

SPECIAL GIANT ISSUE - 244 Pages

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STORIES

The TEST TUBE GIRL

By FRANK PATTON



MYSTERY of the BLUE GOD by HARRY BATES

JANUARY
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Volume 16
Number 1

The TEST TUBE



GIRL

By
Frank Patton

"Look at her! That's what she needs! A sun bath! She's like a flower in the sun!"



Nowhere in the world any more children—except one baby in a test tube! Was mankind doomed to die?

LOOK, Allan, my boy, how beautiful it is—" the man in the soiled laboratory smock waved a trembling hand toward the ghostly, moonlit city spread far below the tiny veranda high in the tower of Eugenic Laboratories "—and in a few more minutes we will know whether or not it will all vanish from the Earth. . . .

"And in a few minutes, I, Henri Varrone, the man those desperate millions down there believe to be the greatest of all biologists, will know whether they are right, or horribly wrong. . . ."

"No! Wait—don't do it!"

Allan Sutton's hoarse shout inter-

rupted the biologist's sombre tones.

Varrone whirled about, bewildered.

"What. . . ." he began, then, as Sutton stared upward in horror, his gaze went up the facade of the building beside the veranda to a window ledge.

A white-clad figure was outlined in the moonlight, standing on the very edge of the stone sill. It was a woman, her face pale, tragic, drawn.

"Myra!" called Sutton in a stricken whisper now that carried weirdly through the still night air. "Don't jump. . . ."

Then, as though released from a momentary paralysis, he began to edge

forward, toward the veranda rail, and to a ledge immediately below the poised girl.

Drawn by his voice, here eyes turned down, and for a moment looked straight into his. They stopped him in his tracks with what he saw mirrored in them.

For a long instant she stared, then she moaned softly.

"My baby," she said in stricken tones. "I suffered so long for her. . . . And she isn't even *human*—"

Abruptly her gaze tore from the pair on the veranda, cast skyward a moment, then turned down to the dark street below. She jumped.

Up from the depths, seventy stories down, drifted a thin, eerie scream that vanished into silent nothingness.

"Henri. . . ." gasped Sutton. "Henri—she—she killed herself. . . . I couldn't get to her to stop her. . . ."

The old biologist's face was ashen.

"Poor girl." His voice trembled. "She had such high hopes, such firm belief that her baby would be normal. . . ." He turned and stared out over the city, toward the east. Suddenly his face flamed with anger and he raised a clenched fist and shook it at the horizon. "All because of one man! One human beast who wanted to rule the world!"

Quick footsteps sounded behind them now, and a third man burst out on the veranda.

"What was that scream?" he asked in alarmed tones. "Something happen out here. . . .?"

"Nothing that hasn't happened a thousand times already today, Harland," said Varrone quietly now. "It was Myra. . . . she just jumped from her window. Her baby was born this afternoon—"

Harland Lanier's handsome face paled.

"You mean. . . ."

"Yes. Her baby was a monster."

"That leaves us only two more chances," said Lanier.

"Yes, the test tube baby, and Alice."

"Alice is dying!" Lanier said harshly. The old biologist nodded.

"I know. And in a few moments now we will know whether we can let her die in peace, or. . . ."

Lanier glanced at his watch.

"Come on," he said, his voice suddenly hoarse. "It's time."

THEY went inside the laboratory, passing from the pale moonlight on the balcony into the brilliance of artificial daylight in the great room itself. The contrast made them blink a moment, then when they had accustomed themselves to the change, Henri Varrone stripped off his soiled laboratory gown, stepped to a sterilizer and began washing his hands meticulously. Allan Sutton and Harland Lanier did the same.

Moments later they were ready, and with a serious look on his features, the master biologist advanced toward a large glass-and-metal machine mounted in the middle of the laboratory floor. It was surrounded by complex mechanisms that breathed and pulsed with a rhythm that was uncannily lifelike, somehow simulating the beat of a human heart. There were dials and meters and controls; bubbling liquids in crystal globes and tubes, deliberately whirling fly-wheels and balances.

And in the center of it all, the vat-like machine itself was a gleaming cylinder of glass, filled with a viscous, transparent liquid in which floated a perfect human embryo, fully developed. As they stared at it, the tiny legs kicked vigorously.

"Yes," nodded Varrone, "she's ready. She's alive, healthy, and free from any deformity that instruments can detect. Whether all her glands are normal, we

can't know for several months yet."

"If she lives when we take her out of there," said Lanier soberly.

Varrone shot a glance at Lanier's face, and he frowned. But he said nothing, although it was obvious that deep inside him Lanier's shot had hit home. They had failed before, in artificial incubation.

"Get the case-records on this embryo," he instructed heavily. "Read them back to me. We must make no mistakes."

Lanier produced them from a lab table nearby.

"I had them ready," he said. Then he opened the book and scanned its pages. He began reading in a level, precise voice.

"Embryo 154. Removed from mother approximately five and one-half weeks; removal completed three minutes twenty-seven seconds after death due to loss of blood from slashed wrists. Foetus revived to life under sub-microelectric impulses at B-intensity.*

"Embryo 154, placed in Wagner saline-solution, gradually acclimatized to incubation, and after two hours, placed in incubation, and nourished with dilute blood serum, 34.2 male blood, type 4, 65.8 pure glucose . . ."

Varrone interrupted the flow of Lanier's voice.

"Skip the period until the final ten days."

Lanier paged smoothly through the book, then paused again. His voice resumed.

"First muscular reaction observed. Embryo exposed to X-ray examination, one-fifth second duration to assure complete lack of effect on reproductive glands, to determine structural condition. Formation perfect, except for slight atrophy of left hand.

"Response to all chemo-therapy examination excellent. Coordination 98.9%. No signs of cellular damage during period of death after death of mother. Artificial birth estimated August 11, approximately 11 PM."

Here Lanier paused a brief moment. Then resumed with a queer note in his voice.

"Test shut-down of Lindbergh activator mechanism negative. No signs of individual response."

He snapped the book shut.

"That's it," he said. "No signs of response."

Varrone's lips tightened.

"Could mean anything, could mean nothing," he said. "Until the embryo

* Early in 1944, Professor Eamias T. Whitacker, of the Dowling Institute of Military Technology, experimenting with sub-electronic radiations in ekauranium, discovered an ultra-short microwave of much shorter length than the gamma rays he was examining. Unable to gain any positive reaction, beyond the recording on his meters, he worked in the dark for two months before he accidentally exposed a freshly slain guinea pig to the rays and was startled to observe signs of life in a corpse he was absolutely certain had been stilled of all life processes. Thinking that he had created an artificial and false "life" by electrical muscular stimulus, he abandoned the field opened to him.

Only a year later, Dr. Ira Waldron, of the New York Technological Society, stumbled onto the same reaction, and definitely isolated the rays and found them to be basically related to the mystery of life itself. He was able to revive dead

animals almost at will, provided they had not been dead more than a period of seven minutes and twenty-one seconds, beyond which point cellular deterioration had progressed to such a state life was impossible.

Toward the disastrous close of the war, Dr. Walton astounded the scientific world by taking his apparatus to the battlefield and reviving a soldier who had been killed by a bolt from an electrogun.

Thus, the discovery of the "life ray" in the microelectric wavelengths made possible feats of surgery that would otherwise have been impossible, and was instrumental in saving countless lives that would have been lost because of failure of the normal life impulses.

It was this ray that saved the life of Henri Varrone's embryo, when it was removed from a mother who had gone mad and who had committed suicide by slashing her wrists.—Ed.

is removed from the solution, there could be no definite reaction."

"However, if there had been, we'd have been sure there would be no still-birth," Sutton cut in.

Varrone shrugged.

"We'd have been sure of nothing," he said. "But I would have been much encouraged had there been a slight individual reaction."

LANIER stepped forward and began efficiently preparing a silken net to scoop the embryo from the incubator vat. Then he removed the cover, mounted a ladder, swung the net into position, and dropped it slowly.

It sank, enveloped the embryo, and Lanier skillfully drew it shut with looped cords. Then he turned to face Varrone and Sutton, who had leaped to the incubator controls.

"Go ahead," he said evenly. "I'll sever the umbilical connections the instant the power is cut."

Sutton spun dials, opened switches, and pressed levers. With each one an individual humming mechanism died. When he had finished, Varrone pulled the master switch out and with a receding whine, the entire machine became silent.

Lanier made several quick motions, then swung the net out of the thick liquid. Varrone, waiting to receive it, got a bath of the streaming stuff, but ignored it. Guiding the swinging net to a padded rubber table, he opened it, seized the limp figure within, and swung it aloft by the heels. He slapped the embryo on the buttocks smartly several times. But there was no response.

"Microelectric therapy!" he snapped. "Quick!"

Sutton wheeled the apparatus up swiftly, depressed its ray cone down upon the rubberoid table, and pressed a switch. A thin scream of energy

keened swiftly up the scale into inaudibility.

For a moment Varrone watched the little figure anxiously, then waved a hand. Sutton cut the rays off. Once more Varrone held the lifeless figure aloft, slapped it sharply.

Lanier's face was white. He stepped forward.

"Let me try," he said.

He snatched the tiny form from Varrone, and swinging it rhythmically by the heels, slapped it vigorously for more than a minute. He increased the tempo almost frantically. All at once a thin cry came, and Varrone, beside him, exclaimed exultantly.*

"There! She's coming around!"

Lanier cradled the baby in one big hand and stared down as it gasped several times, then began to cry in a reedy, weak voice.

"It's alive!" he gasped. "Alive!"

Varrone sank down into a lab chair, utter relief on his features.

"Certainly," he chuckled. "When a baby cries, it's alive."

But as he spoke, the thin, piping voice ceased, and the child lay still in Lanier's big palm.

Abruptly Lanier resumed the rhythmic swinging and spanking. Varrone rose slowly to his feet, his face slowly going grey. He watched for a moment, then he stepped forward and placed a hand on Lanier's arm.

"Stop," he croaked. "It's no use. The child is dead."

Lanier and Sutton stared at him dazedly.

"Dead," repeated Varrone, like a man who's soul had shriveled. "It's the

*Sometimes the task of making a baby take its first breath is a rather difficult one, and the youngster is treated to quite a vigorous thrashing to make it respond, cry, and draw the necessary breath to start its lungs to pumping. The rhythmic swinging is also a means of startling the nervous system into reaction.—Ed.

end. *She's stillborn, and Hitler's rays have slain the human race.*"*

CHAPTER II

A Fight in the Park

IT WAS cool and quiet in Central Park, where Allan Sutton had gone to quiet the turmoil in his mind. All

*Here we have the cause of the great crisis that faced humanity at the abrupt close of the Second World War. Early in 1943, Hitler, faced with an impasse, his armies held at bay by the Russian Bear, and by a Britain made powerful through American aid, introduced a weapon his scientists had deemed too terrible to use. It was a great ray-cannon which was an outgrowth of the electro-guns which generated an electrical beam thin as a hair, but deadly as a lightning bolt. This super-ray actually destroyed the atom, causing tremendous explosions, but in actual use, Hitler found it to be more dangerous to the army using it, and not as effective as Britain's super-bombs. After two months of use, he reverted back to heavy artillery and dive-bombers.

It was not until the closing days of the war, when Hitler had been forced to sue for peace after Europe became a hive of uncontrollable revolt, that it was discovered that the super-ray cannons had had an effect unsuspected by the scientists. Radio engineers had puzzled over strange interference in transmission during the two-month period when the rays had been used, but did not attribute the disturbance to the new cannons. However, no corner of the Earth remained untouched by the incredibly short waves generated by bursting atoms, and although no outward effect was visible, the fate of humanity was sealed by a very simple biological factor. All over the world, women were either rendered sterile, barren because of the destructive effect of the short waves, or those who could bear offspring found themselves the parents of evolutionary monstrosities that were too horrible to let live.

Faced with the fact that mankind was doomed, scientists sought feverishly for a cure, and failed. Nowhere in the world was a normal baby born. Countless thousands committed suicide, and countless thousands went mad, deranged by the abnormal physiological and psychological reactions of their glandular functions.

