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The Tree of Life

The Red Tree, not knowing what it did, had given humanity to the world. Now it was planning to take back its gift. . . .

By Paul Edmonds

WE FOUND the thing near the Burmese frontier, in the Annamite mountains, after tracking down vague legends for months. What it was I don't know. A great and mysterious people once lived in Indo-China, and I think their science far surpassed ours. Certainly the Red Tree could never have evolved without human aid.

The Red Tree—well, that was part of the legend. We were hunting the Garden

of Eden. Or, rather, the birthplace of the human race. Fables have it that man developed from a marsupial in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley; science has dug up significant fossils in the Gobi. But we were on the track of something different. We had seen quaternary human skulls, far older than the Cro-Magnon, sent to us from the Annamites; and Babcock, our ethnologist, had a set of ancient manuscripts which he said were copied from sources older than Genesis.

He looked like some artist's conception of a Martian—shivelled little body, with a bulbous bald head set atop it. At night, squatting by our fire, he would talk for hours on what we might possibly find. His wrinkled, parchment face would light up with intense conviction.

"Folk-lore has a scientific basis. These native legends—they tie in beautifully with Genesis. All races believe in a super race that met disaster. Well, why not?"

"Atlantean myths," Kearney grumbled. He was the boss, a biologist, a red-haired giant with pale, piercing eyes. He was a slave-driver, but paid well. So we weren't kicking.

"Atlantean myths," he repeated. "Such a mutation is ridiculous. You imply that a super race sprang suddenly from Cro-Magnons, and then vanished without trace. Pure bunk!"

Babcock glared at him. "I said nothing of the sort!" His squeaky voice was annoyed. "There are aboriginal races today. Suppose all civilized mankind suddenly met a disaster—something only the hardiest physical species could survive? In a few hundred years, perhaps, the Earth would contain nothing but savages—Australian bush-men!"

Kearney smiled infuriatingly. "All right. Suppose something like that happened long ago. Wouldn't we have found architectural traces—artifacts?"

"Not if such a community was isolated. It'd have to be, in a world filled with

savages. Suppose the most intelligent ones interbred? That'd mean a circumscribed locale. It happened in Egypt, to some extent."

"No traces," Gunther rumbled. He was our archeologist, a squat, swarthy, bearded man who looked like a Neanderthaler himself. He peered through horn-rimmed glasses and growled, "They'd have left some traces."

"Not if they lived in a world hostile to them. They would have found some safe retreat. Besides—what about Easter Island?"

"Oh, shut up," Gunther said. "You're crazy."

Babcock flared up at last. "If you'd taken the trouble to read those parchments, you'd be a lot smarter now."

I NOTICED the native bearers were watching us, so I hurriedly tried to pour a bit of oil. This was natural, for I wasn't a scientist, except in a very minor way. My job was to take notes, and use our cameras whenever it seemed advisable. Later, we'd write up my notes, and bring them out in book form, back in the States. If we got enough film footage, Hollywood might be interested. So I had to keep my eyes open.

However, shooting a fight among the members of the party wasn't in the cards. "Where's Westerly?" I asked. "Haven't seen him for hours. Do you think—"

Kearney moved his broad shoulders impatiently. "The devil with him. He's hitting the pipe, I suppose. But he knows enough to taper off after a while. We've got a long march tomorrow."

Inwardly, I wasn't so sure. We had picked up Westerly in Saigon. He had been recommended as one of the best guides in the business. Maybe so—but my own field, in a small way, was psychology. I classified Westerly as a schizoid, extremely neurotic, and, I thought, mentally unstable. Also, he smoked opium

steadily. A half-breed, he was the sort of man who couldn't be trusted with a gun—for he'd fire at a shadow.

Babcock ignored me completely. "Ever heard of mutations, Gunther?"

The squat man tugged at his beard. "So what?"

