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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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SUZANNE

by J. JOSEPH-RENAUD



"The arms of the plant seized him
in their embrace."

IN A spacious hall, lit by tall lamps, sat a young man in evening dress, bound in an armchair. Around him stood a woman and three men. The young man's downy mustache seemed extremely dark in his spectral face; his gaze was fixed and mournful. The ends of his white tie hung loosely down; mud was drying on his disordered hair, on his torn white waistcoat, on his black trousers.

"Mr. Wilson, once more we tender you our humble apologies! But we are acting in the service of our country, and we must have the text of this new secret military entente between

England and France. A general drew it up, a minister signed it, and an attaché of the embassy—you—copied it! The general and the minister are both beyond our reach, so we are obliged to have recourse to the attaché! . . . Don't look so angrily at poor Milly—she too is serving her country! Yesterday evening in her little house you had hoped to find her—and you found us, and we were daring enough to ask you to divulge a state secret. You said: 'No!' So, we were obliged to bring you here in a motor car, bound down to one of the seats, enveloped in a great fur cloak, and gagged under a

chauffeur's mask. It was impossible for the passers-by to guess that this strangely motionless chauffeur was longing to call out 'Help!' " said one of the men in military tones, although his long gray hair and gold-rimmed spectacles gave him more the appearance of a German university professor than of a soldier.

"These cords are torturing me," panted the prisoner.

His eyes wandered back to the beautiful red-haired woman, who, closely wrapped up in a mantle, was passionately listening.

"Loose him," said the man with the gold-rimmed spectacles.

The other two, who were of herculean build, and evidently only sub-alterns, obeyed the order. But the prisoner was very weak; the floor seemed to be rocking under his feet. He fell over in a faint. . . .

When he regained consciousness he was again sitting in the armchair.

"Well? No need of cords now! A low diet, the open air, hunger, fatigue—no one can withstand these. And, if necessary, we have something better than that. . . . But you have only to speak, it is so simple! Give us the outlines of this clause, and you are free. Your involuntary complicity will be a guarantee to us for your silence, and when you return home you will receive a liberal compensation."

The young man answered: "You shall know nothing!"

Stars were still dancing before his eyes, and the humming in his ears had not ceased, while blood was dropping from his wounded wrists.

"Since you are obstinate, my dear fellow, we shall be obliged to make you acquainted with Suzanne—a very charming person! But first permit me to introduce myself. . . . Dr. Salzmänn! . . . These gentlemen are my friends and collaborators. Now come!"

His tone had suddenly become honeyed—ironical—terrifying.

The two big assistants supported

the dragging steps of the prisoner, but the red-haired woman remained behind.

She turned away her eyes as the captive passed her.

In a corner was the head of a winding iron staircase, which they descended in the dark. A heavy iron door opened before them, and a puff of warm air, smelling of eucalyptus, blew upon them. Fine gravel crunched under their feet with a hollow sound, as though they were in some enormous empty building. Far away, somewhere in the silence, a fountain was splashing.

The strange doctor turned on the electric light, and suddenly an enormous conservatory was revealed around them, so vast that its real size could not be gaged; for the small electric lamps, cleverly hidden among the green branches, shed but a feeble glimmering light, and nothing could be seen but foliage stretching far into the distance on all sides. Above, colossal leaves clustered gracefully on unseen branches, in dome-like groups, while, above these, others were dimly seen, and yet others. All around, above, everywhere, there was but a fantastic tangle, which it was difficult to believe belonged to the vegetable kingdom. Was there not life in these orchids, which looked full of an impotent rage? And in these green spiders, three feet high, crouching as though to spring? A confusion of terrifying creatures seemed to inhabit this warm forest, among the shadows and the glimmering lights.

No sound from outside—neither the sea flowing over the pebbles nor yet the moaning of the wind—penetrated here, but one could almost *hear* the intense life of all these exotic plants, so crudely green in the pale electric light.

The doctor evidently had lavished both wealth and care on this marvelous garden. Several times he stopped the group to mention, with ironical courtesies, the name of some rare plant

to the captive who was panting in the heavy, suffocating air.

THE end of the conservatory was in darkness, but it was just possible to see that it had recently been altered to form a rotunda, similar to the monkey houses in zoological gardens but with stronger trellis-work and with some enormous iron bars to further strengthen it.

A terrible apprehension aroused the young diplomat from the torpor into which he had fallen. And he suddenly noticed a sweet, sickly odor, somewhat resembling that of over-ripe bananas, lilies, or decaying dahlias, mixed with the smell of wild beasts! . . . One would have supposed a menagerie was near. . . .

