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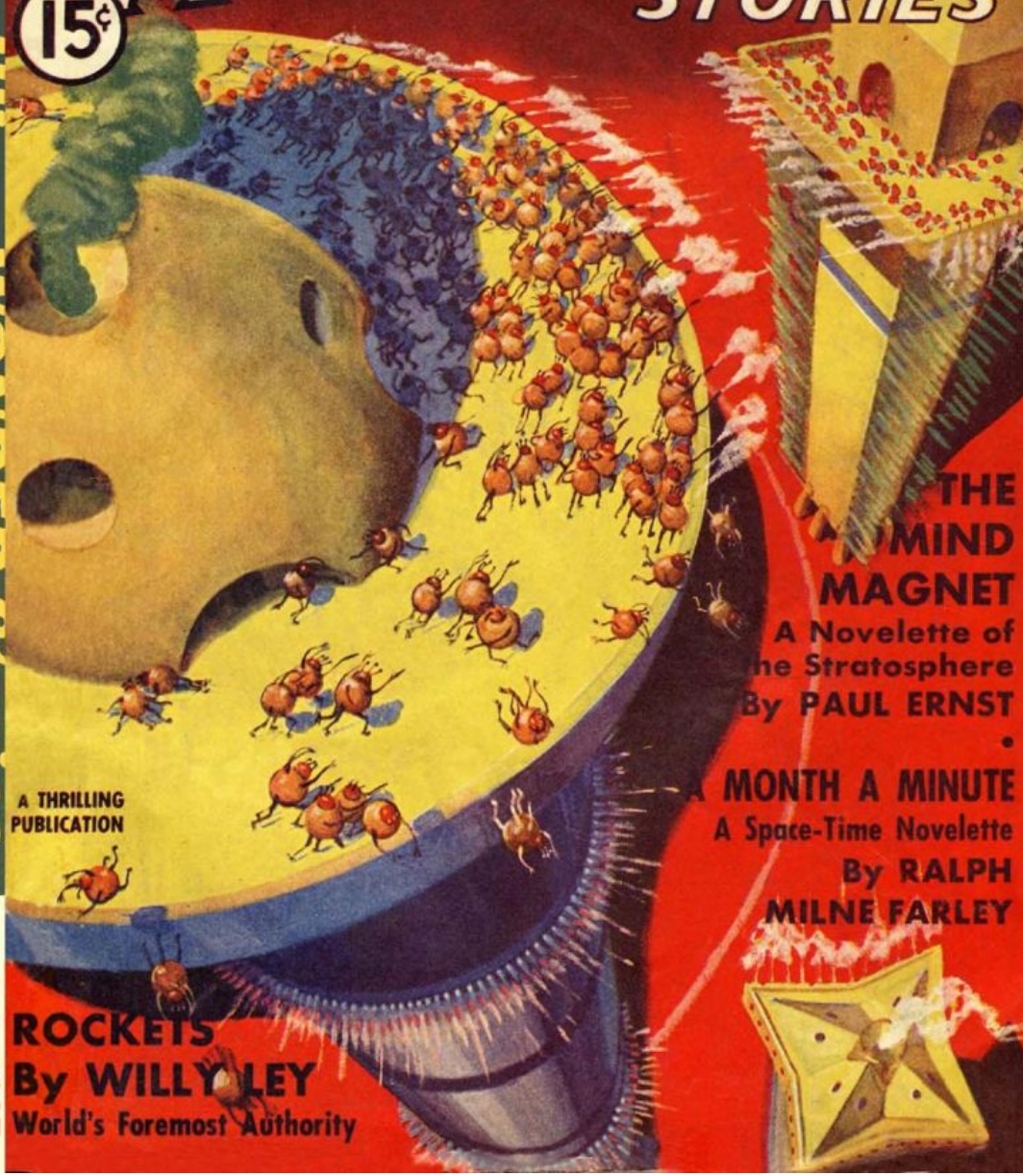
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 World's Foremost Authority

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DEC. 1937

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Green tentacles coiled around him

THE BLOODLESS PERIL

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym of Will Garth.

Author of "Space Trap," "The Night Men of Mars," etc.

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, December 1937.

