

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 15, No. 4

OCTOBER

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Cover by Emsb

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 15, No. 4, Whole No. 59, OCT. 1958. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc., at 32¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and Possessions, Canada and the Pan-American Union; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and general office, 327 Madison Avenue, New York 17, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. © 1958 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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Those who have read THE SECRET MASTERS and FACES IN A DUSTY PICTURE know, of course, that Kersh is one of those ambidexterous writers, as much at ease with the dreaming left hand of science fiction as with the muscular right arm of war and the world. What happens when such a formidable combination goes to work on a plot dealing with the sinister mental diseases of plants? Yes, the mental diseases of plants. A neurose, after all, by any other name. . . .

The Terribly Wild Flowers

by GERALD KERSH

"THERE IS NO 'OFFICIAL SECRECY' which can totally blanket the origins of the so-called mysterious fire that destroyed the botanical gardens at Forfex in Kent. But in this age of panic it was regarded as expedient to keep the matter quiet until the situation was well under control—which the authorities hope and believe is now the case. (Oh, ay, we live in hopes! As to the Government's viewpoint on Psychological Warfare, as they term it—when in doubt, keep your mouth shut.) Hysteria is often best treated by a sharp slap in the face, but how does one slap a billion faces simultaneously? And we do live in a period of mass hysteria, wild credulity, mad conjecture and impending stampede. The intelligent observer must feel, just now,

as the American cowhand must feel when riding herd with a thunderstorm impending . . ."

I quote Dr. Angus Huish, Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, sometime of Edinburgh University, as one might gather from his dour, pawky manner of expressing himself. "If the scribblers of so-called 'Science' features had got hold of this, particularly at the time it occurred," Dr. Huish continued, "a generation nurtured on fear and rumor, that cut its teeth on flying saucers and weaned its imagination on flight by rocket anywhere out of this world, might have lost the little that remains to it of Reason . . ."

There is a childishness about your abstract thinkers (of the Huish type) who do not forcee

consequences. Consider, for example, Einstein and his atom bombs, or Nobel and his "safe" nitroglycerin; rocket researchers and their "sputniks", or the inventors of useful insecticides and paralyzing Nerve Gas; or the Philadelphia cancer researcher and his dangerous crystals isolated from inflamed cells—a tubeful of which cost a million dollars in research—who, asked if they might be used for war, replied, appalled, "Yes, but that is not what they are for!" God knows whether such men are a blessing or a curse to Mankind.

Great as he was in his field of medical research, there was too much grey Edinburgh granite in Angus Huish's makeup and, as in Kipling's orang-outang, "too much ego in his cosmos." To Huish, human agony was symptomatic, merely a clue, and disease a puzzling problem to be grappled with ruthlessly, if necessary, but inexorably—reminding one of his pitiless predecessor, the ill-famed anatomist of Edinburgh, Dr. Knox, who paid cash on the nail for corpses and asked no questions, and was hooted out of the city to the sinister refrain:

*Up the close and doon the stair,
But-and-ben wi' Burke and Hare,
Burke's the butcher, Hare's the thief.*

And Knox the boy who buys the beef . . .

Angus Huish's specialty was the human brain, among the 15,000,000,000 neurons of which lie the dry, picked bones of thousands of exploratory theories that died in their tracks. Unfortunately, he did not. A masterful, scholarly man, both bold and imaginative, he always managed to get his way by a sort of didactic bullying in the style of Lord Macaulay, plus a knack he had of exciting curiosity and sometimes fierce controversy even among reticent and cautious scientific men all over the world. He was a jurist among Doctors of Medicine; and yet it was he who was primarily responsible for what some of us suspect will yet culminate in universal calamity.

His thinking (apart from his mathematics, formulae, and statistics, which it would be difficult or well-nigh impossible for the layman to comprehend) may be understood by touching upon the highlights of his earlier scientific papers. The first, in the early 1920's, innocently reported on the reactions upon bean-plants of human poisons—which, in effect, is *Phytopharmacology* as it is known today. Further Huish reports on his findings received confirmation from outstanding scientists: Dr. Banerji of Calcutta, for example, and Dr. Slameda

Sauers, the "Mme. Curie of Neurology." To sum it up, he had noticed and proved that young lupines, flourishing on healthy human blood in dilution, would be stunted and eventually killed by the poison—or toxin—in a 1/100 solution, of a true psychotic's blood (for "psychotic" read the incurably mentally deranged).

