

15¢

ISSUED MONTHLY

# Famous FANTASTIC Mysteries

APRIL 1940



*The Devil of the  
Western Sea*

*By Philip M. Fisher*

*The Beast Plants*

*The Blind Spot*

*By Hall and Flint*

*A. Merritt - others*





★ *Famous*  
**FANTASTIC**  
*Mysteries* ★

Vol. 2

APRIL, 1940

No. 1

**Coming in the  
 May Issue**

**Sunken Cities**

By  
 DOUGLAS NEWTON  
*A Complete Novelet*

This story is one of the most glamorous and bizarre in the collection of famous fantastic fiction. A schooner tossed by hurricane into a sea secret—a submerged city never seen by the eyes of civilized men. People half fish, half human, and beautiful to look upon. A strange and wonderful fantastic scene to which the artist Paul does full justice.

**Also—**

**Three Lines of  
 Old French**

By A. MERRITT  
*An immortal story that  
 none who have read  
 it forget*

“Darkness and Dawn,” announced on the Editor’s page of the March issue as a possibility in May, has been held over for a later issue

**AMAZING!**

The Devil of the Western Sea  
 Philip M. Fisher 6  
*A great adventure that defied the barriers of  
 time*

**ASTOUNDING!**

The Blind Spot  
 Austin Hall and Homer Eon Flint 34  
*In Six Parts—Part II*

**STRANGE!**

The Beast Plants.....H. Thompson Rich 66  
*Death whispers in a gloomy swamp, as mon-  
 strous flowers await their victims*

**THRILLING!**

The Conquest of the Moon Pool...A. Merritt 78  
*Conclusion*

**STARTLING!**

Fire Gas.....Stanton A. Coblentz 113  
*Into the mountain hide-out of the mad world  
 dictator goes Hal Remingway alone, to smash  
 the secret power drawn from outer space*

Weird Travel Tales.....Bob Davis 64  
 Austin Hall.....Autobiographical Sketch 112  
 The Readers’ Viewpoint..... 124

Cover illustration for “The Beast Plants”  
 painted by Frank R. Paul

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publisher, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.  
 WILLIAM T. DEWART, President

THE CONTINENTAL PUBLISHERS & DISTRIBUTORS. LTD.  
 3 La Belle Sauvage, Ludgate Hill, London, E.C. 4  
 Paris: HACHETTE & CIE, 111 Rue Reaumur

Copyright, 1940, by The Frank A. Munsey Company  
 Published monthly. Single copy 15 cents. By the year, \$1.50 in United States, its dependencies, Mexico and  
 Cuba; Canada, \$1.75. Other countries, \$2.25. Entered as second class matter October 6, 1939, at the post  
 office, New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Currency should not be sent unless registered. Remit-  
 tances should be made by check, express money order or postal money order. Copyrighted in Great Britain.  
 Printed in U. S. A.

**The May Issue Will Be On Sale April 10**

He seized one of the loathsome bell-jars, and hurled it into the creature's yawning maw



## The Beast Plants

By H. THOMPSON RICH

What were the silent monstrosities that stalked the Georgia swamp and held a girl imprisoned? Neil Huntley found that the horrible truth of the devilish plants far exceeded the most nightmarish rumors

WHEN the first wild rumors about the beast plants began coming out of Okefenokee Swamp, in Southeast Georgia, intelligent men refused to credit them. If the newspapers ran the stories at all, it was in facetious vein.

"Flowers like dinosaurs?" they scoffed. "A new idea for the D. T.'s!"

But there was one intelligent man who gave these rumors full credence, astounding though they were. That was Neil Huntley, assistant professor of biology at Hartford University, Connecticut.

The reason he believed the reports was

because he connected them with the mysterious disappearance the year before of Professor Hiram Mortimer, head of the biology department at Hartford.

With the learned professor had gone his charming and talented daughter, Doris. They had left the university at the end of the spring term on a research expedition whose objective was kept a secret even from Huntley himself—and had not been heard from since.

Huntley knew Professor Mortimer had been conducting experiments on mutations—the development of new species—of

carnivorous plants. And Huntley knew that one of the most peculiar species of this meat-eating plant family was found only in the swamps of the Carolinas and Georgia.

*Dionæa* was its name—Venus's flytrap it is more commonly called—that amazing plant whose leaves have the power to close on luckless insects like the jaws of a steel trap.

