

# THE THING THAT KILLED



*For a moment my yells seemed to push aside the blank veil across her eyes.*



By  
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**Jerry Lane Was Half of Dr.  
Bloch's Living Experiment—  
But His Part Meant Death!**

**W**E didn't kill old Doc. The rotten press campaign against us is just low-down yellow journalism. The vicious attack of District Attorney Gleason is a lot of political hooley, thrown out to catch a few extra votes. Patsy Stevens and I are not guilty of the murder of the world's greatest botanist, Dr. Heinrich Sigmund Bloch.

Out of respect for his family, and because I didn't want to chuck mud at the name of a Nobel Prize winner, I've kept my mouth shut up till now. I've refused to give the details of the craziest, creepiest scientific experiment ever pulled off.

Before that nightmare evening when Bloch's mania for digging into the mysteries of life made him go hog-wild, he was tops in science. I guess you know that

his studies in hybridism and his four-volume work, *Osmotic Irregularities among the Sarraceniaceous Plants*, are classics. I still think of him myself as a sort of intellectual dynamo, a great botanical genius. And, in spite of the spine-jolting bumps he put me over, I can separate Bloch the experimentalist from Bloch the man.

But I can't hold my tongue any longer. The only chance Patsy Stevens and I have of clearing away the cloud of suspicion that's making life tough for us is to tell the truth frankly. Then maybe people will stop heckling us, stop whispering about us, stop pointing at us as if we were a couple of homicidal crooks.

It all began when I got Sigmund's note, written in his crabbed, old-maid handwriting:

Dear Jerry: You're the fellow I need to help me in a job of work I've got on hand. It's terribly important. Please come out to my place this evening. And—this will probably seem odd to you—don't tell a living soul you're coming. Destroy this note, Jerry, if you still respect your cranky old prof.

Yours affectionately,  
Sigmund.

There were two reasons why that note bothered me. Doc was never one to be furtive about anything. He was so honest and open he would just as leave hand his bankbook to a confidence man as not. Now he was acting as secretive as a spy. And I couldn't see why he had picked on me to help him in a "terribly important" experiment, inasmuch as I nearly flunked two of his courses at school.

As Doc had once said himself, I was better at the "dynamic tropisms of the football field" than I was at lab work. There was something phony about the whole set-up. But I was flattered up to my neck that he wanted me to help him.

Grinning, I touched a match to the note and let the ashes drop. I wouldn't have grinned if I had realized that in burning that note and accepting Bloch's invitation I was letting myself in for a taste of unadulterated scientific horror that would haunt me like a nightmare the rest of my life.

But then, as I've indicated, I'm no mental Titan. I'm just one of those chaps who, was thrown in the first round by the Einstein theory and who's still fighting a losing battle with math.

I did what old Sigmund asked me to —said nothing to anybody about where I was going. I slipped away right after supper and headed my Lizzie, which runs in defiance of the laws of equilibrium, gravitation and the conservation of energy, toward the Jersey hills where Doc has his hangout.

It's quite a dump, too. Some of his breeds of crazy plants have been bought by nurserymen all over the country. Doc has picked up some dough to play with. He has put it into greenhouses and buildings on his hundred-acre farm.

I got there just at sunset. Doc met me at the door and I thought at first it was the sunset light that made him look so queer. Then I figured he must be sick. For he was just about the color of the sheepskin I almost didn't get. It was a funny kind of paleness, as if he had a bad case of anemia.

**H**IS long nose was white and pinched. There were blue circles under his eyes and his cheeks were sunken.

His voice was hearty enough when he said: "Hello, Jerry." But I noticed when he shook hands that his fingers trembled. He turned and led me into the house and I couldn't help seeing that his legs were shaky, too.

"You don't feel well, do you, Prof?" I said.

He turned and gave me a funny look. There was something strange in it, something I'd never seen before. It was almost like suspicion, or cunning.

"I never felt better in my life, Jerry," he said. "But I've been wotking hard; maybe not eating or sleeping quite enough—and this job of mine is exacting."