And what he proposed to do was search among the billions of plants in the vegetable world for suitable specimens in order, first, to induce a disease akin to human insanity; then, to cure it; and, last, to adapt this cure for Man. Thereby he would find an infallible remedy for madness.

All very fine and large, you may say, but try and sort all the plants upon the earth to choose the right ones! Also: how correlate our complex nervous system with the simple structure of a plant? Still, as Dr. Huish would argue, was even grass simple, if it could convert air and soil and sun into food upon which animals and Man himself were, in fact, hopelessly dependent?

But in the end, among the higher orders of plants, Dr. Huish hit upon a group suiting his purpose exactly: those most closely approximating flesh, and which may be said to "eat" — the sundew and the Venus's fly-trap, for example — and which also have the "intelligence" to snap at or snare their insect prey, and secrete

something like human digestive juices to feed upon them.

But now Dr. Huish found himself at a biological dead-end, somewhere beyond the microscope and the microtone, in some region thinner than a centrifuge could divide — a region verging upon the spiritual. And he hated this.

Nevertheless, Dr. Huish was not out of luck — or call it "luck of the Devil," to quote the head-gardener at Forfex — for he felicitously fell upon a perfect medium for his insanity inoculations, and an imperfect place for his carnivorous plants. Grudgingly he conceded his debt to the United States researchers at the Rockefeller Foundation, M.I.T., Johns Hopkins, etcetera (whom he described as "stolid technicians," excepting only Dr. Bligh of Minnesota), for his medium. This consisted of components of uric acid, one of the causes of rheumatism, which also happens, as Dr. Huish originally suggested, to stimulate the human brain to reason, or making sense. But it was only when Dr. Bligh synthesized from a powerful derivative of uric acid, commonly known as Purine, certain significant compounds, that Dr. Huish had the basic solution, to which he added plasma for his *Purine Complex* 48.

And then that fanatical old botanist, the Earl of Forfex, died,

and his large and ancient estate in Kent went entirely to the tax-gatherers. His son, the 7th Earl, was ruined; and, the Castle with its botanical gardens being taken over by the National Trust, Dr. Huish sprang upon the hothouses like a tiger . . . in the name of Humanity.

Nobody was more pleased than the current Lord Forfex when he was put out of the cold, gloomy Castle and into the snug Keeper's Lodge. Dr. Huish made him a laboratory assistant—a handy drudge to bully and cajole and be adored by—although he irritated Huish with his persistent, monotonous voice and an aggravating coolness of manner. Moreover, he dressed like a knickerbockered professor out of a comic strip, and sucked at a pipe which had cost several pounds once upon a time but which he had neglectfully knocked and scraped into something more becoming to a tramp.

Besides the Earl of Forfex, who was a botanist like his father and a Master of Science, and the men of learning who came to the Castle from all over the world (never was any scientist more fortunate in his assistants), Dr. Huish had as head-gardener the slum-bred Jack Hopkins, a Cockney destined like his father to be a postman, but who had something about him which plants appeared to un-

derstand. So, in London's northern latitude he grew tropical orchids and pineapples for one of the Rothschilds; made a showplace of a cinema star's roof-garden, soot-intoxicated and wind-swept above the polluted River Thames; and in the leaky glasshouses at Forfex reproduced under glass the conditions of the marshes, from the equatorial jungle to the subarctic tundra, that beget carnivorous plants.

Even the countrymen around Forfex had to admit that the "townee"—as they called Jack Hopkins—had "the touch." He was the only man with whom Dr. Angus Huish chose not to argue. So when Jack Hopkins growled, "Ill weeds always thrive," Huish nodded and said, "Jack puts it in a nutshell. . . ."

But somebody picked on that phrase, "ill weeds"—referring to the human variety because Huish was a brain specialist—and in one of the lesser Medical Journals there was a paper on the preternatural strength of madmen in relation to the terrible power of survival of savage herbs. To which, Jack Hopkins indifferently said:

"Savage 'erbs? Why, Gawd save the Queen, sir, would you call a lamb savage because it took a snack off of a bit o' clover? Or your mother savage because she took 'er dinner off of a lamb chop? Well, then —"

Dr. Huish said, "...leave mothers out of this, and concentrate on pitcher-plants, sundew and Venus's fly-trap."

