



Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 24 CONTENTS FOR SEPTEMBER, 1934 Number 3

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The People of the Black Circle"</i>		
The People of the Black Circle	Robert E. Howard	274
<i>A weird novel featuring Conan the Barbarian</i>		
The Jest of Warburg Tantavul	Seabury Quinn	296
<i>A ghost story of vivid power and gripping human appeal—a story of Jules de Grandin</i>		
Naked Lady	Mindret Lord	317
<i>A tale of voodoo and a millionaire's strange scheme for vengeance on his wife</i>		
The Sinister Painting	Greya La Spina	325
<i>An eerie story of a fiendish murder and a midget psychic investigator</i>		
The Return	Julia Boynton Green	334
<i>Verse</i>		
Vine Terror	Howard Wandrei	335
<i>A weird-scientific tale, about vegetable vampires that lusted for animal and human food</i>		
Sable Revery	Robert Nelson	351
<i>Verse</i>		
The Trail of the Cloven Hoof (part 3)	Arlton Eadie	352
<i>An astounding weird mystery novel by a British master of eerie fiction</i>		
The Pale Man	Julius Long	373
<i>A queer little tale, about the eccentric behavior of a strange guest in a country hotel</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Coming of Abel Behenna	Bram Stoker	377
<i>A weird tale of the sea</i>		
A Cloak from Messer Lando	August W. Derleth	389
<i>A short story about Cesare Borgia and the magic of a mediaeval sorcerer</i>		
The Eyrie		394
<i>An informal chat with the readers</i>		

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

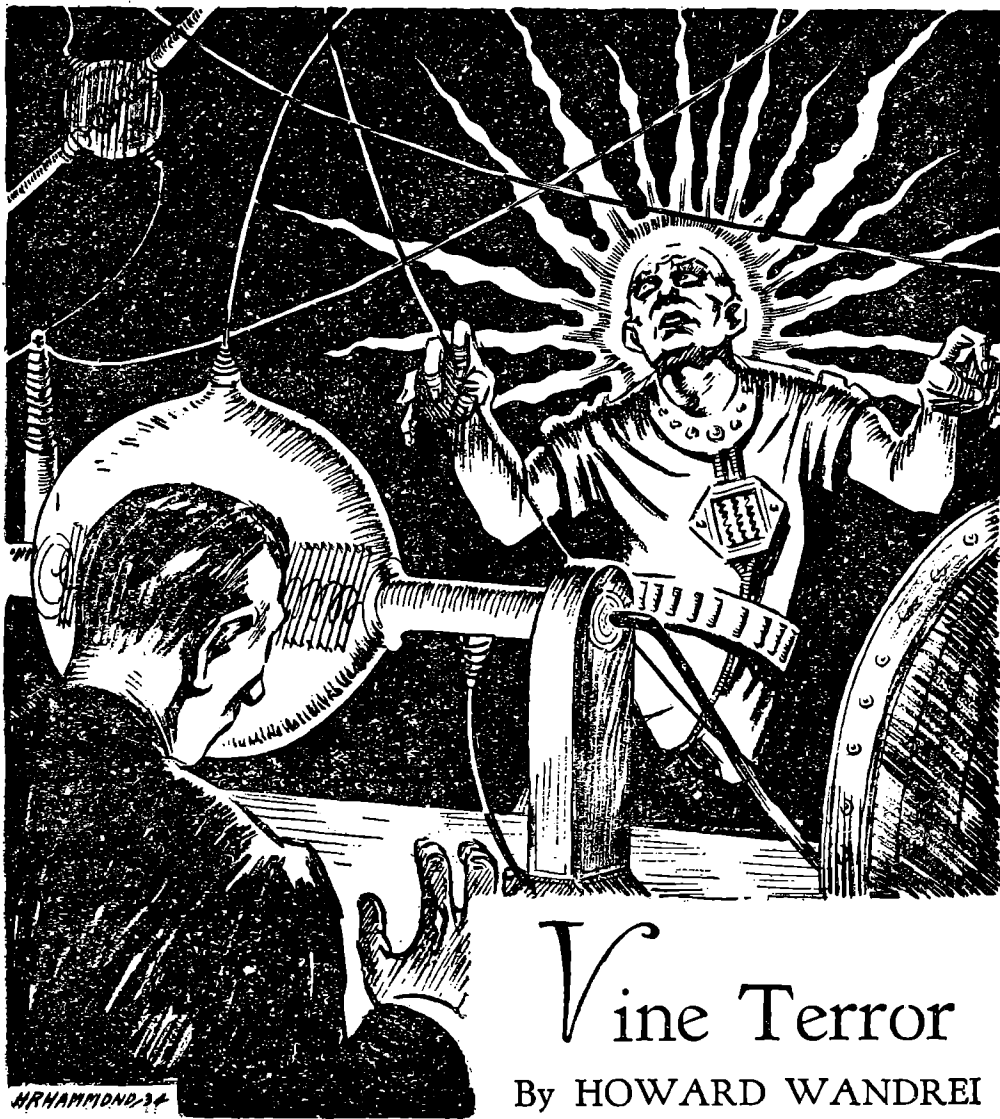
Copyright, 1934, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company.

COPYRIGHTED IN GREAT BRITAIN



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"There was a violent explosion of radiant energy that shocked him into temporary blindness."



Vine Terror

By HOWARD WANDREI

An unusual weird-scientific tale, about vegetable vampires that lusted for animal and human food

ROMAN SHOLLA stood perfectly still on his front sidewalk, bewildered. He blinked a few times, and opened and closed his mouth like a fish out of water. Then he thrust his still unlighted pipe into his pocket and ran.

There was reason enough for his fright. Sholla, proprietor of South's Cut-

Rate Supplies, lived on the outskirts of the community below the hill on which stood the glass, stone, and metal faced South Experimental Laboratories.

It was about twenty minutes past seven when Sholla issued from his front door, in his hand a pipe, which he loaded methodically with a poking forefinger. He proceeded down his front walk, at

which point he produced a match from his side pocket and struck it on the mailbox nailed to the oak tree. But the tree wasn't there. It had moved, moved out of reach. The earth was shouldered aside. At the base of the huge, broken-barked bole was what seemed to be a wake of turf.

