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As Maxted caught sight of the thin, foxlike face staring in through the window, he turned and rushed outside

SWEET MYSTERY OF LIFE

By
JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

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*The lovely plant-girl who blossomed in the greenhouse of Harvey Maxted was an
enigma that no human could fathom!*

To idiot Jake the world was peaceful: it was devoid of all worries, tumults, and fears. To the intellectuals, Idiot Jake was an object of pity—to the harassed he was a man to be envied. His simple mind did not know the meaning of anxiety.

So long as he could sit on the parapet of the small stone bridge spanning the Bollin Brook he was satisfied. If he had any old paper which he could tear into fragments and toss into the gurgling water below it was to him a close approach to paradise.

The small English village where he lived with his hard-working widowed mother was serenely sleepy on this autumn Sunday morning. The sunlight gleamed on thatched roofs still damp from departed frost. Smoke curled lazily from crazy little chimneys into a placid blue sky.

On the bridge over the brook Idiot Jake sat in his patched overalls and tattered Panama hat. He was long and spare with a narrow face and cramped shoulders. Only in the receding chin and loosely controlled mouth was the evidence of his mental deficiency to be seen. Surprisingly enough his eyes were very sharp and very blue.

Absently he looked into the flowing water coursing below him and wished that he had some paper fragments to throw into it. Somehow, though, it was too much effort to go and search for them.

A half-mile from the village center, on its extreme outskirts, and well screened by dense beech trees, stood the home of Harvey Maxted. Nobody in Bollin village knew exactly how Maxted occupied himself. He seemed too young to be a hermit, too thoroughly sane and genial to be an inventor, so tongues wagged, as they always do in a little hamlet perched on the edge of the world.

Actually Maxted was by no means mysterious. He had quite a good Civil Service post in London to which he traveled back and forth every day. If he chose to live in the quaint old house bequeathed to him by his parents, it was entirely his own affair, and if he had decided to live alone except for a fifty-year old man servant named Belling that too was nobody's business but his own.

He lived alone for a reason, of course—to have a quiet spot where he could pursue botanical experiments unhindered. Flowers, products of the most brilliant grafting processes, bloomed in every part of the great conservatories attached to the house. Even an old glass-walled, glass-roofed annex which had once been his artist father's studio had now been converted into a horticulturist's paradise. Apart from the flowers it also boasted all manner of technical apparatus.

Harvey Maxted, thirty-eight years old, with plenty of money and a keen investigative brain, had one ambition—to produce that much sought after botanical miracle—a jet black rose. . . .

On this particular Sunday morning he stood before a framed area of soil and fertilizer set directly in the rays of the hot September sun streaming through the glass wall. His young, good-looking face was tense. Dark untidy hair tumbled in waves about his forehead.

In some odd way his strong masculine figure seemed out of keeping amidst the exquisite botanical creations looming all around him.

Going down on his knees he went to work steadily in the special area, putting a slender cutting deep in the prepared soil and pressing down with his thumbs all around it. For half an hour he stayed at his task. Then thankful for relief from the intense heat of the window, he left the conservatory and wandered into the house, meditating as he went.

Belling, his servant and confidant, was crossing the hall at the same time.

“Do you think you’ll be successful this time, sir?” he inquired, pausing.

Harvey Maxted smiled ruefully. “All I can say is that I ought to be. But after eighteen failures in trying to produce Erebus, the black rose, I’m losing some of my confidence. In fact I’m probably crazy to try it anyway. Pride, Belling. That is what it amounts to. I want to feel that I am able to accomplish the impossible.”

“And you will, sir,” the older man declared, nodding his gray head reassuringly. “You see if you don’t.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Maxted reflected for a moment.

“I’m going out for an hour or two,” he added. “See that the conservatory doors are kept locked.”

“You can rely on it, sir.”

It was late evening when Maxted returned home. He ate a belated dinner leisurely, read for an hour, then went into the conservatory annex for a final look at his rose cutting before retiring. But the moment he reached that frame of soil and fertilizer he stopped in dismay.

The cutting had withered completely. It lay limp and yellow with every trace of life drained out of it!

For a moment or two Maxted could not believe his eyesight. Then he twirled round and shouted angrily for Belling. Within a moment or two the elderly man servant came hurrying in.