"So I do, sir, but it's kind o' funny. Might I ask what that stuff is we been feeding 'em? A little tubeful a day, you know? It's not for the likes of me to ask the likes of you what you're a-doing of —"

"Bluidy right it's not. Mind your business."

"So I will, sir, but it's funny, that's all."

"Oh?" said Dr. Huish, with a kind of lowering glee. "Funny again, is it? Out with it!"

Now Lord Forfex interposed in his soft, authoritative way, "Mr. Hopkins, the solution is a secret. But let us have your observations, if you please."

"Thanks, m'lord, for talking civil. And I'll try to explain, if I can. You know, your lordship, the sundew is a slow-moving plant and eats meat. But so do you, and me too; I had stew for my dinner, and very nice too. Meat is good for plants. There's nothing richer than graveyard soil, I'm told. But as a gentleman you don't guzzle, you mind your manners and don't gallop..." He paused to light a pipeful of that spoiled shag which is used to fumigate greenhouses, the stuff known in the 18th Century as "mundungus."

"The point, come to the point!"

shouted Dr. Huish hoarsely.

But Jack Hopkins was not to be hurried. He said, "Well, the sundew likes carrion, sir. But so do ladies and gentlemen turn up their noses at a fresh pheasant, or a bit o' venison or mutton not properly hung for weeks. Also, the sundew gives out a perfume what attracts flies which it eats. And so do ladies and gentlemen, only they buy it in little bottles, and they eat maggots in Stilton cheese..."

Dr. Huish made a characteristic gesture of impatience, folding and unfolding his arms and legs and ruffling what was left of his hair. "I see you're getting a bit impatient, sir," Jack Hopkins continued. "But I'm getting to my point. One of them there sundews bit my Nellie —"

"Hopkins, if you carry on like this, I'll have you certified, damn me if I don't!" Dr. Huish roared.

"Hold hard, Huish, if you please!" said Lord Forfex. "Mr. Hopkins, Nellie is your dog, I believe; and the sundew bit her, you say?"

"In a manner of speaking, m'lord. This 'ere sundew, your lordship, what don't like fresh meat and moves slower than the hour-hands of a clock, suddenly reaches out, quick as a snake, and fastens itself to Nellie's nose. Drew blood, too. Now, my Nellie which I raise from a pup for twelve years, will pin a rat or a

cat or even a man — anything as walks on legs what comes nigh summat as grows—but she wouldn't go near a flower. My opinion is, sir, that this 'ere sundew has took to secreting summat attractive to dogs —".

Dr. Huish called upon the Devil, whose existence he doubted, to take him if he could make head or tail of Hopkins' cockney jargon; whereupon the gardener touched his forelock, having respect for the mysteries of life, and retorted, "Best not invite Old Nick too soon!"

Then he turned to Lord Forfex. "What's more, this Venus's flytrap 'ere generally got no perfume a human can appreciate. But last night, m'lord, one of ours give out a pretty smell and I bend down to sniff. Went for me, and well-nigh got me too with them needley little teeth o' hers. No, m'lord, this ain't in nature. And now my Nellie's acting up queer, and running a fever. . . . Yes, Doctor, you can say 'Oho,' and all that; but our sundew has poisoned my Nellie and it's not poppycock! A man can't help liking his little bit of a dog —"

"And when was it you said the sundew attacked your dog?" asked Huish. "You're sure it didn't bite you?"

"Sir, you'd be hard put to it to get a pen-knife through the skin o' my hand, let alone a tendril. Nellie got bit two days ago."

"Hum. Well, Hopkins, we want a blood-specimen out of this dog of yours."

"Sir," said Hopkins, "anybody puts a needle in my Nellie will, I'm sorry to say, do so acrost a shotgun!"

Dr. Huish shouted, "Strike me blind, but if I don't get a blood sample, I'll have the cur chloroformed for rabies!"