"Fo' fo'teen years," he explained excitedly to Eric Shane, who lived across the street, "I strike m' match on the tree. You see me do it. What is happen?" He looked around belligerently at the little group that had collected, and which had drifted back to the scene of the novelty.

"I tell you what. I come down the walk and put out my hand to the post-box to strike the match. Every morning just the same. Eric will tell you so. But now I can't reach it," he said, his voice trembling. "Look for yourself. The tree has move' away from the sidewalk!" He pointed passionately at the base of the tree with his unlighted pipe. Before it, between the little huddle of men and the tree, was a plowed furrow, like a short, fresh grave.

Wiry, dark little Fred Yanotsky, who had once inspected ore at the Ashton mills, was looking up at the laboratories on the hill above Sholla's house.

"You vill find vhy up d'ere, I t'ink," he said malignantly. "No good come of machines. I know. I work wit' machines for ten, twelve year. Many funny t'ings happen. Funny t'ings." His voice trailed off ominously.

"Ah!" exclaimed Sholla contemptuously. "You talk like crazy. Because you catch yourself in the wheels one time, whose fault was it? You want to hang the big stamp, maybe, or the digger? P'raps you like to burn those generator' up there, like witches in the old country?"

"I do' know," said Yanotsky slowly, shaking his head. "I see some awful

funny t'ings." He looked up balefully at the power plant, and fingered the mutilations of the arm that had been caught in the mill machinery many years ago.

"Ay," spoke up an old bearded fellow, Papa Freng. "What has happened to the game? Tell me, Roman Sholla."

"The game?" said Sholla. "How do you mean?"

"The game, the small game. What has happened to all the rabbits? Where are the squirrels that used to come to my window for nuts, all summer and all winter? I tell you, there has been no small game seen here these three months, nor the small green snakes, even. Roman Sholla, what of the birds?"

"Birds? What are you talking about, papa? Up there is a bird, now." He pointed off at a slow-winged turkey buzzard of remarkable size, a really gigantic specimen, that was pursuing a low, undulating flight toward the wood that surrounded the hill and the laboratories. The five men at the oak tree turned and eyed the bird warily as though they were watching Judgment approach. The buzzard passed nearly overhead, somewhat to the right of Sholla's house, and side-winged into a wide spiral as it prepared to alight in the trees half-way between the house and the laboratories on the hill. Its trailing legs dropped a trifle, the wings spread umbrella-wise, and momentarily it disappeared from view among the foliage. Sholla turned to Papa Freng triumphantly, saying,

"Well, papa, there was one—or didn't I see it?"

"Look!" said the old man, seizing his arm and shaking it.

The buzzard had suddenly reappeared, beating its wings so violently that to the five astonished men it sounded like a waterfall. The frantic bird uttered hoarse, terrified cries, thrashing the air

heavily. It was apparently working to lift some tremendous weight. The cries ceased abruptly, as the bird seemed to erupt above the foliage. It was heavily laden with what could only be a vine, which was entangled in its claws and dangled with many lively twists, dropping earth from the curling, whipping roots as the bird circled wearily higher and higher above the woods—higher and higher, till the silent, gaping circle of watchers strained their eyes to see. And then, when the great black buzzard, like a living kite with its grotesque tail, was almost beyond vision above them, the vine dropped away. It fell as though weighted, roots first. Behind its downward plunge trailed a little flurry of leaves that had been torn away. The vine plummeted into the trees with a distant, leafy uproar in almost precisely the same spot from which it had issued. And when the five gaping watchers looked again into the sky the great buzzard was nowhere to be seen.

FROM the central chamber of the laboratories a watcher commanded at least a fifteen-mile view across the plains. This morning a tall, gray man was standing at the windows, looking out thoughtfully with keen blue eyes. From where he stood he could just make out the group of men now straggling away from the front of Sholla's house. He was smiling tolerantly.

"What cheer, fellow citizen?" said a voice behind him.

"Oh, hello, Schommer," said Haverland, turning around. "Why, it's those confounded birds again. They don't seem to like these woods at all. I can't imagine what the devil has got into 'em. We'll have to beat them up one of these days and see whether there's a hungry critter or two down there. Set traps."

"Yes," said Schommer, blinking away the dregs of sleep. "Why, I haven't seen even a squirrel around here since—well, since poor Keene got his."

That was three months ago. Haverland remembered it with regret and a great deal of embarrassment. To his complete shame, whatever it was that Keene, the senior engineer, had been working on—and those projects of his were remote enough—Haverland had destroyed. When Keene had been electrocuted, Haverland and the newcomer, Harriss, had been assisting in his experiment. Schommer stood just back of Keene. There was one peculiar aspect of the affair that Haverland thought of afterward as a remarkable, if peculiar, conception of his own. At any rate, it seemed to have been a phenomenon witnessed only by himself.

Keene had stretched forth a lean hand, and the bare wire had crossed his wrist. And then there was light, like a halo.

From where Haverland stood, watching through the poles of two huge electrodes, between which was fixed a bulb of one of the inert gases, Keene's body seemed to be aflame. He stood there like a waxwork, moments after Haverland had disconnected the current. Phosphorescent fires chased up and down his arms, and the exposed flesh of his breast and face seemed to be burning. The soft radiance brightened gradually. Harriss and Schommer, apparently blind to this aura of light, gaped at their chief fearfully. The radiation of light was now sharply brilliant, and as Haverland gasped at its brightness there was a violent explosion of radiant energy from Keene's head that shocked him into temporary blindness.

It was a stupid, an unforgivable thing to do; it irritated Haverland to think he could be capable of such carelessness. That bulb of gas, in which had appeared

a deposit of transparent, flowing crystals, might have had some important bearing on the nature of Keene's mystical and complex experiments. One almost dared suppose that the impossible was sometimes possible, and that perhaps in this one case the inert gas, or combination of inert gases, that Keene had been working on was active after all.