Science Evolves a Superior Plant Kingdom When a War of the Future is Waged in the Laboratory!

The world map was dotted with blood. In Berlin, Paris, New York, Tokyo, tall buildings lay in wreckage with corpses dotting the debris. On the plains of the Argentine and the Dakotas men and cattle lay swollen in death caused by fungoid spores rained down in bombs from war planes.

World war! A fight to the death between the white and yellow races of the entire globe.

In the East the center of strategy was Tokyo. Walled in by men and machines, barricaded by a shell of electronic force so tremendous that it drained the power resources of the Orient like water through a pipe, men moved pins on maps with the result that millions more died.

In the West the strategic center was Chicago. And there on the evening of April third, 1988, a war council was gathered between the High Command of the white race, and its greatest scientists. The meeting was for the purpose of coordinating science's contributions.

Hugh Farrell, President of the United States and of the council, faced the gathering. Overhead could be heard the drone of guarding stratosphere planes. The air quivered with the backlash of the electronic force wall barricading Chicago as Tokyo was barricaded.

But more than ionization made the atmosphere quiver. The yellow men were ahead in the war game and the whites knew it. The white race faced extinction.

Farrell put the realization into words.

"Occidentals, you have heard the situation outlined. We must find new weapons of war, or we die. So we have called you scientists to ask if you have anything to offer. *Anything*—so it may be turned to military usage!"

There was silence, then babel as the scientists were swept with war frenzy. A man leaped to his feet.

"*Herr Doktor Bruenig*," Farrell acknowledged.

"I offer my latest work," shrilled the man. "Chrome steel with molecules so arranged that no known projectile can penetrate it."

Thunderous applause. Bruenig sat down and two other metallurgists only a little less famous rose and gave up secrets representing decades of labor.

A big, barrel-chested man with a thick red beard and frosty blue eyes got up.

"Professor Ryder Storm."

The big man boomed: "I present to the High Command my recently isolated filterable virus known as Ryder's Palsy, and its antidote. As you know, an ounce of it dropped in an

exploding glass vial can make imbecile, shivering wrecks out of all human beings within two square miles.”

One after another the scientists of the West rose. Finally a Frenchman got up and said in cold, incisive tones:

“I am, as you know, a botanist. I came to give my latest hybrid—a poison flower which sprouts and grows rapidly, and the seeds of which can be dropped behind enemy lines. But I feel that my contribution must be small indeed compared to the probable gift that could be made by the greatest botanist among us—Professor L. H. Hart, who for some strange reason”—the man’s voice dripped acid—“has not chosen to speak.”

There was a hush. Farrell looked from face to face.

“Professor L. H. Hart,” he said at last.

There was no answer. Farrell’s white lips compressed.

“Not present? What scientist dares not to answer the call of his race?”

“Professor Hart is present,” came a calm, sweet voice. “But Professor Hart does not care to participate in plans of war.”

An almost physical shock rocked the house. Every eye turned to the person who was an eminent scientist and at the same time a beautiful woman.

She got up slowly, tall, Junoesque, striking in her plain white tunic.

“I came tonight,” she said, “hoping to find others like myself: scientists who would refuse to lend their intellects to mass murder. I find none. All are ripe for war. So I shall stand alone. President Farrell and others of the High Command, I refuse to lend my few achievements to the purpose of destruction.”

There was pandemonium. Then Ryder Storm of the flaming beard leaped up.

“One moment all! I believe Professor Hart, in her disappointment at the bloodshed any woman would naturally hate, is speaking words she does not quite mean—”

The woman’s soft voice cut in impersonally.

“My thanks to Professor Storm for his championship. But my words were final. I refuse to act in violence. With the permission of President Farrell, I shall leave now.”

With the grace of a girl, she moved calmly to the nearest exit. Names which no scientist should know were howled after her, but her cool face showed no sign that she heard. The exit door closed behind her and a dozen men leaped to their feet.

“Stop her!”

“Jail her as an enemy alien!”

“Make her cooperate!”

“We fight for our lives—and she refuses aid!”

Farrell’s upraised, weary hand forced silence.

“You don’t force women, even great scientists, to your will. Anyway, you couldn’t force this one! I know Professor Hart. Rack and fire could not break her will.”

