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# Strange STORIES


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# The Hydroponic Monster

By MARIA MORAVSKY

Author of "The Soul of the Cello," "Spider Woman," etc.



It moved forward him like some prehistoric monster

*Vic Widmer Could See the Plant was Green—but Didn't Think the Plant Could See Green!*

**A**MONG the enormous stalks of tomatoes, and two-story-high lilies which Vic Widmer grew, experimenting with soilless agriculture, he spotted that morning a curious, cactuslike plant of vivid green.

"And how did you get here?" he said, smiling.

Hydroponics was his hobby, though he was a lawyer by vocation, and he

talked to his plants as one would to pets.

As he looked at the unusual cactus, it seemed to stir, from the roots up, giving the weird impression of a cat stretching.

Widmer took off his newly-fitted glasses with their modernistic, pointed-up lenses which made him somewhat resemble a curious faun. He wiped them, put them on again on his straight nose. No, the glasses were not blurred. Everything looked as before. Only during the time given to this procedure, the plant seemed to have doubled in size.

Widmer caught a sharp breath. He was used to the miraculously rapid growth of plants fed with a solution of minerals, but this was too much. Some dimly remembered superstitious belief was pushing itself in front of his consciousness, something about plants being endowed with wills of their own.

As the strange plant grew, literally by leaps and bounds, he watched its octopuslike leaves twisting impatiently, like green limbs trying to shake off some invisible bonds. He shuddered.

Then, after a brief, sober reflection, he laughed at himself.

"Hindu fakirs grow mangoes from seeds before the eyes of their audiences," he mused. "They are probably advanced students of hydroponics. If a radish can be grown from seed to the table in three days, it is possible for a naturally fast weed to grow much faster. I must have stumbled on some different proportion of the basic solution. Now, what did I put in there last time?"

He went to the northern end of his slat house, opened a beaverboard locker which served as chemical cabinet, and picked up a gallon jug, half full. He looked at the liquid and tried to remember. . . . The color was the same. He put the jug back into the cabinet, and sat down on the potting bench, his high forehead wrinkled in thought.

No, he had not changed the formula. He had used the same old basic solution of Epsom salts, calcium nitrate, primary potassium phos-

phate, except that he put less of calcium this time, the local water being too full of it.

**H**OW about his trace solution? He picked up a bottle from the top shelf of his chemical cabinet. Its contents looked just slightly off color. But he recalled only one change in that quart of trace solution. He had run out of ammonium iron citrate and substituted ferrous sulphate, which was, according to the government bulletin, just as good.

"Wait a moment," he forced himself to reflect, as the green thing grew fantastically thick in front of his eyes. "How did I obtain that ferrous sulphate?"

What was the piece of iron which he had thrown into sulphuric acid? Why, an ordinary rusty nail. Could that have something to do with—with this monstrosity?

He looked at the cactus, now five feet tall, its smooth leaves resembling somewhat *Aloë Vera*, trembling in some unfelt wind. No, it could not be a cactus, if it were related to *Aloë*. True, *Aloë* was of a liliaceas family, but—

"Oh, just a weed!" he muttered, and, impatient with the freak, he raised his sunburned hand to pull it out.

But his movement was arrested in midair. He could not do it. He could not do it because the plant trembled as if—terrified.

There was an uncanny lifelike quality in its sporadic trembling. Its long, rounded leaves seemed to cringe as if afraid of a death blow. It was mortal fear and not tropical breeze which made those green limbs tremble.

"All right, you live!" Vic Widmer nodded at the giant weed.

Then he began to review again, step by step, his latest application of chemicals.

He walked up and down his large slat house which covered almost all of the worthless, filled-in plot behind the general store of Ed Sacker who had sold this "soilless farm" to him. Now and then he would absent-mindedly pick up a pebble and finger it, while trying to reason out what

caused the strange weed to grow so supernaturally fast.

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks as he recalled something. That had not been an ordinary nail he had dissolved in sulphuric acid the day before. It had been a horseshoe nail. A very rusty one, and unusually small.

He remembered how he had come by it. He had been digging and digging before he proved to himself that the land was worthless. He had found nothing but rubbish, covered superficially by a thin layer of muck. The muck obviously had been carted from the lowlands. There was no muck in this section of Palmico.