“Something the matter, sir?” he asked in surprise.

“I’ll say there is! Did you follow out my instructions and keep these doors locked while I was away?”

“Of course I did, sir.” Belling was genuinely distressed. “I know how valuable everything is in here.”

“You didn’t open any of the windows or ventilators from the outside?” Maxted caught himself and grinned apologetically, patted the man’s arm.

“Sorry, Belling! That was unfair of me. But it’s so blasted strange for that cutting to die like this! It means the end of twelve months careful grafting.”

Belling considered for a moment. “Perhaps the heat, sir?”

“Not in this case: the heat was an essential part of the experiment.”

Maxted leaned over the frame and lifted the dead cutting between finger and thumb.

“Just as though some other plant had claimed the soil and taken the nature out of it,” he muttered. “In the same way that cultivated plants have a struggle to live near sturdier trees.”

There was a puzzled silence for a moment or two. Then Maxted stood straight again and sighed heavily.

“I simply don’t understand it, that’s all. I know this soil to be chemically pure. I’ll have to sleep on the problem, Belling, and when I come home from town tomorrow night I’ll take a careful look at this soil.”

All next day, as he pursued his normal occupation in the city, Maxted could not help himself thinking about his dead rose cutting. Even a keen gardener might have been baffled by the occurrence, but with Harvey Maxted it was something much more. He was a botanical scientist, understanding mysteries of the plant world not even known in the ordinary way. . . . Yes, something was decidedly wrong and nothing else but an analysis of the soil could show what it was.

That evening Maxted wasted no time in getting home and even less time on a meal. Then he unlocked the research conservatory and hurried in, switching on the powerful floodlamps.

The rose cutting had shriveled now into a mere piece of brown stick but, in its place, something *else* was showing, just peeping above the rich black soil. Maxted stared at it fixedly. It looked just like the smooth, fleshy head of a toadstool, perhaps an inch across, yet it was more bulbous.

Very cautiously he touched it and to his amazement it jerked away slightly from his hand, as though with nervous reflex action!

“What the devil!” Maxted was dumbfounded for a moment. Soon he swung round.

“Belling!” he bawled. “Belling, come here!”

Belling came, his tired face troubled. In a moment he assessed the incredulity on Maxted’s face.

“Something gone wrong, sir?” he asked anxiously.

“I’ll be hanged if I know—unless it is that I’ve worked so long among these plants I’ve started seeing things. Take a look at that thing where the rose cutting was. Tell me what you think it is. It—it recoils like the head of a tortoise when you touch it!”

Belling’s lined mouth gaped for a moment as he realized the immense implication behind the assertion. He stretched out a bony finger and tapped the fleshy looking nodule. Again it jerked and the soil around it shifted infinitesimally.

“Great scott!” he whispered, his eyes wide. “It’s alive, sir! Definitely alive! But what *is* it?”

“I don’t know,” Maxted confessed in worried tones. “I wanted to produce a rare specimen and it looks as though I’ve done it.”

His first shock over, Belling’s mature common-sense came to his aid. Stooping, he looked at the nodule intently in the bright light. Presently he glanced up with the oddest expression.

“I think we should examine this under the microscope, sir,” he said. “Silly though it may sound, I believe I can see the outline of a—*a face!*”

“A what!” Maxted ejaculated, startled. “Hang it all, man!”

“The microscope should settle the argument, sir.”

Maxted rubbed the back of his head in a bemused fashion. Finally he turned and went over to the bench.

Bringing back the heavy binocular microscope he succeeded finally in balancing it so that he could train the lenses directly on the object in the frame.

Wondering vaguely what he would see he adjusted the eyepieces. Inwardly he was prepared for the unusual, the fantastic—for anything, indeed, except the monstrous impossibility of what he *did* see.

For there was a face!

Belling had spoken the truth. Under the powerful lenses and brilliant light everything was in pin-sharp detail. The rounded nodule had now become a completely hairless head. Underneath it were perfectly chiseled features—a long straight nose, tightly closed lips, and round chin. The eyelids were lowered at the moment, giving the face a masklike aspect of deathlike serenity.

“Well, sir?”

