

by **THORNTON AYRE**

A startling thing came out of the weird box Bill Dawlish found on Venus. What was its grim purpose?

THE feting and speechifying were over—and Bill Dawlish looked heartily thankful for it. "Damned good job I don't go to Venus and back every day!" he grinned, seated at the head of our reunion dinner table. "Spencer got to the Moon and back in 1970; I've made this trip ten years later. And in another ten years . . . ?" He shrugged off the speculation and went on with his meal.

There were four of us present—Bill Dawlish himself; his taciturn, strong-necked co-explorer Ralph Trent; myself—Bob Hansen, as the inventor of the machine that had done the trick; and Madge, my wife. Here we were in a little quartet, safe from the public gaze, in my quiet New Jersey home.

"If the truth were told," Ralph Trent commented presently, "Bill here is holding out on us. He found something on the Dark Terminator of Venus that's enormously valuable. So he says! But he won't tell us what it is."

Bill grinned. "Not yet. Somebody might want to frisk it, and I want to see what happens first. Nobody's to know a thing."

"It" was a steel-bound box, heavily combination locked, which had gone up with the rest of Bill's luggage to his room. I remembered how I wondered at the time what the thing was . . .

"To be frank, I don't like it," Ralph persisted, his dark eyes smoldering rather resentfully. "I shared the dangers with you; Bob here sank his money in the venture—What right have you to keep back anything?"

I waited, rather surprised. Deep down I'd never really liked Ralph Trent. Courageous, yes—but aggressive, even sinister. That he was piqued by not knowing what was in the steel box from the Twilight Belt* (*The Twilight Belt of Venus, immune to the 20-hour day and night.—Ed.) was plain.

"I have the right of discovery," Bill said quietly. "Before I show it to the world I want to be sure of something. Believe me, it's for everybody's good."

Ralph hesitated, then went on sullenly with his meal. Altogether, it seemed that Bill's secret had cast a blight over the proceedings for the rest of the evening passed in merely matter-of-fact anecdotes instead of ribald celebration. And so, finally, tired with the events of the day, we went to bed early.

"Just what," Madge asked me, yawning, "do you think he *has* found?"

"Lord knows! Mineral probably. If it comes to that, anything from Venus is enormously valuable because of its very rarity. I guess he's making too much out of nothing . . ."

There the subject dropped and we composed ourselves for slumber—but about an hour later we were both jerked upright and awake by the most unearthly scream ringing through the quietness of the house. It had come from somewhere along the corridor where Bill and Ralph had their rooms.

In an instant I was in my robe and slippers, and racing to the door. On the corridor gushed a flood of light; Bill's door was wide open. I hurried to it, then stopped dead just inside the threshold. It was an appalling sight which met my eyes.

There was Ralph Trent, fully dressed and pale as death, with a massive poker in his hand. On the floor in front of him, sprawled out with a ghastly wound across his forehead, lay poor Bill! That he was dead was instantly evident.

With an effort I mastered myself, turned just in time to push Madge back into the corridor.

"What—? Why?" she asked, startled.

"Something pretty bad," I told her tensely. "Murder, maybe. Go back to the room—for the moment anyway. . . ." Then I hurried back into Bill's room, slammed and locked the door, grabbed Ralph's arm and whirled him round.

"In God's name, Ralph, what have you done?"

"Eh? What?" He looked at me as though he were half stunned. Then he eyed the poker stupidly.

"I—I didn't do anything," he whispered.

"Then what do you call *this*?" I snatched the poker from him, but as I gazed at it I noticed something. It was unmarked; not the least sign to show he'd committed violent assault with it.

"I—I came in here to smash open that steel box," he said, getting a grip on himself. "I know Bill took sleeping tablets tonight to steady his nerves after today's activities: I figured he wouldn't wake. That was why I brought the poker, to prise the lock. But—but the room was dark when I got in. I switched on the light—there was a horrible scream—and I saw Bill lying there . . . just like that. It's true! You've got to believe it!"