Among other rubbish he had struck a horseshoe, then another, and still another. One after one they had protruded from the refill, like relics of some stampede of domesticated horses gone suddenly wild. He had wondered at the time where all those horseshoes had come from.

**H**IS thoughts were abruptly cut short by a loud voice.

"Well, Vic, how about that last month installment?"

He turned with dismay toward the stocky figure of his creditor, Ed Sacker.

"But you promised to wait a few weeks more," he protested. "I haven't had a case for months!"

Sacker smirked with frank disbelief.

"I read the papers, Mr. Widmer. Your brilliant defense of Farmer Grant—"

Widmer's sunny brown eyes were suddenly clouded.

"I did not get paid for that. Grant had no money. His farm was foreclosed just before he killed that man!"

He fairly spat the last words. At that moment he knew how that poor wretch had felt when he had killed his man, because he, himself, felt like killing his land owner.

Sacker seemed to read his thoughts.

"You enjoyed defending that murderer, eh? Always siding with the underdog. It sounds fine—only you 'humanitarians' seldom pay your debts. Too busy saving humanity."

It was a continuation of the intermittent argument in which the two men had indulged for the past three years. A strange animosity had sprung between them, ever since Sacker had sold Widmer that worthless lot.

"I hate to pay for such a dump!" Widmer snapped. "You cheated me!"

Sacker looked around at the enormous vines of *chayotes* twining all over the slat house. Wonder mixed with envy was in his sloe, shoe-button eyes, as they noticed the heavy, jade green fruit like corrugated pears, mixing with ruby-red tomatoes, ripe long before their season.

"Worthless land! Why, this soil grows everything! I wish I had never sold it to you! I could use a few bushels of those *chayotes* and 'ripes' right now, in my store."

"If it's a hint, pick all you want. Shall we call it interest on the payment?"

Widmer tried to be conciliatory. There was no use antagonizing the richest merchant in town. Sacker nodded, reluctantly.

"Just where did you get the fill for this lot?" Widmer asked, trying to veer the conversation into safer channels, and also to satisfy his curiosity. "I found so many horseshoes in it that—"

"In Banana Grove," was the prompt reply. "There used to be an old smithy there."

"But the shoes were so small—as if they belonged to that prehistoric horse. . . . What was it called?"

Sacker did not know and he did not care. Science did not interest him. He was so ignorant that he did not even know how Vic Widmer grew his wonderful vegetables and flowers. He thought that it was he who had the worst of the bargain. In some unexplained way, his land had turned out to be fertile. Perhaps his buyer had dug deeper than the rubbish, into some unusually fertile subsoil.

"You're lucky you got this lot from me!" he stated covetously.

Widmer lost his patience.

"Listen, you ignorant cracker! Your soil has nothing to do with my garden. I've tried to tell you again and again, but you're too full of your profit and

loss thoughts. This piece of land won't grow a palmetto shrub! It was scraped clean by that nursery man who rented it from you before I came here. He sold the top soil for lawns. The subsoil is entirely coral rock, with a few pot holes. There is a few inches of rubbish on top of that. Every time I want to plant something, I have to scrape that rubbish, and substitute clean pebbles, to support the roots of my plants, because that rock has too much lime. That is easier than growing them entirely in water made fertile by chemicals."

"What do I care how you grow them?" snapped Sacker. "They grow here, that's all I know. You got a wonderful farm right at the back of my store. And I have to drive a truck to the interior to get vegetables to sell."

**S**TILL muttering his envious thoughts aloud, Sacker lumbered away.

"And I'd be much obliged to get paid by the end of the month, or I'll start foreclosure proceedings," were his last threatening words.

Cooling off his impotent anger with difficulty, Widmer resumed the trend of his interrupted thoughts. The nail came from horseshoes. . . . The horseshoes had come from Banana Grove. . . . Perhaps some seed, unknown to him, had clung to that prehistoric horseshoe?

But the old smithy was not prehistoric; only old-fashioned. Widmer tried to curb his imagination. Besides, no seed could live in sulphuric acid. His line of reasoning was wrong, entirely wrong.