The doctor, turning to him, said, in the peculiar, pedantic tones he had adopted: "Now, my charming young friend, allow me to introduce you to Suzanne!"

He turned on an enormous electric light hung from the roof of the rotunda. In the dazzling white glare there arose a sort of gigantic tree; its leafless boughs were waving slowly, like mighty serpents, or like the tentacles of an octopus.

The trunk, which could be seen between the movements of the horrible limbs, resembled green marble; at the base it was as thick as a man's body, and increased in girth till, at a height of twelve or thirteen feet from the ground, it branched out into a hundred long, hairy boughs, all slowly moving as though alive. At the end of each bough, thick as an athlete's arm, was a sort of flexible funnel which evidently possessed the power of laying hold of objects and clinging to them so that there was no escape. The shortest of these boughs were seven or eight yards long.

These monstrous tentacles were not waving at random, but with conscious design they were reaching out toward the grating! Some stretched far

enough to seize and twist wires as thick as a cigarette.

"Ah, if the grating were not there! We must enlarge this cage; Suzanne is growing too fast," said the doctor, with a mirthless grin.

No one laughed. Although they must have seen it many times before, this horrible plant clearly terrified the doctor's assistants.

Wilson felt as though needles were pricking him all over. Although he was suffocating in this foul atmosphere, his teeth were chattering.

The doctor continued: "My charming young friend, I see you are a little surprised! But as you are filled with a thirst for knowledge, I will tell you about Suzanne.

"You must have heard of the South American plant call *Nepenthes* which feeds on insects? When a mosquito rests on one of its twigs, the tip seizes it and all the other twigs coil around it, and it is absorbed by the plant, which, while its digestion is going on, appears to be dead. I brought one back here from Brazil. Japanese gardeners succeed in dwarfing oaks and pine-trees till they are only a yard high; well, I experimented in a contrary direction with my *Nepenthes*. I tried to cultivate this little shrub, hardly as big as a rose-bush, till it should be as tall as a forest tree. I noticed in Brazil that a *Nepenthes* near an ant-hill, being thus better fed, acquires extraordinary dimensions.

"I began by stuffing it with flies, and it soon became more vigorous. Then I offered it bigger and bigger insects, such as wasps, spiders, bees, and on this diet it grew ten inches in a few months. Then, gradually, tiny pieces of meat took the place of the insects; Suzanne's growth now became extraordinary and her height and strength were soon trebled.

"I continued increasing the size of her meals; soon she needed a steak every day; then two. One day a sparrow perched on her and in a few seconds it had disappeared among the

greedy, ferocious branches; thenceforth Suzanne showed a strong predilection for living prey.

"For a year I fed her on mice, then guinea-pigs, then rabbits; besides this, her roots were watered with several pails of blood a day which I ordered from the slaughter-house; under this treatment Suzanne soon reached a height of seven feet.

"Well, to cut the story short: she grew higher and higher, and in the end had to be fed on lambs, then sheep and pigs, not to mention the red water, which was doubled.

"This protecting grating has surrounded Suzanne for a long time now, for when she was scarcely five feet high she seized me one evening, and I had great difficulty in escaping from her embrace. If I had met with this adventure a few months later I should not have the pleasure of being here at this moment!

"You guess to what use Suzanne is put? If anyone refuses to give us information which our duty forces us to seek—this is the present case—we bring him to this house, tied to the seat of a motor; we then question him again, and if he remains obdurate we thrust him behind this grating; then we leave him. Of course no traces remain, and the most minute search would reveal nothing. Am I not at liberty to cultivate a *Nepenthes* if I choose? . . . Well, for the last time I ask: 'Will you tell us what we want to know?' If your answer is 'yes,' we are all attention; if 'no,' Suzanne will take you in hand—and she is hungry! See how greedily her boughs are waving! How she stretches them out toward you—yes, toward you, for *she understands perfectly well that you are the prey!* . . . Why, she already smells stronger, and she is beginning to sing!"

In very truth, the fearful stench of a menagerie was growing more powerful, and the hairy tentacles, as they twisted and turned, produced a

gentle, whining sound, like that of a flight of swallows.

Wilson was filled with that unspeakable terror which whitens the hair of the bravest. But the very imminence of the danger kept his mind clear. What could he do? First, he must gain time; otherwise, this very minute would be the last of his life.

In the tone of someone who at last comes to a painful decision, he said: "I have no choice left: my answer is 'yes.' You will know the treaty. . . . But first give me food. . . . I am fainting. . . ."

