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THE WAILING HYBRID

A Novelet of Eerie Thrills

By JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



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THE WAILING HYBRID

By
John Russell Fearn

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The Living Heart

As he drove swiftly through the night Jeff Rowland's thoughts were pleasant indeed, as he dwelt with a certain schoolboyish satisfaction on the circus he had attended in Castleford village not an hour before. It represented his fourth successive visit.

Helen Vane had been there, of course, performing her usual magic and snake-charming act. There seemed to be no snake she could not handle, from a cobra to a boa. Helen—a delightful girl, appealing strongly to him by the very reason of her fearless cleverness. He thanked the fortune that had led him to see the first performance—and her. Not yet had he spoken to her, but he meant to do so before the show moved on.

Then Rowland cursed hotly as with blaring high-powered horn the car behind suddenly drew level with him, headlights blazing wildly. Instantly he swung his own steering wheel madly to the right, bounced crazily on uneven banking.

With bitter eyes he stared at the sedan momentarily level with him, clearly illumined in the reflecting headlights. He caught a glimpse of a dark, swarthy face under a soft hat. The face was leaning low over the steering wheel, oblivious to everything save demoniacal speed. But that was not all! Rowland nearly overturned his car in amazement at the transient vision that followed.

For one clear instant he caught a view of a girl beside the driver, head of golden hair dropped heavily back on the leather cushions with all the indications of unconsciousness. Across her mouth was a tight band, obviously a gag. Then the car was on its way, thundering and bumping on in clouds of dust into the dark.

'Helen! Helen Vane!' Rowland breathed mechanically. 'In that car! I'd know her face anywhere!'

He twisted his car to the road level and for nearly two miles kept the sedan in sight. Then it suddenly veered off the lonely country road and went zigzagging away along a barely defined path across open fields. Its rear light presently vanished, perhaps because the driver realized he was being followed. Rowland promptly extinguished his own lights and watched with narrowed eyes through the windshield. The moonlight helped him considerably, enabled him finally to see the car slide into the shade of a massive dark residence, completely isolated from other evidences of habitation.

At that he slowed down, stopped finally within a quarter of a mile of the place and climbed out on the rough road to take stock of the situation.

The solitary residence was surrounded by tall, heavily foliated trees and high railings. Going closer, Rowland found the massive double front gates locked; beyond them twisted an overhanging drive leading into somber darkness.

Not a light gleamed in that lonely place, not a sound came from it; yet within it was surely Helen Vane.

Rowland's lips tightened. He walked the length of the spiked railings and stared between them in some surprise at numberless glass structures resembling conservatories, or hothouses, joining the residence. At first sight it might have belonged to a nurseryman, a raiser of trees for estates; except that nurserymen do not kidnap girls and drive like maniacs.

Jeff Rowland didn't hesitate any longer. Exercising care over the vicious spikes, he climbed the railings and dropped into the tree-laden grounds, picked his way between the well-tended flowerbeds. Finally he came to the largest conservatory and stood studying the open-top ventilator. If he could get through that—

The thought was no sooner in his mind than he had gripped an outlet pipe and was shinning swiftly up it. Gaining the glass roof, he knelt carefully on the wooden framework and eased himself forward to the inviting skylight.

To clamber through it and drop into the warmth of the conservatory was only a moment's work.

For a long time he stood tensed and listening, surrounded by a heavy mid-tropical heat; then it gradually dawned upon him that he could hear a soft moaning, a sighing which proceeded from the stifling, vaguely moonlit greenery.

For an unaccountable reason his scalp began to tingle.

The moonlight was casting its pale glow upon sickly green and twining branches, branches of a plant resembling hypertrophied honeysuckle and occupying one large bed to itself. And it was from this that the noises were emanating. Perplexed, Rowland went closer to it, found himself stiffening in frozen amazement as the groaning suddenly changed into the voice of a woman, filled with exquisite anguish.

'Free me! In the name of mercy—free me!'

Rowland stared with popping eyes into the heart of that slimy, sweating hothouse and saw something unbelievably weird—the head and shoulders of a strange woman which projected above the hot, oozing soil; a woman who was, as green as the plant that coiled about her, whose thick hair hung in rippling black folds to the soil. She was buried up to her bosom; her arms moved weakly with supplicating, serpentine motions. From her lips, contorted by some unbearable agony, spewed desperate entreaties for release.

'Who—who are you?' Jeff Rowland blurted out, bending toward her.

'Release!' she groaned back. 'Release me, I implore you!'

For a moment the idea of quicksand occurred to him—that she was sinking into this green filth. But that didn't explain her nudity or how she had gotten into the midst of this twining mass of plant. He stepped forward determinedly onto the soil. Instantly the quicksand conception was shattered. It was quite normal.