His tired eyes rested on Storm’s blue-blazing ones. He beckoned. Storm, red-bearded and red-tempered, a gorilla of a man with the brain of a genius, came to the platform and the president spoke briefly to him. . . .

In the black night, over a darkened city, a stratosphere midget flung itself westward, with Laura Hart at the controls. After it came Storm’s fast ship. The first sky-louse, as the small fast vehicles were called, showed lights, then sounded the secret code which cleared a sector

of the electronic barricade. It flashed through, followed by the second sky-louse, and crossed the Mississippi at eight hundred miles an hour.

It cleaved the darkness, as its pursuer cleaved it, until the far-flung Rockies showed ghostly in the night. Then it hurtled toward a small flat space on the edge of a precipice.

It looked like a natural table-space, and the cliff behind it looked unbroken. Actually it was a minute landing field and cunningly concealed in the cliffside was a portal large enough to take the little ship in.

Laura Hart gauged space beneath her by the Geigen meter which bounced black light down and measured its rebound. She came to a perfect landing and jumped from the ship. Storm was already down. He got to the cliff portal ahead of her.

The woman faced him, cold, still.

“Let me pass,” she said quietly.

Ryder Storm stood aside, but followed after her into the slowly opening cliff door. In a garden as lush as though grown in the tropics instead of in a cave where no sunlight ever penetrated, he caught her arms and made her look at him. A great bush loaded perpetually with blue roses drooped beside them.

“Laura! You’ve got to listen to reason. What you said in council was unforgivable. You’d have been mobbed if it hadn’t been for your great name.”

She only looked at him, serene and cool as the northern snows. Storm shook her in his exasperation.

“You don’t seem to realize what this war means. It is the white race or the yellow! One must die. Perhaps both, with Earth a ruined ball, if the war can’t end soon! And the only way it can be ended is by quick victory. For us, please God!”

“I will not join in war,” said Laura Hart.

“You must! The white race needs your brain.”

“No.”

“For the sake of the race—of the world—”

“No!”

“You would see human beings die by the million when some great discovery of yours might just possibly end the war in a week? You would see Earth reduced to savagery?”

“Yes.”

“You mean that?” Ryder said hoarsely.

“I mean it. I don’t care what happens to humanity.”

Storm drew a great breath. He released her arms.

“I can see that my presence here is futile. I had hoped our long companionship would mean something. Good-by.”

He turned. Laura looked after him with unaccustomed color in her cheeks.

“Ryder—”

The big man turned quickly back.

“Well?”

“I don’t usually explain my decisions,” Laura said. “But I don’t like to see you go away looking—like that. So I will, to you.”

“I can guess,” Storm snapped. “You’re a woman before you’re a scientist. You’re a milk-and-water pacifist. You’d rather hide here—until an Oriental squadron blows your mountain down—and play with your silly flowers, than help humanity.”

The woman shook her head.

“That’s not the reason. I am unconcerned with humanity, Storm, because I have recently discovered that man is in the twilight. His rule is almost over. He shall die out anyway. And my knowledge of that makes me indifferent to his present fate.”

“How do you know? Can you read the future?”

“In this one respect, I can,” said Laura calmly. “I know man is about done, and I know the form of life that shall replace him as Earth’s ruler. Would you like to know, Ryder? The life that shall supplant his is the life you have just ridiculed. My silly flowers might eventually rule the world!”

Storm stared open-jawed.

“You’re mad!”

“Am I? You shall see what no one else has ever been shown. You shall see the peaceful, calm, kindly form of life that is going to take humanity’s place. No more wars, Ryder. No more stupid bloodshed. It will be a better world when humanity has finally destroyed itself. A peaceful, lovely world with no greed or destruction in it.”

“Mad,” whispered Storm, his big body seeming to shrink.

But the woman only smiled. “You shall see.”

She beckoned to a man in mechanic’s clothes. “Roll the two ships in, please. And then instruct the others to see that I am not disturbed for the next hour.”

She led Storm through the marvelous subterranean garden to a great metal door, which she opened with code and combination key.

“No other eye but yours has ever seen my secret laboratories, Ryder. No other eye ever shall.”

