to make his flesh creep.

Between the rows of corn, pumpkins had been planted. A few weeds grew, and a sprinkling of wild groundcherries. Lou reached for a lower ear and in so doing almost stepped on one of the groundcherries. The plant leaped straight up and fell a foot away. The roots moved feebly, began

to sink in the soil, and the groundcherry rose gradually erect.

What with revolving ears of corn and leaping groundcherries, Lou felt that he needed a day off, to have his eyes examined. And off he went.

THE main hangout in Shawtuck Center was Andy's general store. On Saturday night, Andy usually did a whale of an illicit business in Minnesota Thirteen, a strain of corn that eager moonshiners quickly and happily discovered made superior whiskey. Weekdays were dead, especially the early days. But the way farmers began drifting in on this Tuesday was a caution. A dozen had collected before noon. Andy did not know what it was all about, but the corn liquor was flowing. There were rickety chairs, empty barrels up-ended, and nail-kegs aplenty to hold all comers.

The universal glumness was a puzzle to Andy. "How's tricks?" he asked when Al Meiers came in.

"So-so." Al twiddled a cracked tumbler, drained it, clanked it on the counter.

"Something wrong?"

"We-ell, no."

"Here, take a snifter of this."

"Don't mind if I do." Al gulped the drink.

"You ain't lookin' so well, Al."

Pieter Van Schluys waddled up.

"Hi, Pieter, why aren't you hauling in?"

Pieter glowered at the speaker. "Dose potatoes," he muttered, "dey iss full mit de devil!"

"So?" Andy perked his ears. An amazing interest developed among the rest of the group.

"Ja. I dig fer vun potato and so fast as I dig, de potato dig deeper. Ja. I tink dere iss a hole so big as China under dose potatoes or de potatoes iss, how you say it, haunted, ja, else I am crazy mit de heat."

"I'll be damned," Al broke in, "and I thought I was seein' things. Listen!" He told of the orchard that walked away. Hesitantly at first, this big farmer almost pleaded for belief, and when he saw that the jeers he expected did not come, he warmed to his tale like a child reciting a fairy-story.

"That must of been your hired hand went

by here like a blue streak in that old jalopy a couple hours back," Andy guessed.

"Yeah. Hank lit out. I don't blame him much. I don't s'pose he ever will come back."

Ed Vogel had a grim face. "I just saw Doc Parker. He says Gus had a stroke when we was movin' this mornin', but he'll pull through. Only there wasn't no mowin'. The wheat don't cut. It just lies down an' then springs up again. You'd of thought it was alive and knew just what I was gonna do."

"My apples ain't worth a dime a bushel now," said Al. "After they got through throwin' themselves around, they was so banged up they ain't even good for cider."

Ed wore a reflective air that turned to a scowl of apprehension. "Say, if things go on like this, we won't have no crops this year. We're ruined."

UNTIL he spoke, not one of the farmers had fully realized the extent of the disaster that faced them. Each had been preoccupied with his own worry. The fantastic rebellion of nature was a mystery. Now Ed's remark drove home understanding of what they were up against. If this was not all a collective hallucination; if they were as sane as ever and had witnessed what they thought they saw; if they had no more success in harvesting than they had had so far—then they were bankrupt, ruined. They could pay off neither mortgages nor debts. They would be unable to buy necessities. They would not even have food for themselves, or seed for next year's sowing.

"I wouldn't eat one of my leapin' apples for a million dollars," Al Meiers declared, and meant it.

"What are we gonna do?" Ed asked helplessly. "We can't all be batty. Somethin's wrong, but what? No crops, no food, no cash. Crops are bringin' high prices this year, but we're done for."

Andy peered over his shell-rimmed glasses. "Why don't you go see Dan Crowley? Maybe he could help you out."

"Good idea," Al agreed, lumbering to his feet. "How about it, boys?"

"Sure, let's see the county agent."

Gloom hung thick on the anxious group that faced Crowley.