Still, who would know the subtle ways of Agnes, the laboratory cat? It was all chance: that it was high noon when Keene died, that the hungry cat was mewing on the central table, and that when Haverland set the mysterious bulb with its more mysterious contents on the table the affectionate Agnes pawed it, caused it to roll into the sink compartment and shatter. All chance, and yet Haverland could only blame himself for a fool's negligence.

But that radiation of light from Keene's dying body was something to be considered. In Haverland's own idiom, it was "one for the books." Halo. The legendary gods of Greece and Rome, robed in light. The death light. The ancient gods of India, the primitive deities of all countries, even unto Christ and the Christian saints, all enhaloed. Tradition somewhere originates in truth, and in the time-forgotten genesis of that shining legend, the legend of the halo, was the simple function of a physical law, a mystery once visible. Haverland shook his head. There were more fools with their follies. . . .

As he entered his own private laboratory, leaving Schommer to luxurious yawns, he thought again of that curious, inexplicable deposit of crystals in the bulb of stable gas—crystals that seemed to be composed of microcosmic glass beads by the billion, and that surely had an involved, slow, endless motion of their own. Haverland felt that he was peering

into the unknown, and again and again the sensation of his personal connection with the death of Keene filled him with uneasiness and with shame, as though he had committed some vast error.

He noted something unusual in the condition of his room, and stopped short. At the end of the laboratory table the window had been broken, possibly by a vine which passed through the opening. The vine twisted along the table top, and was entangled in Haverland's microscope. A pile of glass slides was knocked down. Several had fallen to the floor and shattered.

Haverland toed the fragments irritably. A great deal of damage had been done. He started to untangle the vine from the microscope and crowd it back through the window, swearing mildly to himself, then dropped it and pulled absently at his lower lip, perplexed. It struck him suddenly as being very, very odd that a clumsy, meandering growth like this tortuous creeper should have worked so much of itself into the room.

Some four or five days later Haverland experienced a moment of pure fright. The window had been repaired, but was now open. Haverland sat on the sill, looking over rolling country that was farmed by the hunkies of South. He could see a fan of men spreading through a distant plowed field, for what, he didn't know. As he watched, he was aware of something crawling along his bare forearm. A small beetle, a fly. He brushed it off, then froze in position, panic-stricken. The beetle was not a beetle at all, but a tendril of the vine that grew outside the window. In one eternal minute he took account of many things: of the fact that the vine, which had never been any more remarkable than any of its kind, was now unimaginably luxuriant, hanging from the side of the building in a

vast cloud of leaves; of the fact that a pungent, unpleasant odor moved about and among this cloud; and that a small tendril of this inexplicable new growth was visibly insinuating its way along his forearm.

HAVERLAND had watched the slow unfolding of the cereus, but this thing crept along like a wooden worm vested in leaves. It was encircling his arm deliberately. The delicate shoots seemed to be freckled with infinitesimal suckers, and wherever they touched they clung. Haverland plucked at the thing and it resisted. Suddenly it seemed to grow into his flesh. With the shock of pain the engineer snatched it violently from his arm and flung it out. The thing had been sucking his blood.

Vegetable vampires!

All along his arm were tiny red beads, like a perspiration of blood, as though he had been pricked with a thousand needles all at once. At this moment there was an impatient rapping at the door. It was Schommer.

"Grave-robbers," he said shortly, and with an expression on his face that Haverland was not to forget.

"What?" he said, astonished.

Schommer's blue eyes glared.

"They've dug him up," he said furiously. To which he added, meeting Haverland's blank look, "Keene."

Keene had been buried at the bottom of the hill according to his own often-expressed wish. Schommer and Haverland, hastening toward the small cleared plot that contained his grave, could see nothing until they reached the place because of the foliage-banked iron grille-work around it. Then Haverland stopped dead, dismayed, while Schommer watched him grimly, almost accusingly, thought Haverland. The grave was torn up.

Plowed up. A few bars of the grille were bent, and impaled on the spears of these bars was Keene's body. It had apparently been so displaced for some time, vines having partially enwrapped it and broken into the flesh.

"When did you discover it?" asked Haverland, appalled.

"Only this morning. My wife reminds me to put flowers on the grave once a week." Schommer pointed to a scattered bunch of flowers on the ground—fresh flowers, and the dried stalks of the past. "Now, who would do this thing?" he said bitterly, looking at Haverland. Then he was silent.

Afterward, though, the whole horror of it seemed to be crystallized in something almost irrelevant. When the body was removed to the cemetery in town, it had first to be disengaged from those horrible vines. The trained eyes of Haverland and Schommer were alone in seeing that the flesh in nearest conjunction with the vines presented a most remarkable appearance. It looked raw. Haverland thought of the word "digested." Schommer was staring at him. And Haverland looked at Schommer, while the disgusted deputies of South's coroner quickly practised their trade.

The potentialities of the vine. Vines that climb, and vines that hang. Creepers that find their ways upward to the sun. Tough vines that bind, vines that clutch and choke, that gripe the best life out of the vegetation that gives them foothold. The gleaming, wholly denuded skeleton of a squirrel, still intact, entangled in the vine that girdled the body of Keene.

Keene's death seemed in some way to have laid a curse over the woods and the small game that inhabited them. The three months afterward were a chronicle of desertion, the small cries of birds and

the chuckling calls of wild things decreasing in number day by day till there were only long silences, broken by sounds that could not be identified. The quick, flying skip of a rabbit was as rare now as the cadenced flight of the jay and the gull. The pleasant, frightened movement of wild things disturbed and the splash of leaves had given place to queer, long, meaningless rustles; rustles that marked the insinuating course of large snakes, or perhaps the rustles of heavy vines, that, overweighted, were dropping by degrees from their places among the oaks, the birches, and the cottonwoods. Continuous movements unseen. The threat of invisibles.

EXCEPT when some problem kept him in the building overnight, Haverland habitually rode into the city with Schommer. And both men were thankful for Schommer's car. It was a good three-quarters of a mile from the laboratories into South, and the dense woods, denser now with this monstrous new growth of underbrush, overhung the road all the way. A lonely walk, at night.

"Not even an owl," said Schommer. "Used to be a lot of them."

