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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

15¢ Thrilling WONDER Stories DEC. 1946

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I AM EDEN

By
HENRY KUTTNER

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, December 1946.

In a fabulous Brazilian Valley, Jim Ferguson and Dr. Cairns battle against walking rocks and cannibal plants in their strange quest of a mysterious and fascinating girl goddess!

CHAPTER I

Haunted Dutchman

A warm wind blew down the brown waters of the Parima. It picked up the sweet, clinging scent of honeysuckle and carried it across the open veranda. Watching the Dutchman's face, Ferguson felt a queer crawling unease.

Groot's nostrils twitched. He put out a thick hand beaded with diamonds of perspiration and lifted his glass. But he did not gulp the gin this time. He inhaled deeply, his eyes closed, and once a tiny shudder rippled across his pulpy, big torso.

"De smell was dere, too," Groot said. "De *sina-sina* trees—dey have big, nasty t'orns—perhaps dey were de worst. But *all* de flowers watched. And dey smelled."

Ferguson let his dark gaze slide toward the bamboo screens at the back of the porch. He thought he saw a faint movement there, and moved his hand surreptitiously in warning. The motion stopped. Luckily Groot was too drunk to be suspicious, or he might have heard the heavy breathing behind the screens.

"The flowers smelled," Ferguson prompted. "You must have got used to smells in the Amazon, though."

Groot put down the glass and mopped his swarthy face.

"Dere are sins and sins," he said. "I have broken my share of de commandments, *ja*. But dis was different. All along I was afraid, and de feeling got worse on de way back. De doctor had his scientific zeal; he could look at her as a specimen. Yet he was troubled too. Me—I could feel de way de forest *stopped* when we caught her."

"Indios?" Ferguson suggested. Groot made a gesture of scorn.

"De Indios! Oh, no—it was not de brown savages. I know dem. Dey could not frighten me so I sweated and felt my insides try to crawl down into my shoes. It was like de way life stops when you stab a man. Only it did not quite stop."

Again the perfumed wind crossed the veranda; again Groot shivered. Ferguson refilled the Dutchman's glass.

"T'anks. Look, now—you are a scientist. I am not one. I just bum around Brazil, making a few *reis* here, a few dere. I am not educated. But I am not superstitious either. Dis talk about haunted parts of de forest—well, I have gone to such places, and dere is nothing. Only de Indians do not talk about dis place, and dey do not go dere. Twenty years ago dey did. Suddenly something happened." He moved nervously. "I do not want to talk about it or think about it. I am afraid. I have a feeling I should go back and try to help dat girl. Dis sin lies heavy on my soul, you see."

He lurched to his feet. "I go to my hammock now. No more gin, no. I have had enough."

Ferguson was silent. Groot walked carefully to the steps. There he turned. "De rocks shook," he said. "I felt de ground crawl under my feet. And de flowers—"

He stopped, chewing his lip. Shaking his head, he shrugged and stepped off the veranda. Jim Ferguson watched the bulky figure disappear in the direction of the settlement. He finished his gin and scowled, distracted by the overpoweringly sweet scent of the *madreselva*, the river honeysuckle, that lined the Parima's banks. Finally he rubbed his unshaven jaw and called:

“Come on out. You make enough noise to scare the Dutchman away, and then go to sleep when he’s gone. Afraid I’ll go after the stuff without you?”

Tom Parry came from behind the screens, a thin, wiry, sneering man with a knife-scar across one cheek.

“Maybe,” he said. “I never trust gentlemen. It’s a habit with me.”

“I’m flattered,” Ferguson said, pouring himself another drink. “Where’s Sampson?”

“Here,” Sampson said, following Parry. He was a squat, dark man who spoke little but apparently heard everything. He drew back a chair and sat down, reaching for the bottle.

Parry’s gray eyes were on Ferguson. “Well?”

Ferguson grinned. “Well what? We won’t get any more information out of Groot. He just repeats himself now.”

Parry grimaced. “What are we waiting for then?”

“Nothing. We can go up river tomorrow, if you want.”

“What about the lead suits?”

Ferguson shrugged. “Dr. Cairns has a couple. He must have known what to expect. Lead-impregnated cloth—it’s significant. But now we won’t have to wait. It would take weeks to get down to Manaus and back, and somebody might ask questions. We’ll use Cairns’ lead suits.”

“That’ll protect us from the radium?”

“Yes,” Ferguson said, grinning again. “It won’t protect us against other emanations, though—there may be some mighty peculiar radiations in Groot’s haunted forest.”

“There’s radium, anyhow,” Sampson said curtly.

“Yeah,” Parry agreed. “If Groot doesn’t lead us to the place, I figure the girl will. What’s the Dutchman afraid of—ghosts?”

“His conscience,” Ferguson said. “Everybody’s got an Achilles heel somewhere. Mine didn’t happen to be the same kind, but—”

Parry said maliciously, “That’s why you’re floating around Brazil, with a couple of crooks like us, instead of being a big-shot metallurgist in New York, isn’t it?”

The barb did not sting. Ferguson turned his quiet, dark gaze on Parry.

“That’s right,” he agreed. “It’s lucky for you that I know radium when I see it.”

“Ten grand,” Sampson said. Parry grunted.

“We can get ten million. Besides, Groot gave the stuff to the local padre to keep for him. It’s safer than a bank in this neck of the woods. We daren’t touch it.”

It was safe, yes. Ferguson had warned the priest to keep the radioactive ore in its leaden casket. Why Groot hadn’t continued down river to Manaus or Rio was something to ponder. It was almost, Ferguson thought, as though some intangible cord still bound the Dutchman to that strange, fantastic part of the forest where he had found—what he found.

Ferguson sighed and watched the slow, roiling flow of the river. Up there, somewhere, was Dr. Andrew Cairns, possessor of a secret that Groot could not disclose. For the Dutchman had suffered an emotional shock that partook of psychic trauma; he had stumbled over the threshold of the unknown, and for a little while he had walked in an alien place. A place where the ground crawled beneath his feet, and the rocks shook, and the flowers watched.

No man can ever shut the door completely on the past. Though Ferguson had been drifting for five years now, without ambition and without hope, something of the old driving curiosity came back now. The radium deposit Groot described would be worth a rather incredible amount, but the money took second place in Jim Ferguson’s mind to the boundless mystery he

sensed up river. Rudderless, he moved before a familiar wind that blew toward the shores of a haunting conundrum.

And from upstream the hot wind of Brazil blew steadily, moist with the sickly flower-fragrance.

“We’ll have our guns,” Ferguson said suddenly.

Surprised, Parry stared at him. “Sure. Why? Getting worried?”

“I don’t know,” Ferguson whispered, feeling again the sickly unease Groot’s words had brought. “Could be, Parry. Could be. You see, Groot hasn’t told us everything he saw or—sensed. I’m no psychologist, but I could tell that. Part of his mind out there, wouldn’t *let* him see some of the things that happened. And as long as those things didn’t impinge on him personally, he could ignore them.”

Parry was puzzled.

“I don’t get it.”

Ferguson nodded toward the blue, hazed ramparts of the Serra Pacaranua, a veiled wall above and beyond the jungle.

“If those mountains got up and walked past us and disappeared beyond the horizon, it would be so absolutely unthinkable that your mind might not let you admit that you saw it. Because if you *did* realize that mountains walked, you’d be apt to go crazy. An automatic defense mechanism of the subconscious.”

“Mountains walking!” Sampson mouthed contemptuously. “The gin’s talking.”

Yet Parry’s gray gaze held steady, a little wary.

“What d’you think Groot saw up there?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Ferguson said. “I don’t know. Maybe—mountains walking. . . .”

Five days by *canoe*, three afoot, and they were at their destination, in the foothills of Serra Pacaranua’s mighty peaks. Groot came with them. Ferguson thought the Dutchman’s conscience had forced him to return. Groot spoke seldom now. His heavy face was perceptibly thinner, and nervous tension made him jumpy. Oddly, the same subtle ailment had set its stamp on Dr. Andrew Cairns—which made Ferguson’s thoughts turn in new directions.

Cairns had occupied the wreckage of an experimental station that had once existed here. Native labor had rebuilt it, and the result was better than Ferguson would have expected. But a heavy silence hung over the compound; the usual soft chatter of the Indios wasn’t audible. Parry felt that, too, and loosened the pistol at his belt. Sampson trudged doggedly ahead, a blocky, unimaginative figure, feeling nothing of the subtle currents of strain that surrounded the clearing. And sweat was pouring down the Dutchman’s face.

The door opened; a tall, gray-haired man in dungarees and singlet stood on the threshold, a rifle held at the ready. He relaxed at sight of them, Ferguson thought, but the strained wariness did not entirely vanish. He waited quietly as the little group marched forward.

“Doctor Cairns,” Groot said hesitantly. “I have come back—dere was something—”

A look passed between the two men. Cairns said, “She’s still here, Jan.”

“Dere has been—no trouble, Doctor?”

Cairns studied Groot. Abruptly he slung the rifle so that its muzzle pointed at the ground. “Come inside,” he said. “It’s cooler. Bring your friends, Jan—and introduce us.”

The interior was shadowed and as cool as could be expected. Cairns indicated chairs and busied himself getting drinks. Ferguson followed Groot’s gaze and saw a heavy door with a

business-like hasp and padlock newly affixed to it.

“No ice,” Cairns said. “There was a generator here twenty years ago, but the Indios dismantled it long ago. Incidentally, they ran away last week, Jan.”