"Take it easy, boys," Crowley advised genially. He was county agent for the Department of Agriculture. He was fat and bald. His nose stood out like the prow of a ship and stubble covered his jowls. He smoked black, twisted, foul stogies that smelled to heaven. His feet were on the desk of his office when the farmers came, and there his feet remained while he puffed poisonous clouds and listened. His muddy blue eyes were guileless. Dan Crowley looked harmless, hopeless, and dumb. They were deceptive traits. Dan had a good head. He just didn't believe in extending himself needlessly.

"So that's how it is," Al Meiers finished. "I'm ready to move out of the county now and burn the damn' wheat to the ground."

"Now, now, Al, don't be that way. You know I work for you all."

Pieter Van Schluys moped. "Ja. Vat good iss dat?"

"Plenty. Just leave it to me." Dan hooked his thumbs in his arm-pits and leaned farther back.

"You haff an idea?" Pieter asked hopefully.

"Sure thing. Now run along while I'm thinkin' about this. I'll get it straightened out." Dan was vaguely definite. The farmers filed away.

SHAWTUCK CENTER grew more and more restless as the afternoon waned and farmers arrived with newer and wilder accounts of the pranks that nature was playing. Andy's general store buzzed with anxious and angry voices. The population of Shawtuck County was made up almost exclusively of hard-headed Dutchmen, Scandinavians, and Germans who had settled through the mid-West during the great immigration waves of the late nineteenth century. They were a conservative, strong-working, sturdy lot. They clung to past customs, and some of the superstitions learned in the Old Country. The town simmered with tales of witchcraft and hauntings, of the Little People, of goblins and evil spirits.

What caused this strange revolt of the plant kingdom at Shawtuck Center? Nothing of the sort seemed to be afflicting the

outside world. And what possible action could he take? He could at least make a field inspection for a special crop report.

Dan went out, climbed into his official car, and headed out of town on County Road A.

The land, under the warm, mellow light of the sun, gave testimony of abandonment, without the voice of any farmer. Harvesting ought to be in full swing, but not a figure tramped the fields, not a reaper moved. Here and there stood threshers, harvesters, wagons, farm implements, and combines,

Yet the fields, though deserted, were not wholly silent. This was a day of quiet, such a day of stillness and ripe maturity as often comes at harvest time; but ever and again, as Dan drove along, he saw strange ripplings cross wheat and hay fields, watched clover sway, heard a sound like innumerable murmurous faint voices sweep up from grains and grasses and vegetables; and one patch of woods was all an eerie wail, and infinite restless disturbances of flower and leaf and blade set the forest in motion; while the wild chokecherry and sumac nodded in no

wind and shook for no visible reason alongside the dirt road.

Dan felt uneasy. All summer there had been little signs, increasing evidence, that a change had come over nature; and now the rapid and sinister character of that change became intensified with its completion. The trees, the plants, the vegetables had mysteriously developed a life and will-power of their own. And they had cast off the dominance of man.

Dan drove on through back roads, and twisted over cart paths, weaving in and out around Shawtuck Center during the afternoon. Everywhere he went, he found the same uncanny solitude, the constant whispers whose speakers remained invisible, alfalfa and barley and corn that quaked though no presence was near and rarely a breath of air stirred. The sun was sinking when Dan headed homeward, and it seemed to him that new and deeper murmurs issued from the bewitched fields and the enchanted woods. But he had learned one fact, and it puzzled him.

The phenomena were limited to the valley

where Shawtuck Center lay in a bowl of low hills.

Returning to his office, Dan passed a group to whom Pieter Van Schluys was relating again the saga of the fugitive potatoes. "So dere I vass, fife feet down already, ja, and der man, de Jones person, he stand dere and laugh. Him̄mel, maype it vass funny as a funeral, nein?"

Dan wondered why anyone should be amused by such a strange occurrence. He went thoughtfully into his office and looked at the routine blanks and forms on his desk.

He could well imagine the results if he reported the facts to Washington. "Meiers's apple orchard walked away last night and the trees planted themselves around a pond on the Hagstrom farm because they liked it better there."—And, "The Vogels' wheat refuses to be harvested. Kindly advise proper action to take." Or, "Emily Tawber's melons object to being picked. Does she lose her guarantees under the federal Watermelon Pickle Price Support Program?"