Belling’s eager voice compelled Maxted to drag his gaze from the fascinating vision. He motioned helplessly to the microscope and Belling peered long and hard. When at last he withdrew his eyes he and Maxted were two men facing the unbelievable.

“A plant—shaped like a human being—growing in soil. . . .”

Maxted uttered the words in jerks. “It’s utterly without precedent, either in botany or biology. There has to be a *reason* for this, Belling, something to make us realize that we are not insane.”

“We can’t both be insane, sir.”

“No, I suppose not. This—It. Is it male or female?”

“Can’t tell very well, sir . . . yet.”

They looked again at the nodule and it seemed to both of them that there was a constant suggestion of growth about it. It was enlarging even as they watched.

“Belling!” Maxted gripped his servant’s arm tightly, his face drawn with the effort of trying to understand. “Belling, we’ve stumbled on something infinitely more amazing than a black rose! We’ve got to watch what happens. Best thing we can do is stay in here and sleep in turns.”

“Yes, sir,” Belling agreed excitedly. “Indeed, yes!”

The decision arrived at they drew up chairs and then seated themselves where they could watch the enigma in the frame. The fact remained that the thing was certainly growing. But into *what*? . . .

Maxted and Belling soon discovered that their vigil was not to be a matter of hours, or even of days—but of three weeks.

During this period the conservatory was kept electrically at the same high temperature as on the morning when the rose cutting had been planted. When he had to be absent at his Civil Service work in London Maxted held down his emotions as much as possible, but all the time his thoughts were carrying the remembrance of what he had seen in the conservatory so far.

Then, the moment time permitted, he was rushing homeward again, bolted a meal while Belling related the day’s progress; then they went together to survey the miracle’s advancement.

The former nodule in the experimental frame had now become an obviously human creature standing alone in a special bed of soil and surrounded by plants which screened any chance draft.

The sex was definitely female, down to the waist. From this point, however, the trunk of the body branched off into myriad gray filigrees which, in the fashion of nerves, trailed along and sank into the soil.

A woman, yes—or a half-woman—her nakedness concealed by an Oriental dressing gown as a concession to convention. A woman, yes, indescribably magnetic with her now opened enormous green eyes and masses of Albino-blond hair on the formerly bald scalp. A woman who thrived on fertilizers, humanly poisonous material, and crushed bone residue. A woman the pupils of whose eyes contracted and expanded with startling rapidity at the least variation of light.

Mysterious. Incredible.

So far the woman had made no attempt to communicate. In fact no sound whatever had escaped her. She seemed able to take nourishment either by the mouth or through the weird mass of sensory nerves trailing from her like roots. At other times her eyes were closed and her body relaxed as though she were sleeping.

“Have you any theories, sir, as to what happened to cause this?” Belling asked, when they had finished their latest survey.

“One—just one,” Maxted breathed. “It can explain this, but it is so incredible I hardly believe it myself. Do you know Arrhenius’ theory?”

Belling reflected. He had a good smattering of general knowledge.

“You mean the one about him believing that life came to Earth through indestructible spores surviving the cold of space and then germinating here?”

“That’s the one.” Maxted mopped his streaming face and glanced at the thermometer. It stood at one hundred twenty degrees Fahrenheit.

“It may be possible,” Maxted went on, “that somehow a wandering spore was in the soil when I planted that rose cutting. The cutting died because of the strength of the germinating spore drawing all the nature out of the soil. In this conservatory here we must have accidentally reproduced all the conditions necessary to germinate the spore.”

Maxted looked at the silent woman-plant long and earnestly as she slept, head drooping on her breast.

“Yes, I’m sure I’m right,” he resumed. “Life in any other world would be vastly different from ours. This half-woman must belong to a world where intelligent life takes on the form of a plant. A hot, burning world. . . . Where, Belling? What miracle have we come upon?”

To this there was no immediate answer. Both men kept unceasing watch on the astounding creation in the nights and days which followed.

She grew no taller, but there was greater development in the shoulders as time passed. Once, even, she seemed ill and wilting, but a saturation of the soil with water and phosphates revived her.

During this period she remained practically motionless, her eyes studying the conservatory intently, or else the two men as they surveyed her. It was as though she were trying to determine the nature of her surroundings. When she moved at all it comprized a sinuous writhing of her well rounded arms, as though she yearned to stretch herself. . . .