'Quickly!' the woman screamed, writhing in agony. '*Quickly!*'

Rowland nodded promptly, wondering what particular pain was affecting her so violently. Stooping down behind her, he clamped his powerful hands under her armpits and pulled upward with all his power. Something of extraordinary strength seemed to pull him back—something that caused the woman to scream again and again. Once more he pulled and she abruptly came free, sending him stumbling backward to fall amidst the plant's coil. Like a sigh on a breeze the girl muttered two last words.

'Thank God—' Then her face froze into its expression of unutterable anguish, her eyes glazed and became fixed.

Jeff Rowland, sprawled, immovable, frozen with sick horror at the sight now in front of him. God—the girl had no body below her upper torso! It was completely severed just above the abdomen, leaving green, smothered entrails and complex nerve endings trailing back into the slimy green pit from which he had dragged her.

Now he understood her agony; her mad desire for release. In some inhuman fashion her very body had been provided with roots, linked to the tree itself. She had been a quasi-plant!

A deep and deadly sickness stole over Rowland at the thought, and with it the remembrance of Helen Vane. Monstrous! If such a thing were to happen to her— That thought jerked him to his feet, quivering with smoldering rage. Then he looked up sharply as the conservatory was suddenly swamped in brilliance.

‘Don’t move!’ a voice ordered coldly. ‘Stand exactly where you are—and raise your hands!’

Slowly he obeyed, waited while footsteps came from behind him around the plant bed. Then he found himself staring into the darkly swarthy face of the man he had seen in the car, the cold black eyes fixed menacingly upon him.

The man smiled bitterly. ‘I was wise in expecting you, my young friend,’ he remarked dryly. ‘I suspected you might follow me in your car. My judgment of human nature was correct, even to your using the conservatory window I opened especially for your benefit. I have been detained in my surgery, otherwise I would have come much sooner to see if you had arrived. I might even have stopped you from ruining my work—.’ His black eyes traveled to the dead hulk of the woman, then around the sinuous masses of the weird plant.

‘You have meddled quite a deal, haven’t you?’ he asked slowly. ‘Now I shall have to alter my plans—’

‘That girl there!’ Rowland broke in passionately. ‘Who is she? How in hell’s name did she get like that? It’s—it’s vivisection!’

‘No—just art,’ the man corrected him smoothly. ‘I am responsible, of course. My name is Doctor Calvin Kaylor; I am a retired botanical and anatomical surgeon experimenting with new types—types which none of my blasted contemporaries would believe in. The fusion of a human being with a plant! A fusion that you have spoiled, damn you! You tore out the living heart by the roots!’

His cruel eyes settled on the green cavity from which the stump of a girl had been torn.

‘Living heart!’ Rowland breathed in fascinated horror. ‘You don’t mean—’

‘I mean that that girl was the heart of this plant. She would have grown into a plant woman—a flower of divine beauty. It means I shall have to start all over again.’

‘Not with Helen Vane!’ Jeff Rowland shouted frantically. ‘Oh, I know you’ve got her here—that’s why I came! You can’t do such things, damn your black soul!’

Dr. Kaylor sneered coldly. ‘There’s plenty I can do, so get that straight. I have Helen Vane here, yes. My intention was to use her for quite a different experiment, but thanks to your infernal meddling she will have to take this girl’s place. The plant will die, otherwise. Later I may find a similar use for you—probably you can take the place of Helen Vane in my other experiment . . . Now turn around and get going, through that door! Go on!’

Rowland’s fingers twitched with the desire for action, but he was no fool. Upon him rested the life of the girl he had admired from afar. He kept his hands up and walked through a long dark passage with the doctor behind him, then under further directions he turned into an apartment that was obviously a surgery, stacked with impeccably clean but nonetheless grim-looking instruments.

Before he could ask any further questions or make any moves, chains and manacles were clamped on his wrists and ankles, holding him tight to the wall. It was not so much himself he was thinking about now as the sight of the limp, nude girl lying on the central operating table, slender body and limbs held firmly in the grip of spotless white.

There was no denying the fact that it was Helen Vane, her face still softly made up from her performance in the circus ring!

Hothouse Horror

Rowland shuddered.

‘So you are wondering what it is all about?’ Kaylor asked cynically, coming forward. ‘It isn’t really so very complicated. I have already told you that I am finding a way to bridge the gap between animal and plant life. I believe that with that plant in the conservatory, a specially matured one, I can foster a new type of living being—a woman born of a plant, who will perhaps one day in the course of evolution give birth to beings like herself. I know it can be done!’