The last hope lay in Greater New York, where Henri Varrone, greatest living biologist, experimented with the few remaining, nearly normal women to whom pregnancy was possible. Harland Lanier, two years Allan Sutton's senior, was his chief aide, and Sutton himself, who perfected the incubator mechanism, and who was really the genius of the trio, became the third assistant.—Ed.

about, New York lay dark and seemingly deserted. Even persons on the brink of madness get tired; and despairing New York was asleep.

There were none of the brilliant lights that once made New York a city of day through all the twenty-four hours. There was none of the hustle and bustle of traffic; none of the music and gay voices that heralded the pleasure-bent people of the night; none of the strolling couples to whom Central Park had always been a paradise where they could be aloof and alone, millions of miles from other people. It was this last that struck home most violently to Sutton as he sat on a dusty park bench.

Love had gone out of the world. The sacred institution of the family, the basis of civilization, was gone. In its place reigned despair, hate, madness, suicide, and rampant crime.

The world was dying, slain by an invisible, silent ray of sterility that had smitten womankind, destroyed her miraculous power to reproduce her race, to perpetuate it. In fifty or sixty more years, the last man would die of old age. The Age of Man on Earth would have passed forever.

All the other species of life Nature had created, she had destroyed, either because they were impracticable, or they lacked virility. Man had destroyed himself, by fighting a grim war of science. Hitler had invented a weapon that had been more deadly than he knew. An atom-smashing weapon that had generated a deadly ray; a subtle ray that had fatally altered the function of that mysterious gland in women, in all women, that was man's perpetuation. And the grim truth was that man was unworthy—had anticipated Nature's vengeance by eliminating himself.

And as Allan Sutton sat there, a great shame flooded through his soul. He

felt mankind's failure as a personal failure.

"We're no good," he muttered bitterly. "No better than the dinosaurs; than the mammoth; than the dodo. We deserve extinction."

And yet, his mind fought for a solution to the problem. Why was it that woman's virility had been lost? If one ray had destroyed a vital something, an important hormone, could not another ray restore it?

Restore? What was left to restore?

In all New York remained but one woman with child. A waif of the streets, whom he knew only as Alice. And Alice could not live long enough to bear her child. The white plague of civilization held her inexorably.

"Poor child," he muttered. "And now we must take her child from her, and try for the last time . . ."

He rose to his feet, fists clenched in impotence.

"And we'll fail again!" he exclaimed. "The incubator is perfect. It can complete human birth without the mother. But it can't restore what Hitler has destroyed! That's why we'll fail again. Henri knows it. But he'll fight on, because he's that kind of a man."

"Let's see what kind of a man *you* are!" came a harsh voice behind him. "Let's see *you* fight!"

SUTTON whirled around to face a bearded, ragged giant of a man, in whose eyes glinted the lights of madness and bestiality. And as Sutton faced him, he leaped.

A heavy fist crashed against Sutton's chest, sending him hurtling with stunning force into a clump of bushes. Thorns tore at him, and red blood mingled with the green smear of crushed leaves on his white shirt.

Then the attacker lunged down on him, ignoring the brambles in which

he lay. As the breath crushed out of his lungs, Allan Sutton knew that he faced a killer. He knew that before him was a battle for life itself. And with that animal instinct called self-preservation, he drew up his legs and kicked outward with all his strength.

The big man's body crashed backward, against a tree, and Sutton scrambled to his feet. They faced each other. The madman laughed. He seemed unhurt, or if he was, his mad mind took no cognizance of it.

"Fight!" he roared. "A good fight. There will be much blood!"

And again he rushed.

Sutton side-stepped, swung a fist straight for the jutting jaw. It landed, and pain shot through his arm to the shoulder. The giant was unshaken, and whirling with incredible speed for his size, flung his arms about Sutton in a bear-hug.

Instantly Sutton felt his ribs cracking. He gasped for breath. Frantically he squirmed and fought and pounded with his fists against that grinning, bestial face, but the arms only constricted more. Whirling blackness swirled before his eyes.

Then the killer loosed his hold, snatched his shoulders in steel fingers; his teeth sought Sutton's throat.

A wave of horror swept over Sutton. He lunged backward, pulling the giant with him. They crashed to earth, and the giant's hold on his shoulders slipped. Once more they faced each other.

But all at once a blank look came over the madman's face, and at the same instant a sharp pistol shot whipped through the night air. The giant sagged slowly, then pitched to the earth, dead.

SUTTON turned dazedly to face Harland Lanier, who stood with a slight

smile that held no humor in it on his face, and in his hand a smoking revolver.

"I felt that it might be dangerous out here in the park," he said quietly, "so I came too, and brought my gun. You know, New York isn't a place of civilization any more . . ."

Sutton drew in a gasping breath.

"Did you have to kill him—that way?" he said.

Lanier looked at him queerly.

"He was trying to kill you, and judging from the way you look, he would have succeeded very well. Are you trying to say you'd have killed *him* . . .?"

Sutton shook his head.

"I don't know," he began. "But . . ."

Lanier laughed harshly.

"Forget I said anything. We're all a little unbalanced, I guess. And right now, that mixture of red and green blood on your shirt strikes me as just a little bit funny. My biological knowledge is so befuddled these days that I'd believe you actually had green blood—that *anybody* might have. Or orange, or violet, or indigo, or liquid gold— Say, what's the matter with you anyway, Allan? Why are you staring at me? I'm not crazy, just kidding . . ."

"I'm not thinking that," said Sutton slowly. "It's just that mention of red and green blood on my shirt. Red and green blood! Great Gods! Come on, Harland, we've got to get back to the lab, and Varrone. I've got an idea!"

"What sort of an idea?"

"Chlorophyll—and an autopsy. I've got to perform an autopsy!"

"An autopsy! On who . . .?"

But Allan Sutton was already running, headed back toward the towering bulk of Eugenic Laboratories, black before the setting moon on the edge of Central Park.

Lanier pocketed his gun, glanced

once at the man he had killed, grunted, and followed.

CHAPTER III

Life from the Sun!

ALLAN SUTTON held the slide up to the light, peered at it intently for a long moment, then put it back into the microscope. Varrone and Lanier stood silently, puzzled and curious, at his side, waiting.

Sutton turned, motioned to Varrone to look at the slide. Varrone peered for a long moment.

"Very peculiar," he muttered. "Odddest sub-corpuscular formation I've ever seen. Just as if the molecules were broken—shattered, by something . . ."

"By a vibration," said Sutton quietly. "That's why our test tube baby didn't live. My autopsy proves it."

Lanier looked at him.

"You mean . . ."

"Hitler's ray! There's the answer, the reason for the sterility of women. Hitler's ray has shattered the cohesive structure of the chromosomes, and the hormones of life. The mysterious energy of life comes from the sun. That's where life was born, in the primeval seas, in the muddy ooze heated by sunlight.*

"It is this same energy that gives life to plants, most familiarly known to us as chlorophyll. This green substance contains the missing energy that has been short-circuited from the structure of life in women . . ."

* Scientists have long held that the first cosmic "accident" that caused life to spring into being here on Earth was the creation of a living, unicellular life-form in the sea, under the impulse of a peculiar vibration from the sun caused by the release of terrific energy—sufficient to destroy or create new carbon patterns. All life is composed of carbon-patterns, and the first pattern to take on sentience was most probably activated by sun-energy.—Ed.

Varrone gripped Sutton's arm excitedly.

"My boy, I think you're right. You've found it! Sun-energy is the answer. If we can re-create those original life-giving vibrations, we can 'shake' the chromosomes back into their original life-form. And human beings will again be born who will live and re-create, and evolve normally . . ."

Lanier interrupted.

"Very easy," he said wearily. "Just took Nature billions of years to *accidentally* hit on exactly the right vibration to create carbon life-forms. Billions of chances *not* to hit on it. We haven't time for more than *one* trial, nor more than *one* opportunity to try it—Alice's baby!"

Varrone's face became sober, hopeless.

"You're right, Harland," he said. "But we'll have to take that one chance in billions. We'll go ahead . . ."

"We don't have to *chance* creating a carbon-life pattern," said Sutton calmly. "We've already *got* one."

Varrone stared, and Lanier's jaw dropped.

"Where?" asked Lanier bluntly.

"On my shirt," said Sutton.

"On your shirt?"

"Yes. Chlorophyll. Plant-carbon patterns. And since all carbon compounds are basically alike, they can be mixed. That's what we're going to do. We're going to rehabilitate Alice's baby's blood with liquid plant chlorophyll!"

"Son," said Varrone excitedly, "if you're right, you've saved the human race!"

Lanier took out a cigarette, lit it calmly, and puffed smoke into the air while the other two watched him. Then he grinned coldly.

"If," he said pointedly, "Alice's baby is a *girl*."

IT WAS a week before the three biologists, weary and emotionally overwrought, succeeded in combining human blood and pure chlorophyll into a coagulation-free serum suitable for use in the incubator. Now, at last, all was in readiness. The incubator once more hummed with life, the Lindbergh mechanism beat out its human-heart rhythm, and tubes glowed with fairy-like colors as all the radiations necessary to the normal growth of an embryo were focused in the proper intensity. The result was artificial sunlight minus its destructive, burning quality.

"I don't think I have the strength nor the steadiness left to perform the operation," said Varrone. "I'm too tired, and my hand might slip. Lanier, I think you are best fitted to perform it."

Lanier nodded. "I can do it," he said briefly. "I can keep going for days yet, if necessary."

"I'm with you," said Sutton. "Let's get it over with. I've just talked to Alice, and she's ready."

"You told her she might not live through it?" asked Varrone.

"Yes. And she said she didn't care. If the baby lived, she'd be glad to die."

"Brave girl," said Varrone softly.

"She was a war baby. New York never gave her a break. Seems rather ironic that she may be the one instrumental in saving that same city from the oblivion to which it cast her."

Lanier and Sutton prepared themselves for the operation, while Varrone went to get Alice. When he finally appeared, pushing the wan, pale, extremely youthful girl in a wheelchair, they were ready. Completely cloaked in sterilized garments, even to antiseptic helmets and goggles, they presented a rather startling appearance in the white, artificial-sunlight glare of the laboratory.

"Oh!" Alice uttered a little, fright-

ened scream, then bit her thin lip bravely.

"I didn't know you, Doctor Sutton," she finished. "You scared me—a little." She smiled tremulously.

"Don't be afraid," said Sutton. "You'll be all right."

There was a momentary awkward silence, while the three men fumbled for something else to say, and failed. It remained for the waif of the streets, hardly seventeen, to disperse the uncomfortableness that lay between them.

"I'm not afraid," she said. "I'm glad! And somehow I know that my baby won't die. You said she wouldn't, Doctor Sutton, and I know you wouldn't lie to me. Doctor Varrone has told me that it is your discovery that will make her lovely, and strong, and healthy, just like all women used to be. You must be a very smart man, Doctor Sutton."

She smiled at them brightly.

"You are all such great men. It will be wonderful for my little girl to have you all for fathers. That's funny, isn't it? But I think it's nice. She'll be the luckiest girl that ever lived. And someday when she gets married . . ."

Abruptly she paused, and her eyes roved excitedly from one to the other of them.

"Oh!" she breathed. "One of you *can't* be a father to her; one of you'll have to *marry* her, and have lots of children . . ."

She studied Lanier for a moment, then, hesitantly, her eyes roved to Sutton. She peered up at him, head cocked, trying to see his eyes behind the goggles.

"I think you should marry her," she said simply. "You are the youngest, and I like you best, because you're like me, somehow. Not uppity, like a lot of people I've known . . . oh," she hastened to add, looking archly at La-

nier, "I don't mean you're uppity, Doctor Lanier. It's just that you mightn't . . ." she hesitated, became confused.

"Yes, child," said Lanier softly. "I understand what you mean. You want your daughter to have the youngest man, and have the most children, so she will be a real Eve to the human race."