I sensed suddenly that he was being evasive.

"What's the job?" I asked.

He ignored that, led me through several doors into a back room of the main house, and I noticed something else that struck me as funny. Every time he went through a door old Doc locked it after him.

He got more and more excited and shaky. By the time we reached his back-room den, there were small hectic flush spots on his paper-white skin. I was more sure than ever that he was sick.

But he didn't talk like a sick or discouraged man. His voice held excitement, elation. He

seemed to have some big secret under his hat.

"You're curious, aren't you, Jerry?" he said. When I nodded, he added: "I don't blame you. You've a right to be eaten up with curiosity. But before I tell you about my work, I want to prepare you a little. I don't want you to think I've become a crackpot."

He looked at me with an odd mixture of defiance and appeal as though he were begging me to be indulgent.

"Prof," I said. "I'd have faith in you if you told me you'd transplanted strawberries to the moon. I'm only wondering why you picked out a dumbbell like me to help you when you might have got a whole bunch of sixteen-cylinder, valve-in-the-head brain trusters."

"There's a reason for that," Doc said mysteriously. "I'll explain. But let me show you a few things first."

He drew a bunch of microphotographs from his desk and shoved them toward me. They had things on them that looked like little boats with the bare ribs showing. There were others that were round, like circular sections of honeycomb with perfectly formed hexagonal cells.

"You know what those are, Jerry?"

I nodded. "Diatoms. You can dredge them out of any pond. Every amateur microscopist in the country has squinted at them."

Doc chuckled.

"And you know, Jerry, that we botanists like to call them motile plants. But—" he held up a trembling finger— "there's no absolute assurance that they're plants except that they show traces of chlorophyl. Old-timers thought they were tiny marine animals. They have siliceous skeletons that withstand boiling in sulphuric acid. They move around and behave very much like mollusks. They may be plants or animals or both. They may be one of the missing links between the plant and animal kingdoms."

Doc was on one of his favorite subjects. I nodded again.

"You used to tell us that in the classroom, Prof."

"Forgive an old man's lapse of memory," he murmured. "I just wanted to be sure you understood, Jerry. Here's another picture. You can identify that, too, of course."

"Sure, Prof," I said. "I'm no botanist, but we

got several specimens of those when you took us out on field excursions. They're pitcher plants. Once we almost drowned in a swamp, I remember, getting them."

"Yes, Jerry. Very fine examples of *Sarracenia*. And you know, too, that they're carnivorous, like the sundews, butterworts and bladderworts. The pitchers have a gummy nectar in the bottom and hairs pointing in one direction. Insects can get in, but not out. The plant devours them."

AS Doc said this I thought suddenly of all those doors he had locked behind me. A queer thought, but something in his face or in the atmosphere, brought it to my mind.

Then I suddenly stared at Doc's wrist. His coat cuff had pulled up a little as he reached for the picture, and I saw that there was a strange-looking, bumpy scar on the skin. A little higher up was a queer, lumpy bandage.

"You've hurt yourself, Prof," I said.

He yanked at his cuff quickly.

"It's nothing," he answered. "Only a scratch."

For a second there was an embarrassed silence. For a reason I couldn't understand, Doc's eyes refused to meet mine. Then he looked down at the pictures and spoke.

"Jerry," he said, "both of the photos I've shown you indicate that the plant and animal orders aren't so far apart as some people think. Some day—" He paused again.

"Some day what, Prof?"

"Well, suppose, Jerry, that human beings could borrow some of the secrets that plants possess? Food from the air; untold energy from the sunshine; mineral salts and nitrogen from the soil."

"We get all that by eating green stuff, Prof. Spinach, for instance—"

"I know, Jerry, but suppose a race of men were developed who could do their own direct chemical synthesizing as plants do? Think of the vast possibilities! No food shortages. No worry over droughts. No international conflicts over land to feed growing populations."

I began to feel a little queer. "I see what you're driving at, Prof," I said. "But chlorophyl and haemoglobin are two different things. They—"

He stopped me, smacking his trembling hand down on his desk.