Then one morning, when the autumn sun was streaming through the great windows, she made the first sound. It began at about the pitch of a soprano’s high C and then sailed up effortlessly through two octaves in the purest bell-like clearness it had ever been Belling’s

good luck to hear. Immediately he rushed out for Maxted, who was sleeping after his night's watch.

"She's singing, sir!" Belling shouted, as he blundered into the bedroom.

Maxted listened drowsily to the silver purity of those notes, then he hurried out of bed and dragged on some clothes. The astounding woman was singing with the joyous abandon of a nightingale when they burst in upon her. In fact their entry was perhaps too sudden for she stopped abruptly.

"Shut the door!" Maxted ordered. "We can't risk any cold air in here."

He went over to the woman slowly, stared into her huge green eyes. The pupils, so abysmally wide in artificial light, were now contracted to pinpoints in the glare of sunshine, leaving great emerald-colored irises.

"Who are you?" Maxted asked, in an awed voice, repeating a question he had asked dozens of times already. "How did you ever get here?"

The eyes like those of a tigress stared back at him hypnotically. He realized that such delicately constructed orbs were intended for a planet of alternate glare and total dark.

Venus? Blinding sun for 720 hours; moonless night for a like period. A world of titanic vegetation perhaps—and of such people as this?

Maxted gave himself a little shake and turned his gaze away by sheer physical effort. Belling was beside him, watching and wondering.

"Have you—a language?" Belling asked urgently.

The woman gestured with two copper-colored arms, and somehow it revealed that she did not understand. Then from her cherry red mouth with its oddly pointed teeth came a stream of sing-song notes in that breathtaking purity of tone.

"Speech, sir!" Belling insisted urgently, clutching Maxted's arm. "That's what it is. She's trying to talk to us."

"Yes." Maxted listened to her in bewildered attention. "Yes—speech."

Even so it was but the commencement of weeks of hard work to come, of the exchange of words. But gradually the woman began to understand what was meant. By means of pantomime and untiring patience Maxted struggled to bridge the gap between species. In the intervals between these spells of study the woman either sang gloriously, or slept. Those times when he had to be away on business were the hardest for Maxted, but somehow he got through them. . . .

Inevitably, though, the conservatory's secret did not remain within those hot glass walls. Seated on the bridge parapet one morning, tearing up a piece of paper and watching the strips flutter into the brook below, was Idiot Jake. He heard a voice of uncommon range and clarity floating from somewhere beyond the village, borne on the south wind.

Its beauteous harmony attracted him—drew him irresistibly.

He traced it finally to the conservatory, where a slightly open ventilator permitted the sound to come forth. Idiot Jake could see quite clearly through the plain glass windows, and he started a rumor which went through the clannish, scandal-loving community of the village with seven-league boots.

Harvey Maxted, the mystery man, the apparent misogynist, had got an ash-blond woman living with him! Been no announcement of a marriage or anything, either. Jake himself had seen her, both in the day and at night. She always sat in that little outbuilt conservatory, singing or talking and dressed in a sort of Oriental costume.

That she was only half a woman was not apparent to the prying busybodies of Bollin. The shrubs surrounding the special soil bed hid the filigree of nervous tendrils which began at the waist-line. From outside it looked as though she were sitting down among the plants.

In groups, by night, the denizens of the village crept into the grounds of the house and looked through the unscreened windows onto the scene within. They said it was not even decent and Maxted ought to be locked up for it, and his servant with him.

Then, gradually, they tired of their scandal and ceased to bother.

All except Idiot Jake. Though he no longer risked detection by hiding in the grounds in the daylight, he was certainly there every night, his crafty pale blue eyes watching over the thick bushes, his warped brain considering all manner of speculations about the terribly lovely woman who either sat and gestured, or else sang with a richness which stirred Idiot Jake to the depths.

Absorbed in their efforts to communicate with the plant-woman, Maxted and Belling never even gave eavesdropping a thought. That the conservatory had no window shades they knew full well, but since it and the house were in the midst of grounds the possibility of being spied upon never occurred to them.