No, Dan decided, if he sent in these official messages, he would only be fired and replaced. His only course was to make a further investigation in search of a cause for the bizarre happenings.

He went to the wall and studied the large map of Shawtuck County. It showed the size and location of every farm, the variety and acreage of every crop. He drew a rough circle around the area of the phenomena. At the center of the circle lay the farm of Green Jones. Dan decided to pay Jones a visit.

As Dan turned in at the private road by the mailbox lettered G: Jones, he noticed immediately in the twilight that the land had not been tilled at all. Jones was no farmer. Only lank weeds grew in his fields.

Dan stopped at a gray old frame house guarded by elms and maples. Lights burned in the ground floor windows.

Dan heaved his bulk out with a sigh and lit the inevitable stogy. He rang the bell, and presently a tall, thin man with an angular face appeared at the screen door.

Dan said, "I'm the county agriculture agent. Mind if I drop in for a few minutes?"

Jones replied firmly, "Why, yes, I do

mind. I've a lot of work to do and I'm pressed for time."

"So'm I." Dan blew a cloud of reeking smoke at Green Jones. "I have to get off a special crop report to Washington tonight."

"What have I got to do with that? I don't grow any crops," said Jones, frowning.

"Maybe not. Maybe you just help to make other people's crops grow."

A wary look came into Jones's eyes. "What do you mean by that?"

Dan said slowly, "It's like this. There's been queer things going on around here all summer. All year, in fact, ever since you moved in. Walkin' trees an' gallopin' potatoes and God knows what all."

Jones spoke with a tone of bored indifference, "I heard some of those wild rumors."

"They ain't rumors. I went out for a look-see this afternoon. Crops an' everything else that grows have gone crazy all around Shawtuck Center. There's a borderline maybe a quarter-mile wide where things are kind of uncertain, an' after that the trees an' such haven't anything wrong with 'em. So I looked at my map and saw that the center of that circle is right here."

Green Jones straightened up coldly. "Are you implying that I have some connection with these phenomena?"

"Implying? Hell, no, I'm tellin' you."

Jones regarded the county agent with a peculiar, shrewd appraisal. Finally, after appearing to weigh many matters, he shrugged and said, "You win. Nice crop detective work. I suppose I might as well take you into my confidence. I don't want a lifetime's work wrecked in a day." He stepped aside. "Come in."

The parlor was severely furnished. Besides a sofa, several chairs, and a desk, Dan noticed two prints on the walls: one of Burbank, and another of Darwin.

"Have a chair," his host suggested.

Dan sank into a wing-backed piece that promptly collapsed under his weight.

"Dear, dear," Jones protested. "That was a good chair."

Dan eased himself into the more substantial sofa and blew his nose violently to indicate that he was sorry but unembarrassed. Unfortunately, he dropped his stogy

which left a scorch on the thick blue carpet amid a fine powder of ashes.

"My beautiful rug," mourned Jones.

"Sorry," mumbled Dan.

"Never mind. It's done."

"An' everybody hereabouts is done for the way things are goin' now." Dan steered back to his original topic. "Jones, I don't know who you are or how you done it but you sure raised hell with the crops."

Jones slouched against a mantelpiece. From far away came an insidious drone that Dan could not quite identify. His host idly twirled a golden key on a chain. He looked cool, slightly detached, and yet there was a deep passion behind his features. "Right. My real name doesn't matter. I'm a botanist. Some years ago I got the idea that vegetation seemed to show a sort of rudimentary awareness. It couldn't be called intelligence. I noticed how tree roots turned off and travelled considerable distances straight to underground water pipes. Then there is the fly orchid that acts with almost human ingenuity. It attracts, traps, and devours insects.