"Calm, Dr. Huish, calm," said Lord Forfex, "Are there no guinea-pigs? No rats? . . . My dear Hopkins, all Dr. Huish wants of your little dog is to take a few drops of bad blood away, not to put bad blood in. And furthermore, your Nellie may become quite a heroine, with statues erected to her. Consider Banting —"

"Ay, would you rather have a dog, or diabetes?" Dr. Huish growled.

"Oh, do be quiet!" cried Lord Forfex.

"It ain't only Nellie I'm so worried about," said Hopkins, "it's the plants — they ain't right. . . . Well, take a bit o' blood out o' Nellie, if that'll do good, only let me 'old the old girl down with leather gloves because she snapped at me this morning. . . ."

Jack Hopkins' Nellie was one of those dogs they call "lurchers," which survive, where your thoroughbreds whose brains have been wished away for the sake

of shape cannot, by blatant sunning; sly, soft-mouthed, ingratiating crossbreeds curiously close to the mightiest mongrel of them all, Man. She was calm and smiling — as dogs smile — while she lay at her master's feet in his little sitting-room, and wagged her tail at the approach of Dr. Huish, and of Lord Forfex, whose heavy leather gloves did not disturb her in the least.

But when Jack Hopkins put out his hands to stroke her, saying, "Ah, there now, that's a good girl for you —" she slashed at him upwards and sideways, and might have got her teeth home only he was too quick for her. After that, as if nothing had happened, she rolled over on her back, offering her stomach to be scratched.

Then Hopkins, with tears on his cheeks, said, "Oh Lord, I can tell that sideways look in a dog's eyes. She's got to be dead, I'm afraid ... Lord Forfex, m'lord, could I have the loan of your .12 bore, and a couple of number-6 cartridges?"

Dr. Huish said, "First of all, Mr. Hopkins, let us have the dog's blood-sample. And rather than a dog spoilt with a barrel or two of shot, be reasonable, man, and let me do it with barbiturates in sugared milk, and then a whiff of chloroform?"

"Her blood what I promised," said Hopkins, "I stand by. As for the rest, sir, Nellie was my dog,

and I won't have her 'put to sleep,' as they say." Unintentionally, in his grief he made something like a witticism. "She has got to be shot to put me out of her misery."

"But I want that dog's brain! Hopkins, I'll give you a five-pound note for it. Or, blast my soul, I'll have the dog confiscated in the public interest! Now, all I need are a few drops of blood and spinal fluid out of the poor beastie," said Dr. Huish.

The test-samples being taken — and Nellie accepted the situation with a certain sidelong suavity — Dr. Huish went out, quite pleased.

Lord Forfex lingered for as long as it took to say, "Oh, Hopkins, over the fireplace in the Lodge, you'll see three or four guns. Be so kind as to clean them for me. And in the right-hand drawer of my desk, you may notice a few boxes of cartridges — but they needn't concern you."

"Thank you, m'lord, I appreciate it."

Outside the gardener's cottage, Lord Forfex said in the ruminative way of his that displeased Dr. Huish, "I take it we have been feeding those wretched plants — the sundew and the fly-trap, and the others — Purine Complex 48, plus 2663141? With all respect, Dr. Huish, I don't like it. Hopkins' little terrier was too well trained to nose into a flower,

or slash her master. Something deucedly odd here . . . Wait a second, the genesis of that 2863141 Complex! — what was it?"

"As clean a case as ever I took a blood-test from; stark raving mad, that boy." Dr. Huish rubbed his hands. "A complete psychotic. Sixteen proven murders in three years, each one a little different. A silk stocking today, scissors tomorrow, a wee lead pipe the day after; and later an electric heater in a girl's bathtub, etcetera. *Non compos mentis*, Forfex. The mediaevalists would have said that young Matthew Taylor was 'possessed,' they would."

"Did you say *Matthew Taylor*?" cried Lord Forfex, whereupon Dr. Huish nodded, grinning with a sort of unholy relish. "Sir," Lord Forfex went on, "I have read a little psychology and observed a little more, and I believe that Matthew Taylor was in his right mind *only while committing his crimes!* His normal state, since he was born mad, is mania; so that your Matthew Taylor is amenable and even charming only while devising or committing some atrocity. It is whenever any civilized instincts come into his consciousness that he foams at the mouth! Huish, you took his blood samples when he was calm enough to hold, of course. That means to say, when Taylor was at his most homicidal. And we fed the 1/100 solution of his blood to the sun-

dew and those other plants?"