Besides, they were making good progress in language exchange now. The woman was able to express herself with comparative fluency, and where she stumbled the gap could always be filled in. Certainly the time had come, in Maxted's opinion, for a determined effort to solve the mystery.

"Just who are you?" he asked the woman, seated on one side of the soil bed and Belling on the other.

"I come from the moon of the second planet," the woman's dulcet voice answered, and she added an arm gesticulation.

"Moon of the second planet?" Maxted repeated, frowning. "You mean the moon of Venus? But it hasn't one!"

"Not now," the woman admitted. She hesitated as she chose her words. Slowly, with many pauses, she began to tell her story.

"My name is Cia. I lived, ages ago, upon the satellite of the world you have called Venus. Upon this satellite, as upon the parent world, there existed—and still *does* on the parent world—a race of beings such as I. I am not either male or female, as you would call it, but both."

"You mean hermaphrodite?" Maxted asked sharply.

"If you call two sexes in one that—yes. Many of your Earth plants have that quality and some of your animals and birds. New plants—new living beings in our case—are born simply by the casting of seed. Under the influence of rich soil it grows and can choose its own sex as far as appearance is concerned. Nature has cursed our race by making us plantlike and immobile, but as a compensation she has given us vast intelligence and—er—telepathy. Yes, that is the word—telepathy! Whether it be a jest of Nature to give great intellect and telepathy to beings who cannot move from the spot where they are born I do not know. But it is a fact."

Maxted looked sharply at the absorbed Belling across the soil bed. The woman resumed haltingly.

"This, though, I *do* know," she went on. "Life—our life—became so profuse on our moon, and the myriad roots became so deep and destructive, that it finally smashed the satellite in pieces, just as some of your climbing plants can tear down a wall. We were aware in advance of what was happening by telepathy and so contracted ourselves back into spore form."

“How could that be done?” Belling asked.

“I’ve heard of certain plants, and even animals, which can contract themselves.” Maxted answered. “Take for instance certain sea squirts which spend the winter in the form of small white masses in which the organs of the normal animal are quite absent. In the spring they reverse the process and grow up again. Sea anemones do the same thing if starved of nutriment. So do flatworms. But usually this contraction business applies only to the invertebrates. You, Cia, appear to have a backbone.”

“Wait. Let me get your thought. Backbone?” She pondered. . . . “Not in the sense you know it,” she said finally. “It is hard tissue, not solid bone.”

“That would explain your ability to shrink then,” Maxted admitted. “As for your male-female unity we call it parthenogenesis.”

“This power to contract does not destroy our intelligence,” the woman resumed. “Because, in a sense, we are still alive. When the satellite broke up, we were, of course, cast adrift into space. Myriads of us must have drifted down onto the parent world, drawn by the gravity, to take root and flourish anew.

“In my case I can only think that cosmic tides wafted me across the infinite to this world where I have lain, in a form of suspended animation, for untold ages. Then you produced conditions here identical to those on my former world and I came to life. My effort to understand explains why I took so long to communicate. Our ability to what you call ‘sing’ comes from the need of calling to each other. Over greater distances we have telepathy.”

There was a silence and Maxted drew a deep breath. He looked at the woman from a faroff world, and then at Belling. But before he could speak his attention was caught by something outside one of the huge windows.

A face was looking into the conservatory—a thin foxlike face topped by a battered Panama hat. The greedy blue eyes of Idiot Jake were watching every detail.

“By gosh!” Maxted breathed angrily, jumping up. “I’ll show *him*! It’s that blasted yokel out of the village!”

He strode to the door and opened it, closing it quickly again to prevent any drastic change of air.

In a few quick strides he was out through the back entrance into the grounds. Evidently Idiot Jake had guessed what was intended for he had just commenced to slink away into the bushes.

With one dive Maxted was upon him, whirling him round with a tight grip on the collar of his shabby coat.

“Just a minute, Jake! What are you doing here?”

“Nothin’, mister.” Jake cringed and averted his face. “I just wanted to see the pretty singer. You can’t hit me for that.”

Maxted tightened his lips for a moment.

“The pretty singer, eh? So that’s what you have been telling everybody in the village. How often have you been here?”

“Never before,” Jake lied emphatically, and Maxted gave him a shove.