He was driving slowly, and now stopped the car to listen. Not a sound of bird or beast. He looked at Haverland, who had his lean gray head cocked forward listening intently.

"This place is like a cellar," Schommer continued, in his peculiar clipped style of speech. "Nothing moving; not a sound. Even a beastly smell."

His broad lips curled with displeasure as he released the brake and the car began to move.

"Wait!" said Haverland, gripping his arm.

Schommer looked at him inquiringly, then thrust his head farther out of the

window to listen also. There was never a sound; the woods were deathly still.

"Hear something?" he asked skeptically. "Only living thing I've seen around here in three months was our friend the buzzard this morning. *C. a. septentrionalis*, and for such a big one even he didn't stay long."

"Listen!" said the sharp-eared Haverland, and with so commanding a voice that Schommer obeyed, opening the door and stepping outside the car.

At once there was an explosion of sound in the woods near by. The air was filled with outburst after outburst of agonized cries, cries that seemed to be neither brute nor human.

Schommer snatched a flashlight from the pocket of the car and plunged through the brush at the side of the road, Haverland following. They had scarcely entered the woods, the beam of light playing through the leaves ahead of them, when the uproar terminated in a cutting scream. They advanced through the woods hastily, still hearing an unaccountable, wild thrashing sound close at hand.

When they found the origin of the disturbance not fifty feet within the woods, they stopped, gasping with horror. All about them were trees hung with vines. Directly in front of them was a large specimen at the foot of a huge cottonwood, in movement. It was thrashing about like a whip. The end of it was wound tightly about some object, which, as they watched it thrown bloodily against the trunks of the cottonwood and the surrounding trees, they saw was a dog.

Schommer ran forward for a closer view.

"Stop, you fool!" shouted Haverland instinctively, and at that moment a creeper on the ground entangled itself in Schommer's leg and tripped him headlong. He tried to get up and found him-

self tied hand and foot. Tender young vines enwound his wrists and ankles like steel wires; he wrestled with them, grunting with pain.

Cannibalism. Kind eating kind. Haverland stood there nerveless, and felt, sickeningly, that he was looking again into the unknown. When Schommer fell, the light had been thrown from his hand, and now shone directly on the base of the cottonwood. The vine moved slightly, like a tentacle, as though the dog somewhere off in the darkness were still struggling to free itself, slowly. Schommer was still trying to raise himself from the ground, the great veins of his neck and forehead standing out darkly in the oblique light of the flash.

"I'm caught!" he said helplessly, and then cried out with terror as a creeper cut into one fleshy wrist and made a bracelet of spouting blood.

"Help! Help me!" he screamed. At which Haverland, nervously aware of black, black shadows banked on shadows blacker still among the depths of the tall trees, stumbled blindly forward, produced a knife from his pocket and flicked it open. The vine holding the dog was perfectly still then, and Schommer suddenly managed to free himself; upon which, having brushed off his clothes, he proceeded to bind up his wrist with a handkerchief. Then, feeling highly resentful, and perhaps a little foolish because of the wholly deserted character of the still woods, he picked up the flashlight and directed it toward the ground at his feet.

"Well, that's funny," he said, taking up the vine that had tripped him and dropping it again. "Did you ever see any wood like that?"

The vine was limp, flabby, and draped along the ground like a leafy rope.

Schommer stepped on it, and grimaced as it gave under his heel like flesh.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed. "What the devil do you suppose it is? Never saw anything like it!"

Haverland examined the root of the vine, and was about to draw his knife through it. But there was a windless rustle in the trees, and the vine, which had been lying as loose as a newly dead snake, and as cold, was now rigid and hard in his hand. He caught the fleeting impression that he was the object of eery, unearthly attention. He felt that he was threatened. The woods were now completely still, watching, waiting; the silence was a tangible menace, suffocating him, moving against him.

"Shall we take it along?" asked Schommer. "Might have to get a spade, unless——"

He stooped over and gripped the vine at its base, now quite limp, and tried to pull it out by the roots. Haverland held the light. Schommer was generously built, and his contorted face showed tremendous exertion, but the vine wouldn't give an inch. As he straightened up, nursing his wrist and swearing softly, Haverland saw the root of the creeper withdraw fractionally into the ground, for all the world like an earthworm.

"Hm-m," said Schommer, clearing his throat. "Queer vine, that. How about the other one?"

"Let's go see," said Haverland, and walked carefully through the dark litter of brush toward the big cottonwood, holding the light before him.

The vine that had trapped the dog was a large climber. Closely involved in its foliage was the dead, mangled animal, which he stooped to examine. Schommer grasped the main stem of the plant and shook it experimentally; it seemed to have the character of any other vine, but

when he turned aside to toe the battered, bloody ruin of the dog, the vine wobbled drunkenly.

Compact, gnarled arms of fiber that thought. Intricately contrived, sap-carrying tubes, sap that pulsed, sap that beat through wooden arms. Arms that looked about for supporting trees and moved deliberately like the tentacles of a land octopus. Haverland shivered with the thought. He received the uncomfortable impression that he had entered a stranger's house by some freak, or had the dubious privilege of wandering through the devil's own garden, of being tolerated in that journey.

"Let's get out of this, Schommer," said Haverland. "We can look this thing over in the daytime." He tried to make his voice sound casual, but the words came out harsh and knotty.

Schommer joined him, and as the two picked their way back to the car he said, "What the devil do you suppose happened to that dog?"

"Looked like some cat's work," Haverland lied; "probably the beast that's been accounting for all the game that's disappeared. Got away before either of us saw him."

Schommer shook his massive, leonine head. No cat in the country was big enough to kill a dog so horribly. Why, the thing he had touched with his foot was no more than shreds, a red puddle of flesh and splintered bones. No, it was a stronger, more savage beast than a cat. A beast so thorough and so subtle in its destruction that it absorbed living things into itself without its existence being suspected.