‘That woman you so kindly saved was my first experiment—some village girl whom nobody traced, of course. Her heart was the life of the plant; her bloodstream was the sap; her organisms kept it going. You will remember she was already green herself—’

‘You Godless devil!’ Jeff Rowland whispered. ‘You’re nothing but a fiend!’

‘How like the words of my contemporaries before I retired here to work in secret,’ Kaylor sneered. ‘I think—’

He broke off and moved to the operating table as Helen groaned faintly and squirmed in her bonds.

‘So you’ve recovered?’ Kaylor asked bluntly.

At that she jerked her head up, twisted her face around and stared at Jeff Rowland, apparently without recognition. He felt a trifle put out; he was convinced he had attracted her attention from the front row of the circus. Evidently the state of her mind had banished all thoughts and memories.

‘What’s—what happened?’ the girl asked weakly, her eyes dilating in sudden horror as she beheld her unclothed form and buckled straps.

‘I’m Dr. Kaylor,’ returned the scientist coldly. ‘I first saw your photograph in a paper advertising your circus when it visited Philadelphia. I kept track of you until the show came near here. I saw your show three nights ago and decided then that you were just the type I wanted for my work—blonde, healthy and young.’

‘Tonight I captured you outside your van just after your act—gave you chloroform and brought you here. Unfortunately, the original purpose of my kidnapping you goes for nothing; I have other uses for you now. You can blame this man here,’ and he nodded his head toward Rowland.

The girl’s face fixed in an expression of deadly fear. She squirmed and twisted helplessly in the straps. Rowland tore on his chains with the ferocity of a maddened animal, aching to get his fingers on this fiend, this monster with the ridiculous excuse of a plant woman. But was it an excuse? The memory of the severed woman returned to his mind in a sudden wave of nausea.

‘Kaylor, for God’s sake let her go!’ he screamed hoarsely. ‘I beg of you to do that!’

The surgeon-botanist was not even listening. His eyes were fixed on the helplessly writhing girl.

‘I want your body, your heart—your life,’ he breathed. ‘And I shall have them! Nobody can get into this house without my knowing it. Nobody except this man knows you are even here. I chose my time well— Yes, you will be a very beautiful experiment, my dear!’

Kaylor stood gloating over her, watching the straining of her soft limbs, the wild terror in her staring blue eyes. Then suddenly jerking into life, he wheeled an anaesthetic machine into view, swiftly moved the switches, and clamped the cone over the girl's face.

Jeff Rowland watched with surging passion as Helen Vane twisted and wriggled frantically, gulped and shouted hoarsely under the cone. The straps left crimson welts on her skin as she tugged against them. Then her struggles grew weaker; for the second time that night she relaxed into complete unconsciousness. After a while Kaylor removed the cone and stood regarding her once more.

'It makes it difficult, being the only man who knows the secret of my work,' the surgeon remarked, grinning ghoulishly as he washed his hands in antiseptic fluid. 'I cannot have assistants. However, I think she will remain senseless for the next ninety minutes, and I'll be through by that time.'

'Through?' Jeff Rowland choked. 'In heaven's name, Kaylor, what are you going to do? If you touch that girl—' he threatened.

'Don't be a damned fool,' the surgeon cut in harshly. 'There is no sentiment in my business. You'll watch this through, and see for yourself what will shortly happen to *you!*'

Rowland fell into a stunned, dead silence, heart thudding against his ribs. His horror began to mount as floodlights suddenly came up over the table and bathed the girl in their shadowless brilliance. Kaylor slipped quickly into sterilized overalls, again washed his hands and then donned rubber gloves. Finally, when fully masked, he moved a spotless instrument tray forward and began to tabulate his various glittering devices, made sure they would be at hand as fast as he needed them. His single-handed operation promised to be a feat of no mean skill.

Jeff Rowland felt that he would go mad with fury and terror as he watched, as he struggled and battled and realized his own helplessness. Finally he was forced to give up from sheer exhaustion, stood sweating and cursing and staring in his shackles as Kaylor got swiftly to work with his keen-bladed scalpel. The vicious blade sliced cleanly into the body in front of him, sliced through the outer skin and drove deep inwards, severing arteries and veins that were promptly sutured. By degrees the ghastly truth ate into Rowland's spinning brain. Kaylor was keeping his word! He was making Helen Vane like that other unhappy girl; was cutting her body into two sections just above the abdomen, making swift and complex nerve connections, changing the entire circulatory movement, performing feats of manipulation that clearly showed he was indeed a surgeon of surpassing skill.

Kaylor finished at last and reverently surveyed the upper half of the body he had divided. The lower half he removed and carried to a place unknown. Then he returned quickly, unfastened the upper half and carried it from the surgery, leaving behind him a trail of newly spilt blood that made Rowland shrink in nauseated horror.