"This lost race could have been a mutation—the interbred result of one. Just use logic, for God's sake! Such a tribe would advance beyond its neighboring ones. Better agricultural methods. They'd have treasures, food, clothing. Other tribes would raid it. The mutations would have to find a safe place—"

"Here in Indo-China," Gunther grinned.

"These ranges have never been explored. The natives stay away from certain parts. I've questioned some of them. They say the wild animals are tame there, and that—something—lives beyond. They don't know what. When they find themselves in that part of the country, they get out, *mao!* Damn quick!"

"I expect to find a few fossils, at best," Babcock remarked. "Maybe a carving or two."

JUST then Westerly joined us. He was a thin, gaunt man, skeletal and hollow-eyed, with sagging hollows in his cheeks. He stood by the fires, watching us silently, his eyes very bright.

"What's up?" Kearney asked.

"The boys. They won't stick. I've a hunch they'll desert pretty soon."

"Yeah? What about paying 'em more squeeze?"

Westerly shook his head. "That isn't it. They're scared stiff. Tonight—tomorrow—they'll slip off."

Gunther said savagely, "We'll take turns standing guard."

Kearney bit his lip. "I dunno. If it comes to a showdown—they might cut our throats rather than go further into the mountains. How about it, Westerly?"

The guide nodded. "They would, all right."

"So. Suppose we have 'em camp here and wait for us? How does that sound?"

"It's about the only thing to do," Westerly said. "It's wisest, and safest. We can't be more than four days' march from—wherever we're going. Unless the maps are all wrong."

Well—they were. It took weeks of arduous logging through the wilderness, foraging as much as possible off the country, and hoping the natives would be waiting for us at the base when we got back. If we got back. Such tribes as we encountered were hostile, but we had our rifles. So it never actually came to a scrap.

Our supplies were low. Kearney's marksmanship saved us; not a day passed without some sort of fresh meat. For a while, that is. Presently there was little game to be seen as we penetrated farther and farther into those towering, mysterious ranges. They are blank spaces on the map. I've been up the Orinoco, and in parts of Africa where white men had never been before; but those mountains on the Burma frontier were the loneliest place in the world.

The point is—we found Eden. And, I think, mostly by accident; a rift chopped out of the heart of the slopes, a gorge-valley a mile wide and perhaps five miles long, winding tortuously between high cliffs. Imagine the Grand Canyon a mile wide. That would be it. There was vegetation down there, green and inviting, and a silvery river that emerged from a cavern in the rock wall to vanish down the valley somewhere.

Babcock stared down, his face white as paper. "Those channels—" he said.

I looked at him. "Eh?"

"See? Dry channels now, but once there were four rivers flowing through that gorge."

Gunther muttered something in his

beard. I said, "Well, what about it?"

"Eden!" Babcock grimaced with excitement. "The four rivers of Eden! Not the Euphrates Valley, after all. This is the real basis of Genesis—the valley of the four rivers!"

Gunther coughed. "You're jumping at conclusions. There's no proof." But I saw doubt in his eyes.

"There will be ruins down there," Babcock said confidently. "Wait."

Kearney was squinting at the depths of the gorge. "First we must get down."

It wasn't too difficult. In the beginning, those cliff faces must have been unscalable and perpendicular. Perhaps the natives climbed up and down by means of pegs hammered into the walls. In any case, erosion and earth-slips had done their work, and shifting strata had made ledges and cracks leading down. It was hard, but not too hard. The five of us descended with difficulty, passing along our packs. I paused to take a few camera shots of the scene.

At the bottom—well, it was like a park. The place was very silent. Mist drifted up from the river. A mile away the opposite wall rose to the blue Burma sky.

KEARNEY hefted his rifle. "Something alive there," he said softly.

We froze, watching a clump of bushes a hundred feet away. Out of it slunk a tiger—an unexpected beast at this altitude.

Kearney's rifle came up. The tiger stared at us, and then looked away. It seemed to be waiting for something.

There was a scrambling in the rocks above us. I whirled, just in time to see a mountain goat leap entirely over our heads. It came down on the river bank, plunged into the water, and began to swim across.