“Unless you decide to work with the High Command against the warring yellow men,” said Ryder.

Laura Hart’s shoulders rippled.

“Small chance of that! I prefer peaceful flowers to bestial humans.”

Storm’s first impression in the great room behind the metal door was one of color. Green predominantly, but splashes also of every other color.

His next was that he seemed to stand in the midst of a green and turbulent sea which surrounded but did not envelop him.

His third was a realization that he stood under a different kind of light than any he’d ever seen before, and a sense of sublime well being.

Then he began to note details.

The walls of the big chamber were lined with large glass tanks. In each was the flashing color, the rhythmic movements that made him feel that he was in a varicolored ocean.

He stepped toward the nearest tank, in which was the one color, green.

He saw an undulating surface halfway up the tank. It moved regularly, up and down, taking about three seconds for each rise and fall. Up, a brighter green; down, darker and duller; up again. Like a heaving little pond.

In the bluish radiance of the locked laboratory, Ryder felt a tendency to shiver. The tide in the tank had no meaning for him, and thick glass was between him and it. Yet he felt the subtle presence of danger.

However, Laura didn’t seem to feel that way. He looked at her, and went to the next tank.

In here was color, purple, flashing on and off and rising up and down as the green stuff had, with a cycle lasting only a few seconds.

Then he started, for here the nature of the heaving stuff was coarser and he could distinguish its broad flat particles. Those particles were leaves. Plant leaves!

Up they swelled. A purple blob—a perfect flower—crested each. Then, like a bubble bursting, the flower drooped and withered. Up and down, like tides in the ocean. Like waves. Only the waves were growing and dying plants!

“In the name of heaven—”

“Evolution,” said Laura Hart. “Growth and death in the span of three seconds instead of a full summer.”

“It actually looks like that. But it can’t be!”

“It is, Ryder. Years ago I learned to speed up life. I did it with plant life by irradiating peat moss beds and the surrounding air with super-violet rays from the lamps overhead, and by constantly forcing into the growing-beds a mixture of nitrogen, oxygen and phosphates which is my own secret formula. That forced the growth faster and faster, culminating in these beds where an entire plant generation lasts a bit less than three seconds.”

“Three seconds—from seed germination to death and decay?”

“Exactly. Nearly a million generations in a year. You see the future vistas revealed by that. In a year I can see plant evolution as it will take place in the next few hundred thousand years. I know what plants will be like a half million years from now. And there is one plant—”

Laura Hart’s voice was dreamy. Prophecy was mysterious in her blue eyes.

“There is one plant which has evolved most powerfully and successfully under my forced feeding. The plant that shall rule the world! At the period in its evolution in which it is most perfect, I stopped the forcing process so that now specimens grow naturally as they will in the far future. Come, you shall see them.”

She led Storm through the laboratory, to a second door. He looked from side to side. Here was a tank in which a flower new to botany produced a reddish bloom as large as a pumpkin every three seconds. There was a thing like a barrel which opened a veined lid like a trap yawning, closed it as flashing death struck it, sagged to the peat moss bed, then grew green and tall again. There were perennials too: plants taking longer than a season to grow. These mushroomed in three-second spurts until they were tall trees, dropped fantastic blooms, then died again.

“Plants as rulers of Earth,” Laura Hart said softly, as she unlocked the inner door. “Flowers as overlords. There will be peace when human beings are gone. Plants have no greed for power, no instinct for murder. They do not kill as men do.”

Storm was awed by this woman who had gone as far in botany as he had in bacteriology. But he couldn’t let that pass.

“A world of cabbages!” he snorted. “Peace? It will be the peace of a turnip! I’d rather be ruled by bloody despots than by milkweeds!”

He stared curiously at her.

“You know,” he said in a different tone, “I’m wondering if this sweet future world of yours will be as serene as you think! It may be that some law of survival of the fittest will hold true even then. There are warlike plants, you know. And all will fight for the root-spread that means their existence.”

Laura smiled. The smile made Ryder's hands clench. It was so unmoved and impersonal. If he could only reach this woman—hurt her—do anything so she would become a human being instead of a pacifistic thinking machine!

"I have worked with plants all my life, Ryder. I know them. Animals, including man, are vile and murderous. Plants are clean and placid. But you shall see."