"Oh," she gasped. "You understand me too! Now I don't know . . ."

Varrone stepped forward.

"Come, child," he said. "Let's get ready."

For an instant her face went even whiter, then she looked up at Lanier.

"I'm ready," she said. "I'm not afraid at all. I know you won't hurt me now. You're kind and gentle, and you're not so old. Maybe my little girl will like you better. If she does, she can pick you."

She rose to her feet and walked falteringly toward the operating table. There was a beatific smile on her thin face. And a moment later, as Lanier picked up the scalpel, a choking sound came from behind his antiseptic mask.

THERE were tears in Henri Varrone's eyes as he pulled the sheet over the calm, still smiling face of the little seventeen-year-old waif of the streets.

"Not even the name of Jeanne d'Arc can outshine that of Alice of Manhattan," he whispered. "She was a real heroine. . . ."

Harland Lanier turned from where he stared bleakly out of the high window of the laboratory at the city below, revealed now in the bleakness of day. He looked at Varrone.

"I didn't hurt her," he said simply. "She never lost her smile."

"No, son," said Varrone. "You didn't hurt her."

Both men turned now to where Allan Sutton still labored desperately at the

incubator. As they watched, he stepped back with an exclamation.

"It's done!" he said. "The job's completed. Not even a filterable virus* could get into that incubator; and that Lindbergh mechanism would run for twenty years without attention, if it were necessary."

Under the soft orange light of the artificial sun-rays filling the interior of the incubator with a warm, bright glow, the newly transplanted embryo hung suspended in the green-cast liquid. It was a tiny thing, hard to discern through the thickness of glass and the colored serum itself. It was a small green blob of color, shapeless, indefinite.

Varrone stepped closer, peered at it.

"You've done a good job, Sutton."

"We've all done a good job," said Lanier. "I only wonder if it will all be in vain. If that embryo turns out to be a male—"

"We won't know for another month, or more," said Varrone.

"Maybe sooner than you expect," Sutton cut in. "I have a strong hunch that the growth of the embryo will be slightly faster than in a normal human being, because of an accelerating effect of the chlorophyll serum. It has a metabolic rate, normally, much higher than blood cells. This chloro-blood mixture might still possess something of plant metabolism."

As he finished speaking, there was silence for a moment. Then, beneath their feet, the building trembled slightly for an instant.

"What was that?" asked Varrone sharply.

Lanier looked puzzled.

"It couldn't have been an earthquake tremor. Yet, it felt oddly like one. I was in Shanghai once. . . ."

The windows of the laboratory thudded in their frames and shook as though a mighty blast of air had struck the building. Then, hard on the heels of the phenomenon, a growling, blasting roar came out of the distance.

"That was no earthquake!" exclaimed Sutton. "Something blew up—and from the sound of it, something really tremendous."

He sprang to the window and looked out.

"I don't see anything—" he began.

"Over here," came Lanier's quiet voice. "Out toward Brooklyn. Near the navy yard."

In an instant the three biologists stood before the laboratory window staring out over the city. Some ten or more miles away, a tremendous mushroom of black, oily smoke towered into the heavens, looming up ever higher as the force of the explosion that impelled it continued to drive it aloft.

"Great God," said Varrone, "that must have been something vital!"

They watched for long moments, while the tower of smoke spread out, then, strangely, began to descend, spreading slowly outward as it did so.

"Heavier than air!" Lanier burst out, incredulously. "That isn't ordinary smoke."

Varrone frowned.

"I never saw anything like that before," he muttered. "I'm not a physicist, but I know enough about chemistry to say that that smoke cloud is something ugly. And if I'm not wrong, it's going to be dangerous to those people over there."

"We'll know about it soon enough," Sutton said. "But I, for one, am willing to hear about it after I wake up. I'm

* Filterable virus: medical science discovered early in the 1930's that some diseases were caused, not by a germ, but by a virus that was so penetrable in its power to pass through insulating materials, that no screen known to science could filter it out, or prevent its passing through a membrane. Thus it could not be isolated for study.—Ed.

dead tired, and I'm going to get that sleep we've put off for too long already."

"A good idea," Varrone said abstractly, his gaze still fixed lingeringly on the mysterious cloud pall on the horizon. "I second the motion. We've got some tests to make on that embryo in another twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER IV

An Unexpected Danger

"GET back!" the hoarse voice blasted through the murk of growing night. "That stuff's certain death!"

"Don't look like it to me," came another voice contemptuously. "Just a munition dump somebody forgot about. Got rotten with age, and blew, that's all . . ."

A big man loomed out of the mist, fists balled.

"I said get the hell outa here!" he snarled. "And I mean it. I'm gonna clear everybody outa here, and everybody means you too."

"Oh, yeah. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the boss of this section," the big man's voice was ugly. "The name's Matt Welch. Ever hear of it . . . ?" He paused significantly.

His challenger paused, looked at him a long instant.

"Sure," he drawled. "I heard of you. You're the big monkey who thinks he's going to set up a little dictatorship of his own here, and I think you're the guy who had something to do with that blow-up over there yesterday. Just to create a diversion so you can put in some strong-arm stuff and take over. Well, Mr. Matt Welch, I think I'm going to have a little to say, too, about who runs this show. Things has changed, but not for you, Welch . . ."

Matt Welch charged. Abruptly, forcibly, irresistibly. A Greek god

would have envied the physique he hurled at his challenger. And as his great fist rocked the challenger to his heels, it was obvious to the men who appeared suddenly out of the mist, drawn by the fracas, that the newcomer had underestimated the man he had challenged.

And that underestimation was his death warrant.

He went down, stunned, and rolled desperately to escape the plunging body of Matt Welch. He regained his feet, recovered, and his hand leaped for his belt. He drew a gun.

Several of the advancing men hurled themselves forward, but too late.

Matt Welch had gripped the fellow's gun arm in one powerful hand, and now he bent it back.

"Stay back, fellows," he roared. "I can handle this mug myself!"

And he proceeded to "handle" the man in a rather horrible manner. There was a sharp crack, as a forearm bone broke; a shrill scream of male agony that was terrible to hear as Matt Welch then bent the body of his adversary over his big knee, slowly, delicately, yet with brutal force. There was a noise like a pistol shot, and the grim fight was over.

"Migawd," gasped one of the men who had halted in their forward rush to aid their chief, "broke 'im in half, like a rotten two-by-four!"

"And that's what'll happen to any other monkey who says I ain't boss of New York!" snapped Welch. "And now, get outa here, over onto the Island. When that black cloud gets here, it ain't gonna be healthy, hereabouts!"

IT was while they were walking briskly over Williamsburg Bridge that one of the men fell in beside Matt Welch.

"What's that stuff behind us, boss? That stuff that blew up and is spreading over the ground like black molasses

gas?"

"A new gas they never got around to using in the war," said Welch. "I warned 'em they'd better move it, because it'd get old and touchy and finally blow off like it did. But they were smarter'n me. They were chemists—I was only a top-sarge in the army. So it blew up."

"What'll it do to anybody caught by it?"

Matt Welch laughed grimly.

"Nothing much! It's just about the most deadly and horrible gas there ever was. It's some kind of coal-tar product, and it's in the benzol family. Doesn't do anything to the body, except maybe bleach out the skin a little, but one whiff of it, and bingo, you don't remember nothing anymore! Kills in a fraction of a second. You don't even have to breathe it. It goes right through the skin. And no gas mask can guard against something like that, even if there was a gas mask it wouldn't go through!"

"Whew! That's black dynamite, all right," breathed the man. "I'm staying as far away from it as possible." He turned and eyed the Brooklyn shore. "Think it'll cross the water?" he asked.

Welch shrugged.

"I don't know. I think it will. But it shouldn't get further than the Hudson's Jersey side. The Palisades will hold it back. And after awhile it'll be absorbed by the ground and lose its kick. Turn back to common coal tar."

They jogged on a while longer in silence, till they reached the Manhattan shore. Then the man who had spoken before asked another question.

"Where we going, boss?"

"I got plans," said Welch briefly. "There're a coupla guys over at Eugenics Laboratories I wanta see. They got something I want, maybe, if what I hear is right."

"You mean about them babies they're experimenting with?"

"No," said Welch. "I don't mean babies. It's got nothing to do with babies—yet. An' now, shut up. I got thinking to do. About fifty years of thinking. . . ."

"A MONTH'S growth in twenty-four hours!" Henri Varrone's voice held an incredulous note. "It doesn't sound possible, but it's happened. I don't know what it means. Something has gone wrong. . . ."

Harland Lanier's shout interrupted him.

"Henri—Allan—come quick! It's a girl!"

Varrone whirled from where he faced Sutton near a lab bench.

"What!" he gasped. "A girl you say!"

"Yes, look! And I'd say a perfectly normal development so far, even if it has been tremendously speeded up."

Allan Sutton nodded.

"Yes, Henri, I'm sure Harland is right. We needn't fear any great danger from this tremendously accelerated growth. It must inevitably slow down, and after she is born, and takes up a normal existence outside the incubator, development should resume a normal, or near-normal rate."

Varrone shook his head doubtfully, but there was hope in his eyes.

"You may be right, my boy, but while this process is going on, that embryo will grow like a plant. Apparently, thus far, the only plant characteristic is the rapid growth. The rest of the development is entirely normal, as we can all see."

"*Fleur d'esperance*," murmured Lanier softly. "Flower of hope!"

The door to the laboratory opened, and the three absorbed scientists failed to hear it, so intent were they in their

study of the embryo in the incubator.

Matt Welch came over behind them and stood silently for a long moment, his keen eyes taking in every detail of the huge laboratory, the incubator, and studying each one of the biologists closely. Finally he nodded in approval.

"I guess you guys know your business," he said. "Like I do mine."

The three whirled to face the intruder.

"What are you doing here, man?" asked Varrone sharply. "Don't you know this is an experimental laboratory, and very important experiments are being carried on. . . ."

"I know," said Welch. "Damned important. And I'm glad to see your department is being handled so efficiently."

"What do you mean 'your department'?" asked Lanier, frowning.

Welch shrugged, threw up his hands deprecatingly.

"I'm in charge of keeping order in the city," he said in an explanatory, easy tone. "There're only about fifty thousand people left in the burg now, and law and order has sort of gone to pieces. So that's where I come in. I've got things pretty well under control now. No more looting, destruction, disorganization. . . ."

"That's fine," Lanier said coldly. "Then maybe you'll see to it that we aren't molested here. Our work is of prime importance to the whole human race, not only to New York City."

"I know," said Welch. "But I'm afraid I gotta give you a few instructions first, before we all get outa here. . . ."

"Get out of here?" Varrone's question was almost an exclamation. "What do you mean?"

"Take it easy, Doc," said Welch. "I ain't meaning nothing that hasn't got sense to it. All I wanta make sure is

that that green baby you got in there is safe? She's mighty important to my future—to the future of all of us."

LANIER stepped forward.

"Just what are you driving at, Mr. . . ."

"Welch is the name," said their visitor. "Matt Welch. And here's the pitch. Say, for instance, you gotta leave here, for a month, two months, maybe five or six. Does this thing have to be tended?"

"That's none of your business," Lanier said quietly.

Welch frowned.

"It *is* my business," he said, a bit more sharply. "And I got my authority right with me. Come on in, boys." He waved a hand toward the door behind him. Several men, armed with business-like rifles and sub-machine guns, filed into the room and stood silently behind their leader.

"Now," Welch went on, "I'll explain why it's my business. I wanta know what I asked you, because if this thing isn't safe here, and won't run itself, we gotta move it to a place where it will be safe, and where you fellows can take care of it."

"Why?" asked Lanier, lips tight.

Welch grinned.

"Because yesterday—you musta heard it—a big government gas store house, left over from the war, exploded, and there's a cloud of the deadliest gas ever invented spreading slowly toward this building. In another day, it'll be here, and it'll be anywhere from a month to six months before any living thing can set foot in this area again. That's why. Is that reason good enough for you?"