It seemed hours before Kaylor returned, and when he did he was grinning in cruel satisfaction, stripping off his rubber gloves. Then he tugged out his revolver and held it in a rock-steady grip.

With his free hand he snapped Rowland's manacles loose and held him at arm's length as the prisoner tensed to attack him.

'Better not!' Kaylor advised in a level voice. 'It won't get you any place. Get moving into the conservatory—and don't try any tricks!'

Hot with fury Jeff Rowland obeyed and finally entered that warm expanse of light. His eyes turned instantly to the body of the unhappy girl, sunken to her breast as her now vanished

predecessor had been in the self-same green pit. She was still alive; the slow but weakened movements of her chest showed that, but her head hung with the heaviness of total unconsciousness.

Kaylor approached the girl. 'Anaesthetic not yet passed off,' he murmured, brooding over her thoughtfully. 'I have connected her arteries and nerves to the corresponding ones in the plant. This plant has a circulation of its own and needs her heart to keep it going. Once her body becomes adjusted, she will rapidly change and start to grow, blossom into something rare and beautiful—a plant woman!

'In heaven's name let's get out of here,' Rowland groaned, turning his face away. 'It's more than I can stand.'

Kaylor chuckled. 'Weakling!' he sneered.

They returned to the corridor, and the next thing Rowland realized clearly was of being flung into an empty, dusty room, and being shackled by long lengths of chain to an immense stake driven deep in the floor.

'Don't worry—I'll look after you,' Kaylor remarked cynically, his face painted into hideous shadows by the electric torch he held in his hand.

'You don't think you can get away with this, do you?' his prisoner demanded, glaring up at him. 'They'll come looking for that girl, and for me, Kaylor. My car's not far away. If anybody finds it—'

'Thanks for telling me,' the scientist remarked. 'I'll move it into my garage. This house is safe enough, don't you worry. Anybody nosing in here will get plenty for his trouble— Well, I'll see you later—tomorrow morning, in fact,' he sneered.

With that he was gone, leaving Rowland utterly alone. Not very long afterward he heard the noise of his car being driven up the drive, then a silence fell on the terrible house . . .

Rowland awoke from a stiff and drafty slumber on the following morning to discover Kaylor, standing beside him in the drab light filtering through the barred window. Amazingly enough the surgeon was holding quite a respectable-looking breakfast tray in his hands.

'Better eat it,' he advised curtly, setting it down on the floor. 'I'm not doing it for love, but because I want my next subject to be as healthy and well fed as Helen Vane.'

Rowland winced at thought of the outraged girl, but he ate ravenously. He had to keep his strength up in preparation for attacking this fiend when the chance came. When he had finally finished he was released from the shackles, but held once more under the revolver threat, forced to visit that abominable hothouse again. To his surprise green blinds were drawn over the glass windows, plunging the place into deep emerald twilight.

'Light hurts her,' Kaylor muttered almost sympathetically. 'She has changed amazingly in the night, performed a rapid metabolism. When I came in this morning she had her arms over her face to shut out the glare. Once I drew the shades she lowered them, and I could study her carefully. She's turned out a perfect specimen. Look for yourself!'

Rowland didn't need any command, aided as it was by a prod from the revolver. His eyes were already fastened on the incredible sight of that girl, oddly changed in appearance now by reason of her skin having become shiny green, her golden hair deep jet black. Her soft arms were waving gently to and fro in a fashion that was somehow sinuously repulsive—a reptilian tendency following closely the sinuous formation of the ghastly plant of which she was now a part.

Nor did the girl appear to be suffering any.

‘It’s ghastly,’ Rowland groaned, thinking of the Helen Vane he had known and comparing her to this incredible creature writhing in the soil.

‘Horrible, nothing! You’re just squeamish,’ Kaylor growled. ‘I guess you’ve seen enough for now. Back to your room!’

Bitter-faced, Rowland obeyed.

In the room once more the chains and manacles went back on his wrists and ankles.

‘I’ll be back later,’ Kaylor said coldly as he went out and locked the door with a bang.

For a time Rowland sat on the dirty floor trying futilely to conceive some method of escape.

Finally he shook his head wearily and stared helplessly toward the bars of the window.

The Woman Grows!

During the day Kaylor came into the room twice to bring food. His final visit was at nine o'clock at night, bringing supper and a camp bed.

'The better you are in health, the better I'll like it,' was his cold comment, as he fixed the cot in position. 'I'll see you tomorrow morning. Sleep well, and don't try anything funny.'

With that the door closed and locked behind him. Rowland ate in silence, surprised to find how hungry he was. Once he had finished he threw himself on the bed, cast the chains as far from him as possible and gave himself up to thought. Finally he slept . . .