“So. Well—dis is Mr. Ferguson. Mr. Parry and Mr. Sampson. Dey—dey asked me to guide dem—” Groot stumbled.

Mild amusement showed in the doctor’s eyes. “I suppose I was too generous. If I hadn’t given you that radium sample—but I felt you’d earned it—”

“You’ve guessed it, Doctor,” Parry said. “Do you mind telling me if there’s more radium where that came from?”

“There is more. And I haven’t staked out a claim.”

“Why not?” Sampson asked.

Cairns didn’t answer. The Dutchman stabbed a hairy finger toward the locked door.

“Is *she* in dere?”

Cairns nodded. “Yes, Jan. I’ve been giving her hypnotics ever since you left. She’s been unconscious.”

“She?” Ferguson said. “I’m a little curious. Who is she?”

Cairns reached out a long arm and picked up a flat metal case. He opened it, revealing a medical kit—a professional man’s kit.

“I’m glad you came,” he said. “I haven’t slept for days. For weeks—I don’t know how long. I was afraid I’d have to kill her, and I wasn’t sure I *could*. Because I don’t dare let her wake up.”

He thrust the box at Ferguson, who automatically accepted it.

“*Kill her?*” Ferguson asked, and Parry echoed him.

“I’ll show you how to use a hypodermic—I’ve been using apomorphine, a strong shot.”

“I know how,” Ferguson said.

“Good,” Cairns muttered, not even showing surprise. “Fill it up to here . . . whenever she shows signs of waking . . . don’t let her wake up. I’ve got to sleep a little.”

Sheer physical exhaustion suddenly drained the life out of the man’s face. He slumped bonelessly in his chair, as though only force of will had kept him awake till now.

“Doctor?” Groot said.

“Later,” Cairns whispered. “Tell you—later. Only—Jan, don’t take chances. Keep her under. Last time—mistake . . . Don’t. . . .” His voice faded.

He slept.

“This is plain crazy,” Sampson said.

Ferguson was examining the bottle.

“He’s used up most of his benzedrine supply,” Ferguson said. “I wonder how long he’s been awake, anyhow?”

Parry said, “Who cares? I’m wondering if he’s got any more radium around the place. Here!” He went swiftly to the unconscious doctor’s body and began searching Cairns’ pockets.

“He wouldn’t keep it in his pockets,” Ferguson grunted.

“No, but he’d keep the key to that room.”

“It is in de lock,” Groot said. He was at the padlocked door, staring at the heavy wood panel as though hoping to pierce its solidity. When Parry turned the key, Ferguson half

expected the Dutchman to object, but Groot made no move, though a slight shiver shook the gross body.

Parry swung the door open, stepped over the threshold—and his footsteps paused. His voice came back.

“What the devil! Sampson—Ferguson! C’mere!”

CHAPTER II

Escape

They all came, crowding into the bare little room. There was little to see. Through a grimy window light came faintly. And on an army cot lay a girl, wrapped in an old flannel bathrobe. She was bound, slim wrist and ivory ankle, by thin, strong ropes.

She slept. Tiny marks on her bare arm told Ferguson where the hypodermic needle had gone in.

This was no Indio girl. Her hair was pure silver, not with age, for it was silky and sleek, but with the cool shine of polished spun metal. Utter relaxation was in the abandon of her posture, even trussed as she was. Her skin was a luminous white, faintly tinged with a darker tone beneath—like thin ivory against the light.

“Do you feel it?” Groot whispered.

“Feel what?” Parry asked sharply.

“De—whatever it is. I don’t know! Only dis is wrong. She does not belong here. It was a sin to take her out of de forest.” Groot stumbled forward and stood looking down at the girl. “A sin,” he mouthed. “De earth is her mother—we took her from de earth. Wake up!” he cried suddenly, his big hands closing on the girl’s shoulders. He shook her gently. “Wake up! You lie dere as if you were dead—I can’t have it.”

The cloudy lashes quivered. Instinctively every man in the room shrank back—for a sound had come from outside the house. It was horribly human, but Ferguson had heard the cry of *jaguara* before.

Something crashed against the house door. There was a ripping, tearing noise, and again that furious screaming sounded. With a swift, easy movement Sampson darted into the next room; he didn’t seem chunky and awkward any more. He picked up Cairns’ rifle and moved out of Ferguson’s range of vision.

The girl’s eyes opened. They were intensely black. Pupil merged with jet iris.

Again the door shook; again that wailing scream ripped out.

“Parry!” Sampson yelled. “There’s a couple more of the big cats coming!” The rifle blasted. The jaguar’s death cry was swallowed by a heavier crash against the door.

“They don’t act like that—unless they’re goaded,” Parry said. He stared at the girl, hesitated, cursed, and whirled toward the outer room.

Expressionless, lovely, and withdrawn, the girl lay waiting. Groot wrung his big hands, making helpless sounds. Ferguson stared at him.

“Jan! Come on. We’ve got to drive those cats away.”

Groot gripped Ferguson’s arm. “It is no use. She will only call more.”

“You’re crazy!”

“I don’t know what to do,” the Dutchman faltered. “She—she will kill us all—she’s bringing *jaguara* here.”

“How could she?”

“Ask him,” Groot said. He pointed to the doorway. “Ask him. He knows!”

Dr. Cairns stood there, his eyes dull, a loaded syringe in his hand. His teeth showed in a mirthless grin.

“Wrong time for me to fall asleep,” he said—and a jaguar screamed outside the house as Sampson’s rifle snarled.

Ferguson stared. Cairns hurried toward the cot. The girl did not look at him as he punched a fold of her skin and sank the needle into the ivory flesh of her arm.

“You’ll kill her!” Ferguson said.

“No,” Cairns said. “Not *her*. She’ll just sleep longer. And as long as she’s awake, we’re not safe. Watch and listen.”

The rifle boomed again; the sharper crack of the pistol sounded. The shrieking of the big cats rose to a pitch of blind fury. A great body hurled itself against the door with a splitting of wood.

The screaming died.

Ferguson looked at the girl. The jet eyes were closed.

“We’ve licked the brutes!” Parry yelled. “They’re getting out of here fast!”

“She sleeps,” Groot said thickly.

“This is the third time it’s happened,” Cairns said.

Ferguson frowned at him. “But who is she? *What* is she?”

“Call her Circe,” Cairns said.

He staggered back through the doorway, threw himself across the cot and fell asleep again.

The doctor slept without stirring for six hours. Ferguson waited, the medical kit ready, but there was no further disturbance. Once he thought he heard a stirring from behind the locked door, and got up to investigate, but the girl had not moved. Parry and Sampson took cat-naps, while Groot vanished into the night, muttering vague phrases.

Before dawn, in the fresh, gray coolness, Cairns and Ferguson drank strong black coffee and talked. Parry and Sampson still lay on their cots, but Ferguson did not believe they were asleep.

“I’m glad you came,” Cairns said. “I’d probably have gone mad here by myself. With *her*. That trauma you mentioned?” Ferguson had spoken of his impression of Groot’s psychic bloc. “Yes, it’s possible. In the forest there were some strange things, and I’ve an idea I don’t remember everything that happened.”

“Groot spoke of flowers—and stones.”

“Yes,” Cairns said, “I suppose he did. My own theory—” He hesitated. “It’s hard to explain. Over twenty years ago a group of scientists—came here—built this station—to experiment with atomic power. They failed, and went back. But one of them stayed, a physicist named Bruce Jacklyn. His wife came up here to join him. And, after a while, they went further into the forest, with some Indians. They never came back.”

“You think Jacklyn found—whatever it is?”

“No,” Cairns said, “I think he *made* it. Even today we don’t know much about atomic power. Wave-lengths, vibration, quanta—we can tie them in with radioactivity and life energy. I think Jacklyn stumbled on something quite incredible. I haven’t any idea what it was—or is. But I’ve seen some of the results. A force that can create nebulae, that can create life—or develop it—can do wonders. Mr. Ferguson, do you know what causes mutations?”

“Well, hard radiations can do it.”

“Working on germ plasm. But imagine something a million times more powerful, an energizing force locked in the heart of the atom, a magic wand that can create mutations not only among humans, but among—”

He paused. Ferguson said softly, "Plants?"

"Stones," Cairns said, his eyes bright and blind. "I can't remember . . . now—but once I remembered. Once I saw it. A super-race . . . but not quite that—I don't know." The look faded. "I've found Jacklyn's diary. He left it here before he went into the forest with his wife. It doesn't tell much. But there's a little. His wife was expecting a child."

Ferguson glanced toward the locked door. "You think—?"

"She's no Indio. I'm not sure she's even human, now. A mutation, perhaps the highest type of human ever to be born on earth so far. You saw the power she has over beasts. I suppose a super-being would have that power."

"She can't control humans, though."

"No. Though—well, she can, a little. It's a subtle matter. More than once I've felt a nearly irresistible impulse to let her go. I've kept her doped partly because of that; I don't trust myself."

"You can't keep her here forever. Besides, what about the legal aspects? Not to mention the moral ones!"

Cairns tightened his mouth. "If I let her go now, she'd never come back. We trapped her, Groot and I, because she didn't expect it. It wouldn't work twice. Ferguson, I can't even tell you some of the powers she has; you wouldn't believe me. It would be a crime to let her go now."

"Maybe it's a crime to keep her."

Cairns didn't hear.