Puzzled, we watched.

The goat emerged, dripping, and began

to move toward the tiger. Yet, obviously, it had seen the carnivore.

The tiger didn't move. It just waited, while the goat walked into its jaws. It was the damndest thing I had ever seen. The striped giant reached out a paw, rolled the goat close, and bit into its neck. There was no—struggle.

The tiger stood up and dragged the goat back into the bushes. That was all.

A small thing. But its significance made my spine crawl. I heard Westerly whisper, "The land where beasts are tame. . . ."

Kearney ruffled his red hair. His pale eyes were ablaze. "Funny," he said.

Gunther nodded. "Very funny."

"It's impossible. It's a biological impossibility. It violates the basic law of life—preservation of the *id*, the self. That tiger was *waiting*. It knew the goat would come. And the goat did. Ruminants don't commit suicide!"

Westerly was very frightened. I had a hunch his opium supply had run out several days ago. He was nervous, jumpy, fidgety. He said, "Are we going to camp here?"

Kearney moved his heavy shoulders impatiently. "I suppose so. This . . . it's extraordinary. But we have our guns. Come along."

We found a shallow ford not far away, and crossed the river there. We struck out downstream, keeping to the open country. I had a feeling that we were being watched. When I turned suddenly, there was movement.

Then I had it. The birds. They were—following us.

I mentioned that to Kearney. He only growled, but Gunther nodded.

"Yeah. They may just be curious. Probably that's it."

Yet it was odd. The silence brooding over the valley, and those mountainous, towering ramps shutting us in. I sensed trouble.

A tiger came out of the underbrush and walked toward us. Kearney whipped up his rifle. The carnivore turned its head, staring with amber eyes, and then unhurriedly departed, leaving us vastly puzzled.

Kearney said, "Check and balance."

I looked at him. "Eh?"

"Nature's check and balance system. We're familiar with it in the outside world. But here, under abnormal conditions, it may have developed differently. The natural food of tigers might conceivably be conditioned to act as—food."

Gunther barked a harsh laugh. "Goats conditioned to walk down tigers' throats? Rot!"

Kearney looked at him steadily. "Got another explanation?"

He was silent. We walked on, rifles ready.

WE FOUND the ruins midway down the gorge. Little ridges of weathered stone, pitted and eroded. Gunther got down on his knees to stare. His beard seemed to bristle with astonishment.

"Granite," he said. "Good Lord! This is *old!*"

Little Babcock was crouching beside him. "Any inscriptions?"

"Maybe once. Not now."

Kearney said, "More of 'em. Over here."

We were at the edge of a little forest. Dim sunlight slanted through the trees. One, I saw with astonishment, curiously resembled a cycad—a tree-fern. Perhaps I was wrong. A cycad—evolved, changed.

The ruins were in better condition as we went on. We found an inscription at last. Gunther and Babcock were in ecstasies.

"Hieroglyphics."

"Yeah. Sign-pictures."

"Egyptian?" I asked.

Gunther glared at me. "Not even Sumerian. I tell you, this is *old!* May-

be you were right after all, Babcock."

"Of course I was right! The birth-place of the human race. . . ."

We stood on the edge of a little stone pit, staring down at Babcock and Gunther prowling around within it. This ruin seemed in much better condition than the others. I had the curious idea that there was a reason for this. Perhaps the archaic builders of the city had wanted some sort of monument.

Kearney called down, "Any clues? What about translation?"

Babcock shook his head. "Maybe. Can't tell yet. It's incredibly old, but that may be an advantage. Inscriptions by decadent races are much harder to decipher." He spoke briefly with Gunther. "Go on ahead, if you want. We're going to copy this."

After a brief hesitation, we obeyed, tossing two rifles down into the pit. We moved further into the grove. Kearney's face was alight with interest. Westerly was still jittery. He kept looking up at the birds following us. I didn't feel any too easy myself. Nevertheless, I had my job to do. I used the camera as occasion arose.