About midnight he awoke abruptly at a sudden peculiar sound. The noise was like soft, panther-like footfalls—certainly not the brisk steps of Dr. Kaylor. Rowland heard the sound glide past the door of his prison, soft and indefinable.

'Hey, who's there?' he shouted, sitting up. 'Who's there? Let me out of here, whoever you are!'

There was no response to his request. The soft footsteps gradually receded into silence. But only for a while; then minutes later they came again, and again they receded. Quiet returned and saturated the house. Jeff Rowland found himself sweating in sudden fear, fear of the thought that perhaps the plant woman was responsible for the sounds. But that simply could not be! Why, she was rooted breast deep in soil, her entrails joined to the plant itself.

He clenched moist palms tightly, then again he sat up with a jerk as the cloying odour of a peculiar perfume began to waft into his nostrils. In some way it was like acacia and hyacinth mixed together, heavy and exotic, almost indecent in its seductive aroma. Could it be possible that *she* was giving off this heavy mesmeric odour?

Four doors away in his library adjoining the surgery, Kaylor too became aware of the perfume and looked up sharply from the botanical treatise he was studying. Like Rowland, his mind went instantly to the woman he had turned into a plant. And with that thought the first naked crawling of fear became deeply rooted in the depths of his mind.

He knew already that he had outraged all the laws of nature in trying to bridge the gap between human and plant life. Suppose that this new life happened to be charged with immeasurable differences, possessed of inflexible cruelty beyond human understanding? He shuddered. Finally he went to the door and opened it, to find that the corridor reeked with the weirdly seductive odour.

For an instant Kaylor paused; then picking up his revolver he walked swiftly along to the conservatory and entered, switching on the single green-shaded bulb. His heart missed a beat as he saw his strange creation had visibly grown nearly a foot higher out of the soil!

Kaylor stared at her, then suddenly there came from between her greenly lighted teeth a low wailing—the most ghastly blood-freezing wail he had ever heard! It strained his nerves to the breaking point as it sighed and sobbed through the conservatory like an unearthly moaning from the very depths of hell.

In response to the eerie wail something stirred the tree. Its branches visibly moved with horrible, mysterious life. Again the cry issued from the plant woman's parted lips, and again the tree responded with a life that was terrifyingly all its own.

‘What have you done?’ Kaylor demanded hoarsely, at last of the living statue. ‘Speak, if you can! What have you done to my plant? It didn’t live and move like this before you became a part of it! Oh God, this perfume!’ He clenched his fists and tried to choke down the power of that seductive perfume.

The woman’s teeth showed again in an unholy smile.

‘You made me into a plant and destroyed in me all that was human,’ she whispered softly. ‘I am glad now. I know things that are not known to mortals. You have given life to formerly immovable plants, Doctor Kaylor. For that I love you—love you deeply!’

Perspiration dewed the surgeon’s brow with the intensity of his self-mastery.

‘You—you can’t talk of things like love,’ he muttered hoarsely. ‘You’re just a plant—’

He broke off and stared as her mouth formed again into a round ‘O’ and emitted once more that horrible wail. With that his nerve deserted him. He hurtled from that dankly perfumed glass house, with the vision of sinuous, coiling tree branches rooted in his aching brain.

Kaylor gained his library in double-quick time and slammed the door, stood trying to calm his pounding heart. In his own room Jeff Rowland heard Kaylor’s hasty retreat, and fell to wondering, not knowing what had happened.

Then he set to work again on his chains, until fatigue and cramping pain got the better of him. In the chill and heavily odorous early hours he fell asleep, and dreamed of the horror that was slowly biting into his every nerve fiber.

The following day was drear and forlorn. Gray clouds scudded over the heavens; sweeping blankets of misty rain poured across the fields and seemed to gather in solitary menace about the lone house.

Dr. Kaylor was obviously shaken by the events of the night. Rowland could see it in his black eyes. When he brought the food in during the day, his hands were trembling.

‘Jitters?’ Rowland asked, as he watched them.

‘No,’ came the angry retort. Then the surgeon straightened up and fell to thinking. ‘Did you smell anything in the night?’ he asked finally.

‘Only perfume,’ Jeff Rowland replied, munching steadily. ‘It seems to have gone now.’

Kaylor drew the back of his hand over his brow. ‘Yes, it’s gone now,’ he agreed tonelessly. ‘But tonight it may come back—’

He said no more then, but went out with his head bowed in thought. He looked only once into the conservatory from the safety of the door and beheld his plant woman even taller, now nearly five feet high from the ground, sinuous arms still twining, mouth ready to form into that ghastly moaning wail—Kaylor beat a hasty retreat.