Dr. Huish said sardonically, "I took the liberty, being in charge here, of neglecting to ask Your Lordship's august permission, and dispensed a solution of 3/100."

"Then I submit, Dr. Huish, that you were too daring. These greenhouses and hothouses have been in need of repair — draughty, leaky, boldly patched — for years since my father died. Insects and vermin get in, and what gets in generally gets out, leaving some wreckage behind and carrying some ruin with it. Consider myxamytosis, so innocently started by a biologist in France, and the ensuing catastrophe to hares and rabbits of several continents . . . Hopkins tells me the rats have been at the mushrooms here. You *must* have regard for the consequences, sir!"

"Oh, stop talking like a confounded clock! And what the devil are you prattling about these hothouses for?"

Quite unperturbed by Huish's tone, Lord Forfex replied in his peculiarly metronomic voice, "Because I maintain that any experiment so dangerous and delicate as yours should be conducted in sealed laboratories, as if every greenhouse were an isolation-ward for smallpox! Moreover, in designing 2863141 Complex to induce mental disease in plants and then cure them, and so discover a

therapy for human beings, I fear you have not counted on one terrible factor; and this is, that while one blithely assumes that a disease may be communicated by a man to a plant, one carelessly forgets that a disease may similarly be communicated by a plant to a man —

"Oh, poppycock! If you're thinking of hay-fever, asthma, and such," said Dr. Huish, "it's all allergies — which simply means that certain proteins don't agree with certain people. Often psychosomatic; in other words, pure nerves."

"But I tell you, Huish, that we may have set in motion a very deadly epidemic! Oh please, just consider how *spirocheta pallida*, once mildly endemic among the Caribs, when given fresh hosts raged apocalyptically over the world for five hundred years! And how, through an intermediate host — malaria in the mosquito, for example — other infections become virulent. Then, draw a parallel with our savage sundews attacking a dog, and —"

"Enough of your elementary epidemiology," said Dr. Huish. "Now, referring back to smallpox: no doubt you are aware of vaccination? Man! Do you not see? I'll be the Jenner of the Higher Centers. And, damn me, but I'll make a vaccine, and introduce a Bill in Parliament, so that every child will have a jab!

And mark my words; as smallpox was the scourge of the 18th Century but scarcely exists now, so shall it be with insanity — functional disorders excluded — which is the scourge of our time."

Lord Forfex said, with a sigh, "No doubt you're right. But I'm not a bit afraid of a mad man, while I should be desperately frightened of a mad vegetable. One can police the world of men, but how would you put a Bureau of Investigation, or a Commissioner in Lunacy, over the movements of the grass —"

Dr. Huish said, "I'm grateful to you, my lord, for your premonitions and admonishments. Now, will Your Lordship permit me to start a culture from this blood sample out of Hopkins' dog? Because, if the sundew has infected that snarling cur, why, that's better than I expected."

"Nellie's genealogy I have not looked into, sir. And we might not come out so well if our own ancestry were investigated," said Lord Forfex. "As to snarling, look to the beam in your own eye, Dr. Huish. . . ."

So, a little later, there was a furtive excursion — Jack Hopkins with Nellie at his heels. Under one arm he carried an inlaid shotgun made by Purdoy; over the other shoulder he carried a spade. . . . Out on the verge of the marshes, there was reverberating

sullen thump. . . . When he returned, he went to clean Lord Forfex's guns. Soon, evening fell and as the melancholy mist of the marshes enveloped the Lodge, Dr. Huish burst in, shouting in irritation and triumph:

"Hey there, Forfex, what d'you make of this, eh?" and he held out a forefinger to which by its sharp little front teeth was suspended a very small bat, wrapped in its wings, hugging itself in a kind of ecstasy.

Jack Hopkins slapped it to the floor and stamped on it, while Dr. Huish shouted, "But I want a tissue-test of that bat, blast your eyes!"

"No sir, God knows what you let loose already," said Hopkins and shoveled up the dead bat and pushed it where the coals glowed reddest. Then he thrust his booted foot into the fire for a few seconds.