"I became convinced that there was a kind of dormant awareness in the plant world. It would be a great achievement for science and a possible blessing to man if plants possessed instinct and science could develop it to reason or at least the power of free motion. Then food materials, like animals, could seek a water supply and largely do away with the harmful effects of drought. I worked on that line. I didn't get far until other scientists discovered that ultraviolet rays, even the ordinary illumination of electric lights, could be turned on plants all night long and they grew almost twice as fast as other plants. Physicists found that various cosmic radiations produced definite effects on vegetation and could cause radical changes:

"Two or three years ago, I found that a universal radiation isolated first by Diemann greatly accelerated all activity of plants. I built apparatus to capture and to concentrate that radiation. I turned the intensified radiation loose on some hothouse plants and they grew like mad. I decided to experiment on a larger scale, and bought this farm because it was in a secluded district. For the past

year I've been bombarding vegetation around Shawtuck Center with Diemann's radiations. You know the results—abnormal growth, mobile powers, and apparently rational, rudimentary impulses. That's the whole story. Now I've laid my cards on the table."

DAN knitted his brows. "You say the ray makes plants *think*?"

"No, I don't know that it does. All I know is that Diemann's radiations have always been essential for the growth of plants. I proved that by trying to raise flowers in an insulated hothouse. Nothing I experimented with would grow at all without Diemann's radiations. I reasoned that a concentration of the rays, if strong enough, might cause abnormal developments and hasten the evolution of species. I'm only experimenting and recording data as I go along. There seems to be something more than instinct developing, but it's too early to call it reason."

Dan said, "Hmm. Why did everything happen today? That's kind of suddenlike if you've been usin' this ray for a year, ain't it?"

The stranger shrugged. "Yes, but remember, I too am almost as much in the dark as you are. I know the cause of the change but I don't know the how or why or what. I must observe for years to determine these factors. Possibly there was a dividing-line. On one side stood inanimate vegetation, constantly but feebly irradiated. Then my concentration of Diemann's ray built up the change until its influences reached their climax last night and inanimate plants crossed the line to animation."

Dan suggested, "You might be smart if you quit now."

Jones looked aghast. "But my experiment has hardly begun! Think of what mankind may learn as a result of my researches! The whole course of civilization may be affected!"

"Yeah," Dan answered grimly. "That's what I'm afraid of. If this goes far enough, there won't be anybody left. Animals won't get no food except each other an' we won't have much except animals an' they won't last long. If the crops lie down or walk off

an' can't be harvested, how're we gonna live?"

Green Jones looked thunderstruck. Dan could not help having a half-liking for him. He was obviously sincere, and evidently had meant well when he began his experiment. It was not wholly his fault that it had worked out differently from the way he expected.

"I didn't realize the change had gone as far as that." The botanist twirled his key, but his mind was elsewhere.

Dan stood up. "Jones, you're in a tough spot."

"Yes?"

"Van Schluys is pretty dumb an' so are a lot of the boys but sooner or later they're gonna start thinkin' like I did about why you were so tickled when he was tryin' to dig spuds. Or they'll pin you down on the map. God help you when the boys come tearin' out here hell-bent for your hide. You ruined their crops an' they'll tear you limb from limb."

For the first time, the botanist came all the way down to earth from his remote dreams, speculations, and theories. His face paled a bit. "That was a bad mistake on my part, I'll admit." The ghost of a smile hovered in his expression. "Just the same, it was a sight for the gods to watch that Dutchman pursue his fleeing potatoes."

"Take my advice and move out while you can," Dan said gruffly.

The botanist seemed unnerved. "As bad as all that? But I can't leave my experiment unfinished!" he cried shakily. "Besides, how'll I get away? My car's broken down."

"If your experiment's worth more'n your hide to you, don't blame me for what happens. But I guess this is official business, so I could use my official car to drive you to the next town if you wanted to leave to-night."

**M**R. JONES carefully, moodily, replaced the gold key in his pocket. He seemed to be undergoing an inner struggle to make up his mind.

"Where is the machine?" Dan asked out of idle curiosity.

"Next room." The scientist's indecision and worry fell away. He snapped erect.

"I've got myself into a jam all right but it's too late for regrets. I'll take your kind offer. If you'll give me an hour or two, say till ten o'clock, to collect my data and a few belongings, I'll be ready to go."

"An' you'll turn off the rays?"

"Yes, I promise." His voice was eager, sincere. Dan knew men and knew that Jones would keep his word.