I never saw a man so desperately anxious to be credited. For a moment I stared at him grimly, then I dropped beside the poor mangled wreck that had been Bill. From this lower vantage point my gaze shifted under the bed

A start shook me. That solid steel-bound box was *blown apart*! No other words can describe it. It looked as an old tin will look when hopelessly mangled. And something more—the lid had been ripped clean off its hinges and flung several feet away.

"Okay," I breathed, getting up and clutching Ralph's arm; "I believe you. You couldn't have smashed the box like this anyway— But what in God's name was in it? Certainly not explosive, else there'd have been a fire."

I tugged the box out. Inside was a curious smell, rather like ozone. And now, for the first time, we both noticed it had tiny air holes drilled along the top!

"Whatever was in this was—alive!" I cried incredulously.

Ralph caught the box in his strong hands. I saw his face go grim and set.

"I never noticed the ventilation before, either. I figured that Bill had gotten some special carbon deposits or something, and I felt I was right in demanding a share. You, too. But something alive! I never even suspected. . . . The strength the thing must have had!" He paused, staring down at the dead body of Bill Dawlish.

"We'd better send for the police?" he said finally.

"Not until we know what really killed him," I snapped. "It must be around some place. We'll put him on the bed and then take a look—"

The rest of my sentence froze off as from somewhere in the corridor we both heard Madge give a desperate scream. Like a shot I was through the doorway and pelting to our bedroom. I found her holding her throat in horror, struggling to keep herself from fainting. When she saw me, and Ralph right behind me, she sank weakly into a chair.

"What—what was it?" she questioned hoarsely.

"What did you see?" I demanded, shaking her forcibly. "Madge! What scared you so?"

"Something—something like a silver coil," she panted. "It moved at an incredible speed—suddenly shot toward me from somewhere in the corridor as I stood waiting for you to appear. I saw it gleaming. I screamed, jumped in here, and it went downstairs I think . . ." Fighting for composure she got to her feet again. "Bob, what *was* it?" she insisted.

I glanced at Ralph sharply. "You know? You've seen Venus and we haven't—"

"If it's what I think it is we've got to find it damned quick," he broke in anxiously. "I told you the light was off when I got into Bill's room; I remember hearing a sound in the open doorway behind me as I switched the light on. It was this light in here that saved you, Madge," he finished, looking at her. Then he hurried on, "No time for explanations now. We must track it down, and the first place to look is the icebox, I think . . ."

He swung away, and I followed him after stopping only long enough to grab a revolver from the dressing table drawer. I motioned to Madge to stay behind, but she isn't that sort of a girl. She tailed along beside me as I followed Ralph down the staircase.

We went cautiously, all lights full on—but no sounds came to us from the lower quarters of the house. Not at first, that is—then as we neared the kitchen regions there was a distinct, odd buzzing sound. It was pretty close to unearthly, sounded like a strong-winged bird imprisoned in a tinder box. It made a noise that was crossed between *a rattle and a whir*.

"Easy!" Ralph cautioned, and edged his hand through the slightly open kitchen door, flicked on the light.

At that things happened—incredible things! From inside the kitchen came a whizzing, whirring din, the sound of smashing crockery and glass—then something struck the inner side of the door with staggering force and came clean through the woodwork! We fell flat automatically and over our heads sailed a long, twisted torpedo of iridescent silver.

In a sense it was beautiful, coiled like a corkscrew, and it moved with a bewildering rapidity which dazzled the vision. For a time it kept up its eye-numbing whirring flying—then it made a beeline for the darkness of the shadows near the door of my laboratory.

Then—Wham! And it had gone through the door into the dark laboratory interior.

I got up, my mouth dry, helped Madge to her feet.

"For God's sake, Ralph, what is it?" I nearly shrieked.

"Blind force," he answered enigmatically; then led the way into the kitchen. And we saw as we went the other hole the thing had made in the door upon its entry.