He sighed and resumed his pacing. As he came near the curious plant, he saw slight protuberances on its smooth long leaves. Like *Aloë Vera*, the plant had no branches. Its leaves came out of the ground, in a rosette formation. What if the thing were about to bloom?

Even as he examined the bumps closer, they swelled, and began to open. No sooner did he glimpse a bright spot on the top of the largest bud than it burst open and disclosed a great blue flower heavily fringed

with smaller petals which looked like lashes of a great blue eye.

Another, and still another flower opened, until all the plant seemed an Argus looking at him with its hundred imploring eyes. And Vic Widmer could have sworn that there was intelligence in them!

He attempted to touch one of the blooms and, like an eye poked at, it closed instantly. Widmer laughed uneasily.

"So you are related to mimosas! All right, I won't touch. But, look here, even mimosas can be tamed!"

He was instantly self-conscious about his little speech. This is what came of being too fond of one's hobby. A man talking to his plants! A tableau from an insane asylum.

Still, he reflected, even such a conservative writer as Hyatt Verill maintained that plants, sensitive to human touch, can be tamed. Widmer recalled a description of a mimosa from Verill's book on "Wonder Plants And Plant Wonders." Verill would touch it gently every morning, until the plant in some mysterious way, came to know him and no longer closed its leaves under the familiar touch. Then, as his friend "tamed" another plant of the mimosa family, that one must have considered Verill a stranger, for it closed instantly, as soon as the dismayed writer touched it.

"I'll try to tame this strange weed!" Vic Widmer resolved.

He returned to the far end of the slat house where the cactuslike stranger grew. Great drops of dew hung now on its blue flowers.

"First, I must give it a name." He thought for a moment, then remembered: "Louette." A pretty name. The name of his creditor's youngest daughter.

"We'll call you Louette," he said aloud, and attempted to touch one of the flowers. It closed, spilling a few drops of dew.

"Now, now, don't cry!" he said jocularly. "Louette, I mean to tame you. Don't close your eyes, my dear."

"Hey, what are you doing here!" The thundering voice was Sacker's. "Sneaking here to see that good-for-nothing—"

He barged in, looking all around, everywhere.

"Where's my daughter?" he demanded.

"You're insane," Vic Widmer said without animosity. "She never comes here. I'm talking to my plants."

"You're nuts!" Sacker retorted, after a long and fruitless search. "Talking to plants! Tomatoes! And you thinking you're a lawyer!"

**B**EFORE he turned to go, he laid his heavy, somewhat shaking hand on the young man's shoulder.

"If I catch you and her, ever, I'll beat up both of you!"

He left with his abnormally heavy, rolling gait.

Widmer sat down on the upturned orange crate, and stared at the cedar sawdust covering the slat house floor. The sun rays, filtering through the cypress slats, twined with vines, threw intricate tapestry of shadows under his feet. Orchids, suspended from the ceiling, swung in the faint breeze. Mocking birds sang lustily somewhere on a telegraph wire.

But he was hardly aware of his surroundings. He was lost in thought, staring, without seeing them, at his sunburned bare legs, inadequately protected by the abbreviated shorts in which he usually worked. A big, harmless spider crawled up his left calf. Even if he had seen it, he would not have bothered to shake it off. He was used to the multitudinous Florida insects.

He reflected unhappily about the mess he had made of his young life so far. Three years out of the State University, and no practice to speak of. The large, home-made sign: "Victor Widmer, Attorney-at-law," nailed over his combination office and living quarters, attracted less attention from the passersby than the riotous vegetation fairly bursting out of his slat house on the back lot.

And he had tried to be so sensible and practical. He had known how hard it was for a young lawyer to establish practice in a large city so, after graduating, he had moved to Palmico. He knew that it would take time, even here, so he had learned

how to grow plants without soil.

Wild orchids were his only indulgence. All the rest were useful vegetables; things to eat. He managed to sell some of his incredibly grown produce, too. Still, he had not been able to make ends meet.

The roof leaked badly. If he neglected it, it might rot, after another rainy season. As to that overdue payment, he had no earthly hope of meeting it. Sacker would foreclose all right. No pity to be expected from that quarter!