"That's it, boy—chlorophyl and haemoglobin! That's my angle. That's what I'm working on. That's the basis of an experiment of mine that will set the world by its ears. I may not live to see it perfected—you may not. But centuries hence—"

He had a strange look on his face, the look of a fanatic who is letting his mind chase along one line of thought till he sees everything else cockeyed. The world's full of guys like that right now—dictators who pop their eyes and preen their mustaches, and make whole nations goose-step. I was sorry to see Doc, a scientist, getting lopsided, too. But he went on.

"You don't know what this means to me, Jerry. It's the climax of my whole life's work. I've already taken the first step across the threshold."

"You mean, Prof?"

"I mean I've got a plant closer to the animal kingdom than either the diatom or the common Sarracenia. I want you to help me carry on, Jerry, where I've had to leave off."

His voice faltered. His eyes dropped from mine again. Abruptly I had a strange, creepy feeling of uneasiness along my back.

"You're young, Jerry," he added huskily. "You have enough scientific curiosity to understand and appreciate, and enough physical stamina to contribute... You were a football player. You're robust, full-blooded. You'll help me, won't you?"

"Sure," I said a little weakly. "Sure. But what is it you want me to do?"

"Come and I'll show you," he said.

He led the way to a flight of stairs which seemed to go down to a cellar. He locked the door behind us, descended to a small, square hallway with double glass doors in the middle, which I recognized as a sort of air lock. On the other side of that the atmosphere suddenly got strange, unpleasant, and as humid as the tropics.

There was another door with bright lights showing around the edges of it. As Doc opened this a girl in a white uniform came toward us.

**I** HELD my breath because she was so pretty. She had a mass of copper-blond hair cut in a

page-boy bob. Her features were like those of some goddess on an old Greek coin. Her skin was warm, rich, sun-tanned, and she had big, blue, long-lashed eyes.

It wasn't till I took a second look that I noticed the strange expression in those eyes. The pupils were expanded, vacant, as though she were heavily doped.

"This is Patricia Stevens, my assistant," Doc said. "She's a trained nurse and a very competent young woman. Miss Stevens, meet Jerry Lane, a former pupil of mine."

The girl said nothing. Her only response was a brief nod and a vacant glance from her long-lashed eyes. I had the feeling that she was looking through me rather than at me. I saw suddenly that the lovely, sun-tanned complexion that made her look like an outdoors girl came from a battery of blinding flood-lights overhead. They were sun-lamps, super-powerful ones, burning some kind of mercury vapor, I guessed, in quartz crystal tubes.

Without any word from Doc she went to the wall with the queer mechanical steps of a sleepwalker or an automaton, and pulled a switch. It was as though it were part of a routine job that she had been trained in till her subconscious mind directed her actions. .

As soon as the switch clicked the big flood-lamps dimmed to a yellow glow and I could see beyond them.

Then I forgot about the girl, forgot even about Doc. Little cold maggots seemed to crawl up my spine.

For there was a plant in the middle of that cellar room such as I've never seen before and never want to see again. It was a horrible, nightmare sort of plant. It had broad, thick leaves covered with thorns and hair and ending in whiplike tendrils. Some of the leaves were curled into deep cups. The stem of the plant was twisty and shiny, It was at least twelve feet high; almost as high as the room. And the color of the stem held me fascinated. That was a sort of blue-red, waxy and feverish.

I drew in my breath, then felt my heart begin to hammer. For something else was happening.

As the lights went dim the plant began to move. Not much—for it was rooted in a tub. But the stem began a slight, snaky undulation and the great, thick leaves started groping in a way that

made my spine crawl.

One leaf that I watched seemed to open and shut like the palm of a giant, fingerless hand. There was a strange, eerie energy here. That moving leaf seemed to be a mute gesture out of the chill, prehistoric past before living forms on Earth had become differentiated as they are today.

A sweat broke out on my face and I don't know how long I might have stared like a man in a dream if Doc hadn't spoken.