Storm followed her into the inner laboratory, twice hidden by great metal doors from intrusion.

This second laboratory was about thirty feet high and as large as a football field. Its light was different. Looking up, Storm saw that only half the bank of lights were on. There were no tanks in here, save a small one nearby which was empty; a temporary forcing bed of some sort no longer used but not yet taken from the big room. The plant life of the place grew from peat moss on the floor, open and unrestricted.

And what plant life!

Each plant was twelve to fifteen feet tall and as large around as a man's thigh. Its upper half was a naked stalk crowned with a blazing orange bloom as big as a hog's head.

A forest of the things stretched from door to far wall of the secret laboratory. And though there was no breeze in here, they swayed a little as though imbued with animate life.

"The common day-lily," said Laura Hart. "At least it was the common day-lily a million generations ago. Now it is as you see it—the probable future ruler of Earth."

"The sweet flower king, eh?" growled Ryder. "But I don't believe it. What are these things, after all, but overgrown yellow flowers? Any beast that browses can cut them down. There may be evolving insects to kill them. Or man—the scientist of the future—can find ways to annihilate their whole species."

"Insects?" smiled Laura Hart. "These plants have developed sap that is poisonous, searing. Man? If humanity doesn't decimate itself in war, it will refuse to work together—as always in history—until too late. Beasts? They can't harm them unless they develop higher reasoning powers than these flowers possess."

Storm stared at her.

"You mean to say—these vegetables can reason?"

"Yes. They can. They possess intelligence, Ryder. I don't profess to know what kind, or what sort of nervous system produces it. But they have it. And experiments prove that they are occasionally mobile; they can move from place to place as animal things can. That means they could move from dry spots to moist ones, from barren ground to fertile."

She stopped and frowned.

"That's odd," she said, looking down between rows of enormous, weaving flower stalks. "There was a bed of giant peonies in here. I don't see them now."

"They may have evolved right out of the picture," Storm grunted.

Laura took the sentence seriously.

"No. I stopped the rapid growth-span of these plants at this perfect stage. The proper chemicals are in their peat moss bed, but they must have the violet light for rapid evolution."

She pointed upward.

"As you see, the violet ray tubes are not on. Only ordinary sunlight tubes. So the peonies could not have completed their evolutionary span while I was away—"

Again she stopped. Her eyes widened.

"Ryder—something is wrong in here! I can feel it—"

“Yes, I think something is!” Storm exclaimed. “And I think I can tell you where your peonies are! Look!”

He pointed to a great plant. The big yellow bloom was closed. But from the tight-closed rim a wilted green length trailed. It was like a vine tendril trailing from the mouth of a tightly closed sack. Or like the tail of a small serpent protruding from the swallowing jaws of a larger, cannibalistic one!

“Your sweet flowers,” Storm said grimly, “your beautiful plants which will some day make this a better world—seem not to be so peaceful after all. There goes the last of your peonies. The lilies have devoured them!”

Laura’s hand was at her throat. Her face was like death, as she saw the limp roots of the lesser plant slowly and grimly drawn into the beautiful bloom of the larger.

To her this was supreme tragedy. For half her life she had built her ideas on the thought that some day the world would be governed by things of peace—plant-things among which there would be none of the wars and destruction practiced by humans. She had dreamed of a brighter, better day; and, dreaming, she hadn’t cared in the least what happened to humankind including herself.

And now—one species of her super-plant had warred on another! Had warred and won, and devoured the losers!

Storm, guessing her tragic thoughts, took her hand in his.

“Don’t feel like that,” he said gently. “You’re a great scientist, but you’ve made the mistake so many pacifists make. That is, to ignore the rule that life is a battle. Nothing lives that doesn’t have to fight something else for its life. In your future, which turns out to be not so sublime after all, the lilies are crowded by the peonies, so they war on them and the war can only end in the extinction of one or the other. In the present, the yellow race feels crowded by the white, so there is a war that can end only in—”

He stopped. His hand tightened over hers.

“What is it?” Laura asked apathetically.

“The door. Look toward the door.”

Laura turned. Slowly the desperate disillusion in her eyes was replaced by an emotion that had nothing to do with intellect: the emotion of stark fear.