A LIGHT breeze moved through the woods as the two engineers approached the car, a moist, muggy breeze, and the grove of cottonwoods below the

laboratory was filled with sound. The majestic trees were scarcely distinguishable against the black sky, but fireflies illuminated the foliage here and there, and briefly showed vast and looming walls of leaves and branches, in whose enclosure the two men at the car seemed to be at the bottom of a well of shadows. The effect was that of a great beast lying prone and still which had suddenly commenced to breathe. There was no freshness in the air, rather the effluvia pouring out of a boundless swamp. The sensitive Haverland harkened to the sound of the night breeze through the leaves, and noted the peculiar leatheriness of their motion and collision with each other. The familiar, fresh sound of the wind playing through poplars and cottonwoods had taken on the character of a confident, jubilant, multitudinous handclapping.

He remembered that sound. Later, among the realities of his home in the city, those engulfing shadows flocked about him and marched endlessly through his dreams, through dreams of leafy cordings and living ropes, dreams of phosphorescent foliage and vines enhaloed, all sounding before the violence of cyclonic winds that blew the radiance into flame.

Hurried, harried by dreads and he knew not what, next day he busied himself with an apparatus which he had set up in his rooms a day or two before. This consisted chiefly of a microscope and a common broad beaker. In the beaker, and filling it to the brim, was a pulpy mass in which could be discerned indisputable chlorophyll; leaves ground into a kind of rough paste; macerated vines with their foliage, which he had clipped from the creeper outside the window (the writhing, the leaping, and the voiceless fury). Near the microscope was a delicate, graduated instrument used for some kind of measurement. Alongside the

microscope stood a small glass-stoppered bottle nearly full of a transparent umber fluid which had been expressed from the pulp.

Still doubtful, hesitating, never convinced, Haverland delayed his investigation one moment more. He approached a locker and removed from it a soggy paper package. With as much deliberation as he could muster, he opened it and produced a large piece of raw meat. He walked to the window with it, opened the window, and then, lingering still, stepped back. Wind outside plucked at the tower of vines, and its whole length undulated with a confusion of whispers.

Haverland wiped his brow, sagging with perspiration, and flung the meat outside. The vine thrashed out across the window. In a moment the meat had been torn into minute shreds, and the whole disappeared among the foliage. Haverland slammed the window and leaned against it. When the leaves patted the glass against his back he sobbed. Pound after pound of fresh, raw meat, vanishing thus in midair. Below the window, if he desired to look, was a sprinkling of clean-picked bones, even to the skeleton of a bird or two. There remained one certain test which the engineer felt was final.

As he stood before the odd collection of objects on the laboratory table, silent and thoughtful, he was aware of remarkable hootings and whisperings outside the building. It was as though the wind, finding small apertures and irregularities in the construction of the place, were deriding him and his work, making sport of his loneliness.

The day had been overcast. The light breeze that had begun the day before had blown up banks of clouds all day long, till by late afternoon the sky was obscured with a thick, uninterrupted blanket the

color of dusty metal, that seemed to serve as a sounding-board for dull thunders in the distance.

SCHOMMER, since he lived near by and wanted to finish up the business of the night before, had called for his chief in the morning. Early as they were, when they had passed through South and entered the road leading through the woods below the South laboratories they found their way blocked by a man at work.

Eric Shane, who lived at the far end of South, was one of the more capable laborers among the community of foreigners. Because of his war record, when such things were of importance in employment, he held the position of road patrolman along the network leading out of South. His grader, built after the fashion of the war-time tanks with which he was familiar, was stalled in the middle of the road. He was proceeding on foot along the ditch at one side, industriously wielding a scythe. At the sound of Schommer's brakes he turned about.

After observing the two in the car silently for a moment, he said deliberately,

"Wery juicy."

"What's that, Eric?" asked Schommer.

"The wines. Wery juicy," Shane repeated. He held out his scythe, from which yellow sap was dripping.

"Vines? Well," said Schommer, puzzled, "what're you cutting 'em for?"

"Big fellahs," said Shane, shaking his head. "Across the road, blowing around from the wind. Lots easier to cut."

"I don't see any," said Schommer, craning his neck to look beyond the grader. "Cut the rest of them already?"

Shane looked steadily up the road, then stared owlshly at the two engineers as though he had seen them for the first time.

"Maybe, maybe not," he said. "I ain't been vorking wery long. I t'ink maybe vind blow him back."

He picked up the creeper he had just slashed and threw it hastily into the woods, delivering a kick at one heavy, dragging end of it. Then he wiped his sap-stained hands on his coveralls and looked at Schommer shyly.

"Should I move him?" he asked, pointing to the grader.

"Later," said Schommer. "We've got a little job for you in the woods. Bring along your spade."

Eric unhooked the spade from the grader and looked at it perplexed as he followed Schommer and Haverland through the brush. In a moment the three men arrived at a spot where the ground was broadly disturbed.

"This is it," said Schommer.

"Minus the dog," said Haverland, staring at his companion. He was suddenly filled with a great wrath, and a hatred enough to drive out any fear of the unknown. The great creeper that had been lying on the ground at the base of the cottonwood now mounted upward and was lost among the foliage of the tree. There was no trace of the dog.

Both Schommer and Haverland advanced to the base of the vine and looked about.

"X marks the spot," said Schommer grimly. He scraped a cross into the ground with one foot, where lay a loose scattering of splintered bones. "Marrow and all," he continued. "Nothing left but splinters."

It was uncommonly dark in the woods, for today there was no sun. Eric looked all around carefully, then planted his shovel firmly in the soft earth. He eyed the two engineers earnestly and rather uneasily as they examined the creeper wound all about the cottonwood.

"The devil! That's a big fellow, Charlie," said Schommer. "That surely can't be the one we saw lying on the ground last night."

Haverland shrugged. The vine was thick as a small tree, but it was as gnarled and twisted as though it had been through torture.

"You know," he said, "this is all kind of backward. I've seen wind tear a vine free, but blowing it back up is a horse of another color."

"I don' like it," said Eric. The air was charged with a musty, pungent animal smell, at which he wrinkled his nose with dislike. "I t'ink maybe I better go now."

"O. K., Eric," said Schommer. "We don't need you after all."