"You think this is the garden of Eden?" Westerly asked me, in a low voice.

I shrugged. "It's old, anyway. These ruins—I don't know." I had a sudden mental picture of a race of intelligent, cultured men dwelling in a world filled with brutish Neanderthalers or Cro-Magnons. A few mutants, developed before their time—

What had Earth been like then? Not as it is today, certainly!

We came out into a little clearing. The ruins of a building were there. A circular cleared space, where a pavement might once have been, was surrounded by irregular hummocks and ridges—fallen walls and pillars.

In the circle's center grew the Red Tree.

IT WAS sentient—alive. I sensed that from the beginning. I knew suddenly, that this was the focal point of the valley.

It looked like a pineapple, five feet high, rugose and red as blood, with a lighter scarlet crown like a big globe atop it. That was all. A tree that made Kearney, the biologist, gasp in wonder.

"No!" he said, and—"Impossible! This thing. . . ."

Westerly was shivering. "That is the Tree. This is Eden—yes!"

Kearney gave him a vicious glance. "Don't be a fool. It's a mutation—an unknown species."

My camera was unreeling busily, with droning clicks. I had color film, luckily. The tree would photograph well.

Kearney walked toward it, staring. "I'm not sure it's vegetable at all," he said thoughtfully. "There is—"

The globe atop the pineapple stirred. It lashed into motion. It uncoiled, and the tentacles of some octopoid thing reached out toward Kearney!

By sheer luck it got the rifle first. Kearney yelled and threw himself back. He went down, falling heavily full-length, and tried to roll away. One of those damned tentacles had his foot. I saw him slipping back, clawing at the ground.

I let the camera drop, to dangle from its strap, and leaped toward him. I got him under the shoulders and yanked. No use. The tree was incredibly strong.

Other tentacles reached toward us.

"Westerly!" I shouted. But the guide was cowering back, licking his lips, horribly afraid.

Kearney's face was white as washed stone. He said, harshly; "Keep pulling. Vail!"

I obeyed, but we were losing ground, and being dragged steadily toward that forest of waving tentacles.

I heard thumping footsteps. Gunther burst into view, summoned by the com-

motion, his black beard bristling. He saw what was happening, and jerked his rifle up. The bullet sang harmlessly off the Tree's armored trunk.

He dived past us, yanking a light axe from his belt. He started to chop on the tentacle that held Kearney. Meanwhile, I was still pulling desperately, my heels digging into the ground. Kearney had a knife in his hand, and was slashing at his shoe-laces.

The shoe came off suddenly, and the tentacle whipped back. It coiled around Gunther. It lifted him!

Lifted him high! Abruptly he was wrapped in a cocoon of the scarlet ropes. He was raised up, head down, and then—lowered—

The Tree was hollow. Gunther vanished into it. The tentacles coiled into a bunch at the top, as before. There was no trace of our archeologist.

Kearney was cursing in a steady monotone. He seized a rifle and pumped bullets at the thing. I picked up the hatchet and went gingerly toward the crimson trunk. My first blow was as useless as the last. It was like hitting resilient steel.

Kearney yelled and pulled me back. The tentacles were uncoiling again.

Gunther, still struggling, was flung down at our feet. The red ropes flashed up. They settled in their former position, and remained motionless.

WE SEIZED Gunther, dragging him to a safe distance. He shook himself free, found a bottle in his pocket, and thirstily gulped whiskey.

"You all right?" Kearney asked.

"Yeah . . . I'm okay. Whew!"

Kearney stared at him. "That's the damndest thing I've ever seen. A cannibalistic tree that's finicky about its food."

I said, "Just what happened, Gunther?" He grinned crookedly. "I don't know. Everything went dark; I kept on fighting; and then I was tossed out."

Kearney said, "There wasn't any digestive fluid." His brows were drawn together. He was vastly puzzled.