"If I can get her back to civilization, away from these animal friends of hers, teach her English, we might learn much. She's intelligent enough, I'm sure. Whatever Jacklyn discovered, it shouldn't be lost to the world. A method of artificial mutation—a new race of supermen, perhaps—eugenics would probably be *the* science. If you found a million tons of—well, if you found the Fountain of Youth, wouldn't you want the world to know about it?"

"Perhaps," Ferguson said. "You don't remember what's out there?"

The doctor rubbed his forehead. "I'm not sure. I—ah, well." He stood up. "I'm going to find Groot. See you later." He went out.

"Crackpot," Sampson said.

Ferguson smiled. "Think so? Here, have some coffee. No use playing possum any longer. What did you hope to find out?"

Both Sampson and Parry rose from their cots and accepted the coffee Ferguson poured.

"The doc's an educated man and so are you," Parry said. "I figured he'd talk more to you than to us, that's all."

Sampson examined his pistol. "Those jaguars were hungry. They smelled grub."

But Parry seemed less certain.

"Look, Ferguson. D'you think there's anything in what Cairns was saying?"

"Frankly, I don't know. He can't even describe what he saw, you know. It might have been something so impossible that his subconscious won't let him remember."

"D'you think he knows what we're after?"

Ferguson smiled at this question and nodded.

"Of course," he said. "He's not a complete fool. He simply isn't interested in the radium. It isn't his line."

"There won't be any—trouble?"

“Not with Cairns. I’m sure of that.”

“So’m I,” Sampson said, reholstering the pistol. His hand stayed near the flap as Dr. Cairns hurried into the room, his tired face drained paper-white.

The doctor went directly to the locked door and opened it. Parry exchanged puzzled glances with Ferguson. Then the two men got up and followed Cairns. Sampson remained where he was, his cold eyes watchful.

Cairns had got the door open at last. Over his shoulder Ferguson could see the cot—empty—with cut ropes coiling on the blanket. The window was open.

The rigidity went out of Cairns’ figure. Ferguson saw him slump. He reached out, but the doctor straightened again, his mouth twisting.

“That crazy Dutchman!” he forced out.

“What’s happened?” Ferguson said. But he had already guessed the answer.

“When I was outside, I noticed somebody’d opened that window,” Cairns said. “Groot must have done it last night sometime. The girl woke up.”

He turned. “If he’s gone off without a protective suit, he’s finished. Blasted fool!”

Cairns stepped into the outer room. Parry moved closer to Ferguson.

“So the Dutchman’s taken a powder, eh? With the girl?”

“Looks like it.”

“Who’ll guide us now?”

Without answering Ferguson followed Cairns. The doctor had opened a tall cupboard and was examining folds of darkish fabric hanging within.

“He took one of ’em all right. I’m not going to let him get away with this! The biggest thing man ever stumbled upon—and one man’s sentimentality throwing it away forever! Pah!” Cairns pulled out one of the shapeless cloaks and began folding it into a neat bundle.

“What are you going to do?” Parry asked softly.

“I’m going after him,” Cairns snapped. “I’m going to bring the girl back!”

“Better take your hypo along,” Sampson suggested, reaching for the medical kit.

“Yeah,” Parry said. “And don’t forget Groot’s got a gun.”

“So have I,” Cairns growled.

“Mind if we go along?” Parry asked. “You may need some help.”

The doctor hesitated. His eyes were troubled.

“Listen,” he said at last, “You can come if you want. The radium’s there; *I* don’t want the stuff. I just want the girl. But it’ll be dangerous. I’ve enough material for suits for all of you, but radium burns aren’t the only things that could happen. You’ll have to decide for yourselves.”

Ferguson let his gaze slide from one face to another. In Sampson’s and Parry’s he read only greed and wariness. In Cairns was a deep, troubling fear, veiled by the man’s burning fixity of purpose. Of the four, Cairns was the only one who had been into the unknown country. And he could not quite remember what he had seen there.

“If we can catch up with them fast, Groot will be burdened with the girl,” the doctor said. “She won’t recover from that last shot I gave her for quite a while. Once she wakes up it’ll be harder.” He picked up the medical kit “Made up your minds?”

“Sure,” Sampson said, and stood up. Parry merely nodded. Cairns looked at Ferguson.

“What about you?”

“I’ll string along,” Ferguson said. But a muscle at the corner of his jaw twitched uncontrollably.

As they packed, he wondered. He had too much imagination, that was the trouble. Years of drifting aimlessly had not entirely dulled the original keenness of his mind; he was still a scientist and a technician. In the safe, aseptic surroundings of a laboratory there wasn't much room for the unknown. Part of an equation might be lacking, or a chemical component. But in a lab you had control. Here, on the shadowed edge of the world, things went on happening without control, recklessly plunging ahead like one of the great rivers that rush down from the Andean summits.

Yes, he was afraid of what they might find. But he was too curious to turn back now.

They took only light field packs. And they went north, toward the high blue crags of the Serra. But they did not overtake Jan Groot.

CHAPTER III

Place Of Fantasy

When they found him, he was not Jan Groot any longer. It was the morning of the second day, and Cairns was growing obscurely restless, as a man might who is nearing things his conscious mind is too wise to let him remember clearly.

"I'm not sure," he said that morning after they had broken camp and started out along the barely perceptible trail through the jungle. "I *think* we're nearly there. But I can't remember any more. I thought I knew the way, but everything is so vague." He shook his head.

Sampson only plodded doggedly on, but Parry gave the doctor a cold, suspicious glance. Here, in the jungle, Ferguson was beginning to understand his companions more thoroughly than he had been able to understand them back at the outpost. There, they had been simple adventurers, not especially troubled by ethics, for ethics were excess baggage up the Amazonas. Parry was imaginative and therefore apt to be more dangerous; Sampson had a single-minded tenacity that could not be easily swayed.

Had the stakes been less, Ferguson might have taken precautions, but there were fortunes enough here for a hundred men. He wondered if there'd be enough radium to fill the makeshift lead-protected containers he had made. Even half filled—there would be enough!

No need to extract the element from pitchblende ore, either. Groot had said the stuff lay in plates over the rock. Fantastic—but Ferguson had seen the radium the Dutchman had brought back with him.

A pulse of excitement began to beat deep in his mind. This was the first chance for wealth he had discovered since he had gone adrift. Years of floating around the back country hadn't made him any softer. This time he'd redeem his fortunes.

Cairns asked him a question once, and Ferguson broke a long silence.

"You have your research, Doctor. I had my work once, too. Not any more. I'm after that radium, and nothing's going to stop me from getting it."

"Nothing? You're tempting the fates."

"I've learned how important money is," Ferguson said slowly, his jaw hardening. "More important than anything else. I'd face the devil himself now if necessary. I intend to go back to New York and—oh, a lot of things. But that'll come later."

"You're a technician—a metallurgist. You must know how unimportant such matters as an economic system are, Ferguson."

"Not to me. Not any more. Wealth is everything now."

They plodded on in silence, watchful, feeling the eyes of the jungle upon them. The eyes were knowing. It was a very curious feeling. Ferguson had never experienced it before—as if the trees and the rocks through which they passed were invested with a sentience that was almost reasoning, as if it was known all through the jungle where they were bound and why, and the jungle did not want them there.

Ferguson had heard sensitive men complain before now about the vast, unfeeling indifference of the forest to human suffering. He never had thought to walk through a forest whose menace was too close a focus of attention, a wilderness that watched without eyes and listened without ears to those who trod its ways.

The scent of wild honeysuckle was very strong.

It was Cairns who found Groot.

The big man lay crosswise of the trail they followed, half shrouded in a smother of vines and leaves so that they might have passed him by if the scientist's keen eye had not caught a glimpse of the Dutchman's blue shirt between the leaves.

They tried to pull the leaves away from him, though they knew from the way his body rolled when they tugged at it that he was dead. And the vines would not let him go.

"He's tied up," Sampson said. "She tied him in the vines and left him."

"Those lianas?" Cairns said. "No. Look." And he held back some of the leaves of the large vine.

They all looked, and Ferguson whistled a long soft note, and Parry, who did not believe in such things, had to turn away and go back a little down the trail.

For Groot had been crushed to death as by a boa constrictor, one of the great snakes of the Amazon that can wind its monstrous coils leisurely about a man and squeeze him into pulp. But the coils that had crushed Groot were the green coils of a vine. That was unmistakable. From thick stems as big as a man's wrist to tiny tendrils winding thinner than grass-blades about him, the vine had flung its deadly embrace about the man's body and tightened, tightened until breath stopped and bones gave way and the liana had sunk deep into Groot's flesh, killing him.

Cairns dropped the dead man's wrist. "Still warm," he said. "This must have happened lately. Not more than an hour ago, even in this heat."

"He was dead before it happened," Sampson said slowly, staring at Groot's suffused face. "He had to be! How could that thing grow around him if—if he'd been alive?"

Cairns answered almost casually.

"I hope you never find out, Sampson."

Ferguson looked at him. "This doesn't surprise you too much. Is it part of what you've—forgotten?"

"Maybe." Cairns stood up, his gaze searching the forest "Yes, maybe it is."

"Are there many of them? Do the things—drop out of the trees? We've got to know what the danger is?"

"It depends on how near we are to the valley. I don't think we're in danger yet. It's only when *she's* near that things like this happen." His lips tightened as he looked down. "Poor sentimental fool! I warned him not to trust her."

Parry had come back.

"Look," he said abruptly. "The vine—" It was moving. Ferguson had his gun out almost before the first stir had breathed softly through the leaves, dreadfully as if Groot were coming to sluggish life among the coils of the thing that had killed him.