Madge nearly burst into tears at the chaos in her domain. Plates and glasses were smashed to hell. The solid steel of the ice-box was warped and bent and the food inside it, though untouched, was mixed in an unholy jumble.

"The silver coil, as you named it, Madge, is a denizen of Venus' Twilight Belt," Ralph stated grimly, turning. "It lives in eternally dark caves and extreme cold. Ordinarily, it seems torpid. On Venus, Bill and I explored the Twilight Mountains and found thousands of these motionless silvery coils lying frozen stiff in the dark. We figured they were dead or asleep, even as the tortoise hibernates for the winter. I warned Bill against having anything to do with them—but it's clear what must have happened. Without my knowing it he took one as specimen, thinking to make a fortune from the Earthly zoologists—God, if only he'd listened to me and kept away!"

Because I knew Ralph was a better scientist than Bill had ever been I believed him.

"Yes, blind force," he repeated. "On Venus I found obvious signs that the lower classes of Venusian life, instead of being protoplasmic are of force, crystallized.* (* The whole universe can be defined as either energy (force) or matter. Matter can be changed to energy (an example: the burning of coal in a steam engine, which produces steam power, and in which much energy is wasted in the form of flame, smoke, friction, etc.), or conversely, energy can be changed to matter (theoretically, although we do not have any practical evidence of this except perhaps in the formation of the odd "fungus" we find on battery terminals, etc.). Neither is ever lost. Thus, here, we have a proposition we cannot basically deny; the possibility of a form of matter made up of energy which has been thus transformed from force. The indication here is that the "force" is merely crystallized, and would eventually revert back to its original state.—Ed.) Why? Because the energy of the Sun, so much closer to Venus than to Earth, is infused into all the life structures of Venus. The creatures of the Twilight Belt however are the lowest class, akin to our protoplasm. Of course, though the Twilight Belt is out of range of actual sunlight, the Sun's energy permeates every inch of the planet. . . . It's obvious that the warmth of the bedroom stirred this thing into life. It burst its bonds, attacked and killed Ralph and, I believe, was going to use him for food—though its normal food as I see it would be in our range of poisons. Then, as I guessed, sudden light chased it off and it looked for the coldest, darkest spot—the icebox. But definitely it is carnivorous and will try and attack us for food's sake—it's the only aim in life. We'll be unpalatable for it, but better than nothing."

"But surely we can kill it?" I demanded. "Shoot it?"

He smiled bitterly. "Might as well try and shoot solid steel! It's *force*, man! Darkness will quieten it but won't kill it. Light will frighten it, but also won't kill it. Yet we've got to nail it somehow . . ."

He thought, then braced himself. "We've a fight on our hands, Bob," he announced, his jaw set. "Let's see what we can do. You'd better stay here, Madge."

She nodded, but I doubted if she'd obey ...

RALPH and I started off from the kitchen and cautiously entered the laboratory. We advanced quietly, then, as hell had it, I stumbled. That loose board by the doorway had a habit of tripping me up. I

straightened, sweating and listening. All was silent. Through the hole in the door streamed the light of the hall in a narrow cone.

"If we stay in the dark we can't see to get at it!" I objected.

Ralph mumbled an assent and put the light on. Nothing happened, but some chemical jars had been overturned. Salts of lemon were strewn on the floor and some had clearly been consumed. Ralph gave me a significant glance.

"That's the kind of thing it likes! Poison! Now, where is it?"

Gathering a little courage we advanced, only to swing round in alarm *as* Madge came in.

"Shut the door, quick!" Ralph blazed at her; and she did, fumbling with the key. We hadn't told her to lock it, but evidently she thought the precaution necessary. Then she gave a horrified gasp, lunged forward—There was a remote clink.

"What?" I barked at her, tense with anxiety.

"The—the key!" she replied huskily. "I've dropped it— It went down this crack by the loose board . . ."