Ever and again throughout that drear day the surgeon heard that ghastly cry from the conservatory. It penetrated the walls and filled the air with its strange meaning. Once Rowland heard its muffled echo, and the sound struck an odd chord in his memory. Weird and ghastly though it was, he was convinced it was not altogether an alien sound to him. But he had no time to dwell on it; his desperate efforts with the manacles seemed to be getting somewhere at last.

By the time five o’clock had arrived he had worked his right hand free; withdrawn it, raw and bleeding, from the steely clutch that had held it.

Nevertheless, he kept the hand out of sight as Kaylor entered with his supper. It was no use starting anything until he had the left one free, too, and that would take some hours yet.

After that, he had only to snap back the ankle fetters and go to work on the surgeon when the opportunity offered. He was thankful when Kaylor left him again to his own devices.

As darkness began to fall, Kaylor's courage waned in proportion. The horrible wailing from the greenery was increasing; probably 'she' needed food. Then as the twilight gave slow place to black night, the perfume returned to roll in reeking waves from the conservatory itself.

Kaylor spent most of the evening in the security of his study, with all the lights blazing behind drawn curtains. He could feel his courage slipping—so much so that he finally jumped to his feet and grabbed his ever-handly revolver. Either he had to shoot that damned woman and ruin the experiment, or else lose his very reason! This haunting dread of something ghastly about to happen, 'her' very presence in the conservatory, were things he could no longer bear.

With tight lips he flung open the door and strode into the perfumed corridor, went swiftly along its drafty darkness and entered the hothouse, switching on the green-shaded light. His nerve began to fail him again, his revolver hand drooped.

The woman was still there, of course, relaxed now for a change. Her hypnotic eyes fixed upon the surgeon from the shadows. Her lissome arms hung down at her sides, fingers nearly touching the soil. Then after a while she began that swaying motion once more, sinuous and seductive. The perfume radiated from her once again in sickening, overpowering waves. And presently that low wailing sob rolled from her heavy scarlet lips.

'In heaven's name, stop that screaming!' Kaylor cried, as the twisted green branches of the devil plant writhed in rhythmic response. 'Stop it, I tell you!' He stood breathing hard, revolver levelled. 'I came here to kill you,' he went on thickly. 'Yes, destroy you—' He broke off as peal after peal of hideous laughter spewed from her sensuous mouth.

'Kill *me*!' she cried at last in derision. 'First you destroy all within me that is human—change me into a hybrid, half woman and half plant, then you decide to kill me. You ignorant, stupid fool! Don't you realize that it is too late to do that? Hundreds of seeds of me are now in this plant—will blossom in the future, giving hundreds of reproductions of *me*! If you kill me it will make not the slightest difference—there will be perpetual reminders of me, haunting you to the end of your days!'

Kaylor's face blanched. 'You're lying!' he shouted abruptly, voice harsh with fear. 'You've got to be lying! What you say is unthinkable! Damn you, for your beauty, your perfume, your unworldly seductiveness! If you don't die I shall lose my reason—'

He stopped suddenly and whirled about at the sound of a thunderous crash in the corridor outside. Even as he stood bewildered, it was followed by another. Quickly he made for the prison door, but at that identical second Rowland catapulted through it, face frozen with fury, bleeding fists clenched for action.

Without a pause his right fist came up and smashed Kaylor under the chin, sent him flying backward. Kaylor's revolver exploded into the air but his grip on it remained unshaken.

'Now you'll get what's coming to you!' Rowland panted, lunging forward. 'Get up, damn you! I'm going to beat you to a pulp, you—'

He broke off short as Kaylor suddenly vaulted to his feet, gun ready for action. He fired—and missed, followed it up with a swinging left haymaker. Rowland sidestepped and brought up a terrific uppercut, hurtling forward to follow up his advantage. But Kaylor's bunched knuckles struck him with blinding force between the eyes. He went reeling backward, felt the

sharp stab of a bullet as it tore like white-hot wire across his shoulder. Weakly he dropped down near the now relaxed and brooding plant woman.

He could not be sure, but it seemed to him that she aided him to rise. He felt his injured shoulder and stood swaying, staring groggily at Kaylor's levelled gun. The surgeon was smiling viciously.

'Fine spirit,' he said softly. 'I don't want to kill you—you will be too useful alive. Come over here—'

Horrible Revenge

Wincing with pain, eyes narrowed for the slightest sign of a loophole, Jeff Rowland obeyed the command, and this time Kaylor was relentlessly on his guard. He backed around menacingly as Rowland moved, so intent on his task that he failed to notice how close he was coming to the weirdly waving plant woman. The perfume from her body increased by the moment as he stepped further backward in a half circle.