He was still mulling over it unhappily, supporting his dark, curly head on his closed fist when he felt something sticking to his leg.

He glanced down and saw the spider. But it was not the spider's legs which clung to his bronzed skin. The spider scuttled down, then stopped, as if paralyzed. A thin, sticky feeler was closing around its sand-colored body that was marked with a white cross.

Young Widmer's glance traveled in the direction of that extended feeler, and rested on his weird weed. He surveyed it with wide-eyed wonder, for Louette had grown a new set of flowers!

They were oddly shaped, much larger than the first ones, and of a different color. Dirty white, mottled with purplish veins. They had deep, carvinorous-looking throats, like those of the giant Florida flycatcher. Long, thin feelers grew out of those grotesque flower centers. It was one of them which tugged now at the hapless spider.

Soon it withdrew, dragging with it the body of the spider which disappeared into the flower throat. The flower then closed, in the usual manner of the flycatcher's bloom, while the other set of flowers grew still bluer and clearer, like the serene eyes of a well fed human.

By now, Widmer was past gasping. He did not want to live in the state of suspended wonderment, he wanted to *know*. With fierce effort he concentrated again on the interrupted problem of Louette's origin.

Where was he, when Sacker had come barging in bothering him

with those immediate, practical demands? Oh, yes, the horseshoes. The horseshoes that had come from Banana Grove.

Banana Grove. . . . What was that peculiar news about the Grove which he had read about awhile ago? Oh, yes, on the night of the shooting stars, when the sky had been full of those celestial fireworks, a small meteorite had fallen by the former smithy and broken into fragments. Souvenir hunters had picked them up, but some sharp pieces had dug themselves deeply into the soft muck.

He jumped up and passed his long, calloused fingers through his dark chestnut curls. Now he understood! That meteorite fragment! Was it in the fill on his lot?

He now remembered finding a curious pebble among the rubbish next to that nail. Like a fool, he had stuck it into a pile of other pebbles supporting the roots of his plants, without investigating how such a pebble got among those soft coral rocks. If he were a real scientist and not an amateur, he might have known that it was geologically alien to the subsoil of that section of the country.

He bent and peered under Louette's leaves, now spreading contentedly like the limbs of a sleek, green octopus.

Yes, here it was, that sharp pebble which now he had no doubt had fallen from the sky.

A fragment of meteorite! A strange seed or embryo of some live organism must have clung to it, and sprouted here, awakened by the powerful chemicals which abnormally speeded its growth!

He straightened and looked down at the would-be *Aloë*. He did not need to bend much now, for it was nearly as high as he. The new carnivorous flowers were opened again, the darkly purple maws yawning hungrily. In spite of his plausible explanation of the phenomenon, he shuddered involuntarily. The plant was a cannibal! What if it grew too large to control? What if it ceased to content itself with insects?

"So what?" he pacified his nervous uneasiness. "The plant can't walk.

It won't eat me, unless I come too close."

As if in answer to that, Louette moved. Its roots seemed to stir from the ground, withdrawing, like powerful claws of some bird of prey, tangled into a dark net. With mounting fear, Vic Widmer realized that there was nothing to hold the plant except loose pebbles.

They were piled loosely, on purpose, to provide good drainage so the plants would not be overdosed with the chemical solution which might kill as well as feed them. Widmer snatched the quart bottle which held trace solution.

"If I give you more than the usual dose of this, you die!" he said, threateningly shaking the bottle before the flower eyes of his weird plant. It could see—he was certain of that!

"It must be some unknown form of animated life, unknown at least on our planet," he thought. "A half-plant, half-animal, endowed with some intelligence."

His scientific curiosity still stronger than his fear, he watched avidly how the plant would react to his threat. What he saw made him drop the bottle. The great jade limbs shook as if with helpless terror. The gentian-blue flowers opened still wider, looking imploringly into young Widmer's own. Those eyes hypnotized him into pity.

"All right, you live!" he repeated.

Only this time it was not a jocular expression. He felt as if he had spared a dangerous enemy. But was it an enemy?

**I**T LOOKED at him now with an adoring expression, with softness. So a bottle-fed cub might look at the human who raised it. Well, wasn't Louette a bottle-fed creature? He no longer called it a plant, even in his thoughts.