"Good God, Madge, do you realize we're trapped in here?" I yelled. "This laboratory door has an inner lining of steel: we can't smash it down even if the Silver Coil can . . . And the windows are too small to get through—"

"Shut up!" Ralph interrupted sharply; then as we froze into silence his big hand closed round a girder-spanner on the bench. He advanced with infinite caution to a shadowy part of the laboratory in the corner. There, I remembered, I kept a lot of other loose chemicals some of which were no doubt edible for this blind, merciless thing from Venus. I stood waiting, Madge clutched to me, both of us in thrall at Ralph's iron nerves.

The door of the corner chemical cupboard, steel faced, was slightly ajar. In any case I never bothered to lock it—In a lightning movement Ralph suddenly flung himself at it, slammed it shut and swung the heavy bolt in place. Then he relaxed and mopped his dewed face.

"Got it for the moment," he grinned breathlessly. "Now we've got to figure out something to put an end to it. It is afraid of light—that we know. I suppose there is a chance that a light intense enough might kill it. Got anything?"

"I've a two-thousand watt film projector," I said quickly. "Carbon arc light. That might do it."

"Good!"

He followed me as I hurried over to it. We swung it round on its tripod and directed the lens toward the steel door—but at that identical moment things happened again. The steel of the door began to warp and flake! Speechless with amazement we could only gaze at it, watching the outwardly bulging dents; then like an aerial torpedo that corkscrew of living horror slammed out to freedom, pieces of steel hurtling with shrapnel force in all directions.

"Get down!" Ralph screamed—and we all dropped flat, watching in desperate fear. And this time we saw the Venusian horror more clearly as it whirled round with dizzying speed seeking shelter from the electric light.

It had a face of sorts—a blind expressionless face with no eyes and seemed to be all tightly clamped mouth. It was for all the world like a perpetually coiled snake, only in the style of an earthly electric eel it gave off a silvery glow. More than that indeed, for it sparkled and crackled like a living bolt of lightning when it struck metal! Despite my horror, I found time to admire the diversity of Nature who had conceived such a mass of supernaturally powerful destruction, obviously with the intent of making it able to master its normal rigorous environment.

Finally it hurtled into a corner behind a workbench and was still again.

Gently Ralph got up, edged his way round to the film projector and fumbled with it. Madge and I could see his face was set in hard resolution. Finally he flicked the button on the machine. The motor started up and with it the blinding glare of carbon arc light casting a flour-white beam on the opposite wall.

"Here," Ralph said, and slid across to me the wrench he had been holding. "If it dives this way I am out at it. Our only chance, I guess. I'm going to drive it out."

He wheeled the projector forward on its rubber wheels, swung the beam so it flooded the corner. There was an instant response as that heinous thing was stung into action. It sailed through the air towards me.

I ducked, straightened again, then whizzed the wrench with all the power of my arms. It was like trying to hit a flash of lightning! I missed hopelessly and went flying. Madge wriggled under the heavy bench for safety. I recovered my balance and raced to Ralph's side as he swung the projector round, using it as a searchlight.

Tormented by the brilliance the Venusian horror hurled itself at the walls, the fittings, the glass bottles—Then it dived towards Madge! She gave a frantic scream—but thank God it missed her.

Ralph's jaws tightened at the narrow shave, and with admirable courage he moved forward, slowly pinning the thrashing monstrosity into a corner of blinding brilliance.

"It's obviously hungry," he tossed out. "And but for this damned light it would make a meal off us right now, even if we are not right in its line of menu. Keep the light on long enough and it may die, like a fish out of water—"

He broke off with a gasp as the carbon light fizzed and flickered abruptly. The snowy effulgence changed to yellow, then deep purple. Savagely he adjusted the carbon points, struggling to rebuild the right resistance between them—but in those seconds of momentary diminution the thing was done.

Freed from its light prison the monster leapt. It hit me a glancing blow but it was like a wallop from a five-ton truck. I went staggering backwards helplessly and struck the wall with a force that nearly knocked me silly.