"Nepenthe Splendens!" he whispered, his voice shaking with pride. "Its ancestors were the great Nepenthe pitcher plants from Malaya. It's taken five years of cross-breeding to develop it. That's the living experiment Jerry, that I want you to help me with."

I saw then that the plant's stem, low down, almost at the base, was split a little and that a length of flexible tubing was held in place there by carefully wound bands of linen tape. The other end of the tubing was coiled in a little box on the floor. The end of it seemed to be forked. There were some dials and gadgets on the floor, too, that I couldn't make anything of.

**T**HE moving leaves of the plant seemed now to be dipping down toward that tubing in a strange, monotonous pulsation that was like the restless wings of a great moth. The lowest leaves of all bent down till they almost touched the tube.

I had a feeling that the plant was struggling to make itself understood; that some blind instinct was shooting powerful impulses through all its cells.

"It's hungry," said Doc quietly. "Photosynthesis stops as soon as we turn the lights off. The plant is growing very fast and has become accustomed to cooperative nutrition the instant its own chlorophyll ceases activity."

He looked at me to see if I understood.

I did understand, with a growing sense of horror, as though cold fingers were pressed around my neck. I understood so well that I pretended dumbness, and forced myself to say:

"Better turn the lights on again and let the plant do its stuff."

"No, Jerry. That wouldn't solve the problem now. This is a wonderful case of interdependence between two living orders—vegetable and animal. The marine alga that finds its home on the backs

of horseshoe crabs is as nothing compared to this partnership. This is a true mingling of chlorophyll and haemoglobin in the most remarkable synthetic cooperation the world has ever seen. The plant has reached the stage where, without periods of mutual cooperation, it will die. It needs such cooperation now. I've served it faithfully. I must rest awhile now for the sake of my health. I'm asking you to take my place, Jerry, in the interest of science."

"You mean—" My voice was trembling so I could hardly recognize it.

"I mean that I'm going to connect your veins with the plant's cells for a time just as I have done with my own veins for days."

He held up his arms, let me see both wrists and I understood the full meaning of those strange scars. I was silent, stunned. "It's no worse than a blood transfusion that is done every day in a hospital," Doc said quietly. "It's a small thing to contribute to an experiment that probably ranks as the greatest in history."

"But—but—" I stammered. "You say this is a case of cooperation. If my blood circulates in the plant, then the plant's sap will circulate in me?"

"Exactly, Jerry. Your blood will be thinned a little, but that is all. You will exchange some proteins for other nutritive elements that the plant manufactures," he spoke very expectantly.

I stared at Doc's sickly, transparent skin and felt my gorge rise. It didn't look as if he had got much out of his partnership with the plant. He divined my thought and tried to head me off it.

"I'm old, Jerry. My cooperation with the plant has been slightly onesided from the first. Because my stamina has lessened through the years I haven't been able to give back my share of energy to Nepenthe Splendens. But you can. You and he should achieve a perfect chemical balance."

"Look here, Prof," I said. "I'd do almost anything for you—you know it. But this—this is crazy, suicidal. That plant is growing constantly. You said so. It's twelve feet tall now, I won't be able to feed it long anyway. You're starting something you can't finish."

"Can't I!" he said. He chuckled then and got a strange glint in his eyes. "I can get other men," he said.

I realized suddenly then, insofar as his

experiment was concerned, he had slipped over the brink. He was so in the grip of his big idea that he had lost all perspective. He wouldn't let anything stop him—not even kidnaping, or murder. If I helped him in this wild business now I'd just be leading him on to his own doom. He was headed for terrible trouble as sure as Fate. But I made my voice soothing.

"You've proved your point now, Prof," I said. "You've fed this plant and you say the plant's fed you. That's about as far as you can carry the experiment till you've gone into all the chemical angles of it."

"You're instructing me in my own life's work, Jerry!"

His voice was cold, ironic for a moment. It was the first time I had ever heard Doc talk like that. But it's the way all fanatics get, dictators included. They don't want to be told anything.