But there was nothing to shoot at. And it was the vine that stirred. A cluster of green buds was lifting itself on a slender stem, slowly, with a smooth motion a little like a snake's. Other clusters rose one by one among the leaves. The men watched silently.

A bud began to unfold, showing a fringe of blue inside the green. Another, and another. The vine bloomed as they stood there, too unsure to move. The whole process could not have taken more than ten minutes from the first rustle of motion to the last unfolding cluster. The vine lay there looking up at them, then, with cluster upon cluster of blue flowers, white-ringed, like blue eyes. The blue of Groot's eyes. . . .

Ferguson felt sweat trickle down his ribs. He had an unpleasant, illogical feeling that if Groot's eyes had been brown, these flowers would have unfolded brown centers to stare at them.

"Filthy thing!" Parry said. He kicked at the root of the thing. The leaves writhed away from his heavy boots and a few of the tendrils began to untwist and grope blindly in the air, like antennae.

Ferguson found where the brown stalk vanished underground. He pushed Parry roughly aside and with two blows of his machete severed the root. It writhed like a snake under the edge of the blade. And, cut, it began to wilt almost instantly. The leaves curled up, the blue flowers closed slowly. Ferguson felt obscurely as if he, and not the vine, had murdered Groot as he watched those impossibly familiar blue eyes fold shut.

They buried the Dutchman beside the trail.

"Do you want to go on?" Cairns asked them then.

They said that they did and again began to plod through the jungle. Men who are hungry for wealth can be very stubborn. . . .

"There it is," Cairns said on the third day, pausing at the head of a little valley and holding back a swinging branch to clear the view ahead. "There's the gate. Your radium's beyond, and my—my girl."

There was hate in his voice when he said that, and dread.

They went down the narrow cleft and across a grassy slope slowly, not sure what to expect. Serpent vines writhing at them out of the trees? Jaguars screaming as they sprang? Unguessable dangers lurking just within the opening?

Yet, after all, there was nothing. A low line of hills closed the end of the valley, leaving an arched cave-mouth open to the valley within. They could see greenery and sunlight through the short tunnel.

"Jacklyn's valley?" Ferguson asked. Cairns nodded.

"Yes. I remember about this part of it. Nothing wrong here. Jacklyn and his wife found the place, set up a station not far away. It was wild jungle then. It still is—with variations." He grimaced nervously. "No, I don't remember after all. But I've got to go on in. If any of you want to change your minds, this is the time to do it."

He did not wait for an answer. He shifted his pack on his shoulders and marched forward with an almost somnambulistic directness. Ferguson kept close behind, though his stomach was tight with anticipation and his skin felt abnormally sensitive, as if it were trying to develop eye-cells all over to watch from every side. A man might have a thousand eyes here, and still not be wholly safe.

A broad flagged path led down from the cave opening, through flowering green trees toward a distant house half concealed among the leaves. The valley, glimpsed from its entrance here, dipped down in a gentle bowl and rose on the other side to lap the far line of hills with a tide of jungle. Except for the path and the house, there was no sign of human presence. But the valley itself looked odd. Ferguson blinked. It looked wrong. He stared. There was no breeze, but the jungle was in motion, subtle, undulating motion that not even a breeze would have wholly explained.

Sounds rose from it, too, sounds that Ferguson had never heard before.

Thin, sweet, ringing noises, a soft chattering that seemed almost to carry a tune. And once a deep sound, resonant, echoing, rolled through the jungle until the very earth seemed to

vibrate underfoot. It might have been a jaguar roaring, but it sounded as if the earth itself had spoken with a hollow voice whose tones resounded through all the empty spaces of the underground.

“What’s that?” Parry asked sharply.

“Echo,” Ferguson said, when Cairns did not reply. “Maybe a big cat.”

“You’re crazy,” Parry said. “I know what a jaguar sounds like. And that wasn’t it.”

Ferguson shrugged. Cairns raised his arm, pointing.

“This is where Groot and I stood,” he said. “I remember now. That’s the path we followed when we found—her. Jacklyn built that house and the path. He and his Indios, years ago. *She’s* probably waiting for us.”

“How would she know we followed?” Ferguson asked, staring at the distant house. Cairns grunted.

“How do you know when you stub your toe? The valley—she’s a part of it. I remember!” His voice changed. “Outside, anywhere, she can summon the animals. Nearer to her own place—here—she can talk to the trees and vines. But in this valley—”

He gave Ferguson a blind, strange look and moved on down the path without finishing the sentence.

Ferguson followed, wondering a little about mutations. The scientist Jacklyn, working with forces too inconceivably vast to harness, setting free unknown radiations that must have flickered through the jungle like heatwaves, striking the encircling hills and echoing back again until everything in the valley was saturated with a power that could twist germ-plasm out of its time-accustomed paths, and produce—what? Anything. Anything at all. Animate vines—or—or vegetable animals!

What had become of Jacklyn, his wife, his Indios? Hard radiations could kill. Had the child, the girl, growing up in the midst of that furnace-hot cauldron of intangible waves, been the only human creature who survived? And if that were true, what unimaginable changes had the forces wrought upon her? Not only to the eye—her hair and her eyes and her pale ivory skin were strange enough—but inwardly, and mentally, and in other ways one could not even guess?

A small animal dropped from a tree and scurried up the path before them, curiously unafraid.

It looked like a squirrel, though there was an odd tinge of green to its brown coat when the wind ruffled it.

Sampson, who was nearest the edge of the road, snatched out his revolver, a light calibered weapon, and threw a quick shot after the little beast.

“Fresh meat,” he said briefly.

The bullet took the small greenish thing dead-center. It catapulted head over heels down the road with the momentum of its flight.

Then—Ferguson’s eyes widened—it picked itself up, shook its tail and scurried on, paying no attention to the men behind it. Dumfounded, they paused in a group and watched the creature pounce upon a vine that lay looping out into the path. Its sharp teeth flashed. It severed the vine and a thin milky juice gushed from the cut end. The squirrel sucked greedily.

The vine gave a convulsive lunge and a great coil of it came down out of the masking underbrush to seize the squirrel in a green, serpentine embrace. There was an interval of violent activity. When it ended, the vine lay in sluggish, victorious folds about the animal, and

a spray of cup-shaped flowers was creeping forward to fasten sucker-mouths upon the furry body.

Cautiously the men came nearer. The vine moved a little, but that was all. Machete poised, Ferguson bent. A shudder crawled down his spine, but he forced himself to touch the small animal's pelt.

He jumped back, his breath catching. It was quite impossible, of course!

Parry stared at him. "What's the matter?"

"Grass," Ferguson said unevenly. "I'll swear it's grass—not fur."

Cairns laughed without mirth.

"I remember," he said. "See the thing's tail? It isn't fur either, it's fern. Or it looks and feels like it, a big cluster of fern, adapted somehow. That isn't a squirrel anyhow. It isn't an animal. It's an adaptation, something like a tumbleweed a million times evolved. A plant that feeds on the juices of other plants—when it's lucky. No wonder the shot didn't hurt it! It hasn't any nervous system. Heaven knows how it does work inside."

"Let's go on to the house," Ferguson said grimly.

The building at the end of the path was very quiet amid its encircling trees. It was a stone house, they saw as they came nearer. Pale stone pillars supported a tiny portico, and the walls were great slabs of stone. The most curious aspect of the house was its elaborate carving of leaves and tendrils and flowers, twining over the pillars and adorning the walls and framing the windows in delicate traceries of stone.

"Indio work?" Parry asked. "The carving, I mean?"

Cairns chuckled harshly and kicked at something in the path before him.

"Look," he said. "Here's more—carving!" His boot lashed out again.

There was a long garland of the stone flowers lying across their path. Cairns trampled on it and kicked the splintered fragments away.

"The stuff *grows*," he muttered.

"Grows?" Ferguson said. "Not—but that's stone."

"I know. Stone evolving into plant, or maybe plant into stone. It grows, though. Groot and I—"

He paused suddenly, staring. Ferguson followed his gaze and felt a suffocating closeness in his chest. There was no real reason. It was not fear, exactly.

It was only that in the doorway of the house, under an arch of stone flowers, the girl stood, watching them with a bright black stare.

CHAPTER IV

Singing Plants

Her gaze was strangely blank. She saw them, but she saw the trees and the pathway too with the same indifferent acquiescence. And here, in her own place, there had come upon her—a *change*, a subtle enhancement of the strangeness Ferguson had sensed about the girl from the first moment.

The spun silver hair was white fire in the sunlight. Her posture had altered, as though her muscles could flow like water. Ferguson thought of a jaguar pacing the confines of a cage, and the same feline in its native habitat. There was a difference, certainly, though this girl was not feline in the least degree.

It was *ease*—That was the quality, he saw now. Utter, placid self-confidence, untroubled by the tiny neuroses that attack civilized and uncivilized men alike. It was the air a goddess might have had, an invulnerable goddess armed with the power of Jove himself.

She was not a Circe—no. For this girl would not care about human beings. She would not trouble herself to change men to swine. As those cool, calm black eyes met his briefly, Ferguson had a troubling thought that the girl did not even regard him as a man or whether he was of the same species. She was *not* the same species as himself. No human could be one with the forest and the ground itself, a confident unity that hung unspoken but clear enough in tide quiet air.

This was the home of the goddess.

Cairns was walking slowly forward, his face white as the girl's. She regarded him as she might have looked at a squirrel-thing scurrying past on green, insensate feet. She came out of the door slowly, her hands sliding across the doorposts as if they caressed the stone-vined columns, and Ferguson thought madly that the house felt her touch and responded.