I straightened again, only to feel paralysing horror pump through me. For Ralph was struggling with the thing—and it was the most ungodly sight I'd ever seen! His coat and vest were practically torn off, to reveal gaping wounds where the monster had cleaved with the force of a welder into his flesh. It was only his iron strength that kept him going—and even that was failing.

Madge—small wonder—had fainted clean away. Sick with fright, I snatched up the wrench and dealt the thing a terrific blow. All I got for that was a backlash, half electrical, through my fingers that made me shout with anguish. It had been like hitting a steel wall with a steel rod.

And Ralph? He had relaxed now, moving weakly, horribly mangled. The ghost of a grin was on his dark, powerful face, then it froze into the granitelike grin of death. There was blood on the floor. Hardly conscious of what I was doing I groped my way to the projector and, being used to its tricks, had the carbons at full blaze instantly. Immediately the serpent flew to a shadowy corner for safety.

I looked at the mangled ruin that had been Ralph, took down a smock from the door and threw it over him. Then, breathing hard, I tried to get some sort of control over myself. This thing had *got* to be slain! But what methods? Light only scared it—immobilized it, but didn't kill it. How about an electric shock? If I could remove the electrodes from one of my disrupter globes and attack it with them

Not much use, probably. I didn't even know if it were electricity as we understand it, or whether it was the embodiment of basic force which we definitely do *not* understand. Besides, attacking electricity with electricity might blow me to Hades!

Then as I stood thinking furiously a weak cry swung me round. I had almost forgotten about Madge. Gently I helped her to her feet and she clung to me tightly.

"Is it—?" she whispered hopefully.

"No," I told her grimly. "It's behind that bench at the moment, sheltering from these arcs— Good God, if only we could get out of here! We must!" I finished desperately. "Come on—we'll rip up the floorboards and try and find that key. Should have done it at first . . ."

With my wrench we pried up the boards and I fumbled below. I could feel nothing. I got a torch and flashed it in the gap. I saw the key finally, a goodish distance away.

"Hang on," I told Madge tensely. "I'll go below and get it."

"All right—but hurry up!" And her eyes went nervously towards that deadly corner still pinned by the projector beam.

Down I scrambled, edged along on my stomach with the floor beams pressing down on my shoulders—then just when I was within an ace of grabbing that infernal key there came a violent

commotion from above. There was the sound of smashing glassware and a scream from Madge, followed by her running feet some place over my head.

Her voice screamed huskily. "Bob quick! *Quick!*"

I couldn't even answer her. The dust from the flooring had choked and blinded me. I jerked my head up and caught it a resounding crack on one of the beams. The torch dropped from my hand and went rolling out on the concrete foundation. Desperately, I made a final grope in the dark for that key, and couldn't find it— Then I wormed my way round and back to the hole in the lab floor as quickly as I could.

Madge was out of sight, the bench was overturned, bottles were strewn in all directions. Some of them had had corrosive acid in them and now it was swilled smokingly on the floor. The Venusian horror was hurling itself with gigantic force at the only remaining steel cabinet where I kept my filing records. Since Madge was not in sight she'd obviously screwed herself in there for safety. As for the Thing's escape—those damned carbon arcs had faded again!

I dived for the projector, forced them into action and hurled blinding light at the thing—but only for a second or so for the acid swirling on the floor suddenly nipped the flex cable right through and the light died out of the lamphouse! Sweat broke out all over me as I realized I was defenseless.

Almost involuntarily I picked up the entire projector and hurled it at the Coil. Evidently it was hurt for it flew away from the cabinet door. Instantly I jumped forward, yanked the door open and got Madge out—then we dashed for safety behind the overturned bench. Temporary safety, anyway ...