Lanier's jaw went slack.

"My God!" he gasped.

Sutton came forward.

"You mean there's no way of guard-

ing against this gas?"

"I mean just that. No gas masks will do any good. It can't be dispersed, and it'll take a long while before it eventually neutralizes itself and turns back into the coal tar it came from. Then it'll be just like a black gum on the ground, and perfectly harmless."

"How do you know all this?" asked Lanier suspiciously. "Are you a chemist?"

"No. Just a top-sarge in the army—or I was before the peace was settled. But my old man was a chemist. He invented the gas. He told me it would become unstable with age, and I tried to tell the wise-guys who were keeping it stored, but they knew better. They're dead now, along with about ten thousand other people over in Brooklyn."

Varrone turned to Lanier.

"But we can't move the incubator," he protested. "It's impossible."

"We don't have to," Sutton said. "I'll run it myself, and the gas can't touch the embryo. And if the gas will disperse, as Welch says it will, and become harmless, his time limit gives us plenty of leeway. Two months at the least. . . ."

"You mean it *can* be left in perfect safety?" asked Welch.

"I don't know," said Varrone helplessly. "At the present rate of accelerated growth. . . ."

"We've got to take a chance," said Lanier. "Even considering the rapid growth rate, which must slow down as the embryo becomes more complex, we couldn't do anything but let events take their course. The die was cast when we sealed the incubator. We'll come back the instant it is possible, and if anything has happened—well," Lanier shrugged, "we can charge it up to Fate, who seems to be dealing the cards right now."

"Say," Welch broke in. "You're a right guy, for a scientist. I think maybe I can use you in my setup, after this is

all settled."

Lanier turned and stared at the big man.

"Maybe you can at that," he said levelly. "If you mean what you say about 'settling' things."

Welch grinned.

"I mean it all right," he said significantly. "And now, I think you fellows better see that everything is shipshape around here, lock everything up tight, and we'll be going. I think maybe Pittsburgh is gonna be our headquarters for a couple of months. I've got some of the boys straightening things out over there. . . ."

CHAPTER V

The Flower of Hope

MATT WELCH lowered the binoculars to his belt, returned them to the leather case.

"Pigeons," he said briefly. "They're walking on the ground. We can go back."

He turned and looked sharply over the men who stood at attention in a stiff line behind him.

"Captain Iverly," he barked. "Take command until I get back. And shoot any man who tries to cross the Hudson from the Jersey side. That island is strictly taboo."

"Right, sir," said Iverly, saluting smartly. "I'll shoot 'em, sir."

As Welch and the three biologists stepped into the boat, he grinned at them.

"Nice job of discipline, if I say so myself," he remarked. "Now if things have gone right over there, maybe we can save something out of this mess Hitler made for us."

Lanier stared at him steadily. In his eyes there was a strange flicker, as though he masked an inner opinion of Matt Welch.

"I've never seen a better job of handling men, or an ugly situation," he said. "In five months you've cleaned up the whole country west of Ohio and from New York to Atlanta. Especially that revolution in Pittsburgh. Even if you do say it yourself, I'll give you my honest respect for a good job."

Welch peered at him, a peculiar, calculating look on his face.

"Mister," he said. "Are you kidding me?"

Lanier smiled a little.

"If I am," he said quietly, "I'm doing a good job of it, if I do say it myself. . . ."

Silence fell over the four men now, and the only sound was the lapping of the waves and the muffled purr of the marine motor of the sleek launch. Once in a while there was the thud of a floating cake of ice against the hull. It was still early March, and there was ice in the river.

Sutton and Varrone scanned the black shore of the Island.

"Ugly looking stuff," said Sutton, "but the pigeons are walking over it, all right. It's been completely neutralized."

Varrone looked anxiously at the Eugenics Laboratories tower looming up ahead of them, its ninety-story spire etching the sky like a fire-blackened needle with its tip rubbed clean of soot.

"Even if the gas entered the laboratory," he said, "it wasn't in any great concentration at that height. The precipitate extends barely to the fiftieth story."

"Might not have even gotten up to the lab," remarked Welch. "The stuff, if I remember rightly, was plenty heavy. Stayed down under two hundred feet most of the time."

The boat slowed now, as Welch guided it in toward the slip where once

great liners like the *Normandie* had docked. The Swedish-American Line Piers were there, to the north, and Sutton threw a rope over a mooring post and made fast.

Then he helped Varrone up onto the dock. The quartet stood there a moment, surveying the oddly blackened city before them a moment.

"Come on," said Lanier then, "the sooner I get to the lab the better I'll feel. I'm on pins and needles."

As they hurried through the city, Matt Welch remarked:

"Mighty good thing the war ended when it did. If they'd used this stuff, there wouldn't even be any *men* alive today! If I've ever seen a graveyard, it's this city right now. Except for them pigeons. . . ."

THE elevators in the tower were not working. Lanier grunted.

"Good thing we got all that exercise marching around the country, attending executions, and running from bandits. We're going to need our legs to walk up those seventy stories."

A half-hour later, panting and dry-lipped, they stood before the laboratory door, waiting while Sutton fumbled with the key with a hand that trembled.

"I feel funny," whispered Welch, running a finger around the collar of his army shirt. "Thinking of that baby in there, about ready to be born—if nothing's happened to it—sort of gets me. I don't go for this kind of thing. I'd rather be in a good fight any day. . . ."

The door swung open, and his voice died away. The four of them walked into the darkened interior, then halted. Before them was the warm orange glow from the incubator, like the living coals in a furnace. The soft, even hum of smoothly functioning machinery met their ears.

"Still running, as though we'd never left it!" exclaimed Sutton eagerly.

But Matt Welch's goggling eyes weren't on the mechanical marvels of this hall of wonders. He was staring at the incubator itself, at the figure that floated limply in the bottom of it.

"That ain't no baby in there!" he gasped. "If that ain't a grown woman, I'll eat my hat!"

Lanier and Sutton leaped forward, followed by Varrone, who now forgot the fatigue caused by the long walk up the stairs.

It was quite obvious to them all that Matt Welch would not have to eat his hat.

Inside the glass casing of the incubator floated a perfectly formed female body. It was that of a girl of apparently sixteen or seventeen, insofar as physical development was concerned. Her long, coal-black hair streamed slowly about in the chloro-serum. Her face was beautiful, and her eyes were closed, features placid, unmoving, un-alive.

"The accelerated growth," said Varrone in alarm, "it didn't slow down!"

Lanier's face was grey with disappointment.

"We're too late, by far," he said bitterly. "She's probably been dead for three months. Perfectly preserved, of course, in that serum. . . ."

"Not 'of course!'" said Sutton excitedly. "She wouldn't be perfectly preserved at all. Under that light, putrefaction would have set in almost immediately. She's in perfect condition—and look!—*she's moving!*"

One of the slim legs flexed slightly, exactly as that other embryo had, six months before.

Henri Varrone sat down on a chair, a strange look on his face.

"I don't understand how," he whispered, "but there it is. She's alive, and apparently developed to the stage, still

in an embryonic environment, of a sixteen-year-old girl! By all the laws of nature she should have been walking and breathing now. Or she should be dead. But she's neither!"

Lanier frowned.

"Just what are we going to do about it?" he asked. "Should we take her out now and try to live normally, or—?"

Varrone looked at him, an incredulous light flooding his face.

"Are you trying to say . . ."

"Why not?" interrupted Sutton excitedly. "Another month in the incubator and she'll be a mature woman. A *mature* woman, do you hear!"

"It's fantastic," breathed Varrone. "In all my years, I've never dreamed of anything so biologically impossible as this. A full-grown human being, in less than seven months altogether. Twenty years, crowded into seven months. . . ."

He stopped speaking as Matt Welch advanced slowly, an expression on his face none of them had ever seen there before. He went up to the incubator, close to the glass, and peered inside in fascination.

"A full-grown woman," he muttered, "twenty years old—and there's nothing the matter with her!"

HE WHIRLED to Varrone.

"Is that right?" he asked hoarsely. "Is she okay? She won't be like all the other women were, after Hitler got through with his damned rays?"

"We don't know that yet," snapped Lanier. He was staring at Matt Welch through narrowed eyelids. "We won't know it for awhile—even if she lives after we take her out of there."

Varrone was on his feet, seemingly oblivious of the question put to him. He was debating mentally on some problem.

"Got to get her head down," he said "She's in the wrong position utterly. In order to properly circulate the blood . . . I wonder!"

"Wonder what?" asked Sutton, his interest adding fire to that of Henri Varrone's. He stepped up beside the older biologist.

"Get out the cardio-meter," snapped Varrone. "We've got some experiments to make."

Lanier and Sutton leaped to obey, and for the next hour Matt Welch was forgotten. He remained in the background, watching with a strange mixture of fascination and studied calculation as the three men set up the cardio-meter, and the calculating look in his eyes grew as through the laboratory boomed the greatly magnified sound of a human heart, beating steadily, strongly.

Thud-thud. Thud-thud. Thud-thud-thud. Thud.

"Yes," said Varrone. "We've got to suspend her in an inverted position. That heart-beat must be made regular. Her circulation is impaired."

For a few more moments Matt Welch watched, then he turned to the door.

"I'm going down to rustle some grub," he said. "You fellows are going to have your work cut out for you. I'll play cook."

Lanier threw him a hasty glance.

"Good idea," he agreed. "We'll be here hours yet. In fact," he decided "we're staying here for the next month. Better arrange to move some of your men over here and camp in the building. We may need help."

Matt Welch nodded and went out.

There was a new gleam in his eyes that grew stronger as he clumped down the interminable stairs.

"That guy *knows* she's gonna be okay," he said aloud. "He's a sharp one, all right, but not as sharp as Matt

Welch. I gotta do some more thinking now— and it ain't fifty years in the future this time. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

The Chlorophyll Girl

"TODAY will go down in Man's history, either as the greatest moment in all history, or as the blackest."

Henri Varrone put the greatly enlarged micro-photograph down and turned to face his two colleagues.

"This blood-cell photograph shows a perfectly normal structure; the shattered condition induced by Hitler's ray being entirely absent. She's normal, healthy, and fully mature. When we take her out of the incubator in a few minutes, Man's future will be decided. Either he goes on populating the globe, or this world becomes a dead planet, unpeopled by intelligent mammals."

"Let's get it over with," said Lanier hoarsely. "If we don't get her out of that damned thing soon, I'll . . ."

"Yes," said Varrone quietly. "Let's get it over with."

They set to work, and in a matter of minutes they were ready to shut down the faithfully purring Lindbergh mechanism. One by one the three of them shut down the various valves. As Varrone pulled the master switch, complete mechanical silence settled on the laboratory.

Lanier mounted his ladder, hastily unscrewed the bolts that held the cover of the incubator in place, and then pushed it aside. Plunging his arms into the chlorophyll liquid, he loosened the silver cables attached to the girl's feet and wrists, which had held her suspended head down in the glass interior. Then catching one hand, he lifted the still form, shining wetly green in the daylight, and arms under hers, lifted

her out and carried her down the ladder.

"Quick!" exclaimed Varrone.

Lanier laid her down, took the loose cable still attached to her feet, slung it into the pulley provided for the purpose, and hauled the slim green form aloft until it swung free of the floor.

"Sub-microelectric radiations!" Varrone commanded.

Sutton was ready, and the invisible rays bathed the green body for perhaps half a minute.

"That should do it," he said.

"Stimulus!" barked Varrone.

Lanier hesitated a brief second, and he reddened. Then, lips tight, he stepped forward. The sound of a palm meeting bare flesh echoed sharply through the laboratory. Once, twice, three times it came.

The suspended girl gave a slight gasp, then went silent again.

"More!" said Varrone sharply.

Lanier, his face red to his neck and his ears burning, applied himself to his task again.

This time his efforts were rewarded. The slim green form writhed violently on its silver chain, and abruptly an outraged feminine cry keened through the laboratory. It was not the cry of a baby, but the protesting scream of a woman who had been spanked.