As he turned around, and Haverland stooped to examine the bark of the vine, there was a rustle in the foliage overhead that was not caused by any wind. It was the sound of innumerable bats in flight, the sound of leather in motion. Eric jumped up and down with excitement, his jaws moving soundlessly as he pointed. Schommer stared at him, marveling.

"Watch himself! Watch himself!" shouted the Finn, finding his voice. "*Wine come!*"

Schommer glanced up, then snatched at Haverland and hurled himself forward. The two men sprawled headlong as the "wine" slipped from the tree and fell behind them. The leaves of the vine were massed like a great green mushroom, and the whole growth fell limply and heavily, all at once, smothering the base of the cottonwood with a thud, in a solid mound of foliage.

"Well, I *will* be damned!" said Schommer, finding his feet and brushing himself off. "Now, what do you suppose made that happen?"

"It fell," said Haverland slowly, as if to himself. "Simply came loose and fell,

in a heap. And we were directly beneath it."

"Looks as though someone were wishing us a lot of bad luck," said Schommer, laughing nervously. "Now, if I were superstitious——"

HAVERLAND said nothing, but he was subdued as he tramped back to the car with Schommer. He had seen what Schommer had not seen, just before the vine had fallen. That vine had a most unnatural surface of flexible, wrinkled wood, all covered with a kind of unholy sweat. The crevices of the bark were thickly packed with parasites, countless numbers of small insects which conceivably could only be battenning on the vine itself. These insects were lice, uncommonly large, well-fed lice in great numbers. He considered this phenomenon judiciously and humorously as the car left the grader behind (with the panting, exhausted Eric) and mounted the drive to the garage behind the laboratories. Half-way up the drive his restless eyes saw something new.

"We're late," he said, breaking the silence. "That's sloppy work, too."

"Eh?" Schommer was surprized out of a mood of his own. When he had locked the car and issued from the garage with Haverland he looked at his watch.

"As a matter of fact, Charlie," he said, "we're early. Only ten minutes to."

Haverland verified the time with a glance at his own timepiece. Then he looked mystified down the hill and said,

"Plumbers are early, then. They've dug in."

"Where?" asked Schommer, puzzled, as he loaded his pipe. Haverland pointed toward an oak near the bottom of the hill, where the ground was spaded up.

"Something clogged up the drain," he said. "Probably the roots of that tree.

Looks as though they've used a plow, doesn't it?"

Schommer squinted at the tree without recognition. The turf was broken all the way down the lawn, so that clods formed a rough ditch running from the walls of the laboratory directly into the tree.

"Sloppy work," repeated Haverland, shaking his head.

Schommer removed the pipe from his teeth and followed the course of the ditch with troubled eyes. Something beyond the tree attracted him; he walked a few paces down the lawn. The ditch continued on the other side of the tree, to the extreme bottom of the hill. Curious technique—as though the plumbers were hunting for the tree and couldn't find it. Haverland, slowly taking his place beside Schommer, saw the loose flesh of Schommer's face harden, tighten, till he seemed ten years younger.

Schommer raised his arm and pointed at the tree with his pipe as though it were a target and the pipe a gun. Then he looked at Haverland with eyes whose perplexity had something also of terror.

"Wonderful!" he ejaculated. "Charlie, that tree wasn't there before!"

"What?"

"No! The hill has always been clear. That tree is a good twenty paces up!"

"Schommer——" said Haverland through his teeth. Then he checked himself; no need yet for the wild statements he could make. After all, no one could be really sure, really certain that the fantastic things he suspected had any basis in fact. He was silent. Schommer only regarded him curiously, placing the pipe again between his teeth. Then he drew hurriedly against the almost dead fire in the bowl as Haverland proceeded farther down the hill. An oak tree, that looked all of a hundred years old. Immovable

as rock. A fresh leaf sailed out of the foliage and reached the ground about ten feet in front of him. He picked it up absently, and as he stood there for a moment, genuinely troubled, he twisted the leaf idly in his fingers and noted that it was as limp and as tough as leather. He turned slowly and retraced his steps up the hill.

More of those leaves, and the leaves of other trees in the woods, flapped against the windows of the building during the day. The wind was steadily rising. Leaves like patterns cut in the skins of animals.

Some time ago, there was that item in the local paper concerning the tree that had moved. The Laboratories people told jokes about the ignorance and superstitions of the people who lived in South: how the hunkies hated the whine of the generators, the complicated glass and metal apparatus, and the living blue sparks that jumped all over the laboratories like fireflies. But finally the tree had left the yard entirely to stand at the edge of the woods. Now there was an investigation; sliding substrata were discovered, in which the roots were involved. Odd that the layer of earth should have moved uphill! And now a tree on the very hill on which the laboratories were built, playing the same tricks, tearing up the sod.

DURING the day Haverland several times discovered Schommer standing at the window area looking down speculatively at the woods. Young Harris had the phenomenon pointed out to him, and twice left his work to make an examination. Cowl shrugged; he would not have been surprized if a hen had crowed after laying an egg.

The plumbers did come in the afternoon. Having taken a sounding from the

building they dug in at a point midway between the tree and the laboratories. Advantage was taken of the ditch in the turf, since it was discovered that below it, down to the sewer, was a cleavage line of broken, friable earth. It was as though a giant plow had followed the sewer-pipe from end to end, breaking the ground. Actually, one of the extraordinarily long roots of the oak tree had entered a joint in the pipes. All manner of refuse had caught on the obstruction and damned the sewer effectively. The difficulties of repair, however, were negligible.

By this time the wind outside had become rather heavy, in the midst of which the laboratories were an isolated calm. The wind occasionally gusted with still increasing violence, and now and then small objects struck the walls and windows with faint rappings. Haverland could fancy he heard shoutings from down the hill; there was a waterfall of sound among the cottonwoods. At this moment the night-bell rang.

With some degree of surprize and curiosity he left his chambers to see what was wanted. He was alone in the building, it was late, and this was a place where few visitors came. He had locked the door, of course, after Schommer had gone at last; and now, to his further surprize, there was no one on the steps when he opened it. He stood there in the doorway wondering. It was those queer little dark people in South, and their total lack of comprehension of the purpose in these researches, their distrust of everything mechanical, and their absolute fear of electricity; but it was rather a quaint expression of hatred, to ring the bell because the machinery whined. Annoying, too.