Putting two and two together, Huntley concluded that it was to Okefenokee Swamp that Professor Mortimer had gone to carry out his researches. He resolved to follow him there, learn what grisly Frankenstein monsters the professor's experiments had created—learn, too, if possible, what fate had befallen him and his daughter.

HUNTLEY tried to assure himself, on the way down on the train, that his motives were purely scientific, impersonal. That he would do the same for any fellow professor; but he couldn't put the memory of Doris Mortimer out of his mind.

He recalled how lovely she was, in her dark, slender way. Recalled their friendship, their many talks, walks, rides, dances.

He had expected her to write, when she went away with her father that spring a year ago; but never a post card, let alone a letter. She could not have disappeared more completely if she'd taken a rocket and hopped off for Mars.

He'd thought it odd, at first. Now he was actually worried. What he was going to find down there in that vast, dismal swamp he didn't exactly know, but he was prepared for the worst.

One thing he found, even in Savannah, was that the rumors that had percolated into the Northern papers were mild compared with those current locally. By the time he reached Waycross the tales had become utterly mad and fantastic.

The town was full of white, black and Indian refugees—and the horrible tales they told of what had driven them from their native haunts in Okefenokee's depths were on every tongue. Some of their friends,

who had fled at the same time, were missing.

Huntley talked with some of them. Their eyes still wide with terror, they told of ravenous plants like mighty crabs, with a dozen deadly claws. Plants that spread over the marshy ground like hydra-headed dragons, seizing, devouring everything in reach, birds, beasts, reptiles, even men.

He shuddered as he listened to these hysterical tales. He wanted to discount them, to believe they were grossly exaggerated by the panic-stricken natives. But the descriptions sounded so much like some giant—and mobile—species of *Dionæa*, that he was forced to conclude Professor Mortimer's experiments had met with a ghastly success.

Neil found it impossible to get guides to go into the swamp with him, as may well be imagined. The "crackers" whom he approached looked at him as though they thought he was crazy. What? Go back there again, when they'd barely escaped with their lives? Not for any damn-Yankee ever born!

So he told them he would go in alone, whereupon they knew he was crazy. Even if he escaped the beast plants, he would never come out, they warned him. There were parts of that great swamp marked on official government maps as "impenetrable" and unexplored. The natives called it "trembling earth," because it literally shook when you put foot on it. One misstep, anywhere over that swamp's whole area of hundreds of miles, might mean horrible death in a bottomless quagmire.

Huntley thanked them for their words of caution, but insisted, nevertheless, that he was going—for he was sure that somewhere in the reaches of that foul morass were Professor Mortimer and Doris.

The morning after his arrival in Waycross, Huntley entered the swamp, carrying a pack with sleeping-bag and equipment on his back and a shotgun under his arm.

He had chosen this weapon instead of a rifle, not only because it would be more useful in bringing down small game and

wild fowl, but because he believed it would prove more effective against the beast plants.

What truth lay in this belief, Huntley was to learn much sooner than he expected.

Toward noon, after trudging for some hours over quaking bogs where cypress and black gum reared their swollen trunks out of the muck, he emerged on the edge of one of those small open areas known as "prairies"—and there, at a distance of perhaps a hundred yards, he saw a sight that caused his blood to chill.

It was a plant, undoubtedly a *Dionæa*, but a prodigious size, its mighty cirlet of trap-ended leaves measuring fully forty feet across. From the center rose a great shaggy stalk some twenty feet high, with a huge pendulous bud at its crest, like a giant head.

The leaves of the monster had the typical division of the species, he noted in that tense moment—the lower part broad and spatulate, the outer end divided in two lobes. This trap or "claw" of each leaf bore mammoth spines at the edges; and any one of those huge jaws was capable of seizing a full-grown man in its hideous grip.

**T**HE colossal plant stood motionless at first, and Huntley thought with relief that it must be rooted to the soil, like a normal plant. Then he plunged into a nightmare world when he saw the huge bud turn and seem to stare at him as if with malice through its half-open tip. The next instant its dozen mighty leaf-legs were in crablike motion; it was rushing toward him at a dizzying speed.

There was but one thing to do. Raising his shotgun, he fired both barrels into the oncoming monster.

He might almost as well have fired into the air. Only for an instant was the charge of the grisly thing checked. Then, its towering head-stalk vibrating with fury, it continued its mad rush.

Huntley took to his heels. But no use. The plant made ten yards to his one. Almost before he was well under way he felt

himself seized by those horrible appendages.