"Let her down!" commanded Varrone, dancing about excitedly. "Good Lord, but she's mad! Let her down!"

LANIER, his hand still stinging, loosened the metal cable, grasped the girl's gasping form in one arm, and let the chain rattle through the pulley. Then, still holding the girl tightly, he snapped off the cuffs that held the chain to her ankles.

Then, with difficulty because the burden in his arms was squirming so, he turned the girl right side up, and set her on her feet. Promptly she sat

down on the floor, hard, and another surprised cry came from her lips. Then, as her eyes, open wide now revealing glowing green pupils, met the daylight, she stopped with a choked sob, whimpered once or twice, and sat motionless, her gaze fixed on the source of light, unwaveringly, uncomprehendingly. She would have keeled over if Lanier hadn't dropped to one knee beside her and put an arm about her shoulder.

Reflexively, her head turned sharply around, and her eyes stared at his face, but they looked beyond. They focused on nothing.

"She's as helpless as a baby," said Lanier huskily. "She can't even control her eyes."

Varrone knelt too, felt her pulse.

"Yes. She'll have to learn to do everything, just as a baby does. But I think she'll learn much faster. In a few months we should have her learning to talk. She's strong, and apparently healthy. She'll be learning to use her feet in a few days."

But the slim, girlish figure lay quietly on Lanier's arms now. Her head lolled back, and her eyes remained staring, the first green glow that had been in them almost faded away. All at once she drew her knees up and her arms folded around them. Her head dropped on her knees and she was quiet.

"Reflexive embryonic reaction."* observed Varrone hesitantly.

*Many people, even adults, like to "curl up" and assume the position of the embryo before birth. This is a natural tendency of some people while asleep. In this case, the green girl is responding to an instinctive, hereditary reaction that is partly human, partly plantlike. She is assuming both the embryonic position, and imitating the closing of the petals of a flower, demonstrating that some strange hereditary effect derived from the plant world may be a factor of the hormones in chlorophyll as well as it seems to be in the hormones of human beings. This is an interesting question, and scientists may discover that there is a curious relationship between human, animal life, and the plant world.—Ed.

Lanier looked up sharply, detecting the hesitancy in the older biologist's tones.

"Something wrong?" he asked quickly.

Varrone shook his head slowly. Then his eyes went to the window. Outside, it was snowing. A spring snowstorm had begun. Inside the laboratory it became almost dark, gloomy.

"I don't think so," he said slowly. "It's natural that she wouldn't respond right now. You noticed how she faced the light at first; it's dimmed now. I think she's all right. . . ."

MATT WELCH stepped out of the side corridor into which he had darted a moment before. He looked at Harland Lanier's broad back vanishing down the stairway at the end of the hall, then he grinned.

"Now," he whispered, "we'll have a look at what's in that laboratory they claim is so delicate it mustn't be disturbed."

He quickly opened the laboratory door, stepped inside, and closed it. He stared around.

"Empty," he said. "What the hell is this?"

He walked swiftly across the huge laboratory, his footsteps echoing on the floor. He entered a smaller room beyond, then stopped in his tracks.

Seated in an easy chair, facing him, was the green girl. Her eyes were wide open, staring, fixed on him. Her face was wan, emotionless, a pale, whitish green. In the gloomy light of the cloud-wrapped day, she seemed almost corpse-like. She was clad in a simple gown that scarcely hid the curves of her body. Through it Welch could see that she was scrawny, thin, and bony.

"Hell!" he burst out. "They ain't feeding you right, sister!" He stopped, staring at her eyes. They seemed to

look through him, beyond him.

"Hello," he said tentatively, a little less emphatic. "Hello, can't you talk?" He stepped forward slowly, frowned. He swallowed hard.

"Hello," he repeated in a louder tone. He waved a hand before her eyes, then he backed away.

"What's the matter with her?" he growled. Suddenly his jaw hardened. "Them damned biologists. They ain't so smart after all. They sure ain't taking care of her right . . . I'll see about this, or my name ain't Matt Welch . . ."

He halted abruptly, staring at the girl. The sun had just broken through the clouds and brilliant light streamed into the room. Almost like magic the former gloom of the place vanished, to be replaced by a springy warmth that made Welch blink. He fixed his eyes in wonder on the girl, who was moving now.

Her head turned, quick and darting, almost as though her neck muscles were uncontrolled. She faced the sunlight. Her pale eyes began to glow. She lurched erect, would have fallen if Welch hadn't leaped forward and caught her.

"Take it easy baby," he warned. "You ain't very strong yet."

She squirmed in his grasp.

"What's the matter, sugar?" he asked, puzzledly. "What's the fuss about?" Then his eyes widened. "Oh, I get it. You want to get over into the sunshine. Yeah, that's the idea, baby. You need sunshine and lots of it. Get rid of that damned green stuff on your skin. Get a little healthy tan—"

He led her stumbling, erratic footsteps over toward the window that opened on a veranda. He threw it open. It was a tall window that reached from the floor almost to the high ceiling. Brilliant sunlight lanced down, fell across the whole room.

The girl uttered a little gurgle of delight, spread her arms toward the sunshine, leaned forward, face uplifted.

"Sure, baby," said Welch, leading her out onto the balcony, which was warm with the breath of spring. "Sure . . . let's get a little sun bath. Do you good."

THE girl stood erect, swaying slightly, and Welch released her and stepped back cautiously.

"Say," he said admiringly. "You ain't a bad looker. A couple more pounds, and a little color, and you'll be a knockout. I think we're going to get along all ri . . ."

"Welch!" came a harsh voice behind him. "What's going on here?"

Matt Welch whirled to face Harland Lanier, who stood in the doorway of the room, eyes blazing in anger.

"Didn't I tell you to keep out of here?" Lanier grated. "Do you want to ruin everything?"

Welch grinned.

"Ruin everything? Me? *You* don't look so efficient to me. Take a look at that girl *now!* You guys ain't got sense enough to see she needs a little sunshine and good food and building up. She's as skinny as a rail. And I guess I can see, too, what you mean by 'ruining' everything. I'm onto your little game, Lanier. She's hot stuff, Mister. Yessir, I can sure see why . . ."

Face flaming in rage, Lanier leaped forward, his fists clenched. Welch braced himself, his fists closed, and he grinned.

But behind him the green girl turned, and luminous eyes fixed on Lanier's face. She smiled brightly.

"Hello," she said. "Hello, Hello."

Stunned, Lanier stopped in his tracks. Welch dropped his fists and turned to look at the girl. At her feet lay her discarded gown, and the sunlight

gleamed brightly on her pale green skin.

"So you *can* talk . . . and *act*," Welch said admiringly. "Hello, baby, again, and pleased to meet you!"

"Hello," she repeated, parrotlike, and her joyous smile grew. Her eyes remained fixed on Lanier's face. "Pleased to meet you . . . hello, baby!"

CHAPTER VII

"Like a Flower Blossoming . . ."

"IT'S uncanny," said Lanier. "You should have seen her there in the sunlight, reaching out like a flower toward the sun, shedding her clothes so that her whole body might drink in the rays. She almost seemed to grow as I watched her; seemed to fill out those hollows in her cheeks where she'd lost weight. She *drank* up that sunlight like a sponge, I tell you. . . ."

"Like a flower blossoming," said Varrone seriously.

"That's it!" said Harland Lanier. "I'll swear her hair—you know how inky black it was—began to brighten as I watched it. Today her hair is as gold as the metal itself—and as shiny. It's the loveliest sun-gold colored hair any girl ever had; and her skin . . . a creamy light green, traced through everywhere by the darker green of her veins and arteries, showing through the skin like the traceries in a fresh, green leaf.

"And talk! Why she repeats everything she hears, and remembers it too! She looks at you with those glowing green eyes of hers and recites everything she's ever heard. She still doesn't know what the words mean, but sometimes she gets out something intelligible. Especially 'hello'. She knows what that means, and she chatters it like a monkey every time I come into the room."

"Harland," Varrone interrupted him. "I'm worried."

Lanier gaped at the older man.

"Worried? What about?"

"About . . . her."

"You haven't got a thing to worry about," scoffed Lanier. "Sutton and I have given her every test known to medicine and biology, and she's perfectly normal and healthy in every human aspect. And her plant nature hasn't done anything except give her some rather startling floral characteristics. That hair-changing stunt, for instance. She changes colors like a blossoming flower. And she reaches out to the sun like the head of a daisy. But that's nothing to worry about. It adds to her beauty, which is quite striking."

"I hope you're right," said Varrone dubiously. "Somehow, I have a feeling that this strange mixture of flora and fauna bears some aspects that aren't quite evident as yet. I'll have to wait till later in the season to know. Perhaps with the coming of Fall . . ."

Lanier frowned.

"What's Fall got to do with it?"

"Maybe nothing," Varrone answered. "I hope not."

Lanier laughed and clapped the older man on the back.

"Now that we've actually succeeded in creating a biologically normal woman, you haven't got anything to worry about, so you proceed to imagine things."

Varrone nodded.

"Maybe I do. But now, I've got some slides to examine, and I think you and Allan have some school work to attend to. You've got to educate our chlorophyll girl, you know."

With that he hurried back to the laboratory.

to the quarters where the green girl had been made comfortable. As he entered, he heard her laugh peeling out.

Her arms were tightly around Allan Sutton's neck, and she was laughing delightedly, her head thrown back, her golden hair streaming down behind her like a waterfall of sunlight.

Sutton's face was red, and he struggled to disengage her arms from him. He succeeded just as he saw Lanier enter.

"Good Lord!" he burst out. "She's like a clinging vine. She nearly strangled me to death."

Lanier grinned.

"From the way she's laughing, I'd say she thought it was a good idea. Good thing for you she hasn't got any thorns."

"Oh hasn't she?" Sutton replied ruefully. "She's got the sharpest fingernails I've ever run across! If she's like any flower at all, I'd say it was the tiger-lily."

"By the way," Lanier said casually, trying to keep his eyes away from the girl, who had stopped laughing now and was staring intently at him, "your mention of a flower reminds me we haven't given her a name yet. What'll we call her?"

Sutton looked thoughtful.

"How about Flora?" he suggested. "Flora and fauna, you know."

"No," Lanier shook his head. "Sounds like a cigar."

"Rose, Lily, Daisy . . ."

"*Le fleur*," Lanier went on. "The flower. Ah! I've got it! We'll call her Fleurette."

"Hey, that sounds okay to me," Sutton said enthusiastically. "Fleurette it is." He turned to the girl, seemed about to address her by her new name, then stopped as he saw the intentness with which her gaze was centered on

L ANIER looked after him a moment, then turned and opened the door

Lanier.

"Hello," she said suddenly. "Hello, Harland Lanier!"

Lanier's jaw dropped for an instant, and his eyes went wide. Then, he swallowed hastily, recovered his composure and answered.

"Hello, Fleurette," he said. "I hardly expected that from you, yet."

"Hardly expected," she agreed brightly. "The sun is beautiful, isn't it?"

Allan Sutton scratched his head.

"It's amazing how fast she learns," he said. "I said that to her just before you came in, and that's when she threw her arms around my neck: Now she's repeating it, and getting close to the proper place to use it. Like your name. I told her that too, but for the life of me, I don't know how she understood *who* I was talking about."

"Maybe being part plant has something to do with it," suggested Lanier. "You know how fast a flower grows and develops in a short season."

Sutton shot a startled glance at Lanier.

"Maybe Varrone's got something there at that," he said with a new thoughtful seriousness.

"Say," Lanier stared at him. "What's this all about anyway? What are you two muttering about? Both of you sound like a couple of Calamity Janes!"

Sutton shrugged.

"Personally I don't think there's anything to worry about, but Varrone seems to think she's too much like a plant."

"He told me that too, but I don't see it. If you ask me," Lanier went on drily, "she was reacting quite emphatically like a human being and not a plant, when I came in here."

Sutton reddened.

"I didn't give her any encourage-

ment . . ." he began.