"I'll be back at ten sharp. Better not let anyone else in."

Dan left, jubilant over the success of his visit. He had discovered and he had eliminated the menace to Shawtuck County agriculture.

It was eerie driving through the woods. There was neither moon nor wind. The still air lay like a cool and weary sleep over the aging world; but the autumnal quiet that should have prevailed was missing. There were great rustlings abroad, and dark movements among the blacker masses of trees and crops, a continuous ghostly murmur issuing from the shapes of things possessed. The entire landscape seemed restlessly alive. There were voices without speakers, and slow creeping without breeze or visible agency; and Dan felt the impact of dimly remembered legends from childhood, about haunted woods and forests where witches resided, the Druids of the trees, the gnomes, and the Little People who lived under blades of grass and toadstools. It would be strange indeed if somewhere in the long ago, Diemann's radiations had been stronger when the world was younger, and all manner of growing things had then owned powers of life and motion that declined through the ages, leaving only ancestral memories for record until Jones brought back to nature its ancient gift. They were mysterious and disturbing activities that obsessed Dan as he drove toward town; and he was glad to leave behind him the soft and wailing wide whisper of inarticulate things, as the lights of the town drew near.

**B**ACK in his office, having firmly shut the door, Dan cocked his feet on the desk and smoked interminably. A small shaded lamp on the desk kept the room in semi-darkness. The air became stale and bluish with smoke. Through the half-curtained

windows, he watched figures drift by; arguing farmers; worried old crones; harassed and hopeless and blank faces, strong ones and weak ones, some dull and others furious, all showing the paralysis, the demoralization that the revolt of nature had produced. Beset by events alien to their lives, they were unable to cope with them, much less understand them. The only refuge lay in herding together and trying the forced gayety of town, with plenty of potent drink, as an antidote; as if the courage of the individual might return through combined strength and association with his neighbors. It was a night of fights, altercations, and bitter argument, and rowdy choruses from Andy's store.

Dan folded his hands on his lap. He had no desire to mingle with them until his task was finished. Tonight would see the end of the strange harvest, and tomorrow he could worry about the crop reports to Washington. The day's work had been strenuous, for him. He dozed, being one of those fortunate mortals who can snatch a cat-nap under almost any circumstances.

He could not have slept long. It was only just past nine when he blinked awake. He had a vague impression of some distant and receding roar, echoing through slumber to wakefulness; but all he now heard were the sounds of a few racing feet. The street outside his window was deserted.

Dan regarded the window and the empty sidewalk for perhaps a minute before a thought struck him with such force that he sent the chair spinning away as he crashed to his feet and pounded out.

The street was almost deserted. The tumult of less than an hour ago had subsided. A few broken windows, a picket-door hanging askew, some smashed bottles, and a couple of overturned kegs in front of Andy's store were the only remaining evidence of the crowd. The one person in sight was an old woman with infinitely wrinkled face and slow steps passing the Church.

Dan called, "Where's everybody?"

Old Mrs. Tompkins peered out of ancient eyes. "Eh? They all went out to the Jones place."

"What!"

"Lordamercy, you don't need to yell so.

I ain't stone-daft yet. They're gone and much good may it do. Pieter was telling his story and I don't know who it was decided Jones could say a-plenty about these goings-on. I'm a religious woman, Dan, but I tell you, if it's this Jones who's the cause of all this grief I'd—"

Whatever she thought was lost on Dan who jumped into his car and sped off toward the Jones farm.

Dan hoped to overtake the angry farmers. He didn't know exactly what he could say or do, but he thought they would at least listen to him. Dan sympathized with their feelings. They had been baffled, scared, and ruined by the perverse results of Jones's experiment. There was a certain justice to any punishment they might inflict on him. But Dan could see the scientist's side too; his passion for discovery in unknown fields; his willingness to experiment, whatever the cause; his primary purpose of aiding humanity and increasing the general good. The experiment had got beyond control. Vegetation given a new power, had responded in a far more willful and independent manner than Jones anticipated. He could scarcely be blamed for the curious developments which had occurred. He might have hoped to benefit mankind, but the character of Diemann's radiations had ruled otherwise and given the plant kingdom a new vitality that fought human control.