So this was the end—the fate of the professor and his daughter themselves, no doubt, had long since experienced. He tensed, expecting any moment to feel one of those deadly traps close on him, its foot-long spikes pierce him through and through.

But nothing of the sort happened. Instead, as he vainly tried to move and free himself, he was startled to see another beast of the same type draw up.

The two monsters stood there for some time, nodding and gesticulating, apparently debating what they should do with him. The one that had captured him seemed in favor of dispatching him at once, for he could feel the wounded plant tremble as with suppressed rage. The other, however, appeared to protest vigorously, almost as if urging a plan of its own.

Abruptly the naturalist was lifted up and borne off through the swamp by his wrathful captor, his savior following at its side.

For miles the two beasts continued their swift but crablike progress.

Well toward noon they drew up on a sandy knoll rising out of the muck. There he was released and permitted to stretch his cramped, aching limbs. But if he had entertained even the slightest hope of escape, it was soon dispelled; for now other members of the hideous species began gathering.

They formed a circle around him, as though curious to see what strange creature had been brought into their midst. Presently a macabre conference began, evidently concerned with the exact form of his doom.

But in the midst of these eerie rustlings and raspings, salvation came—salvation so dramatic, so astounding, that Neil Huntley at first could scarce believe his eyes.

The circle parted, and in stepped Doris Mortimer.

"Neil!" she cried, rushing up to him.

"Doris!" he echoed, noting with amazement the awe in which the monsters seemed to hold her.

She extended her hands, murmured, as he took them: "I felt all along you'd come!"

"But you never wrote. Why?"

"I couldn't. For months, daddy wouldn't let me. He didn't want anyone, not even you, to know where he was. And then—then it was impossible."

Her voice shook, as she spoke the last words, and Huntley understood—or thought he did.

"You mean you've been the prisoner of these ghastly beasts?"

She shuddered. "No, not their prisoner, Neil—their queen!"

He shuddered, too. "Queen? Good Lord! How can that be?"

"Simple enough. Daddy brought them into being, you see, when he succeeded so horribly this spring in the experiments begun last summer. And with the almost-human intelligence he gave them, they worshipped him from the very first as their creator, their god."

"How awful!"

"Poor Daddy. He suffered the torments of a damned soul. It drove him into his grave."

So Professor Mortimer was dead. What a retribution, for tampering with the laws of nature! He strove vainly for adequate words of sympathy.

But she understood.

"It is better so. His mind had gone, Neil; broke under the strain. And now I am their queen—Heaven help me!"

"I see." No wonder they held her in such awe! "But isn't there some hope, some chance of escape?"

"I don't know. I wonder. But we can't talk about it here. They have such uncanny brains, in those horrid buds of theirs. I—I'm almost afraid they may understand what we are saying." She forced a dreary smile. "Suppose we adjourn to the palace of the queen?"

"Yes, let's!" Huntley agreed.

"Let's get out of their sight for a while, before I go mad myself."

She linked an arm in his, held up the other.

The circle parted. Rustling and rasping, the beast plants let them pass, and escorted them, like a guard of honor—or a file of executioners.

She led him across the knoll to a low frame shack like an army barracks, half-way down the far slope.

"Daddy's laboratory, and our home for the past year," she said as they entered. "We had some colored boys who helped him build it, but they fled this spring, when the new plants began to grow huge and break loose from their roots. Perhaps some of them got out of the swamp alive. Was that how you heard?"

He told her of the wild rumors that had reached the outside world, and how he had deduced that it must have been to Okefenokee she and her father had gone, when they left the university the year before.

"But tell me what happened here," he said when he had finished. "How did your poor father succeed in producing this giant species of *Dionæa*?"

"I DON'T know exactly," she began, when they had taken seats in the little living-room where they had been standing, "but the process was based on the results of his Hartford experiments on mutations that could produce utterly new species. You remember how he disagreed with Mendel's laws and said Burbank was more nearly on the right track?"

"Yes, I remember."

"But even Burbank had only touched the fringes of what was possible along those lines, daddy said. You remember his theory that it was possible to produce mutations without crossing existing species?"

"Yes, I remember that, too."

"Well, the changes daddy wanted to produce were those that would increase the size, mobility, and intelligence of the species. He chose the carnivorous plants because they seemed particularly well adapted to such experiments. And the reason he selected *Dionæa* for his final test was because he could work with it down here in secrecy."