“All right. You go back home before I break your neck. And if I ever find you on my property again I’ll hand you over to the police. Go on. Get out of here!”

Jake touched the brim of his battered Panama, grinned vacantly, and he went loping off amidst the bushes. But as he went the grin vanished and was replaced by an expression of

malign ferocity.

Maxted returned to the conservatory with a troubled frown.

"I don't like it," he confessed to Belling, when he had briefly recounted what had happened. "That imbecile is likely to spread all kinds of idiotic tales—granting even that he hasn't done so already."

"Doesn't seem to be much we can do, sir," Belling reflected. "The damage, if any, is already done."

Maxted nodded regretfully. Then with a shrug which indicated that he had decided to drop the matter, he turned to look again at Cia. She was watching him intently.

"This meeting between Earth and Venus—or at any rate Venus' moon—is about the most marvelous thing that ever happened," Maxted said. "But wonderful though it is it is incomplete in itself. We are just individuals representing our respective species. There will have to be a way found for space to be bridged and our two worlds to have exchange of visits. You understand what I mean, Cia?"

"I understand," she assented.

"Good! Tell me, with all the high intelligence your race possesses, have you any ideas on space travel?"

"Only in theory. Being immobile we have no use for space travel. But space can be crossed in spore form, as I have already proved."

"In that form, though, are you not at the mercy of the cosmic tides drifting in space?"

"Normally, yes. But a gigantic gun could be fashioned by a race such as you. You have the ability to move about. We have not. Spores fired from such a gun would have enough impetus and direction behind them to make them hit my world."

Maxted stroked his chin and frowned.

"Do you mean that we, of Earth, should try to become spores?"

"I do, yes."

"Can't be done," Maxted sighed. "We are vertebrate."

"You can still become as spores," Cia insisted.

Maxted was greatly puzzled. What she said seemed incredible. He frowned.

"But—but how?" he asked, at last.

"If not as spores, then at least a condition very near to it. Our science long ago devised a system of reducing a solid—which includes a vertebrated being with a bone skeleton—to infinitesimal proportions. So you see, we of Venus cannot build a huge gun to fire ourselves to you—but you can build one and fire your reduced selves to Venus, I promise you, you will come to no harm. Reduction in size means reduction in life energy consumption. You would survive the journey."

There was silence for a while as Maxted paced slowly up and down the conservatory. Cia outlined her plan.

"We of Venus need a race like yours to free us from bondage," she said. "We are intellectual giants chained down by Nature. None of our mighty ideas can bear fruit until we have somebody with us who can move about and so help us. I am prepared to give you the secrets of reduction and atomic power, which you will need to fire the gun, together with the design of the gun itself—if you in turn, with others of your race, will pledge yourselves to work side by side with us to free us from enslavement."

"We have atomic power," Maxted said quietly.

“Completely harnessed?” the woman demanded.

“Well, no. At present it is confined to the early stages. I cannot, of course, speak for my entire race, Cia. It would take years to make everybody understand what is happening here. Even then there would be no guarantee of others agreeing with my viewpoint that we should help you and your people. But speaking for myself and the many scientists who for years have been crying out for a chance like this I am willing to cooperate. Once the thing is done cooperation between our worlds is inevitable.”

“Very well,” the woman said. “I realize that you cannot convince your race without proof, so I shall make the secrets your property.”

“Now?” Maxted questioned eagerly.

“No, tomorrow night. I must have time to consider the relative differences between your mathematics and mine. For tonight I prefer to be left alone.”

“All right,” Maxted assented. “But one or other of us will remain on guard outside. I don’t feel any too happy after discovering that the village idiot has been prowling about.”

Contrary to Maxted’s fears, however, Idiot Jake did not present himself again during the night, or during the next day, Sunday. By the time evening came both men were too absorbed in the Venusian plant-woman’s slow explanation of profound secrets to give any thought to Idiot Jake.

For two hours Cia talked and gave mathematical formulae which Maxted wrote down laboriously in his notebook. In that two hours he learned, through figures anyway, how by electronic processes the human framework of bone—or any inorganic object as well—could be reduced to a matter of atomic aggregates without impairing the inherent intellect. He learned, too, how atomic force could be extracted from copper with complete safety.