"The dog's brain!" cried Huish. "Where's that dog's brain?"

"In the marshes, sir, and so's Nellie with half a bag o' quicklime. . . . Dr. Huish, I begin to get it. The sundew and so on attracts animals like my Nellie, and drives 'em mad. Oh yes, but your sundew, your fly-trap, and your pitcher-plant, they ain't infallible — here and there is a fly or two gets away, which bats eat. . . . Oh for goodness sake, Dr. Huish, I firmly believe you been bit by the madness as got old Nellie!"

Lord Forfex said with unusual vehemence, "I subscribe to what Hopkins says, sir, and strongly recommend that, after the usual tests, you put yourself under close observation . . . Pardon me, Doctor, but you're not looking well."

"Suddenly a splitting headache, from working with the likes of you, or maybe a cold from the marshes," said Dr. Huish. But he was almost jocular when Lord Forfex brought him a hot whisky toddy and some aspirin. "The toddy, yes; but it'll be codeine for a head like this, not a weak analgesic —" He sucked his finger where the bat had bitten it, and emptied the steaming tumbler. "A migraine . . . a common migraine."

He even nodded politely to Lord Forfex's suggestion that he go to bed and have Dr. Maverick, a researcher from Boston who was another assistant of Huish's, sit with him.

"I had thought of injecting myself when the time was ripe. Forfex —" Huish rubbed his hands and chuckled — "but ah well, it's been done for me. Never mind the dog's brain. Who knows? When I need one, I might go and bite a dog myself, eh? Tell Maverick to take a blood sample and a tap of my spinal fluid; and if I get difficult, put me in a strait-jacket; but so long as I am compos mentis I'll describe my symp-

toms in proper scientific terms, so he better bring his notebook. It is highly interesting, this development. Goodnight."

He went out and Jack Hopkins, 'taking a liberty' for the first time in his life, said, "Begging your pardon, m'lord, could I have a drop o' that whisky? Somehow or other, my blood runs cold."

"Please, Hopkins, and pour me some too. My hand is not altogether steady." After he took a stiff dose, Forfex said, "Colonel Brumfit's horses who graze in the Lower Meadow beyond the greenhouses, used to be tractable hunters. But now they bite! They have gone insane, Hopkins. Another thing! The Colonel says that foxes now advance towards the dog, and slash! 'After that,' he says, 'shoot your hounds for rabies! What do you know about that?'"

"Oh yes, m'lord, I heard. But until Nellie got bit I didn't connect them things with the poison put into the poor plants. But it's catching, sir! I mean to say, whoever seen a rose bend deliberate across a path to scratch a man, like it done Joe Harvey — what went for 'is sister with a slash-hook? And a hive o' bees turned on Fidler the honey man, and what does he do? Brains his mother, what adored him, with an eight-day clock. And where rats and mice used to hide, now

they come out fighting; and what they bite goes queer," said Hopkins. "... M'Lord, do our greenhouses belong to you, or the nation?"

"Now, Hopkins, everybody knows that I no longer own even a blade of grass at Forfex — but I do feel the Lower Meadow ought to be burnt over."

Jack Hopkins touched his forehead. "No offense, m'lord, but you better not... As I reckon, the wind this evening will blow up brisk, straight out to sea. And I ought to look to my bothouse stoves and lamps, and maybe take a little hay to stuff up one or two chinks. I'll enter it in the Book, of course —" He sucked at a cold pipe, and slapped his pockets. "Could your lordship spare a few extra matches?"

"Certainly, Hopkins. Want any help?"

"I'd as lief do it my own way, m'lord, thanking you. And if you'll excuse the liberty, you might take a nice stiff walk to The Forfex Arms. Your lordship do look a bit peaky, and the air'll do you good. And if you wish, I'll carry a message to Dr. Maverick about sitting up with the sick 'un."

"Thank you, Hopkins, you always seem to know best," said Lord Forfex, with a sigh...

Two hours later Lord Forfex, having walked six miles, sat in the bar of The Forfex Arms with a

pint of old ale and some bread-and-cheese. The proprietor of the old pub, of which Forfex's ancestors had been landlords, once was Head Porter up at the Castle.