"Also I presume, because it already had marked mobility of the fly-trap portion of its leaves, I can understand how he might have stimulated this mobility and also increased the plant's size. But I can't understand," and Huntley was emphatic about this, "how your father could have created an intelligence that didn't exist before."

"But it did exist," said Doris, almost with a shudder. "Don't mobility and intelligence go hand in hand? Can anything move that hasn't nervous energy, and isn't that just another name for brain power?"

"No, it isn't brain power, it's reflex action. That's just the difference between plants and animals—that lack of a general nervous system to receive and transmit impulses."

"But plants do have just such a system," she insisted. "Darwin hinted at it when he said that the impulse to motion of *Dionæa* is transmitted along the fibrovascular bundles. And currents flow through leaves much as they do through the nerves of animals. So there!"

"I surrender. Guess I'll have to, anyway, since your father has proved it so overwhelmingly. Come to think of it, some noted East Indian botanist has demonstrated that plants have a circulatory system, as well as a nervous system—a heart and a brain, of a sort."

"It's not the size of those horrid things," she burst forth, "or even their deadliness, that terrifies me most. It's their intelligence. That is prodigious, in its way."

"I can easily believe it. But go on," Huntley urged. "Tell me how your father produced them."

Haltingly she explained how he had selected the largest, hardiest specimens of the fly-trap which he could find, and had nurtured them all through the previous summer, supplying them through lobes with chemical compounds rich in the nitrogen the swampy soil lacked. This developed the leaves at the expense of the roots, which partially atrophied. Thus was the mobility of the next generation stimulated.

Then, when these favored specimens

came into flower, he bred them together by cross-pollination. Then, when the seeds formed and were ready to drop, he gathered them carefully, took them to his laboratory and soaked them in solutions of his invention which should stimulate the size of the next generation.

"Soaked them till they got as big as marbles," said Doris: "as big as baseballs!"

Huntley gasped.

"Oh, I was afraid then," she went on. "I had a sort of premonition. I urged, begged daddy to leave. But he said he wasn't going back to the university at all; was going to stay and continue his work, and nothing I could say would change him. Well, I couldn't leave him here."

Then had come the treatment of the giant seeds to stimulate the intelligence of the next generation—a process the professor kept secret even from his daughter.

"But haven't you even an idea of what he did?" asked Huntley.

"Not anything at all clear," she replied. "I know he cut them, though, and grafted things inside—brain cells, maybe. But all through this part of his experiments, daddy acted so peculiarly that I thought at times he was losing his mind. Perhaps he was, poor dear."

So the fall had passed, and the winter. A torture of boredom to Doris, an ecstatic trance for her father.

"That, really, is about all," she finished. "Daddy planted his dreadful seeds in the early spring. They began to sprout very soon, began to grow terribly fast. Then the horror started. For, as you know, he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams in all three of the mutations he set out to produce. He succeeded so harrowingly that his reason toppled, and before the end of spring—"

Her voice broke off, her lips trembled.

Huntley touched her hand. "I know how close you were to him, what a loss it is. But now, our first thought must be of escape. Not only to save ourselves, but to warn the outside world that these rumors

coming from Okefenokee Swamp are the truth."

"But how? I have already tried it twice. They watch me constantly. Even now we are guarded. Look!"

She indicated the front window. He looked—and there lurked a pair of the beasts, within fifty yards.

"And look!"

She indicated the rear window, this time. Again he looked, and there lurked two more of them.

Huntley turned back to her.

"The queen's palace is indeed well guarded!" He laughed ironically. "Nevertheless, I think abdication is in order. How about trying to escape at night? Can the infernal things see in the dark?"

"I don't know. Sometimes I think they can see and hear everything—rather, sense it somehow, through adjustment to the most delicate vibrations."

"But plants as a rule aren't much on night life. Let's try it, tonight—that is, if you really want to take a chance. But don't let your prime minister force you to abdicate against your better judgment."

"I'd sooner die than go on here, with these monstrosities. But I tremble to think what may happen if we get caught."

"But it would be worse horror to stay here."

**W**HEN the long afternoon and the brief twilight had given way to darkness, they set forth.

Not a beast plant was visible, and a heavy silence brooded upon the swamp. Carefully they picked their way around the edge of the knoll, plunged into the depths of the quaking morass.

The night was moonless, but a myriad of stars gleamed in the clear summer sky—and one of these, the Pole Star, guided their footsteps northward.