"I was afraid you mightn't understand, Jerry, that's why—"

**W**HAT Doc did then was something I had not expected or anticipated. He moved faster than I had supposed an old, weak, shaking man could. His thin hand dived into his coat pocket, came out with what seemed to be a tiny toy pistol.

Before I could even open my mouth he touched the trigger and there was a faint hiss of compressed air. I felt a tiny prick like a needle against my side.

I reached forward, took the gun away from Doc.

"What's the idea?" I said. "You're liable to put a guy's eye out. You must—"

I didn't get any further. All at once I began to feel funny. It was as though a kind of thick film was crawling over my skin. My tongue felt thick, too.

"Why, Prof!" I said. "Now I get it! You've pulled a murder-mystery stunt! That was a poison dart. I didn't think you—"

My tongue was so thick I couldn't go on. I tried to take a step toward Doc, stopped.

There were tears running down Doc's cheeks. I realized suddenly that he was putting up a scrap inside himself—the scientist and the man fighting; an experimentalist who wouldn't stop at anything, and one of the best-hearted guys that

ever lived.

"It won't hurt you, Jerry!" he almost sobbed. "Don't be frightened. It's just a harmless drug. It will wear off. But I hoped I wouldn't have to—I thought you'd be willing—"

Either he was getting incoherent or else I couldn't understand him on account of that drug in my body.

I was helpless now. I'd have fallen like a fool if Doc hadn't come forward and held me up. Then he signaled, and I dimly saw the white-clad nurse, Miss Stevens, coming up, too. Her face was a blank mask and her eyes were still vacant. The old boy, in his hog-wild experiment, had given her some other kind of drug. She didn't look at me, didn't seem to feel much of anything. She just helped him get me into a heavy, wheeled chair.

That was ready and waiting, and it was plain to me, even in my dazed state, that Doc had planned this thing in advance. That's why he had written that funny note. It showed how completely obsessed he was—and how dangerous.

He had stopped crying now. His eyes were like bright lights dancing before mine. I heard metal click, saw straps being buckled. I felt my ankles and arms and body being fastened into that heavy steel chair. Then Doc rolled my sleeves up and bared my wrists. Miss Stevens brought the tube forward.

Doc worked like some great surgeon. He was dexterous, swift. He made incisions in both my wrists near large veins. His knife was so sharp that it hardly hurt at all. He slipped small metal suction cups on the ends of the tubes over the incisions, and he did it so quickly that hardly a drop of blood spilled. He clamped the cups to my skin with rubber wrist bands, then stepped back.

All this time the big plant had been moving more swiftly. Its dipping, throbbing leaves were almost like the arms of a man or an ape, gesticulating. It bent toward me as I was strapped in the chair and the suction cups were clamped on.

**N**OW the movements of the plant stopped abruptly. Its leaves were quiet. I could feel a cool sensation in my wrists. There was very little pain, but the coolness increased, crept up my arms, and was accompanied by a strange dizziness and faintness.

I guess I was scared, too. And I was like a

man who stands outside himself and watches. I felt my mouth come open, heard sounds that must have been myself yelling.

Miss Stevens was looking down at me. For a moment my yells seemed to push aside the blank veil across her eyes. There was compassion there, sympathy, understanding. Anyway it made me ashamed of myself, made some of the affects of the drug wear off.

I stopped yelling, relaxed and stared up into the blue eyes of Miss Stevens while I felt the coldness of the plant creep up my arms into my body. I seemed to sink into a deep pool of horror and dizziness. But I kept staring into her eyes, and there my thoughts fell into another pool—a pool as clear and blue and quiet as the skies in tenderest April.

Honestly, I could almost smell roses and hear birds sing.

“You’ve got the grandest eyes I ever saw,” I heard myself saying. “You’re the sweetest-looking kid. I’m going to call you Patsy.”

I was out of my head, of course, absolutely nuts, or I wouldn’t have talked that way to a girl I’d never seen before in my life. But I was telling the truth, and people do go on that way when they’re doped or crazy scared. Ask any nurse who has ever worked in a hospital!

I wanted Miss Stevens to hold my hand. As the sap of *Nepenthe Splendens* began to filter through my body I tried to reach out. But my hands were strapped down.