It was an unlucky night for ignorant, fearful people, though. The sky was heavy with storm, and the wind was

speaking angrily through the cottonwoods. A handful of glossy leaves swept up the hill, and a creeper which had been torn from the side of the building blew across the walk and was shaken against the steps. Haverland locked the door and walked slowly back to his table.

Mysterious. Something grimly facetious about the whole business. All the earmarks of a practical joke on a grand scale. Trees that move. Vines that plummet down fatly from trees that hold them like great green spiders. Game gradually and wantonly slaughtered; skeletons and splintered bones scattered all through the woods. Something in the woods concealed, foul-smelling enough to attract a ranging turkey buzzard. Vines, spongy with sap, blowing around in the road with the slightest breeze. A laborer's fear of still, disinhabited woods, and his flight from them. A vine had tripped Schommer, and so held him that he became frightened. Vines clustering along the road that provided the only means of approach or retreat to the laboratories. Blowing across it. The way Haverland came to work and went home. Vines tough enough to stop a road grader. The voice of Eric Shane, saying, "Wery juicy."

Vines.

Anger filled him again, and he exclaimed aloud, "It's a lie!"

But the walls of the building flung the shout into a trail of echoes; from some remote corner of his brain he plucked out the impression of a bulb of sliding crystals, that Agnes, the laboratory cat, had broken into the sink. Down the sewer, down the hill, into the woods. A thirsty oak, mounting the hill along the sewer, using its roots like the tentacles of an enfoliated devil-fish, a wooden mole. In this whirl of half-thoughts he found the skeleton of the cat outside his own window, the bones completely disarticulat-

ed, but still recognizable. He heard the voice of Eric Shane say,

"I hear' a cat scream—one time, two times, up those hill'."

There was something deadly in the woods. A killer that worked ceaselessly, stealthily, that was not caught in any trap set for it.

In the meantime the first few drops of rain were being flung against the windows with smart rappings like thrown sand. The vine that had been torn from the walls thrashed against the building and occasionally struck the windows in the central chamber with that brittle, short sound peculiar to glass.

Haverland hesitated only a moment as pale violet lightning flickered among the clouds, then turned to the microscope on the table. He prepared a slide cleverly, like a magician's trick, and slipped it under his lenses. One certain test. He adjusted his focus, found something, and rigged up the delicate, graduated instrument that was apparently intended for some occult measurement. There he sat, hands on hips, peering, his face as grim as death. His thin lips recited some ritual without sound.

"Yes, Schommer," he heard himself saying, "those are mighty queer vines; you can tell me nothing. Do you know there's salt in their sweat, eh? Did you know their sap clots? That it takes a blood count, like your blood and mine? *Ever hear 'em talking to each other at night in those cursed woods with their damned clicks, and rubbings, and whispers?* What do you suppose they talk about? *Death!*"

But Schommer was far away in the city, asleep by now. Haverland leaped to his feet and knocked the microscope crashing to the floor. He had a grim purpose in mind, but even now was arrested by the second ringing of the bell, which

broke the comparative silence in the building in the most startling manner.

IT WAS a late hour for anyone to return, and the hunkies of South had all rather sleep in coffins than come anywhere near this place. The bell continued to ring as he made his way to the door. Someone out there was passionately, or mischievously, ringing the bell again and again. Longs and shorts. Staccato rings in series, rings that set the nerves on edge; a whole wild, weird variety of ringings by some impatient lunatic. The bell still sounded alarmingly when he reached the door, which he snatched open at once. The steps were devoid of any presence but his own.

Nearly hysterical with exasperation, Haverland looked into the black, wrathful night, but not for long. A blockade of vines crowded up the steps with a rush, and advancing tendrils whipped through the doorway. Haverland flung the door to with a re-echoing crash. A few short lengths of the vine were caught in the crack, and there they writhed, like the sprouting tails of snakes. One he gripped, which instantaneously snapped about his wrist and entered the flesh. He cried out with pain; taking a shorter grip on the vine with his other hand, at the same time bracing his feet against the door, he tugged with all his might, gasping with panic. It was like trying to break a wet leather thong, but the gods gave him the advantage of weight and terror. The vine parted abruptly; he caught himself as he staggered crazily past the first of the series of generators that ran back from the door.

It was the thing that had nearly got Schommer. Vines gone soft; vines turned animal. Vines as flexible as rubber. Vines whose wooden hearts had been turned into some kind of unholy flesh,

vile with rich, putrid yellow sap. Those tendrils remaining in the door writhed spasmodically; there was a heavy scraping sound, and they were withdrawn through the crack with a powerful jerk, leaving a leaf or two in the room. Haverland still held the piece that had broken off. It was quite limp, like a rounded, dirty strip of flesh, and was bleeding that sticky, pale yellow sap into his hand. He flung the thing away across the floor and walked unsteadily back to his rooms, drawing the palms of his hands heavily down his cheeks. He could hear vines beating against the door and grinding along the walls, unimaginable vines, foul things that were hosts to billions of lice. There was something definite and malicious in their movement as they worked along the window-ledges, tapping at the panes that were now streaming with moisture.

In the downpour outside, the trees in the woods arched and lashed the air with foliage. Haverland listened bewildered to the stunning impact of barrage after barrage of thunder, and fancied that the living voices that issued from the grove of cottonwoods were many times multiplied. Then the lights throughout the laboratories brightened unbearably. As the engineer approached the end of his table the lights went out. The wires had gone down in the storm.

He stumbled over some rope-like thing on the floor, and noticed wildly as he fell that the window was open. Something had come in. He reached out in the darkness, however splintered with lightnings, and found it, pulled at it. Clutching it was like squeezing the compact, corded flesh of a squid. A long, eel-shaped thing that passed through the window into the outside.