Silently they proceeded, cautiously, but more than once they slipped and floundered in the black muck. There was one time when it was all he could do to draw her back from the deadly grasp of an oozing quagmire.

But at last—it must have been midnight or later—they emerged upon a sandy knoll similar to the one that had marked their starting-point. Mounting to its crest, they beheld a sight that filled them with joy.

Beyond, on the edge of the swamp, a scant mile or so to the north, twinkled the lights of a village.

Doris drew a deep breath, stood there silent.

"Only a little farther, and we're safe!" said Huntley.

"Yes, only a little farther!" She pressed his hands impulsively. "Oh, Neil, how can I ever thank you enough for saving me?"

He was tempted to take her into his arms then and there, tell her how she could thank him enough. Tell her it was love that had been in his heart, had led him on.

But now was no time to delay for such a declaration. He simply returned the pressure of her hands, and said:

"You don't have to thank me at all, Doris. I'm saving myself too, am I not? Come, we'd best be going."

They descended the knoll, plunged once more into the swamp.

Almost a mile they made, spirits soaring momentarily, when of a sudden, came a sound that filled them with terror—an unmistakable crunching, crashing noise from behind.

They paused, looked at each other, faces pale in the starlight.

"They've discovered we're gone!" she whispered. "They're on our trail!"

"Yes, but we won't give in!" he whispered back. "Quick—with me."

Gripping her hand, he broke into a run. They plunged on, tripping over roots, and vines, slipping into sloughs and muck-holes, straining every muscle in a desperate dash for safety. But every moment the ominous sounds behind were drawing nearer.

"Oh, I—I can't go on—any more!" she panted, at length.

He bent, lifted her up, staggered on.

There was still hope! The edge of the



swamp was in sight. "Only a little farther!" Huntley gasped.

He stopped short. Two of the giant creatures had burst out of the tangle ahead and barred his way!

"I guess that's the end!" he told the quiet girl in his arms.

But there came no answer. She had fainted.

The trip back into the depths of the swamp was a long, gruesome nightmare for Huntley. What had happened to Doris he didn't know. She had been snatched from his grasp and carried away. As for himself, he was borne along anything but gently by one of the ugly beasts, while others hemmed him in, front and rear.

On they went through the night, that weird procession.

Dawn was breaking, when at length they regained the interior knoll, and there a great tribal assemblage of the monsters seemed to be in progress.

As his captors came up, a rasping murmur ran through the conclave. A surge of relief ran through Huntley, for there was Doris, unharmed, but clasped in the clamshell-like plant which had carried her. The sun was glinting on her dark hair.

She looked pale, but her eyes flashed Huntley a reassuring smile.

"You're all right?" he called, as the beast that had borne him there now set him on the ground.

"Yes, all right." The plant opened its maw, let her gently down. "It's you I'm worrying about. These fiends are getting ready to hold some sort of tribunal. They blame you for our attempted escape, I think. You know—the queen can do no wrong! They think you carried me off. I'll see they don't harm you."

"I only hope you're right, that it's I whom they blame," he replied.

The tribunal now got under way, making further conversation inadvisable.

While the beast plants formed in a solemn circle, two of their leaders remained with Huntley and Doris in the center of the ring.

These seemed to be presenting the two

sides of the case; and it was obvious from the first, by the rustlings and raspings that greeted their gestures that the assemblage was divided in its opinion.

AT LENGTH, what seemed like a vote was taken. A majority left the circle, moved away to one side—whereupon the leader who appeared to represent them seized Huntley, held him poised, ready to fling him into their clamoring midst.

He saw the spikes on the ends of their hideous traps quiver in anticipation, saw them peer at him avidly through their yawning buds. He gave himself up for lost.

But just as the monster was about to hurl him to that appalling doom, Doris rushed up with a scream. Slipping Neil's sheath-knife from its scabbard on his belt, she turned to the assemblage and pressed it against her breast.

It was obvious to Huntley, and seemingly to all of them, what she meant to do. She would plunge that deadly blade into her heart, sacrificing herself rather than see him die so hideously.

Recognizing this, the beast that held Neil let him go.

"Doris!" he cried, rushing up to her, snatching the knife away. "You—you can't do that for me!"

"Why not?" she defied him, reaching for it again. "What different does it make? What does life mean to me if—"

Then she paused, flushed crimson.

But Huntley had heard enough. Seizing her by her slender shoulders, he swung her around, forced her to look into his eyes.

"You—you mean—you love me? Tell me, Doris."