"She catches on quick, though," Lanier said. Then, noticing the gathering frown in Sutton's eyes, he laughed. "Take it easy, Allan. I don't mean anything. Maybe I'm just a little bit jealous. She sure had you in a nice spot . . . for you!"

Sutton grinned sheepishly.

"Yeah," he admitted. "It was kind of nice!"

CHAPTER VIII

Fleurette—Woman or Plant?

"ONLY two months, and it seems I've lived many years already," the girl said, looking straight into the setting sun which painted its red and gold glories on the western sky and reflected them on the city stretched out below. "It's all been so wonderful to me. And at the same time, it's been so frightening."

"Frightening?" Lanier looked at her, his eyes devouring the flaming beauty of her golden hair, her rich, creamy, pale greenish skin glowing like living moonlight. In the two months of summer, she had grown strikingly beautiful. Each day had seemed to add to her beauty, until now, with the near approach of Fall, she had attained a peak of perfection that reminded Lanier of the full, robust, yet delicate beauty of a shining poplar tree, or a slim, white birch. "Frightening?" he repeated. "Why do you say that?"

She stared speculatively at the setting sun, watching its red half-disc vanishing beyond the hills off to the western skyline.

"Because I'm not like other people—like you, for instance. I sense a strange difference, and it perturbs me. Sometimes I wonder—and I'm afraid."

"You've got nothing to be afraid of,"

Lanier said. "Unless it's Matt Welch. Has he been bothering you again? If he has, I'll break his . . ."

"No," she said swiftly. "He hasn't been bothering me. I'm not afraid of him. It's something else . . . the duty that faces me. I'm afraid you and Allan and Henri are staking too much on me. The whole human race—"

"You're all we have to stake *anything* on," he said. "You're the only normal woman in the whole world . . ."

"Normal *woman*," she said, with peculiar emphasis on the word.

His brow furrowed.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

She shrugged a bit, and it seemed somehow like the upspringing of a leaf that has just been relieved of the burden of a clinging drop of water. So many of her motions were like dancing leaves, swaying boughs, nodding flowers . . .

"You yourself named me *Fleurette*," she said. "And I feel that it fits me well. Perhaps too well. Maybe I *am* a flower."

"The most beautiful one in the world," he said, then laughed. "If you aren't a normal, healthy, completely womanly woman, then I'm not a biologist. By every test, you are one-hundred percent human. And looking like a flower only adds to your charm. Your hair, for instance; first it was pitch black, then it turned bright gold with the summer sun, and now, with the coming of Fall, I'll swear it is turning red! Red like the leaves of an oak touched by the frost . . ."

"*Don't!*" she said in sudden terror. "*Don't say that!*"

HE BECAME still, aghast. But only for a moment. He took her hand in his and sought to stop its trembling.

"*Fleurette . . . I . . .*" he fumbled, "*. . . I'm sorry to frighten you. I didn't realize that you were frightened. But what is it? Tell me I'm sure that whatever it is must be something silly that I can explain away in a minute, just like I've explained everything else to you.*"

The sun had dropped behind the hill by this time, and the deep purple of night was sweeping swiftly over the city. Now that no lights were in that city below, it seemed not to exist at night, when there was no moon. It just faded out, became one with the wilderness that was New Jersey.

Her eyes were fixed on the blackness, and she seemed unaware for the moment of his words, or of her hand in his. It was a limp, cool, unmoving. He squeezed it a bit, but there was no response.

"*Fleurette*," he repeated gently. "What's wrong?"

She stirred.

"Oh, nothing," she said distantly. "I think it must be just my imagination. But Henry did say I was a plant—when Allan talked to him about me."

"About you?"

"Yes . . ." her response trailed off, and he couldn't catch it.

"Do you like him?" he asked.

"Oh yes, very much. He's nice."

Once more her voice trailed off. For a moment he was silent, a swirl of emotions sweeping through him, then he gripped her shoulders, turned her around so that she faced him.

"*Fleurette*," he said huskily. "I can't hold it back any longer. I've got to say it. We're here under very strange circumstances. Neither of us, you especially, have self to think of. We're not important, as individual people. You are vastly important, as humanity itself. And I don't amount to much. But there's one thing I do

know . . .

"I love you, Fleurette."

Her deep green eyes seemed staring into his, but they were vague and far away. They seemed to look through him. And she seemed not to have heard him.

"Fleurette," he repeated softly. "Are you listening to what I'm saying? I love you, do you understand, and I want you to be my wife."

She swayed slightly, like a bough in the wind, toward him, and he drew her into his arms. He pressed his lips against hers hungrily, tightly. Then abruptly he drew erect and visible even in the night, his face went pale.

"I . . . I'm sorry, Fleurette," he said after a moment, in which he fought for control. "I thought . . ."

Then he turned and went in. And behind him, the girl stood silently, her arms folded about her slim shoulders, and her head bowed. She seemed oddly like a sleeping flower, with its petals closed for the night.

Lanier walked down the long hallway toward his room, his emotions frozen inside him.

"Cold!" he whispered tensely. "Her lips might have been ice, for all the response she gave me. She couldn't have given me a better answer. It's Allan she loves, not me."

At the door of his room he stopped, and a dry grin came to his face.

"Just like me," he said, "to wait till there's only one woman left in the world to fall in love!"

HENRI Varrone and Allan Sutton faced each other in the laboratory, which was weirdly lit with the red glow of the autumn sunrise.

"The implications are almost too obvious," said Varrone heavily. "I have been trying hard to reason a way around them for months, but I'm begin-

ning to feel that my suspicions are right."

Sutton's face was pale.

"Like last night," he agreed. "I found her out on the balcony, in the dark. She was kneeling there, arms folded, head down, just like she did that day when we took her out of the incubator, before spring came and changed her hair to gold, and made her live like a beautiful flower.

"The flowers in the balcony flower boxes were what brought it home to me most strongly. They were drooping too, in almost exactly the same posture. Bowed for the night, waiting for the sunlight of the next day.

"I tried to rouse her, but she simply wouldn't respond."

"Yes, Allan, that's exactly it," agreed Varrone. "She's more and more like a flower each day. No response at night, vivacious and beautiful during the day. And she changes with the seasons."

Sutton was quiet a moment, his eyes bearing a thoughtful look that brought tiny wrinkles of concern to his eyes.

"Poor Harland," he muttered. "What a slap in the face it must have been to him, and he doesn't even suspect . . ."

"Eh?" asked Varrone. "What are you saying?"

Sutton looked up, startled.

"Was I thinking out loud? I didn't mean to."

"What's all this about 'poor Harland'?"

"He's in love with her," said Sutton quietly.

"In love with her! How do you know?"

"I saw them on the balcony last night, and I couldn't help hearing him ask her to marry him. I'd been on my way to find her, to see that she came in for the night."



"She knelt there like a flower after sundown, arms folded, unresponsive"

"Well," asked Varrone impatiently. "What happened?"

"She didn't respond, plantlike, and he asked her again. She swayed against him, and he thought she wanted to be kissed, so he did . . ."

"And?"

Sutton shrugged.

"She was cold as ice, of course. Maybe never even knew she was being kissed. And he thought it was because she was turning him down. He looked like a whipped puppy when he walked away. And when he had gone, she knelt down like I was just telling you."

Varrone frowned.

"It's too bad," he said. "I'm sorry it has to pan out this way."

"She loves him, too," said Sutton. "From the very beginning when she said 'hello,' her first word, it was to him. It was his name she remembered first. And when he comes in, it's just like when she steps into the sunlight; she lights up and smiles with every inch of her."

"We mustn't tell him," said Varrone.

Sutton frowned.

"Why not?"

"Because, lad, I'm sure now, that I'm right. She's a plant!"

"A plant?"

"Yes."

"You mean . . ."

"It's the end for man," said Varrone bitterly. "She was woman's last hope, and she's a plant! A plant, do you hear? When snow falls, she will die—and mankind will die. We've failed to create a new Eve. And that's why we can't tell Harland. It's better that he thinks she doesn't love him . . ."

A slight noise halted him.

Outside the doorway a slim form stood against the wall, one hand pressed against her heart.

"Yes," she was whispering to herself, "it's better that he thinks I don't love . . ."

"Girl," said Varrone, coming out into the hallway and taking her arm gently, "what are you whispering about? How long have you been here? Did you hear what we were saying?"

CHAPTER IX

"It's Because We're Different!"

"I DIDN'T believe Henri was right in not telling you," said Sutton. "I couldn't keep on concealing the truth from you and cheating you of the little happiness you might have. After all, we're all done now, and if there's anything bright left in the world, there's no use letting it perish without a chance to shine for a time . . ."

Harland Lanier stared at his fellow-biologist.

"You mean that she's a plant, as truly as any flower, and that she will fade and die when the snow comes—like any flower?"

"That's the simple truth," said Sutton sadly. "The chlorophyll has so changed her that the human life span

means nothing. She has the life span of a flower, growing with the spring, flowering with the summer, withering with the frost, and dying with the snow-fall. She's really a plant, Harland. You've noticed her hair today: it's not gold, any more, it's red, and brown, and yellow—just like the leaves in the Fall. If we needed more proof, that would be it."

"Allan," said Lanier huskily, "you're the finest man I ever knew, and the best friend. But it's no go. She doesn't love me. Even knowing she's going to die. I can't snatch at a last few moments of happiness. She doesn't want me. It's you she loves, if you'd admit it."

"I got my answer in the *daylight!*" said Sutton. "No, old man, it's you she loves, and my advice is for you to go to her and have another try at it."

He clapped Lanier on the shoulder, grinned, and walked away, but as he went, the smile faded, and he swallowed hard.

Lanier stood looking after him, a puzzled look on his face.

"Got his answer in the daylight?" he said wonderingly. "What did he mean by that?"

His eyes widened.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "*That's* it! She *is* a plant. Naturally her responses were negative in the dark. She was asleep! Really asleep, like a flower in the night."

He started on the run down the hallway, then came to a stop.

"You fool!" he whispered to himself. "She *is* a plant. You're a human being. Even the sorriest biologist of them all would have sense enough to realize she couldn't love you. She's different; a plant. It's because we're different, that she acted that way when I asked her to marry me. *That's* why she didn't respond."

He walked aimlessly out onto the balcony. He stared over the city, becoming bleak now with the approach of Fall. Leaves were falling everywhere in Central Park. His fingers toyed idly with a withered flower stalk in a flower box on the rail. He drew his hand back with a sharp exclamation as a thorn penetrated his skin.

A drop of blood appeared on one finger, and he looked at it.

"She's a plant," he repeated, then with growing excitement, "because of the chloro-blood in her veins. The hormones of chlorophyll! That's *why* she's different. Otherwise, we are still man and woman. I've got it . . ."

He whirled, raced from the balcony and into the laboratory.

HENRI VARRONE paused at the door of the laboratory and looked at the streak of light coming from beneath it.

"Still working," he mused. "What is the boy up to?"

He opened the door, peered in. Then his brow wrinkled in puzzlement, and he entered, closed the door softly behind him. He walked slowly forward to where Harland Lanier sat in a chair beside a laboratory bench, surrounded by complicated apparatus. He was sitting there tensely, one hand gripping the arm of the chair so tightly his knuckles gleamed whitely in the light. He was sweating profusely, and his breath came in gasps through tight lips. His other arm Varrone could not see, but he did see the glass jar of brilliant green liquid beside the chair in which Lanier sat.

"Chlorophyll!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing, lad?"

He advanced, confronted the startled Lanier, looked at the bared arm, the tiny rubber hoses that led from the chlorophyll tank to transfusion

needles imbedded in Lanier's veins. Through glass tubes he could see the red blood that was Lanier's coursing, to mingle with the chlorophyll to a fixed degree and circle once more to return to the body from which it came.

"Are you trying to kill yourself!" he asked harshly. "Here, turn that infernal machine off . . ."

"No!" Lanier half rose from his seat, then sank back weakly. "No, Henri, don't stop it. I'm doing what I want to do."

"This might prove fatal!" exclaimed Varrone protestingly. "What on earth is your purpose in such a crazy experiment?"