"Bravo! I am delighted! I should have been sorry to—we will give you a meal which will loosen your tongue. And Suzanne shall not be the loser, the sweet creature!"

One of the two giants disappeared and soon returned staggering under the dead body of a whole ox, whose horned head was swinging to and fro.

He opened a very low side door and pushed his burden in.

Ten tentacles immediately snatched up the enormous bloody mass and threw it into the top of the trunk; all the boughs clasped it frantically, and it soon disappeared amid the confusion of foliage. A dreadful noise was heard, and then all was silent; the branches remained folded, giving the plant the appearance of an enormous mushroom.

"She would have liked you better; she prefers living creatures," said the doctor. "Now she will remain two hours, folded up like that and quite harmless, while the process of digestion is going on. Then the branches will fall and begin to wave again, and it would be very imprudent then to come within their reach. Come; you will excuse me if I take you to my laboratory instead of a dining-room—this is the abode of a horticulturist."

THE laboratory was a large room, with walls painted gray, full of implements for the study of chemistry, electricity, bacteriology, etc.

Some were of ancient shape, and Wilson remembered having seen similar ones in scientific museums, labeled "Alchemy."

The doctor placed bread, ham, cheese and a bottle of wine before the young diplomat.

Wilson ate voraciously. The very smell of the bread intoxicated him; the ham melted in his mouth like a delicious sweet; he drank, and the taste of old Bordeaux tickled his palate.

Soon a pleasant feeling of warmth and comfort overcame him; life began to flow through his veins. The food had made a new man of him. He began to feel optimistic, in spite of everything; he no longer despaired of escape.

If only—but he searched in vain among the instruments for a knife, a pair of compasses, anything which could serve as a weapon. There was nothing—nothing but test-tubes, bottles, funnels.

The others were carrying on a whispered conversation in a corner, without paying much attention to him.

The only thing that attracted his attention was a phial with a label bearing the word: "Chloroform." He slipped it into his pocket. His death should be painless. . . .

As Wilson swallowed his last mouthful, Dr. Salzmann said: "We are listening."

There was a little wine left in the bottle. The prisoner poured it out, drank it and smacked his lips.

"You have a good cellar, sir."

"Yes. Well?"

"Well, you scoundrels, did you really suppose I ever intended to divulge anything? I was hungry, nothing more."

The doctor's face puckered into a hundred wrinkles.

"That is all you have to say? Think what that great cage contains!"

"It contains my death, that is all; my answer remains the same!"

A few moments later, bound again,

Wilson was carried by the two giants to the rotunda. The horrible tree was still dozing, with its tentacles folded. But the awakening would come soon!

A large door was unbolted. They placed the captive against the trunk, which was warm like a living body.

The door was double-locked and bolted.

"I regret your obstinacy. You are a brave man," said the doctor, whose exultation seemed to have subsided like that of the tree.

He bowed and departed. The assistants gave a stiff, military salute, then made a right-about turn. . . .

L EFT alone, the prisoner first turned his attention to escaping from the horrible contact of the warm trunk; he succeeded gradually by rolling over on his side, and he did not stop till he had reached the corner of the cage farthest from the plant.

Either from forgetfulness or from cruelty, the doctor had omitted to turn off the light; it flooded the immense conservatory, and the rotunda. In the distance, somewhere behind all the tropical plants the fountain continued its never-ceasing splash, splash. . . .

He was lost! No hope was left! The dreadful creature would soon awaken, and then—

He thought of the chloroform; at the last moment he would inhale it and deaden all sensibility. With his free hand he took the phial out of his pocket and left it uncorked for a few moments; a smell of fresh apple prevailed over the stench of the monster.

But he clung tenaciously to life, and his youth inspired him with confidence in the result of any fight maintained to the end. He did not give in. Horrible as his position undoubtedly was, he wanted to show fight.

They had bound him not very tightly after all, and in a few minutes, at the cost of a few scratches, he was free.

Quick to act, and concentrating all his strength in a mighty effort, he tried first the little door, then the big one, but both resisted. He tried to smash the grating, but not a wire gave way. He tried to climb, and only wounded his hands to no effect; even had he succeeded, it would have been useless, for the tentacles would reach to the very top of the rotunda.

He could do nothing more—only wait. He sat down with his elbows on his knees, and his face buried in his hands.

All the happy moments of his life rose before him with extraordinary distinctness—his first years at school, his travels, his successes in diplomacy. . . . The sweet, sad face of his mother smiled at him as clearly as when she used to sing him to sleep in his cot! . . . And his father—what grief it would be to the poor old man who was so proud of him! . . .