At that moment ragged lightning seemed to tear the southern sky in two,

answered by an eruption of light in the north. As the following thunder battered the place with sound, Haverland stood up thrilling. He had a brilliant vision of the dying Keene; for indeed, this again was the legendary halo. The two colossal charges of electricity in the sky seemed to serve as electrodes, each bolt a pole, the laboratory between; and in this room the halo appeared once more, just as Haverland had seen it over the tube of gas three months past. There was a full, mysterious effulgence throughout the room. A pale, thin radiance flowed out from the thing on the floor and filled the room with a glory of soft light. By this illumination the engineer saw that it was really a denuded length of vine, now more like a hideous, tapering worm; saw, too, that there was scarcely a leaf remaining on the tangle of vines at the window. In the glory of the halo these boneless arms serpented in a terrible dance; every tentacle glittered with sweat in small beads, that winked at the lightning like innumerable eyes. The vine in the room began to raise itself from the floor.

And now, having formed a towering, closed palisade about it, and accompanied by the sound of shouting leaves and colliding trunks, the vine-hung grove of cottonwoods was advancing on the house. It was the sound of earthquake; the hill shook, and metal clanged in the central chamber of the laboratories. Followed a stupendous crash. Haverland hurried to the door, half stunned.

Through the broad windows of this central chamber one commanded a view of the entire countryside. The hill itself was just high enough to permit sight over the foliaged heads of the oaks and cottonwoods. Haverland, looking down at the trees, saw the entire woods bathed in cold flame. The grove was one vast phos-

phorescence. The tree-trunks glowed, and the masses of leaves shone like soft, burnished metal. All the great vines were alive with light, and hung from the trees in waterfalls of flame. It was a thing seen in a nightmare or read in a fairy-tale. Another Birnam Wood, that was coming by degrees, but surely, toward the central point that was the laboratories. The laboratory hill seemed to rise from a chasm whose walls were solid light. Trees and vines in motion. Before their advancing trunks and stems the earth was rolling away in waves. Then, dark off in one end of the chamber, the engineer saw that the oak on the hill had already entered the building. The end generator had been shouldered aside and crashed through the floor into the basement. Commotion was in the air. The storm entered the chamber with the oak, and rain beat on Haverland's face.

And still it was not too late. The engineer whirled and retreated through his own laboratories, leaping the handful of twining creepers in his way. In the back of the building he picked up a sledgehammer, then raced back through the smother of rain to the garage, in which stood three full drums of gasoline. He ran up the incline on which the drums rested, and worked rapidly with a wrench. He stepped back a little, swung the sledge in one heavy blow. The drums, released, tumbled booming down the runway, spilling their contents as they went, and bounded out the doorway to go careering down the hill.

Haverland waited, dripping with rain and perspiration, then produced a box of matches. As he was about to strike a light the heavens gaped and a volcano of flame plunged cracking and thundering into the woods like the finger of God.

Haverland flung himself out of the garage in time to escape the arm of fire

that leaped up the hill. From the back of the laboratories he watched a tower of flame boom up in the declining storm. Above low thunders he heard three successive explosions as the gasoline drums went. There was enough of it, he felt, to suffocate, if not to consume. A shift of wind carried the sound of crackling and hissing vegetation, and carried into the engineer's nostrils the charnel stench of all the pyres of history. Sickened, he stumbled back into the laboratories.

THE following day dawned calm and clear. Roman Sholla came out early and stood on his front lawn, smoking his pipe deliberately and looking up at the hill. A crew had appeared several hours before, and were making much noise as they repaired the damage done to the laboratories by a falling oak. There had been a strong, unpleasant odor in the air all morning, which likely enough came with the shift of the wind from the packing-plant in the city. The members of the crew, as one occasionally came down into South, found the work distasteful, the stench seemingly worse the higher one got up the hill.

One man alone in the building, the chief engineer, Haverland, had escaped serious injury when lightning had touched off three drums of gasoline in the garage and burned it. The South woods had suffered heavily, with a number of the trees and the extraordinarily large vines that grew here either totally burned or badly charred. The famous oak that had taken a journey away from Sholla's own yard, though not burned, was now dead, its leaves already withered.

Eric Shane came out presently, scratching his head and blinking cautiously. He and Sholla were joined shortly by little Fred Yanotsky and Papa Freng. Sholla, situated as he was nearest the laboratory,

took on some importance. He told how the storm had wakened him. The woods had caught on fire somehow, and three explosions ("when those gasoline go off") illuminated the room he slept in.

"It was one big bonfire," he said, holding out his arms.

He told of seeing the lightning strike.

"Big," he said helplessly, shaking his head. The bolt was indescribably huge. He could tell of the sharp burned-leather and ozone smell in the air afterward, though, and did. But the thunder, ah! They all remembered that sound of cataclysm when the big bolt struck, but that could not be described either.

Sholla's three friends were silent. They had said nothing yet, and seemed very much satisfied about something as they looked up at the crew busy at the shattered masonry and twisted metal above them.

"Well, Fred," said Sholla, "what you think of it, eh?"

"I t'ink," said dark little Yanotsky, "maybe it was a good t'ing if *all* the plant fall in. Never, no good come of machines."

"Ah!" said Sholla contemptuously. "Always the same. Crazy stubborn like your father. You should go to school, Fred Yanotsky!"

"This morning," said white-haired Papa Freng, "a squirrel came to my window for nuts. He was very tame, and the first I have seen in a long time." His eyes were fixed on the dreaming distance. As he spoke, something moving near by brought him to sharp attention. With something of eagerness in his voice he exclaimed, "Look!"

He pointed up the road. A small cottontail, pursuing a rather aimless course of exploration or foraging, was proceeding along the ditch, nibbling at green

shoots. Its way was blocked presently by a creeper that lay along the road and sagged under its own weight. It was remarkable in being almost totally leafless.

The rabbit, in skipping over it, suddenly froze, as beast does in the presence of beast. But if the grotesque old Keene had been responsible for the mockery of sentience in these singular growths of

South, his ghost must have rested at last. The watchers saw the rabbit pass carelessly, unmolested, over the stiff tangle of vines and disappear among the ruins of the South woods. Roman Sholla walked the few paces up to the vine, and, toeing its snarled trunks and leafless tendrils, said,
"Dead."