"Sutton told me about Fleurette this morning," said Lanier, his face shining with sweat in the laboratory light. "You should have told me before this. She's a plant, and I've decided to become like her. She won't respond to me as I am, so, even if it does mean we will both die when the snow falls, it doesn't make much difference. I think I have the right to snatch at the few brief moments of happiness I can get this way . . ."

Henri Varrone's face took on a stricken look for an instant.

"I'm sorry, boy," he said. "I didn't realize . . ."

"Henri," interrupted Lanier in a whisper. "I'm getting very dizzy. I think I'll . . . pass out . . . in a minute or . . . so. Finish this business up for me . . . promise . . . even if it kills . . ."

He reeled, and Varrone leaped forward, pushed him back in the seat, held him steady. Lanier had fainted.

Varrone's scientific eye glanced at the many recording meters critically, and in a moment his face took on a professional look of interest. He felt Lanier's pulse and nodded.

"No matter what the outcome, he

certainly is doing a good job of it," he muttered. "Sure, lad, I'll finish up for you. But you're going to be a mighty sick biologist for awhile. Mighty sick!"

CHAPTER X

Matt Welch Kidnaps a Queen

THE acrid smell of wood smoke was in the crisp morning air. Matt Welch stood on the bank of the Hudson, leaning on his rifle, staring across toward Manhattan.

He looked down to where the boat was being readied.

"Captain Iverly!" he barked.

"Yes, sir," came the voice of the captain from below him.

"Don't forget those tear-gas bombs. That'll be about all we'll really need. We'll smoke 'em out, tie 'em up, and be away before they know what it's all about."

"I've got them loaded, sir," said Iverly. "Two whole cases. That's about all we'll be able to carry."

"Good."

Welch turned away from the bank and went back to the campfire where a soldier stood at attention.

"Okay, Barnes," he said. "You can get back to Pittsburgh now. Pick up Preacher Comstock, and take him to Mountain Camp. We'll meet you there, and we'll have a little wedding all by ourselves. Then we can ride triumphantly into Pittsburgh, the new King and Queen of America."

Barnes grinned widely, showing white teeth in appreciation.

"Yes, sir," he said, and saluted sharply. "I'll be ready for you."

He turned to go.

"Wait a minute," said Welch.

"Yes, sir."

"Wear your Lieutenant's uniform for the ceremony."

"Lieutenant's uniform . . .?" The soldier's eyes went wide, then he snapped to attention, saluted again. "Thank you sir, I will!"

Welch grinned at him, as he strode off, kicked out the embers of the fire, and went down to the boat where Iverly waited for him.

"Come on," he said, "let's go. The Empire of New America is about to acquire a queen!"

Matt Welch relaxed on the comfortable cushions of the swanky launch he had procured for this purpose, and contentedly watched the shore of Manhattan draw nearer as the fast cruiser purred across the water.

"This'll give that smart guy, Lanier, an idea of who's boss in this country now," he said to himself. "Thinks he can keep that dame for himself, does he? Well, he's got another think coming. Matt Welch don't let no scientific punk snatch a cute number like that away from him—not when she's the last one in the world! Queen Welch, she's gonna be, and our kids is gonna be the first of a long line of royalty!"

He grinned to himself as a thought struck him.

"Adam Welch, that's me!" he said aloud.

"What did you say, sir?" Captain Iverly turned from the wheel.

"I was just thinking out loud," said Welch. "And it's kinda nice thinking."

"I get you, sir," said Iverly, grinning. "I get you."

"HE'S been out like this a week," said Varrone, "but he's coming around now. The chlorophyll disrupted his entire metabolism. I thought for awhile he'd never come out of it."

Sutton stared down at Lanier's face.

"He looks just like she does," he said.

"His skin isn't quite as green, but apparently he's succeeded in introduc-

ing the new element successfully. I'd say that in a matter of months, he'd change quite a bit more, and become as much plant-human as Fleurette is."

"I think so," said Varrone, and added bitterly, "and by that time he'll be dead, just as she will. He'll outlast her, because he hasn't as much of it as she has, but when it takes full grip on his body, he'll wither like a hothouse plant put out in freezing temperatures."

"Have you told Fleurette what he's done?"

"No. I didn't know if he'd live, and I didn't want to disturb her. You know, I'm almost certain she heard what we said that day. She knows she's going to die. She's been pretty moody lately."

"I've noticed that. And I'm quite sure she's been planning something. She's been very secretive, and I haven't been able to draw her into conversation."

A moan came from Lanier's lips, and Varrone bent over him.

"Time for a little stimulus," he decided. "I'd better give him a little radiation."

"That reminds me," Sutton said. "I came in to tell you there's a launch coming across the Hudson. I saw it from the tower a half-hour ago. I think it's Matt Welch, coming back."

"Wonder what he wants?" Varrone asked. "I don't care for that fellow much. He's gotten too big for his britches over in Pittsburgh. Got ideas of an Empire of New America, with himself as the head of it."

MATT WELCH paused before the huge doors of Eugenics Laboratories and looked up.

"Well," he said. "We're here. Gimme a couple of those tear-gas bombs, Iverly. We'll probably not need 'em, but I'd just like to make that

Lanier guy's eyes smart anyway—before I break him in half."

Captain Iverly handed several of the bombs to Welch, pocketed several himself, and put the rest in a knapsack he slung over his shoulder. Then he loosened the flap on his service revolver holster.

"I'm ready," he said briefly.

They climbed the stairs in silence, the regular clumping sound of their boots echoing up the stair well. They were breathing heavily when they reached the seventieth floor.

"Glad I don't have to climb buildings like this to do all my fighting," puffed Iverly. "I'd get flat feet."

"Shut up," said Welch. "I want to surprise these guys. Don't want to be fooling around breaking down locked doors."

"Sorry, Mr. Welch," came a voice behind him. "We can't accommodate you by being surprised, and I'm afraid you won't have any doors to break down."

Matt Welch whirled around, and faced the leveled automatic in Allan Sutton's hand. He stood still, said nothing.

"What do you want?" asked Sutton.

"The girl," said Welch briefly, levelly.

"I thought so. Well, you can just march right back down those stairs and get out of here, and stay out. She's staying right here."

"Think so?" Welch laughed shortly. "What're you gonna do to stop me from taking her?"

"Kill you, if necessary," said Sutton coldly.

"Well, you'd better start shooting now," said Welch. "Because I'm coming to take that popgun away from you."

He began walking forward slowly.

Sutton's face whitened a bit, but he

didn't waver.

"Two more steps and you are a dead man!" he whispered hoarsely.

A door on the corridor opened. Fleurette stepped out directly between Sutton and the grimly advancing Welch.

"Get back, Fleurette!" said Sutton in alarm. "Don't come any furth—"

But he was too late. Matt Welch, taking swift advantage of the situation, whirled, grasped the girl in his arms, and held her between Sutton's menacing gun and himself.

"Now, Mr. Sutton," he sneered. "If you'll kindly drop that gun, it will prevent Captain Iverly from shooting you through the guts."

The gun clattered to the floor of the corridor from Sutton's nerveless fingers. He stood, white and still, as Iverly advanced, patted his pockets and moved around behind him. The gun jabbed into his spine.

"If you'll lead the way, Mr. Sutton," said Iverly pleasantly, "we'll find some rope and tie you up nice and comfy."

Matt Welch grinned, then transferred his attention to Fleurette, who was squirming in his grasp.

"Take it easy, baby," he said. "I ain't gonna hurt you. I'm going to take you out of this dump, and put you where a girl of your type belongs. You're gonna be a queen, baby, and I ain't kidding about that. Even Cleopatra didn't rule over no Empire like I'm gonna have. This whole damn world will kowtow to both of us, and they'll keep on doing it until they die. But you an' me, we won't die. We'll be Mr. and Mrs. Adam and Eve Welch, and the Welch's will *be* the whole human race, someday."

FLEURETTE stopped squirming and looked up at the face of the big man. There was a strange look in her eyes.

"You mean, you want to take me away from here, and never come back?" she asked.

"That's what I mean, baby," Welch assured her. "We're going to Pittsburgh, our new capital. The Empire of New America. I'm King, and you're gonna be Queen. How's that sound to you, baby? Nothing slow about Matt Welch. You can have everything. Jewels, fancy clothes, anything in the world to pick from."

"You'll go right now," pursued Fleurette, "and take nobody else?"

Matt Welch looked at her.

"Oh, I get it. You want to get away from these dumb scientists who keep you cooped up, eh?"

"Yes, yes, that's it!" she said breathlessly. "You'll leave them behind, won't you?"

Welch laughed aloud.

"Sure, kid. They can stay here and putter around with test tubes and the like. We ain't got no place for them in Pittsburgh. We got more efficient fellows over there. Guys who know how to make guns, and tanks, and planes. . . ."

"Then let's go now," she interrupted. "Here comes Captain Iverly. Let's leave before they know you're here."

"Okay," agreed Welch. He looked at Iverly, who was thrusting his service revolver back into its holster.

"Everything okay, Captain Iverly?" he asked gravely. "If it is, we'll be going, without bothering anybody else. Let 'em think we ain't been here." He winked.

Iverly caught the wink.

"Sure, everything's fine. I tied Sutton up like a mummy, and had a few words with Varrone. He objected, but I persuaded him we were just paying a friendly visit. He doesn't like us, I guess. Anyway, he said to tell you he'd see you in hell. I didn't see Lanier.

Guess he's out paying a social call."

"Well," said Welch easily. "I guess we'll have to skip saying hello to him this time. Maybe he'll drop in for a friendly chat later on, in Pittsburgh. No use wasting time now to pay our respects. So let's get going."

"Yes," said Fleurette eagerly. "I want to see Pittsburgh."

CHAPTER XI

"Some Flowers Have Thorns"

HARLAND LANIER struggled up out of the mists that had clouded his brain for what had seemed an eternity of time. He lay for a moment, eyes closed, trying to remember something. What was it he wanted to do this morning? He shook his head weakly.

"Can't think of it," he muttered. "Couldn't have been very important."

He opened his eyes and stared idly around. Then abruptly he sat up. The movement brought a wave of dizziness, and he fell back again, his face breaking out with sweat.

"The chlorophyll!" he gasped. "Now I remember. I did it already."

He struggled once more erect and clambered from the bed. He was in his pyjamas.

"So Varrone *did* finish up for me," he said wonderingly. "I must have passed out."

He staggered over to the mirror and looked into it. His face was a pale green color, and haggard, thin, drawn. There was a week's growth of beard on his face.

"It worked!" he exclaimed. "Henri Varrone, you're a grand old man. You carried it out to the finish!"

He raised a hand to his beard.

"I must have been sick for a long time," he said wonderingly. "At least

a week."

Securing his clothes, he dressed with an effort, shaved, and then turned to the door. His knees wobbled beneath him.

"I *am* weak," he whispered. "I'd better sit down and rest a moment."

When his trembling had ceased, he rose to his feet once more and made his way to the laboratory. The lights were still on, although it was daylight.

"That's odd," he muttered. "And where's everybody?"

He moved forward, rounded a laboratory bench, then stopped short in horror.

"Henri!" he gasped.

Stretched out before him was the limp body of the old biologist. On the floor beside his head was a dried pool of blood, and in the center of his forehead was a ghastly blue hole.

"He's been shot!"

LANIER'S shocked tones echoed through the deserted laboratory. The emptiness of the sound was another shock to him.

"Allan!" he called. "Allan, where are you?"

There was no answer.

Forgetting his weakness, Lanier searched the entire laboratory. Finally, in a darkened corner he found Sutton's trussed up form. Hastily he loosened the ropes that bound him, and removed the gag from his mouth. Then he lifted the paralyzed biologist to his feet and walked him around carefully until he had regained some control of his limbs.

"Water," croaked Sutton with difficulty.

Lanier allowed the biologist to sink down into a chair, then got a beaker full of distilled water from a jug on the shelf. Sutton sipped it slowly, wetting his swollen tongue. Then he lifted himself to his feet.