She seemed to get the idea, though, that I liked her. She laid her white hand on my forehead, and smiled a funny, strange little smile, like a dopey kitten that wants to do the right thing and can’t quite figure it out.

And because she was there, close by, smiling, I didn’t so much mind being a partner to a devil plant in a botanical hell that old Doc had manufactured.

“Shoot the works, Prof, and see if I mind!” I heard myself say wildly, foolishly.

He did. That was the beginning of the strangest, wildest night I’ve ever spent. Every two or three hours I was unclamped from the plant and the flood-lights were put on. When the plant wasn’t exchanging blood for sap it was getting fed by artificial sunlight.

But I noticed that its leaves still waved a little

and reached toward me even when the lights were on. Once it swayed toward my chair and almost tipped the tub over, and Doc, who stayed in the cellar laboratory constantly, had to cut the photosynthetic period short and clamp me back on the job.

Old Heinrich had a cot in the room, and I could see he was so keyed up over his experiment that he intended to sleep right there. His sessions with the plant before I arrived had made him weak and groggy. He was crying for sleep, and if it hadn’t been for his wrought-up condition, he would have keeled over.

Every now and then his excitement left him and his eyelids drooped. He kept up a running fire of apologies to me for what he had done, mixed with wild conjectures as to where this experiment was going to lead.

I didn’t answer. Dumb as I may be I saw plainly where it would lead. After only six hours of “cooperation” with the plant I was beginning to feel like a guy who has been drawn through a wringer. My blood was thinned with that hellish sap. I looked at my hands and saw that they had a greenish color already. Lord knew what that chlorophyl in my system would do.

But I knew I was weakening fast. The plant was huskier that when Doc had fed it. I saw that I was headed for unconsciousness or a breakdown, and that Dog-Face would have to get some other sucker to help him. That would only be the beginning. If he got too desperate he might even decide to strap Patsy in the chair.

**T**HAT thought made me desperate. Maybe you’ll think it was part of my nutty condition, but I’d fallen in love with the kid. Yes, fallen into those blue eyes of hers just like a guy falling into a well. And I suddenly wanted to get her out, just as I wanted to get myself out. She was too sweet, too fine to be mixed up in a hellish thing like this. If Doc hadn’t doped her she would never have helped him, I knew.

I had to save her, but how? She had been trained in a mechanical routine as Doc’s assistant. Right now she was more like a robot than a human being. There didn’t seem to be anything I could do. Dog-Face was determined to hold me, and Patsy was too much under his control to unstrap me herself.

I tried talking to her once when Dog-Face went out to get himself some cigars. I pleaded with her to unfasten the straps, even told her I'd fallen for her head over heels, hoping that it would jar her out of her dopiness.

But it was no go. Her mind was a blank except for the orders Doc had given her. She was set to carry them out. Nothing I could say would make any difference.

The hours ticked on and along toward morning Dog-Face lay down on his cot.

"I just want a wink of sleep, Jerry," he muttered. "Just a wink. Don't begrudge it to me, and don't think too harshly of me. I'm ashamed of what I've done, but—it had to be that way."

His voice was sincere. He meant what he said. According to the lopsided way he had grown to look at things it was inevitable that I be sacrificed in the interests of science. That plant was more important to him than my life. And somehow, knowing how he felt, I didn't get sore or anything.

I told him I forgave him, but even as I talked, I began to plot secretly how I could get loose. There must be some way, I kept telling myself—some way.

It's funny how bright even a dumb guy will get when it comes to a matter of self-preservation. I was trapped, cornered, scared stiff for myself and for Patsy Stevens, and I had an inspiration right then that burst like a bunch of atoms exploding in my brain. My mind began to focus on something Doc had once told me himself about pitcher plants in general—something I thought I'd forgotten, but which must have stayed down in my subconscious all the time.

I stared up at one big cup-shaped leaf of *Nepenthe Splendens* that hung almost over my head.