I began to think desperately. Since that projector's mass weight had hurt it, it might be possible to damage it with violent blows after all! My eye roamed from its present quiescence—no doubt while it recovered—to the heavy vice I often used. It was electrically operated too. If I could only get the Coil in *that!*

No sooner had I thought of the idea than I thought of something else. It had shown its liking for salts of lemon, and there was still some left on the floor. I wriggled towards the stuff, got a handful of it and sprinkled it on the plate in front of the vice, afterwards springing the vice-jaws wide open. Then I crawled to the switchboard whence it was operated.

"This may do it," I breathed to the horrified Madge. "Worth a try, anyway!"

She watched, wide-eyed. Picking up a bottle, I hurled it at the thing, stung it into life again. It flew round in circles, missing us—then as I had hoped its blind avidity drove it towards the salts instead of Madge and me. It settled—and, thank God, as we tensely watched it, it unwittingly lowered the back half of its corkscrew form into the open jaws!

It was a glorious moment! I was nearly chuckling with relief as I closed the switch on the board. In a flash those jaws closed with inexorable power, pinned the Coil mercilessly. It made no sound but its wild, frantic lashings instantly showed how much it was incommoded.

"Now!" I panted, straightening. "Here comes the showdown!"

For the last time, as I hoped, I picked my wrench up and moved towards it, no longer nervous. Instead a cool sort of bravado was upon me, and like a fool I paused a moment to study it now it was powerless to hurt me. . . . The more I looked at its blind, ferocious little face the more I shuddered to think so beautiful a world as the Evening Star could produce such a thing of evil.

"Kill it, Bob!" Madge implored me weakly. "Don't stand there!"

Her voice jerked me into life. I raised the wrench and swung it in preparation for the blow—but those seconds of idle curiosity had lost me the initiative, for with a sudden violent effort the thing literally *tore itself in pieces*—four distinct chunks that were as brittle as though soaked in liquid air.

But they didn't snap as they fell. Instead they coiled up and writhed with life. Nothing was left but that one immovable piece clamped in the vise. Then as I stared in bewilderment the four pieces started swelling—growing—!

"Fission!" I yelled, understanding. "It's—reproduced! Like a protoplasm divides into a new individual; this thing does it by breaking itself. Either because of the danger or else because it was ripe for it anyway after the food—Lord!"

I dropped my wrench with a crash as the four little devils swelled and grew with incredible

metabolism. Hurriedly I gained Madge's side.

"Bob, what on earth do we do?" she nearly screamed at me. "Now we've four of them to tackle—! We can't do it! We're finished!"

"Easy," I panted; and my eyes flashed to the hole in the floorboards where I'd searched for the key. "Down there!" I said abruptly. "Only way—Come on!"

We scrambled forward and I bundled Madge down the hole first. Already those four children of the Coil were nearing adult size and would then start their endless blind search for food—human or chemical. I blundered into the hole after Madge, dragged down the boards as best I could. For a while we lay in the dark, shivering in fear, listening to the rising commotion above.

Then Madge began dragging herself away slowly, presently gave a little cry.

"What?" I panted, reaching her.

"Acid, on my hand," she said. "Must have seeped through the boards."

"Put your handkerchief round it; all we can do now. Damnation!" I exploded. "Where's that torch I dropped?"

I floundered past her, searching for it. Over our heads there was now a veritable hurricane of energy going on. Bottles were flying, instruments being overturned—then, as I still searched for the torch, I stopped and sniffed. Smoke was distinctly noticeable!

"It can't be—fire?" Madge whispered hoarsely; then she broke off with a horrified scream. "It *is* fire! Look!"

I was looking. Further away from us on our floor-ceiling was a smoky red glow. Either the fuming acid or else the fused electric cable had started it—What in hell did that matter? It *had* started and we were stuck down here!

"What do we do?" Madge cried, clutching me. "Bob, Bob, think of something! Those things above—and us down here— We'll be burned to death!"

I never thought so furiously before. Then in the midst of it, putting my hand down, I landed right on the torch. Instantly I yanked it up, flashed it on. I don't know if it was Providence that directed the beam to a wire running under the floorboards, but it certainly happened.