She moved away toward the jungle. Cairns' warning cry stopped Parry as he started in pursuit.

"Careful! Remember Groot."

"The devil with the girl," Sampson growled. "It's the radium we want."

But Cairns was opening his pack.

"The hypodermic," he said. "Help me, Ferguson. This time I won't fail. I'll find out. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Find out what?" Ferguson said.

"I don't know. Odd." He turned a puzzled gaze on Ferguson. "I thought I knew, but now that I'm back here, my mind isn't clear. There's something I've got to remember." His jaw tightened. "But I've got to get the girl out of this valley! I'm clear on that, anyhow!"

His hands had been busy assembling and loading the hypodermic. The girl was a pale flash of shining hair among the trees before they were ready. But she was still in sight. Cairns started recklessly after her, and the others followed more cautiously, Ferguson scowling and troubled.

She saw them coming. She paused briefly. Then she too began to run, easily, lightly, the trees drawing back out of her way.

"Wait!" Cairns called. "Wait!"

She laughed, a thin, sweet, inhuman sound like water falling over stones. But at the sound of it, the forest stirred.

The forest—*woke!*

Ferguson had only a flashing, nightmare impression of trees leaning ponderously forward in his path. Before him a great furrow of the earth's surface rose like a watery wave, slowly, deliberately, into a crest too steep to climb. A wall that guarded the girl. The ground shuddered underfoot like the skin of a monstrous beast trying to shake them off.

Ferguson fell, his heart pounding, his throat dry with panic, in the midst of a welter of leaves and whipping branches that scored his face. He struck the ground and lay there, but he did not lie still. The earth rocked sickeningly.

It passed. The forest was still again. Ferguson reached out to pat the moist earth tentatively. He got up.

Cairns was on his feet a little distance away, and Parry and Sampson, with pale, blind, incredulous faces, were rising unsteadily. The forest whispered. It was still, but little sounds were audible; shrill, purring noises, a whine from high above, a growling among the leaves.

Ferguson sat down on a rock and took out a cigarette with trembling fingers. He said nothing till twin jets of smoke had spurted from his nostrils.

"Earthquake?" he asked Cairns, then.

The scientist was examining the hypodermic, miraculously unbroken.

"I've got to find her," he said dully.

"Was that an earthquake?"

Cairns whirled on him, eyes blazing.

"How should I know?" he snarled. "Do you think this is easy for me, not being able to remember what horrible things may exist here—doing this blind? I gave you your chance to go back! Go back now, if you want to—all of you!"

Sampson mumbled something.

"You were here once before and got out again okay," Parry said. "I'm keeping my mind on that."

Ferguson looked at his cigarette. "He got out okay. Yeah. But without his memory. We don't know what may have happened in here, that time."

"So it was an earthquake," Sampson said. "What about the radium?"

Parry moved uneasily.

"I don't know. I don't know. Maybe—"

"Maybe we couldn't get out now if we tried," Ferguson said.

Cairns was peering through the forest under his palm.

"I know where she's gone. She—yes, she went there the first time. I remember. There's a cavern over toward the hills. I think Jacklyn must have had his lab there, underground. I don't know what's inside, but there's radium all around the cave entrance. She was—" He hesitated. "—she was there when Groot and I came."

Ferguson stood up. Perhaps he, more than any of the others, sensed the unearthly implications of what had already happened. He knew that the dangers all around them were incalculable because they were based on an unknown quantity. And that realization seemed to have hardened him, stiffened his spine. That was one solidity he could be sure of—the cold, grim, selfless determination of the scientific investigator. At least, until that too failed him.

“All right,” he said quietly. “The jungle’s stopped thrashing around. Maybe we can get to that cave.”

Parry said, “Not even for radium.”

“What?”

“I’m not going.” The man’s voice cracked. “Not for all the radium in the world. I’m getting out of here. Even the rocks—look!” He pointed to the stone from which Ferguson had just risen.

It was a low, gray, rounded thing, veined with deep crimson lines that netted over the surface like veins. And, as they stared, it lurched sluggishly sidewise, relieved of Ferguson’s weight, and the veins pulsed heavily, flushing a deeper red as they watched. The stone was very slowly breathing.

Sampson’s hand clamped on Parry’s arm.

“The radium,” he said.

“I’m not going!”

Sampson’s stolid face was dark.

“We’re sticking together. There’s four of us now. And four’s better than three.”

“Let go of my arm!” Parry snarled.

Sampson did not move. “I been taking orders from you for a long time. I’ll keep on doing it—if you keep your nerve. We’re getting that radium.”

Parry tore free.

“You’re a fool,” he said harshly. “You’re too dumb to understand what this is all about. Earthquake—yeah! I’ll be glad to get out of here alive!”

“Do as you please,” Cairns said. “I’m going after the girl.” He turned away.

Ferguson waited a moment, while Sampson’s stare locked with Parry’s.

Then Parry, his shoulders slumping, followed Cairns.

“What about you, Ferguson?” Sampson said. “You getting ideas too?”

“Plenty. But I think you’ve got a better one. Four’s better than three. We’re safer if we stick together.”

“Then let’s go.”

They went forward slowly.

“I think,” Cairns said as they moved cautiously through the growling jungle, with the heavy, sweet smell of honeysuckle around them, “that I may have been mistaken about the mutations here. You’ve seen the strange blending of animal with plant and plant with stone. I thought it was haphazard development, mutation run wild. Now I’m beginning to believe there may be a pattern behind it. Jacklyn might have had a purpose in what he did here, whatever it was. The answer may be in the cave lab.”

Ferguson grunted. Cairns’ voice continued.

“A synthesis, d’you see? An attempt to bring plants and mammals and stones together in a single unit. If he succeeded in doing that, it’s anybody’s guess what the result was, or is.”

“Why?” Ferguson asked. “Was he crazy? There’s no point in carrying on such an experiment.”

“I can think of one. An armistice. Did you ever realize that life on this planet is a never-ending war—beast against man, man against the forests, plants against the very rocks? There’s no—no pattern. It’s all random. An avalanche may snuff out an entire village, and one man can blow up a mountain. Roots can split rocks. But if a synthesis could be achieved, if the

animal and vegetable and mineral kingdoms could live at peace together, think what that would mean?"

"Peace?" Ferguson said sardonically. "That fern-tailed squirrel wasn't smoking a peacepipe with the snake-vine that killed him. And what about Groot?"

The scientist nodded his head gloomily. He saw the force of that remark.

"I'm not saying the experiment was entirely successful. And—well, Groot was an outsider, a false note. But did you notice the air of peace the girl had? She *knew* nothing could harm her."

"A *tregua de Deus*," Parry interrupted unexpectedly. "I've seen it—the truce of God. When the floods come, the animals are marooned on islands sometimes, but they don't kill each other then. Tapir, anaconda, peccary—they're safe from each other till the water goes down."

"But not safe from the water," Cairns said. "I wonder if even water would be dangerous here?"

"To us?" Ferguson said, and laughed shortly. "Don't forget what you said. We're the intruders. We're the sour notes in this symphony."

"Joining rocks and trees and beasts—that's impossible!" Parry said. "It's unholy!"

Cairns shrugged.

"Basically they're all alike—a pattern of electric energy. I suppose the right way to experiment would be with the basic—the atomic structure. And if Jacklyn did that—"

The sentence died unfinished. They went on, and the jungle watched them go, lifting flowers like eyes among the leaves, flowers that turned on their stems as the men went by.

"Homotropic," Ferguson thought with wry humor. "Or is it anthropotropic? They're watching us, anyhow."

He listened to a deep, growling noise that went with them, soft, almost above the threshold of hearing. There was nothing that might have caused it.

"She's watching us, I think," Cairns said.

Parry jumped.

"She killed Groot. She—she could kill us the same way, couldn't she?"

"She could, I suppose," Cairns agreed. "But we can't guess her reactions. She isn't really human. When I take her back with me I'll investigate those things."

"Why are you risking all this just to get her away from this place where she belongs?" Ferguson asked bluntly.

The scientist faltered in his stride.

"I . . . knew. But now, I'm not so sure. My memory—"

"Slipping?" Ferguson asked quickly.

"No. I rather think it's coming back."

A shout from behind them brought the pair up sharply. Parry had paused and was staring up at something in the trees. Curiously, there was exultation, not fear, in his voice.

"Look at this!" he called. "Look at this—*tree!*"

They went back, slowly and with caution. Parry was jumping for a branch above his head, trying to reach it. Looking up, Ferguson saw what Parry was reaching for.

A tall, slim tree with pale limbs and branches dangled incredible fruit just above their heads. Great clusters of glittering light hung there, catching the sun and turning it to fire. The fruit were jewels, great clear gems quivering with white fire like diamonds, green stones

hanging like green transparent grapes, red ones giving back the light from hearts of dazzling ruby.

Parry caught a branch of diamonds and swung hard to tear it down. The tree swayed and bent, all the coruscating brilliance of the jewels flashing blindingly, and the bough gave way with a ripping noise. The cluster of jewel-fruit came off in his hand. From the broken branch a shower of scarlet sap gushed out upon him, blood-red.

Parry dropped the gems and sprang back, cursing.

“Get it off! It’s acid!”

They mopped the sap from his face and arms as quickly as they could. It smelled like blood too. Parry was gritting his teeth with pain. Sampson watched the man with faintly scornful eyes.

“We’re after the radium,” he said. “Diamonds don’t grow on trees. They’re phonies. They must be.”