"Matt Welch," he gasped with an effort. "He came and kidnaped Fleurette. . . ."

Lanier went pale. He gripped Sutton's arm savagely.

"Where'd he take her?"

"To Pittsburgh. He's set up an Empire, he calls it, there, and he's making Fleurette his queen."

"He can't do that—she's going to die!"

Sutton shook his head.

"He doesn't know that. He thinks she's going to be all right."

"We've got to get her," said Lanier. "How long ago was this?"

"I don't know. I think it was yesterday. It seemed longer, but I don't remember more than one night passing."

Sutton chafed his wrists with hands that shook. He stood up.

"I guess I can move now. Let's get started."

He looked closely at Lanier.

"How do you feel?" he asked. "You look pretty weak, but your face certainly looks like Fleurette's. It's the same green, although a little less pronounced in color."

"Never mind that now," said Lanier. "I feel weak, but I'm picking up a bit. Maybe when we get out into that sunshine outside, I'll get a little more strength. It's pretty bright outside for this time of the year."

"Indian summer," acknowledged Sutton. "We should get a couple of days of this weather before snow begins to fly."

"I'll probably need it," said Lanier grimly.

AS Lanier drove the power launch up the sandy shore of the Jersey side of the Hudson, beneath the towering Palisades, the noonday sun was hot and warm in the heavens. The hills were

a riot of autumn color, the only sign that this was not the true summer, but only a few days of grace before winter began to close her frosty hand down over the landscape.

"You look a hundred percent better," remarked Sutton. "In fact, you're stronger than I am. It's remarkable the restorative powers the chloroblood has upon the human system."

He didn't mention the strange change that had taken place in the biologist's hair. It was rusty red, shot through with yellow and brown streaks, like a frost-nipped oak leaf.

"It's the sun," said Lanier. "I feel very strong. I only hope this weather lasts until we get to Matt Welch and settle matters with him."

He strapped a cartridge belt around his waist, and shouldered the rifle. Then he stepped from the boat, and Sutton followed him, similarly armed. They climbed up the steep slope.

At the top, Sutton pointed down.

"There's his launch," he said. "That proves we're on the right track, all right. He wasn't lying about Pittsburgh."

"Pittsburgh's a long way," said Lanier.

"We can get a car in a mile or so. The roads aren't bad. We may have to clear away a fallen tree or two. But I'd say that Welch'd have to take care of that, if he went through this way."

"That's right. Come on, let's get that car."

They found several abandoned autos. Most of them would not run, or had flat tires. But eventually, through dint of switching tires from one car to the other, they got a complete set, and had a car in running condition. It started hard.

"Gas is old," said Sutton, "greatly evaporated."

Several times along the road, they

stopped to drain the gasoline from an abandoned car, until they had a full tank. Then they went on, making fairly good time.

The desolation of the countryside was not lost on them, but Lanier's mind was on his purpose, and Sutton's face was grim as he watched his companion's rapid, fantastic physical changes. The sun was hot, and with its heat, Lanier changed. Although he seemed stronger, he seemed to age by the hour. And his hair became shot through with streaks of grey, and almost white.

All at once Lanier slammed on the brakes. They had just rounded a curve, and a large tree sprawled across the highway.

"Here's where we work," Lanier said, and Sutton tumbled out of the car ahead of him.

"Hey," said Sutton, "that tree didn't fall there—it was cut down!"

"Somebody's trying to delay . . ." began Lanier, stepping from the running board. That was as far as he got.

A sharp rifle shot rang out, and Sutton pitched down on his face. He didn't move a muscle after he hit the ground. But Lanier was greased lightning. He'd seen the movement in the brush atop a small hill at the side of the road ahead. He whipped his rifle up and fired.

A scream came from the hill and a uniformed figure lurched into view, teetered on the edge, then tumbled down, head over heels.

Lanier knelt beside Sutton, turned him over. Then he got slowly to his feet.

He walked over to where the man he had shot lay inert.

"Iverly!" he said. "The trade isn't very even. A skunk for a man. There'll be a little evening up later."

HE went back to the car, set to work on the tree blocking the road. He

could move it only a few feet, but casting a critical glance at the hole he had made, and the ditch beside the road, he climbed back into the car.

He drove the car through the gap, ignoring the branch that dented the top and tore a fender loose. Then, without stopping, he drove on into the gathering dusk.

He drove all night, making slow time because of the dark, the half-ruined road, and unexpected obstacles. But with sun-up, he was perhaps twenty miles from Pittsburgh.

It had obviously rained in this region, and as he passed through a low area, he reached a stretch where the road was covered with mud from a creek that had overflowed its banks. Through the mud were the unmistakable tire tracks of a car. They looked as though they had been made less than twenty-four hours before.

It was a half-hour later when he saw the car, its wheels still muddy, standing beside the road, apparently abandoned.

Lanier stopped, got out, and walked around it. He saw footprints instantly, and he stiffened as he saw the tiny heelprints of a woman's shoe.

"Fleurette!" he burst out. "I'm on the right track!"

He looked at the car.

"But why did they abandon it? Out of gas?"

He looked into the tank. It was half-full. He cast a sharp glance around, then followed the footprints, which led up the hill at the side of the road and went off into the countryside.

He cocked his rifle and followed, a grim expression on his face. The sun was beating over the trees now, and the birds were awakening. The air was fresh and invigorating, but off to the west a cloud bank was looming, and as he walked along, the wind changed.

Abruptly it grew colder. He shivered, walked on faster.

Then he saw the resort building. It was a magnificent summer home, and obviously the sort of place that would appeal to Matt Welch.

Lanier changed his course. He went through the forest, his steps making no noise in the wet leaves that lay everywhere. He went around to the back of the summer home.

There was no sound.

Lanier advanced cautiously, came up onto the rear porch. He peered into a window, but saw nothing. He tried the door. It was ajar. He entered. Inside, the house was as silent as outside. There seemed no life. Had Matt Welch and Fleurette gone?

He stepped into the front room. Then he stood stock still.

Stretched out on the floor, his blood staining the carpet, was Matt Welch. In his back was the haft of a nickle-plated envelope knife fashioned in the design of a cavalry sword.

THEN the prone man stirred, groaned, tried convulsively to roll over.

Lanier leaped forward. He turned the dying man over, and met the agonized eyes of the king of New America.

"Hello, Lan-ier," gasped Welch. "You got here—a little—la—late."

"What do you mean? Where's Fleurette?"

Lanier's face was savage. He felt no pity for the man before him.

Welch gritted his teeth in pain.

"Gone — out in the forest—to—to die!" he gasped out. "That's what she said, any—anyway. The damned wench stabbed me in the back as soon as the preacher went . . ."

"Preacher?"

Welch grinned through his agony.

"Sure . . . Yeah—smart guy, we was

mar—married last light. She's the—new queen of New — America. I thought she—was on the—the level! When I kissed her, she stabbed me. She was only—stringing me. Just—wanted to get away from—from you . . ."

Lanier paled.

"From me?"

"Yeah. Said she loved you, but she knew she was . . ." Welch coughed bloody foam, and his voice grew unintelligible for a few seconds. Then he went on, obviously realizing he hadn't been understood, repeating: "She knew she—was dying—like a plant, or a—flower. Yeah, a flower—and damn, she's got th—thorns too. Stuck that knife — into me like a major."

His eyes were glazing over.

"Didn't want to make you sad—she said — so she came away — with me. Knew she'd die—anyway. I was a— a sucker . . . fall guy!"

With a supreme effort Matt Welch reeled to his feet, stood swaying, his unseeing eyes trying to find Lanier. He laughed rackingly.

"Fall guy — Matt Welch—emperor —fall gu . . ."

His big body crashed to the floor. He was dead.

Lanier stood with a strange exultance on his face.

"She loves me!" he exclaimed. "She said she loved me!"

He looked down at the body of Matt Welch, then strode from the room. Outside a bitter blast of cold wind bit into his marrow as he stepped off the porch. He ignored it, sought for the tell-tale heelprints that would tell him where Fleurette had gone. He found them.

They led further up into the hills. Lanier followed. And as he walked, his pace quickened.

Once he glanced at his hand, saw that his skin was turning a deep green. He

grunted, then pushed on, watching for the heelprints that would keep him on the right track.

It began to snow, and a queer chill crept up his spine.

"When the snow falls, she will die!"

The words rang through his brain like the knell of doom. He quickened his pace.

"I've got to reach her before—" He didn't finish the sentence.

A VAGUE wonder crept into his mind as he plunged on tirelessly through the gathering storm. He wasn't tiring. He felt stronger than he had before. The thought of Fleurette in this storm, failing, dying, spurred him on. And too, she was more plant-like than he. His still-predominant human heredity would naturally carry him further into the winter.

Then, in the snow before him, he saw her footprints! They were only a few minutes old, obviously, since the snow had been there only a few minutes. The way led up a steep hill now, and Lanier urged himself forward, his panting lungs taking in great draughts of the cold mountain air.

Through the snow ahead he saw a dark form standing against the sky. And a pealing, girlish, happy laugh floated down to him. She was laughing! She was there, standing erect in the snowstorm, *laughing!*

"Fleurette!" he shouted. "Fleurette! I'm coming!"

He climbed up the few remaining feet to her, and stopped before her, staring in amazement.

She was more beautiful than he had ever seen her before. Her hair was almost blue-black, and tumbled over her shoulders in a cascade of loveliness. Her face was wet with snow, but shining with a fresh green color, deeper than he had ever seen it before. Her

eyes were bright green, and radiant.

"Harland!" she exclaimed, laughing joyously.

She threw her arms around his neck and her lips met his, pressed tight. They were warm and soft, and they clung passionately.

"Fleurette, my darling," he said tenderly when she stopped kissing him and looked up at him with sparkling eyes.

"I thought I wouldn't reach you in time," he said tenderly. "I found Matt Welch, and he said you'd come up here to die. I'm . . ."

She stopped him, staring at his face. "What have you done to yourself?" she asked wonderingly. "Your face. It's green like mine!"

"I made myself like you," he said. "That night on the balcony when you didn't respond to my proposal—when your kiss was so cold, I thought it was because I wasn't like you that you didn't respond. So I took the chloro-blood treatment. Then Allan told me the truth: that you were truly a plant, a flower, and that you would die when the snow came. . . ."

"And you made yourself like me, knowing that. . . ."

"It's all right," he hastened on. "I didn't want to live on without you. Now we can both die together. We have a few hours of happiness remaining to us—"

She laughed in his face.

"A few hours! Oh you silly boy. You lovable, brave, silly boy!"

He was bewildered. But he took her in his arms and held her close.

"It's all right," he said comfortingly. "At least we will have had that. Life hasn't cheated us altogether. Man has perished from Earth, but perhaps someday, somewhere, he will appear again. And maybe then we'll meet. . . ."

She struggled to free her head from
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his shoulder, tossed it back, and looked up at his face with eyes that sparkled with life.

"Will you listen to me!" she exclaimed. "Harland Lanier, did you ever hear of a perennial?"

"Perennial?" He stared at her.

"Yes. Can't you understand. We *are* plants. As much plant as human. But we *aren't* going to die. We just change with the seasons. Look, even now, your hair is turning from the autumn colors to black. There's not a gray hair on your head. And if you think you aren't strong—I have some bruised ribs to prove it!"

He looked into her eyes with incredulity that gradually changed to belief.

"You're right!" he gasped. "You *are*

perennial! You're as healthy and alive and vibrant and fresh as a young fir tree! You're not a flower any more; you're a fir tree!"

"Yes," she said. "And the whole world, and a lifetime is ahead of us. And maybe the race of lovely plant-humans we'll start will know how to use this lovely world better than humans have used it in the past."

Harland Lanier looked up into the falling snow, and he let it pelt against his face.

He laughed aloud out of sheer joy.

"Turn your face up," he said. "That snow feels so good, and clean, and fresh!"

Then they stood, arm in arm, laughing up at the snow.