What joys he might have tasted, what great things he might have accomplished! . . .

If he could only write to Milly, the traitress whom he still loved! If he could but throw through the grating a note which they would find afterwards! . . . He felt in his pockets: yes, a pencil and paper.

With difficulty he wrote, in great round letters:

“Milly, I die with no hatred in my heart. I love you, and my last thought shall be of you, my ever-beloved, my beautiful!”

A hissing sound caused him to look up. The plant was no longer asleep. It looked like an enormous Gorgon's head or a nest of furious serpents; the tentacles were waving with strength. One seized upon Wilson, who, mad with terror, uncorked the bottle of chloroform and held it to his nostrils.

In his haste he let fall a drop of the liquid on the tentacle which had just clutched him by the shoulder, when, to his joy and surprize, the strange arm fell limply down beside the trunk.

Instinctively he sprinkled another enormous coil which was about to wind itself around his neck; this one, too, fell like the first, apparently dead.

But the others were whirling around him; they seized him in their embrace, and, as they waved backward in their fury, they carried him to the top of the pulp, above the sort of mouth in which the ox had disappeared.

Half fainting, bruised by the awful embrace, he dropped there the phial. At the same moment he fell heavily to the ground.

Here he remained motionless and dazed. What would happen next? Why were the monster's tentacles not crushing him? It took him a few seconds to make sure that he was on the ground, bruised but alive.

He struggled against a painful numbness, caused by the violence of his fall and the odor of the chloroform. He felt sick and faint, and a cold perspiration was pouring from him.

When, at last, he was able to see clearly, he discovered that the horrible tree was in a new posture; all its branches were hanging down motionless as though dead; the doctor's frightful plant had the appearance of a gigantic weeping willow.

He was only a few inches from the arms which but a moment before had been so ferocious, and although they appeared harmless now, he rose hastily and took refuge in the farthest corner of the rotunda. Here the stupefying influence of the chloroform and of the fall passed away altogether, and he tried to understand what had happened.

This was not difficult! The providential bottle of benumbing fluid had saved him, at least for the moment, from a frightful death. . . . All plants are sensitive to the effects of chloroform, and this carnivorous tree, which in some ways seemed to belong rather to the animal than the vege-

table kingdom, must have peculiarly felt the benumbing influence. At this moment it was just as insensible as a patient under a surgical operation, but this was only a respite; it would awaken from this insensibility as it awoke after its meal, and the peril would be just as frightful as before.

But any respite from death is precious. The prisoner made another attempt to open the doors and climb up the grating, the upper parts of which perhaps were less strongly built; but again the wires only wounded his hands, and again the doors resisted all his efforts; although the monster was slumbering, escape was as impossible as ever.

WILSON at last sat down again, weary and despairing; he half regretted that it was not all over, for the chloroform had only prolonged his agony. If die he must, he would rather die at once.

Time passed thus, till at last he became aware of a pale blue light which revealed first a glass dome, and then the tops of the highest of the tropical plants. At last, then, dawn had come, but this half-light was sickening, horrible. Far away—but perhaps he only imagined this—the angelus slowly rang forth. The mighty murmur of the waves, as they rose and fell, increased. Near at hand, birds were chirping.

Worn out, bruised and bleeding, almost careless of his fate, Wilson gradually yielded to sleep.

The sounds of steps aroused him from his torpor and brought him to his feet; as he gazed through the grating, he distinguished, in the distance, the silhouette of Dr. Salzmänn, coming toward the rotunda.

The terrible man would find out that his victim was still alive; he would call his acolytes. . . .

The captive hid behind the horrible tree, among the tentacles. Like a child playing at hide-and-peek, he turned, in spite of his disgust, around the

warm trunk, dodging the doctor as the winding paths led the latter's steps first to the right and then to the left.

When the doctor saw the extraordinary attitude of Suzanne, he uttered an exclamation of surprise. For a moment he stood motionless, then to Wilson's unspeakable joy he opened the great door of the cage, and cautiously entered. With the end of his stick he touched the tentacles, being careful all the time to slouch as far away as possible; but the horrible arm still hung lifeless as before.

He ventured a little nearer—and thought he saw a phantom.

Wilson had sprung away from the plant. The doctor uttered a cry of terror, and at the same moment there fell on his jaw a crushing blow.

He fell limply to the ground. . . .

Wilson rushed out of the cage and ran along the first path he came to, but the conservatory was a perfect labyrinth, and he soon found himself back again at the rotunda. In vain he tried another path, and yet another; at last, one led him to the side of the conservatory, overlooking the sea. He brushed away the steam with his hand, and, looking through the glass, he saw in the rosy dawn a pale stretch of sands, and farther on, the green, tumultuous waves of the sea.