“Blood doesn’t belong in trees either.” Ferguson said. “I don’t know about this.” He finished wiping the red sap from Parry’s skin, noticing that small white spots remained, cool to the touch, and hard.

“It doesn’t hurt,” Parry said, looking at his own hand with scared eyes.

“Some acid in the sap,” Cairns hazarded. “Normal tissue growth should fix you up. Better not break any more branches, though. What are you going to do with your—brilliants?”

Parry glared at Sampson. “They’re diamonds.”

“They look like it. I wouldn’t be too sure.”

“Let’s go,” Sampson said gruffly. “We’re wasting time.”

So they went on again, and the flowers grew thicker and thicker around them as they neared the far wall of the valley. Gorgeous thick-leaved flowers like living velvet, in shapes and colors no flowers had ever assumed before. Festoons of them hung from the trees, carpets of them hid the ground, great shining sheets of blossoms swathed the thick trunks beside their path.

The sweet, cloying fragrance was still present, but subtly different. There was a bitterness under the honeysuckle, the faintest suggestion of an odor that Ferguson felt with his palate and throat. Cloying, sweet, over-rich, like the smell of blood.

Butterflies flickered through the green air trailing clouds of fragrance. Insects or animate flowers, there was no way to be sure.

And once Ferguson heard a very thin, sweet shrilling from low down among the bushes, and his searching gaze fell on a group of tiny orchids growing on the branches, their spotted throats pulsing. A membrane stretched across the throats gave out that shrilling music.

The flowers sang and watched the men as they went on.

CHAPTER V

Man Who Saw Too Much

Before them the cave was a great dark oval in the hillside. Its inner reaches seemed dark, but not with the darkness of night. A faint glow bathed the cavern's rim, and the walls within.

"Radium?" Ferguson said. "But it's dangerous!"

"Put on the lead suits," Cairns ordered. "Yes, it's radium. I tested it and I gave Groot some. You saw that sample."

They donned the flexible, improvised armor, and, shrouded in the heavy folds, went awkwardly up the slope toward the cave. Everything they saw was faintly distorted through the lead-impregnated glass of the face plates, but it may not have been simply ocular distortion that made the very wall of the cliff seem to move a little as they neared.

Certainly, Ferguson thought, the ground was stirring underfoot ever so slightly, with slow, rhythmic waves like breathing. And though no vegetation grew here, there were tiny flowers of crystal springing up through the rocks, and some of the pale stone traceries they had seen near Jacklyn's house wound leaves and vines of carved whiteness against the cliff.

In the mouth of the cave, looking at them indifferently, stood the girl.

The pale, unearthly glow of radium lighted her unprotected figure with a ghostly shining, and her hair was luminous as if with a light of its own. When they drew too close, she turned and retreated slowly into the cave.

"Cairns, you're right," Ferguson said. "She's not human. The hard radiations would have killed her long ago if she'd been human."

Cairns didn't hear. He was moving across the threshold of the cavern.

"Cairns!" Parry called. "Wait! What's in there?"

"I don't know," Cairns said without turning. "We didn't get this far last time."

A low rumbling began to roll from the darkness before them. It was a sound all four men had heard before, when they had stood at the outer gate of the valley—a deep roar that had seemed to echo through the hollowness of caverns underground.

Now it was immeasurably louder, growing in volume until its mighty torrent poured past them like an intangible river that all but swept them from their feet. And it was not any animal sound, they knew now, without knowing how they could be so sure. No animal throat ever shaped quite that hollow, vibrating depth of noise.

It rose to a terrible crescendo—inhuman—a voice that rolled tremendously, wordlessly, against the ramparts of the valley until it filled cavern and valley and the whole sky. And it diminished again, sank to a whisper and ceased, leaving the cave walls vibrating long after silence had come again.

Ferguson stared through the distorting glass of his faceplate. Cairns' face was strained and very pale.

Ferguson asked a silent question, and Cairns answered it by bending his shrouded head and resuming his slow walk up the sloping cavern flood. Ferguson never knew what force drove him reluctantly in the scientist's footsteps. Perhaps it was simple human curiosity, a force that has been strong enough to move mountains many times before in mankind's history. He only knew that it would be impossible for him to stand here on the threshold of what might be the greatest mystery that had ever existed on the earth or beneath it, and not follow.

So he went slowly after Cairns, and Parry and Sampson, afraid to stay in the cavern's quivering mouth with the cold light of the radium shivering all around them, trailed along too.

The corridor sloped gently upward into darkness. Ferguson climbed after Cairns, moving between patches of luminous pallor that gave forth light. If the girl moved before them in the full bath of the deadly radiance, he could not see her now.

Light from ahead reached Ferguson before he could locate its source. A rosy light, spilling down the slope in waves like clear water. Cairns' shrouded figure vanished; Ferguson turned a corner, and stood with the silent doctor on the threshold of a great bowl of rock whose ceiling was lost in luminescence, not darkness. He could not look up into that blinding radiance.

Before him a vast wall of brilliance curved toward him and up, losing itself in the light overhead. It was translucent, that wall, but the light seemed to dwell in the clear, jewel-like stone, not to shine from some source behind it. And the wall was diamond. It had the unmistakable clarity which is as much dark as light, depth upon depth of crystal shooting rays of flaming, dazzling clarity.

Out of the crystalline wall a great flower grew in a cluster of leaves and tall, folded buds. A living flower, springing from living crystal. Six feet across, it opened its monstrous throat while its highest petal curled down like a sneering lip above the golden mouth.

The flower was colored like a tiger; it was thick and soft like fur rather than petals. It was fur—a tiger-flower that blended flesh and animal in one beautiful, terrible, wonderfully colored whole. And as Ferguson looked at it, he saw motion begin to stir far back in the richly spotted throat. Motion—and sound.

A low echo of that earth-rocking roar muttered through the chamber. As the tiny orchids in the jungle had hummed their shrill song, so this titan of the crystal cavern spoke softly to them in a murmur of distant thunder, a roar like a giant tiger's out of that tiger-throat.

The furred petals quivered. The light in the cavern shook. And the girl who stood at the foot of the great flower shivered through all her pale ivory body, her luminous hair swaying as if the sound were a wind that stirred its metallic strands.

Slowly she moved toward the flower.

It knew her nearness. It knew her. It dipped on its mighty stem and the lowest petal brushed the floor. The girl set her foot upon it.

The petals closed possessively around her and she walked into the heart of the great blossom and, for an instant, vanished from sight as the tiger-spotted velvet petals enfolded her.

When they opened again she was lying in the heart of the flower, her head cushioned on a petal, her silvery hair streaming down. The black eyes were closed. Above her curved the sneering lip of the topmost petal. She was an ivory stamen in that great tiger calyx. She and the flower were one.

Flower and glowing wall of diamond were one. Crystal and flower and maiden were one—living, watching, understanding!

Through the cavern a great, earth-shaking humming drifted. As it died the girl's lips parted. Her voice told Ferguson more than anything else the unimaginable synthesis he faced. For it was not only the girl speaking.

Her voice had the dear, passionless timber with which a flower might speak, laden with the musky honeysuckle scent, and there was something clearer and colder and more fiery than flower or human tongue—the tone that the crystal wall added to the voice of the triumvirate.

Flower and burning crystal and woman together, with a rumble of the beast-roar latent in that clear, quiet tone.

“We are one,” the voice said, and fires sprang up and died in the diamond wall.

Ferguson caught his breath. He could not have spoken then, but he saw the doctor’s shrouded figure stir beside him.

“You come to destroy,” the voice said. “We know that. But still we speak to you, as we have never spoken before to reasoning beings. What would you ask of us?”

“We ask nothing,” Cairns said in a thick, shaken voice. “We will go.”

The flower trembled.

“You will never go.”

“For Pete’s sake, what is that thing?” Parry screamed.

And the voice said:

“I am Eden.”

There was a pause, and then the voice repeated the words.

“I am Eden,” it said. “The new Eden. And not yet may the world know that we exist. Here in this valley begins a new race, a new step toward the ultimate goal of earth. But the step is not completed yet though already we hold all of wisdom in our triad mind. Your race would try to destroy us, if they knew.”

“No, they wouldn’t!” Cairns said.

“Why, then, did you come here?”

There was a long silence.

The flower contracted a little around the girl, hiding her behind a fringe of golden petals. It opened again, revealing the ivory stamen that was its tongue.

“Why would you destroy your own creation?”

Ferguson heard the question only dimly. The blinding light of the crystal had almost dazed him, and the numbing shock of surprise had not yet worn off. But he felt incredulity.

“Your own creation?” the flower said.

“I—I didn’t—create you,” Cairns whispered.

“Remember?” the voice said.

Again the crystal wall flamed. And as the fires died, Cairns’ voice came again, shaken and strangely different.

“I . . . remember. Yes, I do remember now. Everything. But I would still destroy you. I know now what I have done. The world is not yet ready. I would destroy you if I could.”

“Jacklyn!” Ferguson breathed. “You’re—Bruce Jacklyn!”

Cairns nodded, not to him but to the flower.

“I know my own name again. I had forgotten, outside. I’ve still forgotten very much. The powers I released in this valley were too strong. There was psychic trauma. But now—” His voice grew stronger. “Yes, I created you. I made you possible. The third member of the triumvirate is my own child. And I would destroy you all.”

Stillness. The wall glinted with shifting points of brilliance; the great flower hung swaying on its stem, the girl rocking very gently to its motion, her hair swaying as the flower swayed. Ferguson almost stopped breathing.