Spooky-looking and weirdly developed as this nightmare creation of old Heinrich's was, it was still one of the *Sarracenia* family. Those leaf cups bore a resemblance to the common pitcher plants that I used to pull up in the swamp when I was one of Doc's students.

And I knew there must be liquid inside it. The air of the room was heavily humid. Besides that, there was a water spray hitched to a pipe over by the wall.

Yes, there was moisture in that cup so near to

me—and not just plain water either!

My heart began to hammer, and my mind began to grope for words and phrases buried under a couple of layers of sluggish gray matter. Enzymes! A proteolytic acid, something like  $C_{14}H_{10}O_9 \cdot 2H_2O$ . That was tannic acid, and hadn't Doc once told us gaping students that all pitcher plants secreted this powerful proteolytic acid from certain cells inside the cups? This, mixed with water down below, acted as an enzyme to digest the insects that fell in.

Look in your botany book and see for yourself. A proteolytic acid that will soften and break up animal matter!

With my heart beating a swingtime rhythm I stared from the cup over my head to the strap on my right wrist. It was leather, and any kind of tannic acid would soften leather. Even water by itself was a softener, and if water alone would do the trick, how much better it would behave if it had acid in it!

**T**HAT'S what I was thinking as I watched Doc lie down for his nap. I was so excited suddenly I nearly keeled over. By the time Dog-Face began really to relax I had it all doped out just how I was going to get that acid solution in *Nepenthe Splendens* leaf cup exactly where I wanted it. And I began to wonder right then if I hadn't been wrong all my life in calling myself a dumb cluck. I leave it to you if what I did next didn't take some dome work.

You've heard of a tourniquet, used to cut off blood circulation and stop bleeding? Well, I shoved my arms forward and twisted both of them sideward, elbows out, turning those straps on my wrists into tourniquets. They hurt like hell. The straps pressed into my skin till I almost yelled. But I held them there, stopping the blood circulation in my arm veins through minutes that seemed like ages.

After awhile what I wanted to happen did happen. *Nepenthe Splendens*' sap couldn't get through into my blood any more. The big plant began to show signs of restlessness as its food was cut off.

It was eerie, horrible, to see that unholy quivering begin to start. Slow undulations convulsed the stem and the leaves began to dip and vibrate. The cup over my head scooped lower



and lower and the thick, flat leaf next to it opened and shut like a ghastly, fingerless human palm.

Patsy Stevens had been trained in a strict mechanical routine, as I've said. Her doped mind couldn't grapple with the unexpected. The plant was restless, sore as a boil. She could see that. But it wasn't time for the vapor lights to go on and the photosynthetic period to begin.

I was supposed to be feeding *Nepenthe Splendens* and somehow I wasn't doing it. Patsy didn't know what to do. She just stood by helplessly. And she didn't even try to stop me when the leaf cup dipped so low that I was able to grab it with the tips of my curled-up fingers.

I hung on like a bulldog with my fingernails, digging into the pulpy green flesh. And I held my breath, too, and even prayed I guess. For I had my own life there in my fingers and knew it.

Slowly I eased my elbows in, drew the big leaf gently down till the pitcher bowl tipped forward and spilled the acid water over my wrist. Some of it splashed too wide, but most of it fell just where I had hoped—on the leather strap around my arm.

I leaned back then, weak and faint, let go of the leaf, let the blood circulate and let the plant feed again. But only for a few minutes. Moving my arm a little, I could already feel that the leather strap was softening, stretching.

It softened more and more as the proteolytic acid penetrated the leather fibers. I worked my wrist back and forth, pulling till I was nearly dizzy. And then it happened! My hand came free.

I yanked that ghastly feeding tube off my wrist, and Patsy Stevens still stood by helplessly while I reached down with my right hand and unbuckled the other straps. I was out of the chair the next instant and staggering across the room to get my leg muscles limbered.

**P**ATSY followed me, looking uncertain, and I did something I hated to do, but which the occasion seemed to call for. I turned and slapped Patsy right in the face till her cheeks got red and she began to cry. It was one way I knew of to knock sense into a dopey person. I grabbed her by the arm then, walked her back and forth till she stopped crying and till her eyes got almost normal.