She said nothing, but her lips trembled.

"Oh, my dearest—my darling!"

Only a moment they clung together, for presently a vast rustling and rasping reached their ears. Releasing the girl, Huntley wheeled to face that sinister throng.

Then they both realized something—something strange, miraculous. The tones of the vibrations were different from anything they had heard in the past.

The monsters were pleased with this

evidence of love their queen had bestowed upon the stranger.

The two factors reunited, formed about them in a weird moving circle—bowing, almost dancing.

“Oh, my dear!” said Doris, half sobbing, half laughing, as she thrust his knife back in its sheath. “I believe they’re accepting you as consort to the queen. Hail, King Neil!”

They were soon to see how true this was.

With exuberant ritual, with extravagant bowing and gesticulating, the monsters escorted them to the royal palace.

Then, when they were safely inside, began an eerie ceremonial procession. Around and around the building they paraded. The parade grew into a dance, the dance into a dervish riot.

“Darling!” she murmured, clinging to him. “Did you ever see anything so perfectly astounding? I’d like to laugh, if only it weren’t so serious.”

“So would I,” he agreed, pressing her soft cheek against his. “It’s a moment’s bliss in this inferno.”

But they well knew the situation held an undercurrent far too ominous to be taken lightly. They stood there gravely, after the first surprise and relief, watching anxiously the bizarre homage of these strange subjects.

All morning the wild celebration continued, growing in tempo with evidences of their devotion—fruits, birds, small animals.

By afternoon the ovation had developed into an orgy.

“Somewhere these monsters are finding some stimulation, something with the effect of liquor,” declared Neil thoughtfully at last.

“I don’t know what it could be,” said Doris, “unless—”

She checked herself, paled; and the terrible thought ran through his mind too.

Presently came ghastly proof, for now the joy-maddened beasts began bringing more terrible offerings still. Human bodies—the bodies of farmers outside the swamp, of townspeople from the near-by villages—they brought and laid on the porch.

When at last the harrowing day was over, and the surfeited, exhausted creatures had withdrawn, their “rulers” set about the horrible task of removing that tribute.

Then they sat down and tried to consider what their next step should be. Of course, they might make another attempt at escape, but to be captured in a second attempt would surely mean death for them both.

They must figure some way to combat these monsters, for the safety of mankind.

But how? That was the question. Poison? They had none, nor any facilities for making it in sufficient quantities, even if they knew what ingredients to use and could find them. Fire, then? There was little chance of igniting that dank swamp, even if they themselves were willing to risk death in the resultant conflagration. As for slaying the beasts hand to hand—

Late they sat up that night, futilely considering the problem.

At length Doris showed Huntley to the

room her father had formerly occupied—and they bade each other a fond good night, knowing it might be their last.

**I**N THE morning Huntley had an idea. It was nebulous, and he told her before explaining not to put too much faith in it, though he thought it was worth a trial.

"Every plant, as you know, has some natural enemy," he began, "some mold or other fungus—some rust or blight or mildew that under favorable conditions will destroy it."

"But if these beasts had such a thing, wouldn't it have shown some evidence by now?" she asked.

"They haven't," he explained. "That's just the point. No new species has these parasites at first. It takes time to develop them. But neither have they the resistance to fight them, if any should be encountered, for no immunity has been developed either."

"But where can you find such an enemy?"

"On the native *Dionæa* with which your father started, I hope. Those little plants must have some mold or fungus of some sort on them—something against which they have developed a resistance, but that might be made fatal to this new giant species."

Cautiously, watchfully, with a great air of innocence, Huntley ventured out into the swamp after breakfast. Unmolested by the beast plants, since he did not go far, he succeeded in finding several specimens of the innocent-looking little Venus's fly-trap. Their guardians watched him, but made no hostile move.

These little plants he uprooted and brought back to the laboratory. While Doris stood by excitedly, he examined portions of their leaves and stems through her father's compound microscope.

"Ah, here's something that looks promising!" he exclaimed. "Take a peep."

She looked—to see an irregular, island-shaped mass of protoplasm, without separating cell walls but containing several dark nuclei.

"A plasmodium," Huntley explained, when Doris had turned from the microscope and lifted a questioning face. "The formation is characteristic of the slime molds. Curious little devils—half plants, half animals. Very clannish, they are. Like to stick together. You've seen colonies of some of the larger species on rotten logs and decaying leaves."

"Ugh—yes!" with a shudder. "Slimy, yellowish or brownish things!"