Gunther shook his head. "Apparently not. Let's get out of here."

We collected Westerly, who was nearly hysterical, and made our way back to the pit where we had left Babcock. We met him halfway, and reassured him.

"I think we've done enough exploring for a while," Kearney said. "Let's pitch camp."

Babcock nodded. "Near those inscriptions. I think I can decipher them—they're surprisingly easy. There's an odd similarity to the sacred writings of India."

It was Eden, in a way. We saw no more tigers, though we kept our guns ready. Familiarity bred contempt, and presently we were strolling about the forest as though we had lived there all our lives.

Not Babcock, though. He was busily working on the hieroglyphics. All that afternoon, and through the sudden dusk. Kearney and Gunther went off after a time to look at the Red Tree—from a safe distance. After a time I followed and photographed it again.

Moonlight presently silvered the valley. We sat around our fire, talking, while Babcock kept working on his translation. Gunther didn't offer to help him.

The little ethnologist looked worried. I glanced at him from time to time, and once he met my gaze, a curious speculation in his eyes. Then he went back to work. We were all waiting anxiously for him to finish.

At last he sighed and put his notebook down. "Everybody here?" he asked.

"Yeah," Kearney nodded. "What's the answer?"

But Babcock didn't seem anxious to begin. "Look," he said at last, "this is all pretty incredible. And . . . I'm scared as hell."

We stared at him. Gunther said, "What the devil—"

Babcock said oddly. "You know, don't you? The Red Tree—caught you—" He glanced around. "I'm wondering whether anyone else was caught."

There was a puzzled silence. At length Babcock sighed.

"YOU wouldn't mention it, of course . . . Well, some of us may be all right. Most of us ought to be, I hope. I know I am."

What on earth are you talking about?" Kearney snapped.

"The Tree," Babcock said simply. "It's alive. It's intelligent. All the life in this valley—birds and beasts—belong to it. Are part of it."

Gunther growled inarticulately. Babcock's eyes dwelt on him.

"These inscriptions are a warning. The record of an experience by the pre-Adamite race. Once, very long ago, there was a culture in this valley. They had their science—a form of it."

"Science in Cro-Magnon days!" I said incredulously.

"These were mutants. And the Earth wasn't quite the same in those days. Life was still very close to the beginning. There were plenty of mutations. That's why they made the Tree—were able to make it."

I stared.

Babcock bit his lip. "Or else it was a natural mutation. The inscriptions aren't quite clear. The Red Tree destroyed all life—or, rather, all intelligence in this valley. Except the few who were able to escape. The Adam and Eve myth—the Tree of Knowledge. Remember?"

"You're talking about folk-lore, of course," Kearney said.

Babcock's tongue circled his mouth. "No, I'm not. You yourself said the animals here didn't act normally. They were conditioned—but by what?" He

answered his own question. "By the Tree."

Gunther said, "You're crazy."

Suddenly there was a pistol in Babcock's hand. He held it pointed at Gunther. Kearney said, "Put that down!"

"Not yet. Let me talk. I tell you I'm afraid!" Naked horror showed in his eyes for a brief second. He caught himself, went on quietly:

"What's symbiosis, Kearney?"

"Give and take. A parasite living off a host. Mutual help. Like the pilot fish and the shark."

"Is mental symbiosis possible?"

Kearney's eyes hooded. "Mental? You're getting into metaphysics."

"The hell I am," Babcock said sharply. "That Tree is alive! Its intelligent! It has—a brain."

"It's a vegetable."

"You're a mammal. But your primal ancestors weren't intelligent, either. You evolved. The Tree is a mutant. Ages on ages ago, Nature experimented with intelligence. Eventually mammals got it. But plants had their chances. Perhaps only once, here, in this valley. A mutant may bring about a superman—that's an accepted theory. Well, once there was a mutation that caused a super-tree."

Kearney snorted. Babcock's eyes were desperate.