"We've got to get out of here quick, Patsy," I

whispered.

She blinked a minute, shook her head.

"We can't!" she whispered back, "He'll wake up. He'll be mad at us both."

For answer I tiptoed over to the cot where Doc slept, slipped my hand into his pocket, and pulled out his bunch of keys. He was so sound asleep he never knew it. As a kidnaper Doc wasn't so hot.

I grinned as I stepped away from him. He looked so innocent and calm sleeping like that! You'd never think that dome of his could have hatched such a thing as *Nepenthe Splendens*. I turned then and stared at the plant, and stopped grinning immediately.

The thing actually seemed to sense that I was leaving for good and was sore. Its leaves had begun their monotonous waving again. The tendrils twitched and vibrated, giving out a faint rustling that was almost like the scraping scales of a snake.

Patsy Stevens shivered. Her eyes were wide now, staring at the plant.

"I'm afraid!" she gasped, as though she just seen it for the first time. "I want to leave this place, too."

"You bet!" I said. "Let's, before the old boy wakes up."

We went out of the cellar then with the rustle of the plant still in our ears. I unlocked all the doors, and Patsy Stevens and I stole into the early dawn. None of Doc's nurserymen was up yet. No one saw us go.

My old flivver was in Doc's garage. In it we drove back to town and in a little hash-house in the suburbs Patsy and I got really acquainted over breakfast. We exchanged life histories the way kids do, said things with our eyes that we were too shy to say with our tongues.

We got along swell, and I knew we were going to get along even better the more we saw of each other. We did, as things turned out—and now we're engaged to be married. But it's time to soft pedal all that part of it.

The important thing is what happened to old Doc. We never thought there would be any such startling climax. When the story broke it knocked Patsy and myself right between the eyes.

We didn't hear anything about Doc all that morning or anything from him. But the afternoon

papers carried wild headlines.

**FAMOUS BOTANIST DEAD  
BODY IN CELLAR LAB  
BRUTAL MURDER HINTED**

The story below the headlines read:

Dr. Heinrich Sigmund Bloch, Nobel Prize winner and one of the world's greatest experimental botanists, was found dead at noon today in a cellar that he used as a laboratory. The presence of a cot in the room indicated that he slept there while he watched over some sort of plant experiment, apparently having to do with the circulation of sap, about which he was an authority.

The workmen on Dr. Bloch's hundred-acre farm could give no information concerning this experiment. They said Bloch had not taken them into his confidence on this particular branch of his work.

The county coroner gives as his opinion that some tramp may have broken into his laboratory and killed him, with possible robbery as the motive. A large plant of unknown species stood in a tub in the center of the room. This was tipped over and Doctor Bloch's face and hands were scratched by its thorns.

There were other indications of a struggle, as if the doctor had fought with some marauder and been slain by him. But there is also a possibility that the plant may have fallen over on him accidentally while he slept, and that he was scratched trying to extricate himself from

its thorns, and bled to death.

His body was partially covered by the plant when his housekeeper found him. It appeared that the mysterious marauder might have attempted to hide his victim's corpse and then been frightened away by some sound in the house. The police are making a thorough investigation.

**T**HERE was a picture of Doc's body with the plant, now dead and wilted, half concealing him, and under it the caption:

**MURDER OR ACCIDENT?**

Patsy Stevens and I looked at each other. Her face was white. We knew that the police would probably find clues connecting us both with Dr. Bloch and proving that we had been out there that night. That would be easy. Patsy had left some things behind, and so had I. The tracks of my car could be traced—as the police afterward did do—giving the D. A. his chance to get nasty.

But the police didn't know the name of the real murderer, and wouldn't have believed us if we'd told them. They didn't know that *Nepenthe Splendens*, cheated out of a cooperative session with its new victim, had tipped its own tub over, attacked Doc with its thorny leaves, and wilted to death when Doc's blood had stopped circulating.

You can't blame the police. I guess it's the first time in history a plant ever killed a guy.