"Exactly. Mere spreading masses of naked protoplasm. And unlike the fungi, which are true plants, these voracious creatures engulf the tissues of whatever they attack, devouring their victims with the rapacity of animals."

"How horrible!"

"But just the sort of enemy we want—our ally, working for victory against the beast plants. But everything depends upon whether I can develop plasmodia of sufficient size and virulence to do the trick. I must study your father's notes, experiment with his solutions."

**F**OR the next week, that little laboratory in the depths of the great Okefenokee Swamp was the scene of feverish activity. And gradually, as Huntley's plasmodia of repulsive slime molds developed, it became a scene of horror, too.

He felt sure he did not need to change their characteristics; simply their size and quantity, and let their natural voracity do the rest.

Huge liverish-looking things, they grew on cultures under bell-jars till they oozed out on all sides—when he would transfer them to boxes and let them continue their nauseous growth, feeding them, stimulating them with those same mysterious solutions Professor Mortimer had used with such terrible results.

Meantime, while Huntley worked in the laboratory almost night and day, with Doris's assistance, the outside swamp became another scene of horror. For now the buds of the beast plants broke into clusters of great white flowers, and the mating season began.

A deathly fragrance, mingled with clouds of stifling pollen, filled the air. The orgy that had marked the "wedding" ceremony in honor of their king and queen was as nothing to the incessant carousal that now went on, with its demoniac clashes between the lust-maddened beasts.

But there was a graver aspect than this to the situation, for the two workers in the laboratory knew that once the mating season was over, those monsters would develop seeds by the billions and trillions. And that if those seeds once fell, next spring the swamp would be too small for the myriads of the new generation. The following summer would see them overrun the country, the continent!

In short, whatever was to be done must be done before many more days had passed, if an unparalleled catastrophe was to be averted.

So, it was under such pressure that Huntley and Doris worked—and as they worked there developed a graver aspect still. The frenzied monsters, resentful that their sovereigns did not come out and preside over their orgiastic festivals, surrounded the shack and urged them forth with violent rustlings and raspings.

These demands became more and more insistent with each passing day, more and more of the maddened beasts joining in the demonstration. Growing bolder, less respectful of majesty they came closer, peering ever more curiously, more intently through the windows.

Was it merely because they wondered why their rulers wouldn't come out—or did their incalculable, unnatural intelligence suspect what was going on inside?

At any rate, Neil and Doris had long since concluded that to go out, with the beasts in the frenzy, would be to court death or worse. So they stayed inside, worked with desperate haste on those grim cultures.

One night, well toward dawn, Huntley was awakened by a peculiar sound—as of something trying to break into the shack.

Sitting bolt upright in bed, he listened. The sound seemed to come from the

laboratory. Hastily he made his way there, groping through the dark.

On his arrival he saw a sight that chilled him. One of the monsters had broken a window with its trap-jaws and was swishing its floriate head about, inside.

That much he saw by the pale starlight, when the beast suddenly saw him.

What happened next happened with lightning speed. The ominous monster, infuriated no doubt by being discovered, thrust in one of those mighty claws and lunged for him. Dodging, he dashed for the door—but the claw reached there, cut him off. So Huntley backed against the far wall, thinking desperately fast, and the spiked jaws of the deadly trap swung nearer, nearer.

With providential inspiration he seized one of those loathsome bell-jars from a near-by shelf and hurled it full into that yawning maw.

The jaws came shut with a rasp that sent a shudder up his spine. The beast withdrew the murderous tentacle, thrashed its head in fury. But before it could thrust another tentacle in, Huntley had gained the door, escaped.

Doris was standing there in the hall, trembling, a kimono wrapped around her.

"What was it?" she asked.

He told her, adding grimly: "I don't think he'll like that meal any too well! It forced my hand, but—well, we'll be likely to know now, before long, if the thing will work."

And he was right.

For next morning a peculiar stamping, crashing sound came to their ears; and looking out, they saw one of the beasts beating about the knoll in a rage, masses of liverish plasmodia clinging to him like leeches, and growing visibly as they stared.

"Our intruder of last night!" said Huntley with a shudder.

"How horrible!" Doris echoed.

"Yes, but it's our lives or theirs—and our lives and no knowing how many thousands of other human lives! Thank Heaven, we know now the plasmodia are their equals. A few more days and we'll be ready for them."

THEY were not given those few more days, however, for the pain-maddened monstrosity withdrew even as they watched him—to return presently with a score or more of his companions.