Between them and the door, where there had been a wide, clear aisle, there was now a weaving triple row of gigantic day-lilies!

“Ryder! What does it mean?”

Storm had his arm defensively around her shoulders.

“The things have surrounded us—to give us the same fate as the peonies! It means they’re so warlike that they’ll attack anything moving and living within their range!”

“But it can’t be! I’ve been in here many times before, alone, and they haven’t acted like this.”

“Probably because they were weakened and dull from too rapid growth. You have now slowed their growth to normal, and they have gathered normal strength—and mobility!”

He stared at the nearest lily, nerves crawling in his body.

The roots of the thing were slowly withdrawing from the peat moss. Like bloodless worms creeping, they came out of the bed; and when they were bared, the plant they supported moved teeteringly toward them.

Near the door the lily stalks all stood on exposed roots. They joined in the slow march toward Laura and Storm.

Intelligence? Yes, they did have some sort of intelligence. Must have it! Only reason could have made them move between the man and woman and their one way of exit.

“They’re coming closer—” whispered Laura, primeval fear in her eyes. “What can we do?”

“Have you an ax?” asked Storm, keeping his voice calm.

“Not in here. There are some in the general living quarters, but there are two locked metal doors between us and them. We can’t get out because of the lilies. Help can’t come to us because of the locks—”

All the great flowers had their roots exposed now. And all were advancing, rank on rank, closing in on the two.

“I’ll try to get to the door,” said Storm, with his forced calm. “These things can’t be able to move fast.”

He walked toward the front rank of the plant-things that had got between them and the exit. He leaped forward, big arms driving to tear a way between the stalks.

Like a flash the nearest stalks whipped down. Green tentacles coiled around his arms and body.

“Ryder!” screamed the woman.

But Storm was only too desperately aware of what had just happened. With their swift moves, the plants had dropped the big flowers from their stalks. Like giant toads, the blooms hit the moss-covered cave floor with a dreadful soft plopping sound. But they did not lie there.

With the instant of their landing, they began to move on weaving fringes toward the big red-bearded man.

“Ryder—”

One of the separated blooms enveloped him to the hips. Its curling, lovely cup sucked tight. From sections of its vast rim came slow trickles of some sort of digestive acid.

Sweat beaded Storm’s forehead. The muscles of his arms and barrel chest writhed as he fought to tear free. Death stared at him. Then, with a cracking of shoulder tendons, he wrenched his arms from the green coils. He fell back over the blossom that had clamped his legs together, and rolled away.

Laura ran to him. With raking nails she clawed at the ferocious flower cup. Its walls were thin but tough, like orange-enamelled patent-leather. They defied her hands. But some of the rim reached hungrily for her, and with that slight lessening of the deadly grip, Storm tore free.

His eyes thanked her for the help—probably the first destructive move she had ever made. But he only said jerkily:

“That tank! Run, before they cut us off from that too!”

Behind them was the glass experimental tank, noted before by Storm. Empty, unused, it offered a forlorn haven.

A whipping stalk looped down before them as they ran for the tank. The flower dropped from it, to plop on the moss and start inching toward them. Storm seized the thick stalk and wrenched at it. He did not succeed in tearing it in two, but the whole plant shivered and jerked back, leaving the way clear for a few seconds.

The tank had a glass top as well as glass sides. The top was hinged, a glass lid. Storm lifted it up.

“In, Laura!”

The woman climbed in. Storm slithered after her. The lid banged down.

The two stared at each other with eyes in which horror was only a little lessened. The tank was a haven for the moment. It would probably be their coffin in a little while!

Moving with amazing quickness on their wormlike roots, the giant stalks had surrounded the tank. On all sides, the big orange blooms crawled toward the glass, separated from their stems. They piled up around the case, sucking at it with acid-dripping rims, trying to reach the two. And then they proved again that they were able somehow to see and reason.

These two creatures had entered the glass case through an uplifted lid—promptly the tough stalks felt along the top to lift the lid, too, and get in to them!

The blunt, flowerless end of one of them found the overhang of the lid. It moved up, with the lid opening as it moved.

“We’ll fix that,” Storm said thickly.