There was also revealed to him the multiform ingredients necessary to the manufacture of an atomic long range gun, and the calculations necessary for the trajectory across space to Venus. He discovered too how, once upon Venus, unharmed, tiny human beings could recover their normal stature and commence the work of cooperation.

Yes, upon those sheets of paper which Maxted finally set aside on the bench were secrets which could lay the foundations of an interplanetary empire.

Then suddenly, just as the long effort to understand each other was over, there was a violent explosive crack from one of the windows. A heavy piece of tree branch came hurtling inwards in a shower of glass.

“What the devil!”

Maxted swung round angrily and for a moment there was a vision of Idiot Jake’s vindictively grinning face. Then the intruder dashed out of sight and vanished in the darkness of the grounds.

Maxted took three swift strides towards the shattered window, only to pause as Cia gave a desperate, despairing cry and Belling shouted in horror.

Something was happening to the plant-woman! Her head was drooping, her face suffused with an expression of indescribable anguish. Her soft copper-tinted flesh was turning gray and forming into dry and dusty scales.

“It’s the cold, sir!” Belling shouted, seizing Maxted’s arm. “It’s killing her! The temperature’s gone down!”

Maxted made a slow, stupid movement, unable to decide what he ought to do. In any case it was too late now. The night air streaming into the conservatory was charged with frost and

under its withering breath the strange being of a superheated world wilted until she looked as if she had been soaked in liquid air. She began to take on a brittle, crystalized aspect.

“Cia!” Maxted gasped, clutching her hand, then he stared in horror as it snapped off in his grip like a rotten branch.

“She’s dead, sir,” Belling whispered, white-faced. “She’s as brittle as a carrot!”

He paused and both he and Maxted swung round as a police officer came striding in through the shattered window, followed by a surging mass of the village populace. In the background was gibbering the drooling Idiot Jake.

“Now, sir!” Police Constable Adams looked round the conservatory curiously, then at the frozen gray image which had been a woman. “Now, sir, what’s all this ‘ere about you ‘aving a woman in ‘ere? Always sat in the same place? I’ve heard all about it.”

“From that idiot Jake, eh?” Maxted asked bitterly. “Or from these villagers?” He looked sourly at them as they formed in a curious semicircle.

“I ‘eard of a woman being ill treated in ‘ere, sir,” Constable Adams said. “I considered it my duty to hinvestigate.”

“Sheer imagination, Constable, on the part of Jake,” Maxted said, trying hard to keep his temper. “I found him on my property here last night and kicked him out. Tonight he smashes a window for revenge and spreads a trumped up tale. And you’ve no authority to break in on me like this, either!”

“Sorry, sir.” Adams began to look uncomfortable. “I just thought I’d better question you.”

“We all saw that woman!” one of the villagers piped up. “An’ we heard her voice, too. She were a fine singer, she were.”

Maxted gave a weary smile.

“The voice, let me assure you, was from an instrument I am working upon. As for the woman—well—can’t a man fashion a statue to place among his flowers? Look for yourselves!”

He pointed to the dead, granite-like Cia. Constable Adams looked at her, touched her hard shoulders, brooded over the solidly frozen tendrils in the soil as though he wondered what they were. Finally he put his notebook away and touched his helmet.

“Sorry, sir. There’s been a mistake somewhere. I’ll say good-night. Outside, you people! Outside!”

When at last they had all gone Maxted relaxed and rubbed his forehead.

“We might have got in a nasty mess, Belling. We never thought of conventions. Poor Cia! Obviously she froze to death before she had a chance to adapt herself into spore form or protect herself against the cold. Blast Idiot Jake! Blast him!”

“At least we have the secrets, sir,” Belling said. “Over on the bench there is our passport to Venus—”

He stopped short Maxted caught his look of consternation and gazed as well. There was no sign of papers or notebook anywhere. . . .

The following morning it was calm and sunny. Two distracted men had searched all night and failed to find the secrets that could link two worlds.

On the bridge over the Bollin brook Idiot Jake sat and hummed to himself, a bundle of papers in each tattered pocket. As he watched the torn strips flutter down and float away the world seemed to him to be laughing. Perhaps it was—ironically.

[The end of *Sweet Mystery of Life* by John Russell Fearn]