‘Sit down there and don’t try any tricks!’ Kaylor snapped out at last, pointing the gun toward an upturned flower tub. ‘I’ll deal with you later!’

He paused, half in surprise, as he suddenly became aware of a slim but amazingly firm green hand gripping his revolver wrist.

‘*You!*’ Kaylor gasped almost foolishly, staring up into the lustrous eyes of his creation and feeling the warmth and perfume that seemed to ooze from her. ‘I— Let go!’ He snapped out the last words savagely, suddenly realizing what was taking place.

Rowland leaped up from the tub, intent on finishing the work he had started, but to his vast surprise—and Kaylor’s—the voice of the woman warned him back!

‘Stand exactly where you are! Kaylor belongs to me! Obey, or it will be the worse for you!’

Sudden fear wrenched at Kaylor’s heart. The plant woman’s left hand had come now to join the right. It closed fondly about his throat. The heavy scarlet lips came toward his; fragrant breath blew on his heated face.

Then his horrified gaze became fixed as in response to her suddenly resumed wails the tree became abruptly alive. Some of its sinuous branches began to twirl horribly, writhing and twitching in a revolting fashion like a giant octopus. From the midst of the tangle there presently rose one vicious head, swaying with indescribable menace. Jeff Rowland gulped and stared—why, the thing was a viper! A Viper in *this* plant? It moved sinuously downward to coil about the woman’s smooth shoulders, rearing its wicked little head in the perfumed air.

Kaylor’s agonized eyes stared at it unbelievably, then he renewed his frantic efforts to escape. God—a serpent, spawned of this plant, was not even attempting to hurt the woman! True, Helen Vane had once trained and befriended snakes. Was it possible that she was now actually spawning them as plant branches? Incredible!

Calvin Kaylor, traitor to medicine, felt he was going mad. And as he struggled frantically in the woman’s immovable grip, he saw heads of other snakes wriggling and twisting in the green gloom, realized that most of the plant branches were snakes of all descriptions—puff-adders, cobras, even the deadly fer-de-lance!

Then indeed his heart went sick with horror as he caught a glimpse of a massive main stem twitching and sliding toward him with an immutable inevitability. He screamed wildly, tore and struggled with insane ferocity, but there was something about those slender hands on his wrist and neck pulse that held him in a vise of agony. The slightest movement sent sheer torture pounding through him. With bulging eyes, her face staring down into his, he listened to the screaming wail from those lips, and saw reptilian death squirming toward him!

Jeff Rowland jerked his eyes away from the snakes coiling about the woman to the thing Kaylor was staring at—and his heart missed a beat. What had been the trunk of the plant

woman was actually a reawakened boa constrictor! Aroused now by the woman's cries, it slid along with easy swiftness, a full eight feet in length, and presently coiled itself gently but irresistibly about Kaylor's threshing feet, binding them immovably together.

Only then did the woman release the surgeon and stand there, watching implacably. Kaylor screamed in mad pain and horror as that slimy length slid in cold filthy tautness about him. Tighter drew the coils, and far tighter, encircling his waist, his chest, his neck. Breath ceased to enter his lungs. His face turned purple with the constriction.

'Remember Helen Vane,' muttered the plant woman, implacable in her hatred.

Rowland turned away, sickened, and listened in silent horror to the racking rend of bones under the snake's frightful power. Kaylor died horribly, mangled by a pitiless foe.

Only when he was a crushed, dying pulp on the floor did the plant woman wail again, this time with a different note. In response the constrictor slid reluctantly from its victim and crawled back to its former position. One by one the remaining serpents uncoiled and slid back to the branches.

Rowland twisted around and watched blankly, unbelievably, as he saw the woman make a sudden effort and rise from the pit! She stood revealed for a moment as a perfect figure in an amazingly tight but elastic substance that covered her to the ankles. Beneath them were incongruous rubber shoes!

With a faint but bitter smile she hobbled from the plant bed and reached up to the electric light bulb, sliding off the green shade. In the return of white light Rowland stared at her incredulously. She was smothered in green grease paint; her black hair was drawn over her breast in sudden modesty. Her eyes were mascaraed into big circles, her lips were laden with lipstick—even perfume still radiated from her. But of one fact there was no possible shadow of doubt—*she was Helen Vane!*

She smiled at him rather wearily as he stood gaping, unable to credit his senses.

'I don't know your name, but your face is familiar,' she said quietly. 'You are the one who watched my act at the circus every night from the front row, aren't you?'

'Why, yes, but—I'm Jeff Rowland,' he stammered. 'But look here! I saw you cut in half by this butcher here—'

'Not me—my sister Marjorie,' she interrupted in a low voice. 'She was my twin, and resembled me. But there were certain differences at close range. That was why I pretended I didn't like white light and had this place made subdued. White light would have given things away.'