He motioned Laura to the side of the case on which was the lid hinge. He leaned powerfully against the glass wall, and she added her weight to his. The glass tilted, fell on its side. The green coil which had entered was wrenched out by the movement of the case. Again—and the glass tank lay on its top, sealing the lid shut with its own weight.

“They can’t get in now.”

No, they could not get in. But neither could the two victims get out!

Storm exclaimed suddenly. His clothes from the waist down were beginning to smoke. The skin of his legs felt as though bathed in liquid flame.

The digestive acid dripped by the first flower cup was eating in.

He tore the garments from him, then ripped off the tunic of his shirt and wiped the deadly stuff from his legs. He straightened, big torso bared from the waist up, and his breath hissed between his teeth.

Flower cups were clustered against the glass tank like bees on honey. From each dripped the viscous stuff they secreted for absorption of victims. And under the slow drip of that stuff the unbreakable glass was turning milky—and was pitting!

“They can actually disintegrate glass!” Storm exclaimed. “See those pits! They’ll be through in an hour or less!”

Laura Hart nodded in a dazed sort of way. Her eyes were filled with despair.

“We’re going to die in this tank. We’re going to be killed and eaten—by the creations I thought so peaceable and superior to humanity.”

She began to shudder, almost rhythmically. Storm held her close.

“We’re not dead yet.”

Then he thrust her from him. He cursed deep in his throat, at himself, curses that sounded like prayers.

“What an idiot! There *is* a way—”

He caught Laura’s shoulder.

“Where is the switch controlling the overhead ultra-violet-tubes?”

“The violet-tubes?” repeated Laura.

“Yes. Listen—You said you had slowed the evolution of these damnable things by shutting off the violet rays overhead.”

Laura nodded, eyes mystified.

“All right. Suppose we could switch them on again. The rapid growth-span of the plants in here would be resumed, wouldn’t it? They’d pick up their quick progress in evolution wouldn’t they, with each plant dying and being replaced by a new plant every three seconds?”

“Yes. But—”

“In human beings,” Storm said swiftly, “there is such a thing as race memory. Recollection of an event is handed from one generation to the next. But eventually that recollection gets lost in the mists of time. Now, these things are attacking us, eager to devour us. But if their growth-span were quickened, the attackers would die in a few seconds, the next generation would not be so keenly aware that we are a trapped enemy to be overpowered—and as each generation succeeded the last and the race memory died out, that awareness should fade. Don’t you see?”

Hope flamed in the woman’s eyes.

“You mean they might forget what they are fighting for?”

“Exactly. Just as in a thousand years of war men might finally forget who had started a fight against whom, and why. Besides, the rapid evolutionary process can’t help but weaken the plants. Laura, where’s that switch?”

Hope dulled again in her sea-blue eyes.

“It’s over on that panel.” She pointed toward the wall of the subterranean laboratory forty feet away. “We can’t possibly reach it. There are dozens of the things between this tank and it.”

“But we can reach it! We can get to it simply by rolling this tank over and over toward it. We rolled it over on its top to clamp the lid shut, didn’t we? Then why couldn’t we roll it some more—to reach a definite goal?”

“Ryder—” Laura’s fingers bit into his arm. “I really think we could. But if we can do that, why not simply roll to the door and escape?”

“Because the door happens to open inward,” Storm said. “We’d have to stop so far from it, to let the opening door clear the tank, that these hellish plants would have room to get in between and block us again. This side, Laura. Add your weight to mine.”

They surged against the glass wall facing toward the distant control panel. The glass tank tottered on its edge and fell on that side, pinning down some of the coiling green stalks, and pressing flat the separate blossoms there.

“Watch the lid!”

The maneuver was repeated, and they were ten feet nearer their goal. Two great plant stems looped viciously upward with the now exposed glass lid of the tank.

“Again!”

The tank rolled on its side, carrying the reaching plants before it.

“We’re going to make it,” panted Laura.

No one who had ever seen her as the cool, impersonal, detached scientist, or the passionless, inflexible pacifist, would have recognized her now. Her tunic was rent. Her eyes flamed with the primitive urge to preserve life by any means against the attack of aliens.

“Yes, we’ll beat the things yet!” grunted Storm, straining for the next roll of the tank.