A moment or two the ugly chimeras paused on the knoll, while the afflicted one issued a few swift, rasping commands. Then they surged down with him toward the “royal palace” of their now hated rulers.

“Quick, the hall!” cried Huntley, realizing that was the one place those murderous claws could not reach.

They gained it, stood there tense, as the wrathful beasts reached the shack.

A crash of breaking windows followed. The building swayed, its timbers groaned, as the attacking monsters struggled to force their tentacles in. Their bodies were fortunately too large to get inside by any of the existing openings, unless they made new ones.

“Oh, we must do something!” exclaimed Doris, paling. “They’ll tear the place apart.”

“I’ll try,” he encouraged, pressing her hand. “Wait here.”

Rushing to the end of the hall, he waited his chance, then dashed into the laboratory, seized the bell-jar of those deadly plasmodia, hurled it through a window at one of the beasts.

Again and again, risking death each time one of the beasts was infected, in turn infecting those around it in its efforts to fling off the swift-stinging, gnawing stuff that

devoured the beast-plant and grew with every horrid gulp.

The first charge broke as the dismayed monsters retreated, lashing helplessly at this strange enemy that bit into them like acid.

But swiftly they rallied, reenforced their ranks, charged again—more and yet more of them.

Grim, desperate, panting for breath, Huntley met each charge with boxes and bell-jars of the deadly slime molds—and so, for hours, he held off the attacking horde.

As the day wore on, however, it became evident that the besieged pair could not hold out much longer. Although more and more of the beasts were beginning to rasp with the pain of those leech-like parasites, it served only to infuriate them, and in their rage they were literally demolishing the shack, smashing their jaws in the process, but splintering timber after timber.

Worst of all, as the afternoon waned, the supply of plasmodia began to run out—a situation Huntley kept from Doris as long as he could. But finally, as the monsters were massing for a new attack, he was forced to tell her.

“Then you mean—”

She paled, unable to complete the thought in words.

“I mean, I’m afraid it’s the end.” He took her in his arms as he spoke, “but, darling, at least we will face them together. At least, I found you—alive.”

“And oh, my dear, my dear—we found love. They can’t take that from us.”



They clung together, waiting for the loathsome attack they were powerless to resist. He held his sheath-knife ready, to fight while he could, and then to save themselves from a worse fate.

But as the minutes passed and the rasping, frenzied beasts failed to attack they began to wonder, began to hope anew.

Finally, releasing her, Huntley crept cautiously down the hall, stepped into the shattered laboratory. One glance outside, and he signalled her to follow.

"Why, they're going away!" she cried, almost unable to believe her eyes.

It was true. The writhing monsters had evidently had enough for the day, were withdrawing into the sallow dusk of the swamp.

"It must be their natural plant reaction to darkness," Huntley explained grimly. "They evidently aren't keen on night fighting. And unless I miss my guess, they won't be very keen on fighting tomorrow, either!"

**H**IS prediction was fully borne out. By sun-up next day a mighty stamping, crashing sound swelled through the woods, far louder than the noise that had continued all night. Leaving the hall, where they had sat sleepless and ready for the end while Doris dozed fitfully, Huntley went to a window, peered through it.

Rustling and rattling in agony scores of the maddened beasts were thrashing about the knoll, covered with great red

blobs of the ravenous plasmodia. Sickened, Huntley turned away.

The man and girl remained in the battered shack quite unmolested all the day—all the night. By the next dawn the swamp was one vast throb of weakened anguish, slowly subsiding, fading off by sunset to ominous silence.

The third morning of that horrible period not a sound disturbed the brooding hush that had settled there. Thankfully, prayerfully, they looked into each other's eyes. Then they dubiously left that narrow hall that had been their refuge—left the ruined shack to venture outside with the utmost caution.

But there was no need for caution. Everywhere were grim evidences of how thoroughly the slime molds had done their work. The menace was over. The beast-plants had been wiped out.

It was evident, too, that their plasmodia destroyers were doomed. Some were already disintegrating. Others dragged themselves slowly, despairingly along the ground, starving, in a vain search for more of the one species on which they could feed—a species never to exist again.

Doris shuddered. Then, lifting her grave face, she murmured: "Somehow, I knew you'd be successful, Neil dear!"

He replied, his own face grave: "How could I have failed, when you had such faith in me?"

Clasping each other's hands, they fled from that loathsome swamp.