"I'm translating—and it fits into known scientific facts. I tell you, that Tree is intelligent. A descendant of the original one, perhaps. Living in this valley for uncountable ages—and living by symbiosis."

"It's beyond me," I said.

"Mental symbiosis. It takes—something—from its victims, and gets control of their minds. It assimilates all their knowledge. In return, it gives—what does it give, Gunther?"

We looked at the archeologist. His bearded face was a mask. His eyes were—strange.

He said, "You're crazy. Come over to the Tree again, and I'll prove it's merely a plant."

"So we can be trapped?" Babcock asked. "As you were? It isn't you, Gunther. It's the intelligence of the Tree, talking through your brain."

Gunther laughed. His words caught us completely by surprise.

"You're right," he said. "Soon I shall have you all. Then you will take me to the outer world, which I did not know existed. Living here for ages, seeing only with the brute minds of beasts. . . ."

I HEARD Kearney whisper, "Good God!" Babcock's gun swung up. I jumped for it, grappled with him. There was a crackle of underbrush, and Gunther was gone, plunging into the forest.

Westerly laughed. There was lunacy in his tone. He kept on laughing.

Babcock let me have the gun. "He's gone," he said, shrugging. "No use chasing him tonight."

I stepped back. Kearney was looking completely baffled. Westerly's insane laughter rang out through the still night of the valley.

I got water and brandy, and forced them down the guide's throat. He quieted, looking at me blankly. Then he subsided into silence, his lips moving. As I said, psychology is my field.

It didn't take long for me to see that Westerly was insane. Without the soporific of opium, his neurotic mind terrified by this business, he had taken refuge in the dream-world of the schizophrenic. He was mad. Harmless. But—God!

Half an hour later he was tucked into his blanket, mumbling softly, and we sat around the fire and looked at each other. Babcock said, "We've got to get out of here."

Kearney groaned. "This is—impossible."

"You're a biologist. Is it?"

"No . . . no. It fits in. The Tree has an impregnable defensive armor. That's to protect some incredibly delicate nervous organism inside—like our skulls, protecting our brains. Bullets won't harm the thing. I suppose it could have a—a brain."

"It wasn't Gunther talking, at the end," Babcock said. "It was the Tree. Remember? It said it would have us all soon—and we'd take it to the outer world. It's a vampiric intelligence. It sucks our minds—"

"It can be killed." Kearney stood up. "I've some acid that should affect it."

"Nothing can harm it. It—it's perfect, in its fashion. Nothing can get through the armor. Its defences kept pace with its intelligence. The mind inside the Tree is an incredibly delicate organism."

"We must try. You've convinced me, Babcock." Kearney took some canisters from his knapsack. "Come along. Bring rifles. Vail, you stay here and take care of Westerly, in case Gunther comes back."

I said, "Okay," and squeezed my automatic. Babcock, his face contorted, found two rifles and followed Kearney into the moonlit depths of the forest.

Presently Westerly went crazy. I had to revise my former opinion. He was more manic-depressive than schizoid. He became a raving maniac, screaming and clawing at me till, in self-defense, I was forced to knock him out.

Inwardly I felt sick. That Tree . . . intelligent, vampiric. Symbiosis . . . plant-life evolved to the nth degree! It fed on—minds.

We had not known Gunther was—possessed—until Babcock had translated the inscription left by that long dead race. I shivered. Gunther might have lured us, one by one, to the Tree, till we were all victims. Then we would have obeyed every command of that alien intelligence, taking it with us to the outer world, loosing upon Earth a terror

against which there was no defence. For the thing was impregnable.

Was it?

SUDDENLY I felt cold. Babcock had said that any of us might be victims. I wasn't, I knew. Unless—unless I had *forgotten*—

Why—Kearney himself might be. . . . He had gone off with Gunther to look at the Tree. Perhaps he had fallen a victim to it then. Perhaps it wasn't—Kearney—who had been talking to us a few moments before.

In that case, Kearney, even now, would be luring the unsuspecting Babcock into the trap!