There were differences and changes in the farmlands through which Dan sped. He remembered well the Hanson grapevines, but they had somehow vanished, leaving only torn earth. And the Ritter chestnut grove—of which no trace remained, save deep furrows.

AS DAN approached the Jones place, he felt a sudden tightness in his chest. A crowd of farmers surrounded the house, milling around.

Beam of flashlights and glow of lanterns cast flickering lights and shadows on alarmed faces. The surging mob seemed checked. Then, to Dan's amazement, they all suddenly broke and fled to their autos. They raced away, leaving Dan alone in the moonlight.

An ominous chill came over Dan as he

stopped his car. A vast, dark mass, a writhing mound, engulfed the house. Dan got out and stood paralyzed for an instant. Forest trees and cultivated fruit trees, flowers and climbing vines, vegetables of countless variety, bushes and brambles and berries, representatives of all the plant life of Shawtuck County had converged here and overflowed Jones's place. And Dan heard an indescribable sound, a strange, eerie, inarticulate murmur of vegetation.

Now he heard other sounds, the sharp crack and tinkle of broken glass, the splintering of wood, and he knew that the windows and the very frame of the house were giving way. Suddenly there came a cry, a scream for help from within, and he barely recognized the voice of Green Jones. A great shudder convulsed the tangle surrounding the house. There was nothing familiar in the now loud, incessant, and threshing roar of vegetation; a weird tumult such as the wildest gale had never produced.

With unaccustomed agility, Dan leaped to the rear of his car. He habitually carried a variety of new farming aids that he demonstrated as part of his duties, products such as weed-killers, insecticides, fertilizers, and implements. Among these was a portable flame-thrower designed for burning out infected fields and blighted trees that he had been showing off in recent weeks. He grabbed it and aimed the nozzle at the heaving mass. A burst of intense flame struck and clung to the tangled foliage of shrubbery and vines and trees. Briefly, then, a sad sound flared up, like a many-bodied, sub-human, voiceless thing crying for life.

Now a great rent appeared in the mass and even the front of the house began to burn. Dan shut off the stream of fire but carried the thrower with him as he ran inside the burning structure.

His bulk was unused to such exertion, but he gave a convulsive leap when he saw the dark branches and vines beating at the side windows of the parlor, and watched a pane smash. He hurled himself against the door to the next room with a force that burst it from its hinges. He looked at a dynamo that hummed a faint drone on the floor near

the doorway, its brushes occasionally sparking, and connected with an object that occupied the whole center of the room. It looked like a huge metal box. Its plates glowed with a pulsing and ghostly radiance that shifted between soft silver and the crimson of fire. Near the ceiling above it and completing the circuit by thick cables that pierced the metallic concentration box to whatever mechanism lay within, hung a globe between anode and cathode. The globe swam with blinding mist, a purple, impalpable force that streamed out constantly and almost visibly in all directions. The giant globe had a sound all its own, a peculiar, intense whine, at the upper range of audibility.

The rear window to the room had been burst, and a flowing tide of plant growths had already enveloped part of the machine. Jones lay on the floor, evidently knocked unconscious when the mass burst in. For an instant Dan used the thrower again. The vegetation burned into ashes, and suddenly the huge globe melted with a violent flame of purple and red and silver streaked with blue.

Dan dragged Jones from the burning house. The night air became filled with one loud, prolonged, and mournful wail that faded into an inchoate murmur, an inarticulate whisper, then silence. Gone now were the eerie voices and the purposive movements.

Only the crackle of flames and pungent smoke came from the dying house and the dead mass.

Harvesting of crops proceeded normally around Shawtuck Center the following day. The destruction of the machine had also destroyed the newly acquired powers of the plants and fruits and vegetables.

Dan often wondered about that last night. Had the growing things, impelled by some dawning intelligence, converged to destroy their creator, or to encompass and protect him and his machine? He never knew. While Dan watched the burning house, Green Jones must have regained consciousness. He had walked away down the lonely roads of night.