But how had the embryo survived the terrific heat while the meteorite was falling to earth? Widmer paused, then shrugged off this barrier to his hypothesis. How does a grain of wheat survive centuries of drought within a pyramid? For thousands-year-old wheat had germinated after

being removed from the forgotten granaries of Egypt. Was it too much to surmise that other planets have high-heat-resistant seeds?

For it must have been a seed, and not an animal embryo that had produced Louette. Widmer tried to cling to this explanation because that other one, about half-plant and half-human was too grotesque to endure calmly. That disturbed pile of pebbles? They must have been loosened by the plant's rapid growth.

He came over to Louette, heaped more pebbles around those protruding roots. Then he fell to calculating about them. Remembering tumbleweed and rose of Sharon, he no longer felt surprised even at the possibility of this plant walking. Several earthly plants withdrew their roots from the parched soil and tumbled in the direction of the wind, at times covering enormous distances. Then, when a rain fell, while they were resting on fertile soil, they would root again and begin to grow, burrowing into the soft loam. Nothing could be more natural than that.

Comforted by those speculations, he returned to the consideration of his own immediate problem, that of food. He was broke, stone broke. And he was tired of eating nothing but vegetables. He longed for a good juicy steak, or perhaps, fried chicken.

What made him think of chicken? It seemed that he smelled its tantalizing odor right in the slat house. He turned his head in the imaginary smell's direction. And it had not been imagination, sharpened by hunger! Here was Louette, the real Louette, his creditor's daughter, by the door of the slat house, gnawing at a chicken bone.

"Want some?" she asked shyly, stretching toward him a small, dimpled hand which held a piece of golden brown chicken, half wrapped in a lettuce leaf.

"Louette! I told you not to come here! Your father—"

The girl laughed lightly, her golden eyes narrowing mischievously, her cheeks growing still pinker in her embarrassment.

"She can't be more than sixteen,"

Widmer thought. "Just a kid. I mustn't scold her."

He accepted the offer of the delicious meat with unconcealed gratitude. It was sweet of the kid to bother. Especially after what her father had said.

"But please go now, Miss Sacker," he urged. "Your father said he might beat us both up if—"

She grew suddenly serious.

"Don't call me Miss, Vic. We played marbles together. Did you outgrow me so much, since you became a lawyer?"

"A lawyer!" he mimicked bitterly. "I'm a nobody. A would-be. A stark failure!"

Her sympathy for him was greater than her timidity. Comfortingly, she laid her hand on his bare shoulder.

"I know your troubles. Father threatens to foreclose. Why don't you offer to work for him for the payments? He needs a delivery man just now."

Vic Widmer jumped at the opportunity. That was an idea! The kid was much more practical than he, with his interplanetary dreams.

"I'll do that!" he exclaimed. "Thanks for the tip! And now, run along, little lady!"

**H**E BENT and lightly kissed the hand still resting on his shoulder. At the same moment he heard what sounded like hissing. He glanced around. No, it was just pebbles falling. But these pebbles were falling from the hill that supported the weird weed's roots!

One of the roots, which he had just covered before Louette's visit, was now bare, looking more than ever like a bird's leg with claws!

He heaved a sigh. It was fortunate that the real Louette had left promptly. For how could he have explained to her this unnamed monstrosity and make it sound logical?

He knew now. He knew as well as he knew his name. The plant could walk!

Without thinking, he grabbed a piece of rope lying by the slat house door, and tied the heavy green limbs together, to a corner slat house post.



"Now stand still, like a good plant," he said grimly.

That night he could not sleep, wondering how to ask Sacker for the job, without showing too much humility. And through his bread and butter worry, a persistent thought recurred—how was the tied down plant, Louette?

The moon was too bright for sleep, anyhow. Widmer reflected with bitterness that he was too poor even to buy the much needed shades for the house. After tossing awhile longer, he got up and went out into the slat house.

Louette was gone!

Well, he should have known that. The rope was severed as if by acid. That carnivorous what-was-it must have reached for it with one of its feelers and put it into its—should he say "mouth?" For what else could he call that veined purplish flower which could eat insects and digest ropes?