She broke off and turned aside, calling loudly. In response the main skylight of the roof rose up and a group of men's faces appeared.

'All over,' she said curtly. 'Take him away. I'm through with this fiend. He's dead.'

The men nodded, and Rowland wonderingly watched as they tossed down a rope ladder and entered the conservatory, bringing with them various boxes and commencing to coax the snakes into them.

'My snakes, of course,' the girl murmured, turning back again. 'You know that I train them because of my circus act. The fangs are drawn on all of them. You see, in my display of magic, which comes before my snake act, my sister helps me—or rather she did. She resembled me closely, especially with make-up, so of course it made many disappearing acts very baffling. This devil here captured her in the circus grounds from outside our caravan. Why, I don't know.'

‘He mistook her for you,’ Rowland answered grimly. ‘Kaylor was a biological and botanical fiend with a mad obsession—maybe brought on by the constant derision of his contemporaries.’

The girl’s eyes were thoughtful. ‘Evidently he mistook Marjorie for me because he’d only seen me from the distance of the circus ring,’ she said. ‘Anyhow, some of the boys saw him carrying her off in his car. They called me right away and we followed the tracks to this place. That wasn’t very difficult, with the cross-diamond tire tread he used. For some reason the conservatory roof was open—’

‘For me,’ Rowland nodded, and briefly explained. ‘He must have forgotten to close it again in his excitement.’

‘Well, anyhow, I climbed up on the roof and was just in time to see this fiend planting my poor sister in the soil, I heard his words to her, of course—all that he expected she was going to do. When things finally calmed down—after you’d been in to see her, too—I climbed inside and found she was stone dead, horribly, brutally murdered.’

The girl paused and shuddered at the recollection. Then she went on again slowly.

‘The very fiendishness of her death did something to me. I went outside again and told the boys; they were all for rushing this place and tearing Kaylor limb from limb, but I wanted to make him suffer as my poor sister had done. I would give up everything to do that. So I developed my idea.’

‘We returned to the circus and collected my snakes, together with other odds and ends—a rope ladder, make-up box, and so forth. In the night all was quiet. We got into this conservatory again and removed poor Marjorie’s remains for decent burial. The snakes we fixed up in this plant. Then I stripped myself to the waist and put on this elastic sheathing, used in my professional work. Green grease paint did the rest. My own make-up was easy, especially with this black wig. The boys took the tackle outside and one or other of them was always around on guard, in case things got too hot.’

Helen Vane smiled bitterly. ‘Since Kaylor wanted a plant woman, he should have one. I stood in this pit with galoshes on my feet and mackintosh wrapped around my legs—standing a little higher every time, to convey the idea of growth. In the intervening times I simply sat down and waited for my chance to come. I nearly managed it the first time. You see, I wanted him to come close enough to enable me to get a ju-jitsu grip on him. But at first he was too wary. Once I had him in my grip, the boa would finish the job; I knew that. When he threatened to shoot me tonight, I was in a tight corner, but fortunately you blundered in and saved everything.’

‘But the perfume? The wailings by day? The corridor noises?’ Rowland asked, puzzled.

‘The perfume was nothing much—only a gag to heighten the illusion. I had two full bottles of cheap essence of acacia in my make-up box. A little goes a long way. Last night I emptied a whole bottleful in the corridor. I heard you call, but I did not release you because my vengeance had still to be gained. Of course, I soaked myself in perfume as well. A sweetish odour of that sort can be very suggestive to a man in Kaylor’s state of mind—especially if it comes from a supposed plant woman. As to the wailings, they were merely to keep the snakes awake. They know my particular call, of course.’

Jeff Rowland looked at her thoughtfully. ‘Now I know where I heard those sounds—at the circus,’ he muttered. ‘But they were less horrible there, perhaps because the area was bigger. You took a long chance.’

Her shoulders shrugged. ‘I was prepared to risk anything, even my life, to avenge Marjorie. The law could only give that fiend the chair— I wanted something more potent. Nobody will ever know what killed him . . . As to my professional act, it’s ruined.’

Rowland remained silent for a moment. Then he patted her arm.

‘Maybe it’ll work out all right,’ he said gently. ‘I wanted to meet you, you know—but not like this. Let’s get out of this damned place. My car’s somewhere around outside. Maybe we’ll think up something together.’

They did think up something. Bereft of her sister and finding her snakes always gave her poignant memories of that hideous night in the conservatory, Helen Vane became Mrs. Jeff Rowland in the course of healing time.

[The end of *The Wailing Hybrid* by John Russell Fearn]