"What? *What?*?" Madge implored, seeing I was frowning.

"That's the fire alarm emergency wire," I told her quickly. "As you know I have the lab wired in case of sudden combustion without my knowledge. It should go off and warn the fire station as the temperature rises—But we're not waiting that long!" I snapped; and seizing the wire I pulled it with all my strength. Though we heard nothing I knew the alarm had gone at the fire station.

"That ought to fetch 'em," I panted. "And we've got to chance those flying horrors just in case. A minute—the key . . ."

I found it, then held it in my teeth as we turned and inched back to the hole in the floor. It wasn't so easy. Smoke was around us in choking clouds; I had to half drag Madge as she coughed and spluttered . . . But at last I gained the roughly covered hole and thrust my head against the boards.

Just as quickly I ducked back. The four flying coils, as large now as their parent had been, dived for my unprotected head. They struck the boards with rending impact—so I used my torch to keep them off.

Smoke was now suffocating me, filling my lungs. I dragged Madge up, half fainting, beside me, and she revived in the clearer air. The torch still kept them off somewhat. The ordinary lights had gone out, but the glare of the fire was sufficient to show me my way.

The door seemed infinitely far off—but I'd got to chance it. I left Madge directing the torch, blundered to the door and turned the key in the lock. At the same time the scream of the fire-engine's siren came from somewhere outside. I remember opening the steel door—then I guess I must have fainted.

I came to myself to find I was lying beside Madge in an ambulance. A fireman was smiling at us grimly.

"Nice blaze you had there, sir," he commented briefly. "But we got it under— Okay, take it easy. You're all right, and your wife too. Only shock. Say," he added, "we managed to save one of these from

your lab. Figured it might be important."

From his oilskins he pulled a twisted coil.

"Take it away!" I screamed involuntarily; then as he eyed me queerly and I saw it didn't move I added slowly, "Let me look . . ."

Madge, recovering, stared at it too. It *was* one of the four Venusian coils without doubt, but it was as useless as petrified stone and still damp. Damp! I began to laugh hysterically.

"Of course!" I yelled. "The water from the hoses! Why in God's name did we never think of it? Electricity—water—short circuit—Death! A glass of water could have saved us!"

Madge stared at me for a moment, then she joined me in my laughing. The fireman stared at us dubiously, probably wondering if he'd saved a couple of lunatics. Well, maybe he had at that!

The End

TAMING PLANTS

HAVE you ever heard of a person actually taming a plant? Well, believe-it-or-not, it has been done and reported by several scientists, amateur explorers and travelers.

This group of plants, called the sensitive plants, consists of many species of the leguminous group such as peas, beans, acacias, mimosos, and others. Some of these plants are familiar to you as our own North American plants, but the strangest and most remarkable members of the group are found only in the tropics.

The leaves of our northern species usually have to be touched to cause any reaction, but the tropical species are so sensitive that their leaves will shrivel and close even if a person or large animal comes near the plant. Some of the species consist of trailing vines and if only one leaf on the entire vine is touched or "senses" danger, it will close and "warn" all the other leaves who also close. And what is so amazing is that from the time the first leaf flashes the danger signal till the last leaf closes is a matter of a second. When the danger is past, the leaves reopen one at a time and the one that gave the "danger" signal is invariably the one to give the "all-clear" signal.

Many people who have observed this reaction in the sensitive plants believe that this entire procedure is simply a reflex action in the plants similar to the kick response of a human being when he is struck below the knee on one leg crossed over his other leg. But scientists who have observed the plants for many months attribute this action to the intelligence of the plants. They have proved this by experimentation.

If a plant *is* touched or approached by the same person for a few days without any harm being done to the plant after the touch, the plant will become used to the person and will not close when this particular person touches it. However, if a stranger touches the plant, all the leaves will close immediately showing that the plant is only "trained" insofar as the recognized person is concerned and not for the stranger.

—*Carter Wainwright.*