"Its saliva must be terribly potent," he reflected, trying to subdue some nameless terror the thought aroused.

Related to a tumbleweed or an animal, the thing was moving voluntarily, walking in the night, there was no doubt about it. Or, perhaps, it had been stolen by some curiosity seeker, familiar with his experiments.

He would sleep on that. No use imagining grotesque things in the middle of the night.

But in the morning, when he went to water his plants with the semi-weekly feeding solution, Louette was in her place, blue flowers opened demurely, diamondlike dewdrops on the lashes.

Vic Widmer stood stockstill. Was he going insane? Why, he was now thinking about that weed in terms of a human being!

He sat by it on his rough potting bench, trying once more to reason out the puzzle. Must the inhabitants of other planets necessarily fall into those well defined earthly categories of animals and plants? Why even here there existed half-animal, half-plant beings—on evolution's lowest scale. Even today. That algae, for instance, which clogged his fish pool. But then, this plant-animal which he

had raised unwittingly seemed to possess superhuman intelligence. How else could it understand his threats, uttered in human language?

"Babies and animals understand when we threaten them," he said to himself, trying to steady his tottering reason. "Why shouldn't a stranger, an intelligent stranger from another planet? Why, this poor weed, this poor monster baby must feel terrible here, all alone." He managed to soften his growing terror with pity.

Just then he heard Sacker bellowing at the door.

"Come out here, you murderer!"

**H**E GOT up from the bench, wrapping his cotton bathrobe closer about him.

"What's happened now?" he asked angrily.

"Come out, or I'll call the police! It's your damned plant!"

Hurriedly Widmer shrugged off his bathrobe and donned a pair of overalls. Then he rushed toward his adversary who brandished a gun.

"The thing stung me when I fought it!" he declared. "Come on into the house, before I blow your brains out, you hexer!"

Still uncomprehending what caused such high rage, Widmer followed Sacker into his home. Rich as he was, the cracker still lived over his general store.

In a gabled room, on the unmade bed, lay Louette, pale as the sheets that covered her. On her throat were greenish, muddy marks.

"That plant—your damned weed—it tried to strangle my girl!" Sacker sputtered, in renewed rage.

Vic Widmer was stunned. The explanation of this uncanny assault came to him in a flash. The plant was jealous!

Slowly, as one in a cataleptic dream, he walked down the uncarpeted steps, followed by Sacker who prodded him on with his revolver. Once outside, he tried to remonstrate with the furious father.

"Mr. Sacker, I did not know what a monster I had grown. I'll kill it! Louette can't be badly hurt. I saw her smiling just before we left. May-

be it was just a hoax on her part? A schoolgirl's prank? Are you sure she isn't just pretending?"

Even as he was saying this, he knew that he was wrong.

"Listen, you nut!" shouted Sacker. "For some damn fool reason Louette likes you. She pleaded with me to give you a job. She wouldn't joke in such a way. She was in a faint when we found her. That witch-plant of yours must have thought her dead!"

"But, Sacker, for heaven's sake, you don't think that a plant—"

"I don't think! I know! Kill that thing right away—now! Pull it out by the roots!"

Sad as he felt at the thought of destroying this plant being from an alien planet, Widmer steeled himself to do it. Once more he picked up the half-torn rope. This time he made a noose at the frayed end of it.

"I'll help you!" Sacker snapped, pocketing his gun.

The men walked into the slat house in cautious silence, stealthily, as if stalking a dangerous, escaped beast.

But the would-be executioners were too late. The small hill of disturbed pebbles, still emanating the odor of feeding chemicals, was empty. Louette the plant—or was it Louette, the animal?—had disappeared.

"Where is it?" Sacker asked.

"I—it withered, and I threw it away," Widmer quickly lied. "I tried to tell you but you were too excited to listen."

A few days later, on a windy day, a colored gardener in the region of Lake Okeechobee saw a giant cactus-like weed moving swiftly toward Big Cypress Swamp. The Negro swore that the plant used its roots as legs.

But swear to his story as he would, nobody believed him. Except Vic Widmer. And he kept his thoughts to himself. What if some day the runaway plant should come back?

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