Then the flower moved a little and a breath of sound murmured in its throat. A louder breath, a louder sound. The flower swayed to the volume of its own voice, and the flower was *laughing*.

Afterward, Ferguson could not quite remember clearly how they had left, stumbling in their heavy leaden robes, with the deadly radiance of the walls shining all around them and the great gusts of the flower's laughter driving them out like a gale at their backs.

And, outside, they stood staring at one another, listening to the deep, inhuman laughter still echoing from the cave.

In the end, they went back to the stone house that had been Jacklyn's. Cairns—who was Jacklyn—was silent, merely shaking his head when Ferguson tried to rouse him. Sampson and Parry were too shocked by what they had seen to be curious, but Ferguson's mind was burning with questions. His old, lost scientific zeal had come back, and he had forgotten even the radium, for the moment, in his anxiety to know the secrets of this lost land. The secrets that Cairns—no, Jacklyn—must know.

“Why would you destroy your own creation?”

That inhuman, alien voice came back to Ferguson now as he moved through the perfumed forest. The jungle breathed all around them, stirring in its ceaseless, self-generated motion though no winds blew. Eyes upon flower-stems watched them from the dimness; ears that were stone or vine heard their words and perhaps understood them. There was no way to tell.

It did not seem so incredible. Those eyes were simply evolved photosensitive spots of tissue, and even ordinary plants could be phototropic—could respond to sunlight and moonlight and other radiations. As for mobility, many plants had limited mobility. But stone are different. Here were rocks that moved!

Ferguson thought of crystals that could build themselves up in jagged, exotic formations in certain solutions, and was filled with awe.

It would be night soon. Luckily there was a full moon. Gathering material for a fire would be difficult, if not dangerous, in this forest where the trees bled burning, acid sap. And there were the flashlights with their regenerators. As for food, they had plenty, and their canteens were nearly full. Even the brooks that ran in this forbidden valley might be—different.

So, still under the oppressive burden of silence, they came to the stone house and paused on the threshold warily. Ferguson touched his pistol, staring into the gloom ahead.

“Cairns—Jacklyn, I mean.”

The scientist roused himself. “Yes. What is it, Ferguson?”

“Anything apt to be dangerous inside?”

Jacklyn ran his hand over the lintel and drew it back sharply, as though surprised to find it stone instead of wood.

“I don't know. There's danger all around us.” He stepped across the threshold, and Ferguson followed, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dimness.

“Just as I left it, years ago,” Jacklyn said.

Here was peace and quiet and familiar things, as though the raging turmoil of life gone mad in the valley had not dared enter the stone house. A crude table and canvas chairs, books were scattered around, and some pots and pans. Through a doorway Ferguson could see a cot, blankets still rumped across its foot. And he saw more.

With a sharp inhalation of breath he went into that room. He touched the blankets gingerly. They were stone.

Jacklyn had not followed. Ferguson heard his steps moving here and there, and Sampson's heavier tread. He returned. Parry was still on the threshold, a silhouette against the brighter light outside.

“Nothing's changed, except to stone,” Jacklyn said. “Just as I left it. Look at this.”

Ferguson came forward. Jacklyn indicated a Bible lying open on a stone table. “My wife’s,” he said. “She used to read it.” He tried to turn the pages, but the book, too, was stone.

Yet the print was legible. Ferguson read half-audibly;

“The heaven shall reveal his iniquity, and the earth shall rise up against him.”

“The earth shall rise up!” Jacklyn whispered. He sank down on a chair, once canvas, now stone. “It did, Ferguson. It did. I remember.”

His voice died away, and rose again, stronger.

“Not even Adam saw what I saw. For God made Adam on the sixth day, after He had made the firmament and the earth and the waters under the earth. . . .

“But I have seen—*Creation!*”

CHAPTER VI

Marble Man

Stone traceries of vines and bas-relief blossoms had clustered across the walls. Ferguson thought that those flowers of stone were watching. And that something—perhaps the walls themselves—was listening. He crossed the thick carpet to a chair and sat down, but Sampson and Parry stood waiting, their eyes on Jacklyn's haggard face.

"The—the triumvirate—gave me my memory again, back there in that cave. I don't know how. It—they—have strange powers."

"You made that thing?" Parry asked in a shaken voice.

"I never saw it before. But I was responsible for it, yes. I unleashed the power that made it possible. Here in this valley, years and years ago. . . ."

The tired voice deepened. "It was a lovely place when we first came here, Mona and I. There was no shadow over it. The Indios took care of us, and I worked on my experiments, and there was no shadow. I had found a clue to something man had been searching for for years—the controlled cleavage of the atom. There was an element here which may exist nowhere else on earth, an element with a molecular structure large enough and simple enough to study under controlled conditions. I was seeking a basic pattern, a master key, and what I found was a new force. It was an energy powerful enough to permeate all matter, and to stimulate the rate of entropy."

"I don't get you," Sampson said, but Jacklyn went on unheeding.

"Mona was expecting a child. I wanted to take her down river to Manaos, but she would not go. I'd have taken her by force, if necessary, but the child was born prematurely. There was nothing to be done but improvise. Still, I hold a medical degree, the child lived, and Mona lived too—for a while.

"But I found that master key. That part isn't clear. Perhaps the—the triumvirate didn't want me to remember it. I could never repeat the experiment, even if I should want to. It was enough that I opened the doors of Creation once."

His face paled. "It was like a flame that leaped through the valley. An invisible flame. I was out hunting when it happened. The air shook. The ground moved under my feet I—I felt that primal, ravening energy rush out from its focal point, as though God had stooped and touched this cursed valley with his finger.

"It was Creation.

"First—chaos. The forest shook, and the ground shook, and the sky shook too. I saw—unnameable things!" He pressed his palms against his eyes, shuddering. "One thing I remember. Mona running toward me, and the earth opening like a mouth, and—taking her. . . ."

"And after that, darkness. My mind was wiped clean. I must have escaped from the valley somehow. And some latent pattern of memories deep in my brain must have brought me back here, years later, though I did not quite know why, and rationalized it in various ways. But it was that lost memory that drew me back, after so many years.

"And during those years my daughter was alive here, in the new Eden. But the basic radiation I had loosed was working on her, changing her. I had planned, remember, to establish a linkage between all matter. Well, I succeeded. Stone and plant and human merged, and the ultimate synthesis was the thing you saw in the cave.

“A triumvirate. Three in one, one that is three. And because of that basic pattern, not merely three. It is Eden.

“All Eden is one tremendous, living entity, welded into a unit, a synthesis of stone and other things. The ground beneath our feet is alive. And as much a part of the triumvirate as is my daughter now.”

Jacklyn paused before saying in a loud, tense voice, “But this hellish thing must be destroyed!”

Ferguson did not speak. He was staring down at the carpet at his feet. And he saw, suddenly, that it was not a carpet. It grew directly from the stone floor. But it was not grass, either.

It was fur, such as might grow on the hide of some immense carnivore.

“You’re crazy, Jacklyn,” Parry said. “Destroy that creature? It could wipe us out.”

“It’s the radium we’re after,” Sampson growled. “We were fools not to have got it while we were at the cave.”

Ferguson stared at him. “I’m not so sure. Those rock walls were moving. They were alive. They might have resented being dug into.”

Sampson and Parry looked at Jacklyn, hoping he would give them his opinion.

But Jacklyn was still on the trail of his thought. “Eden! Yes, this is Eden. But even in the first Eden there was the snake.”

“The snake?” Ferguson asked.

“Who destroyed that first experiment in mankind before it was finished. The snake—the reptile—the creature whose people ruled the world, perhaps, before humanity rose. We are the rulers of earth now. We are men. But before us, perhaps, was the snake. Two thousand years from now, there may be an allegory about *this* Eden, an allegory which will be read by a race not human, the race that is beginning in this valley now, the synthesis, the triumvirate.”

“So?”

Jacklyn turned his brooding eyes upon Ferguson.

“The snake was sent to test the first man. And perhaps we have been sent to test the triumvirate. We are the intruders in Eden now, the representative of the older race.”

“What good are guns?” Parry asked. “We can’t fight that monster. It’s too strong for us.”

Ferguson thought: “The serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field.”

Yes, the triumvirate was strong. But there were other weapons than strength. And in this Eden—were they not the serpent?

They were silent, while the slow night came down. Parry was absorbed in prodding the white spots upon his arm and face where the plant’s red blood had spattered. The spots were spreading. They were hard and white and cold, and the areas where they merged were wholly without feeling.

Finally they slept, and, outside, the jungle slept too, fitfully, moving in its sleep. Nothing disturbed them, though the blossoms of stone on the walls may have watched them all night, and a few moths that gave out the odor of roses blundered through the windows occasionally. Perhaps, Ferguson thought, in the cavern the flower slept, and the girl cradled in its tiger-spotted calyx. Perhaps even the crystal wall slept too, in its vague affinity with living things.

But when morning came, the awakening brought new fear.

There was nothing different about the valley. Dawn came up beautifully, full of light and cool color. The trees stretched their limbs like animals awakening; the flower-mouths yawned

all through the woods.

Ferguson sat up first. Jacklyn was on guard, but his back was turned and he was staring through the doorway. Ferguson glanced at the sleeping Sampson, and then at Parry. He looked into Parry's open eyes, and froze.

Parry's eyes were altered. They were no longer dark; they were clear and colorless, and startlingly brilliant. They met Ferguson's eyes with a bright, indifferent gaze.