Soon, one of the old gamekeepers (who, in 1940 had bought house property and got rich) said, "That's a funny sunset!"

Whereupon the publican exploded, "Funny? Why, Joe Madson, when the sun sets in the south, call for anything you like and I'll pay for it! . . . Sunset be damned! Forfex is afire!"

"What's this?" Lord Forfex leapt up. "Where's my stick?"

An odd-job man (who, in the old days, would clean your drains for sixpence) said, "Oy'll give 'ee a lift in moy new motorcar, m'lod. Times 'ave changed, 'aven't they, eh? It's the gentleman walks and 'other roydcs in 'is carriage naow."

The host of The Forfex Arms said, "Get along now with his lordship, Bottom, or I'll flat your jaw with a bung-starter!"

Apparently unruffled, Lord Forfex put some money on the bar, and left with Bottom. "There's your real gentleman all over," said the proprietor. "No sir, that's not one to be shook —" He peered at the reddening sky. "It'll be the greenhouses, surely. That townec, I reckon, overdone it with the lamps."

"Oi delivered 'em," said an ex-

coalheaver, "foive 'undred gallons of oil last Tuesday, so it'll be a bonfire like Bloody Mary, loike." And so it was.

The heat sucked in the north wind and the houses of glass became incandescent and melted, and by morning the Botanical Gardens of Forfex were a charred and blasted wilderness bestrewn with curiously-shaped lumps of melted glass and metal. Dr. Huish slept through it all, under strong sedatives.

And the next afternoon Jack Hopkins, nursing a burnt hand, told Lord Forfex he had entered in the Book: "To Lamps, 700 gallons oil; To stuffing chinks, 5 bales Hay," underscoring his signature, *J. Hopkins*.

"And thank you," he added, "for walking over to The Forfex Arms, m'lord, because you know how these country people talk? Well, *I* overdone the lamps. It could be your whisky went to my head and I tipped over a twenty-gallon drum of oil, one place or another, and the hay —"

"Tipped over seven hundred gallons of oil, accidentally, upon five bales of hay inadvertently scattered? Hopkins, you're a bluidy liar!" shouted a familiar voice, and there stood Dr. Angus Huish, beetle-browed and cantankerous, himself again. "Ay, and Forfex connived with you —"

Jack Hopkins thrust out his chin. "No sir, *I* burnt down them

greenhouses and meadows alone, and will plead guilty to arson. I'll get six months, and cheap at the price! 'Ill weeds thrive,' they say, but nothing is ill in its proper place. Balance of Nature, sir, and upset it at your peril. And you've upset it, Dr. Huish, *at the peril of all the world!*"

"Oh, don't flatter yourself I'll make a martyr of you in court," said Huish. "Ye ignoramus, had ye not realized the ocean has more vegetables than fish? That all life on earth depends on the plankton? Damn your eyes, the spores and seeds of *Forfex* will be fifty miles out to sea from this. Ay, look for a Red Tidel Which reminds me, I'll take those Russian assistants of mine to Plymouth for plankton samples..."

Here, the record of Dr. Angus Huish ends, somewhat abruptly in rumors; but it is known that the Government is now conducting certain secret experiments in hermetically sealed greenhouses; that sheep went mad on Sussex Downs; and that Scotland Yard has been concerned with multiple murders in The Marshes. Dr. Huish, it is hinted, may be in a "sanatorium" where, in his lucid

intervals, he traces graphs, correlating the flow of ocean plankton with European and American outbreaks of bloody violence and particularly of juvenile delinquency.

These might be merely signs of the times, rather than what Dr. Huish suggests in the report, smuggled out to one of his former assistants, which I quoted at the beginning of this account. After all, he is not mentally competent. Otherwise, why did he murderously attack with a paper-knife a respected member of the British Medical Association who was addressing the World Health Organization?

This much I know to be true: Huish's assistants from an alien aggressive state — the doctors Shimkinski and Soloveychik, and Professor Ivan Thal — who accompanied Huish to Plymouth, have disappeared. Bloodlessly but completely. Make what you like of this.

We trust that all these are matters of coincidence which those who are now observing the effect of bad human blood upon vegetables may soon resolve.

As Dr. Huish said, "We live in hopes..."