There were several large doors leading out of the conservatory; he opened and stepped out, but the icy air and the roar of the waves benumbed him. He found himself on a tiny balcony which ran along the side of the building, while below him was the smooth wall of the great house.

Below lay a fog, hiding the bottom of the abyss, while above, sea birds were whirling round uttering their harsh cries.

How was he to descend? Was there some means of escape?

He left the balcony, but had walked only a few moments in the soporific heat of the conservatory when

the sound of steps, cries, shouts for help, following each other in quick succession, caused him to turn back. He still had a few moments in which to make good his escape, for the assistants would not immediately grasp what had happened and decide on their course of action; but, when they saw the open door, the condition of their chief, and the torpor of the plant, they would understand all too soon that their prisoner was escaping.

Again he dashed on to the balcony in search of some means by which he could descend. At one end was an iron bar, which, strengthened every three feet by strong cramps, rose up from the sands, followed the contour of the cliff, and then rose straight up to the top of the conservatory, where it doubtless joined a lightning-conductor; this bar passed up one end of the balcony, and Wilson believed himself saved. It was a perilous descent, but he had no choice.

He climbed over the handrail and grasped the bar, but horrible giddiness seized him; the wall, the cliff, the bar, the balcony, all danced before his distracted eyes; he had a terrible feeling of nausea, and was drenched in a cold sweat; only a supreme effort saved him from falling. Hastily climbing back on to the balcony, panting with horror, he wiped his cold, clammy hands. Was his courage going to fail him at the last moment? He tried to accustom his eyes to the sight of the abyss, but the horrible depths and the mist hiding the ground from view sent him back into the conservatory.

He lay down flat behind a clump of trees. The two giants, armed with guns, passed quite close to him without seeing him.

As soon as they had gone, he arose and ran along in the opposite direction toward the door at the foot of the iron staircase. Surely he was saved now, for he felt certain that no one else lived in the house. He could get out.

He started back. In the frame of the door he dimly saw a great green cloak, a head of glorious red hair, a pale face, a beautiful bare arm, and a hand grasping a revolver. Milly!

She stood between him and life. . . .

With the suddenness and precision which had one day astonished him at a rifle range, and the cruelty which he now remembered he had sometimes seen flash from the beautiful green eyes, she was going to—

Ah, no!

She stepped forth from the shadow, like a Rembrandt from its frame; tears were streaming down her cheeks, and despair was written on her features. In her other hand she held aloft the farewell letter which Wilson had written on the rotunda.

"I have read it. Forgive me—and come—quickly!" she said in low tones.

He followed her. The narrow stairs hindered their steps; when they reached the top, they passed through several large rooms, a hall and a kitchen dimly lit up by the gray dawn. Then Milly stopped and turned round.

He noticed all these details as though in a dream. . . .

She softly opened the door. The morning was icy cold; birds were twittering all round. . . .

"Go through the kitchen garden. You will find a little door in the wall; the gardener always leaves the key in it. The path descends almost perpendicularly, then runs along beside the sea. When you come to a cross fixed into a block of granite, stop and wait."

He was in the state of utter fatigue in which the will, incapable of making a choice, eagerly follows without reflection any advice. However, he stopped long enough to say: "Come with me!" Her swift gesture threw aside the mantle and revealed her exquisite ball gown, and her beautiful white neck, as she pointed to the door in the wall.

“Quick!” she urged.

He hurried along. Before closing the door of the garden he turned and saw Milly still on the same spot; her attitude urged him to hasten, but at the same time expressed such poignant grief that he was tempted to return.

Slipping on the pebbles, clinging to the bushes, he descended the difficult path. An iron band seemed to encircle his head; the sea air made his eyes smart. He began to cough. When he was close to the sea, he took up a handful of water and dashed it over his face and head.

He walked a long, long way along the edge of the roaring channel till at last, in the distance, his uncertain gaze fell on a rusty iron cross on a great rock.

The horrible house, far away in the distance, was tiny and white on the bluish cliff.

Suddenly it disappeared in a mass of black smoke, while at the same time a loud report echoed and re-echoed among the rocks. All the birds around flew up into the sky.

AT NOON some coast-guards found Wilson raving in delirium.

When he at last arose from an attack of brain fever he told his story, but no one believed it.

The police made inquiries, without result. Yet he was able to guide the officers to the ruins of the conservatory, and show an immense greasy spot, which, he declared, was where the *Nepenthes* had stood.