They got to the panel. And they landed next to it with the lid underneath instead of on that side!

“Ryder—We can’t reach the switch after all—”

“Yes,” Storm ground out, “we can! But heaven help us if the race-memory of these things can persist through the generations so that they keep on attacking us. Because the only way to reach that switch is through a loophole that will let the things get in!”

He stooped and caught up the ripped strips of his shirt tunic, which were blackened and rotten with the acid he had wiped from his legs. He wound them unheedingly around his big right fist and turned to the glass tank-wall next to the control panel.

The glass was deeply pitted. Opaque from the dripped acid of the deadly flowers. He drew back his arm and crashed his fist against the section most deeply pitted.

A sledge-hammer couldn't have cracked that glass had it been untouched. But the viscous stuff from the blooms had done fantastic damage to the molecules of the glass. With Storm's first blow, it buckled out a little. With his next, delivered with all the power of his big body, his fist went through.

Like furious serpents the green coils of the plants' stems writhed to fasten around the arm Storm shoved through the hole. But his hand got to the switchboard. He shoved home the switch controlling the overhead violet ray tubes, and saw with the move a slight change in the tint of light streaming down from overhead.

Literally holding their breaths, the two stared out through portions of the glass wall that had not yet been etched to opacity by the acid.

And they saw the miracle of the outer laboratory repeated.

Here, as there, the plant-growth of a season was compressed into a few seconds. On all sides of them the giant day-lilies drooped, fell to the ground, decomposed there as another crop swelled to maturity and in turn died and decomposed.

But each upspringing generation of plants reached savagely for the glass tank! With each flashing maturity, long stems crowded to get into the hole Storm's fist had battered, and deadly blossoms sucked at the glass walls and dripped their corrosive acid.

“We're beaten,” Storm said.

The two crouched in the tank, away from the tentacles ever writhing through the hole. But then a shout came from the man's bearded lips that almost burst their eardrums in the confined space.

“We're *not* beaten! Look!”

Outside, the surging plant-things were no longer striving so hard to penetrate the glass tank. With each quick upthrust the swelling green plants moved more indecisively, and their roots went down more solidly into the peat moss. Meanwhile, the blooms had almost ceased to move toward the thin walls protecting the man and girl.

“Whatever method they have of passing history down to their descendants is failing!” cried Laura. “A hundred generations have passed. Now the new generations are losing the race memory and forgetting to fight us!”

Storm held her close and watched with her, eyes shining, red beard flaming in the queer light that was saving them.

And the time came when no stalk coiled toward the hole in the tank, and when no fallen flower inched in that direction. There was only the fantastic sea of vegetation—levelling to the ground, spiraling up like a solid wave, bursting into bright orange bloom and then sinking down again in death.

White-faced, Laura and Storm took the gamble. They rolled the tank back and stepped out of it as the lid fell open.

The near plants bent vaguely toward them, like arms reaching, then shrank back as they swelled to maturity and shrank into death. But the move had in it no hint of attempt to finish a struggle almost won by distant forbears; it grew only from the innate ferocity of the things Professor Laura Hart had cultivated from ordinary flower plants through infinitely accelerated evolution.

They got to the door, stepped into the other laboratory, and locked the menace of the inner laboratory behind the massive metal panel.

Storm took his arm from around Laura's waist. His eyes sought hers, levelly, inquiringly.

"Well?" he said, gently.

Laura managed a smile, though it shivered a little on her pale and tremulous lips.

"We might be able to use those horrible things in war against the Orient," Storm said. "We could drop seeds of these man-eating things in their most ferocious stage of evolution. They'd grow to their full size in about five weeks, and we could rain down tubes of my palsy virus to keep soldiers from hacking them down before they'd overrun the enemy sectors. We'd have victory in a month and a half, if you'd consent to work with me."

Laura moved back into the circle of his arm.

"Yes, Ryder. With you. Beside you. The High Command may have my evolutionary product, for no human beings could be worse than those flowers!" She sighed. "I guess we'll have to take the world as we find it in the present, and fight to preserve what we think is best in it."

[The end of *The Bloodless Peril* by Henry Kuttner (as Will Garth)]