I jumped up, shaking with a fear beyond fear. I had started into the forest when, struck by a sudden thought, I came back and lifted Westerly's limp body to my back. Carrying him, I struck out for the clearing where the Tree was. I ran, stumbling, gasping. . . .

Babcock was standing, his rifle ready, not too close to the Tree. Kearney was behind him, hands lifted, about to push the little ethnologist toward those scarlet tentacles that were reaching out hungrily. I had been right. Kearney was—was no longer human. He was possessed.

I shouted, Babcock whirled, and dropped to his knees. Kearney lunged over him, rolling into that nest of tentacles. They squirmed away from him like snakes. That confirmed my guess. The Tree had taken from Kearney what it wanted already. It was seeking fresh prey.

Astonishment was in Babcock's face. He sprang up, backed away, as I ran forward, bending under Westerly's weight. The guide came to life, tried to struggle free. We went down together. I kept trying to push Westerly toward those squirming tentacles.

Babcock yelled, "Vail! You—it caught you too!"

I knew what he was thinking. That I was acting under the Tree's command. I couldn't help that; I was busy fighting Westerly.

We grappled, went down together, and rolled into the red snakes.

They closed around us. The forest spun dizzily as I was lifted. Gentle pressure was on me everywhere. Then darkness as I was lowered into the hollow trunk of the Red Tree.

Westerly and I. Neither of us struggled now. Something was leaving our brains, and something pouring into it. An ecstasy beyond life. Something unknown to flesh. Known only to that blasphemous Tree that had grown here when the valley was Eden. . . .

A dark current swept into my mind. Then it was troubled. I was floating, bodiless. . . . caught in a sudden whirlpool.

Abruptly I felt agony, wrenching, terrible. There was a soundless explosion of light. I felt myself flung into the air, and came down with a jolting thud on the ground.

I lost consciousness.

Not for long. When I awoke, Babcock was forcing brandy down my throat. I choked, spluttered, and after a while sat up.

THE clearing had—changed. The Red Tree was still there. But it was no longer alive.

The sentient malignancy had gone from it.

The tentacles dropped, lifeless and dull. The red was fading to ochre.

I looked around. Babcock, Kearney, Westerly . . . Gunther. He was kneeling beside me, watching me anxiously.

Babcock said, "What happened? It—it worked, whatever it was. Gunther's all right now. So is Kearney. But—"

Kearney was shivering. "The Tree's

dead. You killed it, somehow. When you were flung out, I felt a . . . a weight lifting from my mind. A pressure I hadn't known was there." There was still an edge of worry in his voice. As if I still might be—controlled.

Again Babcock said, "The Tree's dead; it's starting to rot already. How the *dévil* did you do it, Vail?"

I gulped more brandy and glanced at Westerly, who was still unconscious. "Just a hunch. Poor devil . . . he's insane. Might be better if—"

"What killed the Tree?" Gunther demanded. "It was impregnable. Completely so."

"Not quite," I said. "You gave me the clue, Kearney. You said it was a delicate nervous organism, highly evolved. And it fed on intelligence—sucked the contents out of brains. I gambled on that. I gave the thing the damndest psychic shock it had ever had. It was used to animal mentality. It absorbed yours and Gunther's without trouble, but—Westerly was insane."

There was silence. I went on. "Plants never go mad. Naturally. The Tree had developed its brain to incredible delicacy. Any violent psychic jolt would wreck it. That's simple psychology. I gambled that if it sucked the contents of Westerly's insane mind, its nervous organism would be disrupted completely. Like throwing a monkey-wrench in machinery made of glass. Or pouring emery dust into moving gears."

"It was a risk," Babcock said.

"Yeah. But there just wasn't any other way. And it worked." Nobody had an answer to that.

I drank more brandy and shuddered. "It's dead now, anyway. But we can preserve it, now that the thing's harmless. Imagine the Tree of Knowledge behind a glass case in a New York museum! Direct from—Eden!"