"Parry!" Ferguson said. At the sound of his voice Sampson woke, and Jacklyn turned. They saw the change instantly. Parry met their stares without emotion. He did not seem to realize what had happened to him.

"He—he's *white*," Sampson whispered, pointing with an unsteady hand to Parry's marble-pale, marble-hard face and mottled body where the tom shirt exposed the skin. "It's spread! He's—"

Ferguson said, "Even the eyes . . . like gems. Parry! Are you awake?"

Parry blinked his colorless, dazzling gaze at them. His face was the color of stone; even his brows and lashes were white, and his hair was a tangle of ridged marble like the hair of a statue. But his features were still shockingly flexible. He blinked his stone eyelids—which should not have been able to move at all!

"Sure, I'm awake," he said in a strange, flat voice. "What's the matter?" And they could hear the sound of his stone tongue touching his teeth of stone.

"You've turned to *rock*!" Sampson shouted half hysterically. "Get away from me—don't touch me! You're stone!"

Parry looked down in bewilderment. He lifted white hands and flexed the fingers stiffly, staring. Then with an abrupt gesture he ripped the shirt away and they could see all the marble torso, like a chiseled statue. Here and there mottlings of flesh still showed, as yesterday mottlings of marble had appeared upon his skin. But the flesh areas grew perceptibly smaller as they looked, as the inexorable marble crept over him and through him.

He lifted to the other men a diamond stare, and a wild glare of terror began to flame behind the dazzling clarity of his eyes.

"That tree!" he said. "The jewel-tree! Its juice did this."

"No wonder the flower laughed," Jacklyn said dully. "It knew. No one can enter this valley and live here unchanged. The taint spreads. And you're the first, Parry. But not the last!" He glanced around the circle, searching the other faces, and each man involuntarily scanned his neighbor for the betraying mottlings upon the skin.

"Don't touch anything," Sampson said. "Don't touch Parry. Don't touch any branches or anything at all."

"It can reach us through the ground," Jacklyn said. "And it will. It will."

"Who will?" Parry's voice had thickened, as if the stone tongue was losing its mobility. "Who did this to me?"

"The triumvirate, I suppose," Ferguson said. "The thing that spoke through the flower. Even if the valley's one great unit, the flower is its ruler."

Parry had lurched to his feet.

"The flower!" he said in that thickened, flat monotone. "The flower did it! Changed me to a rock."

He swung around and plunged through the doorway, shouting something in a voice as stony as his flesh.

Sampson leaped out of his path in terror. But Parry was gone in a moment, a white figure in tattered garments stumbling through the trees.

“But if he attacks the flower—we’ve got to stop him!” Jacklyn said. “That’s the center of the valley—its brain.”

“Fine,” Ferguson said coldly. “That’s why I told Parry where to go. Maybe we can’t hurt the flower, but he’s nearly stone. I doubt if it can hurt him.”

“You made Parry think the flower did it?” Sampson said.

“It was the truth. Don’t forget that. And Parry’s dying anyway. Or else he may live forever, in stone. This way, if he kills the flower he may get an easier death himself. And I think he’d want that.”

Jacklyn was already outside of the house.

“The flower isn’t the only part of the triumvirate. There’s the crystal, and my daughter. He might kill her.”

Ferguson had forgotten. Now, even though he knew that the girl was no longer human, he instinctively followed Jacklyn, and Sampson. He paused only to snatch up some equipment, before he ran from the house.

They moved fast. It was a nightmare flight through the awakening jungle, with Parry’s white figure flickering before them. Streamers from the trees reached down occasionally to impede their flight, but Parry ran unmolested.

“He’s part of the valley now,” Jacklyn panted. “The forest isn’t attacking him any more.”

They ran on, early sunlight dappling the path before them and inhuman voices beginning to waken in the trees. But in the end, when the mouth of the cavern loomed before them, glowing eternally with its deadly radiations, they were just in time to see a pale figure vanishing into the throat of the cave, just in time to hear Parry’s hollow shout echoing back.

Ferguson gripped Jacklyn’s shoulder and dragged him back. The scientist struggled to tear free.

“The radium!” Ferguson shouted. “We can’t go in there without—”

“I’ve got the suits,” Sampson said behind them. He tossed two of the leaden robes to Ferguson, and even Jacklyn understood how suicidal it would be to enter the cave without their protection. But he chafed at the momentary delay, and the moment the hood was over his head, he was racing after Parry.

There was an extra suit.

“Forget it,” Ferguson said grimly. “Parry won’t need that any more.”

“Yeah,” Sampson said. He gripped a lead box in one hand as he followed Ferguson into the cave.

They were in time.

On the glittering threshold of the inner cavern they paused with Jacklyn, staring. The great tiger-flower swayed on its stem halfway up the wall of crystal. The pale-haired girl stood just beneath it, watching the stone man charging forward.

“Parry!” Jacklyn shouted.

All through the room the light quivered. Parry’s feet boomed upon the stone floor as he ran. The flower tilted its cup downward and a roaring was beginning to hum from its tiger-striped throat as Parry hurled himself blindly forward.

He cast up both stone arms like a diver and sprang for the gaping flower mouth, straight into that monstrous, roaring throat.

CHAPTER VII

Eden No More

Ever afterward to Ferguson what happened then was nightmare. Ferguson saw the great streaked petals shut like a closing maw over the white body of Parry; he heard the muffled roaring echoing savagely from the walls. He heard the girl scream.

The closed flower lashed furiously on its stem. Parry's yells mingled with the tiger-roars. Then there was a ripping, sucking sound, and the furred petals suddenly bulged and split. Golden blood poured down. Parry's stone arms appeared, tearing at the tiger-striped flesh of the flower.

Louder the roaring grew, bellows of fury. There was a stir of motion behind the great blossom and a tall, folded bud leaned down from its leaves and began slowly to unfurl. The flower was calling for its successor bud to help.

Toward Parry the opening blossom bent.

The paralysis left Ferguson. He snatched his revolver from its holster and sent shot after shot crashing into the new flower.

It shrank back briefly. But beyond it, another bud was opening.

Parry's voice—a man's voice no longer, but a hollow, echoing cry of stone made vocal—rolled again above the shrill screaming of the torn flower. And like that screaming, it, too, was a cry for help.

The call did not go unanswered. For as bud after bud opened and bent with great opening lips toward Parry, a sound behind Ferguson made him whirl. He saw Jacklyn hurled aside, saw Sampson, bulky and grotesque in the lead armor, spring back, and into the chamber lashed an arm of white filigree, a moving vine of stone.

After it came another, and another, great writhing arms that coiled snakelike into the chamber. The living rocks of Eden were answering the summons as flesh made of stone cried to vines made of stone for help against its enemy.

Great marble arms clashed forward. They were less supple than the tiger flowers, but they had the weight of stone in their favor. One wound about a giant stooping bud and closed its opening petals with a grip of marble, while the other stone vines writhed forward toward the roaring flowers that bent to meet them.

Still imprisoning Parry, the great, torn blossom screamed shrilly, dripping golden blood. Ferguson flattened himself against the trembling walls, his useless gun gripped in a gloved hand. The inhuman shrieking pierced his ears agonizingly. The wounded flower was screaming for help to the whole jungle valley beyond.

And the jungle replied.

From outside the cave a deep and terrible roar began to roll thunderously through Eden. Into the vaulted chamber poured a flood of vines, flower-eyes staring like snakes from the coiling tendrils. Scarlet, azure, purple and sun-yellow and amethyst, the flowers glared from that tangle of green tendrils and white withes flailing savagely in combat—the blossoms screaming more shrilly than the great wounded flower that held Parry's stone body.

Across the turmoil Jacklyn shouted something to his daughter, still frozen and motionless, miraculously untouched amid the battle.

And she heard. For the first time she seemed to feel humanity within her, heard with human ears instead of the insensate ears of the triumvirate. She turned her head, and there was life in her black eyes, and terror and appeal.

She cried out, inarticulately, but Ferguson felt the difference in her voice. It was human now, momentarily freed from the passionless rule of plant and stone. And she ran lightly through the welter of struggling serpentine things toward them.

Jacklyn opened his leaden cape and folded it about her as well as he could. "Ferguson," he said urgently. "Help me! We've got to get out of here! We've got to get *her* out too!"

"Parry!" Sampson yelled. "We can't leave him here!"

But even as he spoke, the great tiger flower in which Parry still struggled reared high on its stem, like a striking snake. It poised, hovering—and then smashed down on the crystal wall, screaming.

Parry's stone limbs were shattered against the crystal.

The crystal screamed!

Great jagged streaks sprang out like lightning flashing across its glittering surface. It began to buckle. Crystals dropped in gleaming rain.

Down on the tiger flowers thundered the wall of diamond!

The walls trembled, moved, breathed in and out. Ferguson tore his fascinated stare away. He shouted, pushed Jacklyn toward the opening. With Sampson, they fled across sinewy, writhing vines that still fought the tendrils of whipping stone.

Then they were in the sunlight again. The whole hillside was shaking with great, rhythmic breaths as they ran. Stumbling, reeling, they labored on, hearing behind them the screams of the battling, inhuman things as rock and flesh and foliage tore at one another in mad, ghastly fury.

The jungle before them was in turmoil. The control of the triumvirate brain had let go utterly now, and the delicate balance that had kept Eden poised was shattered. Things that should not have been animate ripped and tore in blind answer to the blindness of the Brain in the ruined cave. The Brain, the collapsing, ruined remnants of the triumvirate, still sent out its insane, crimson thoughts of fury, and the jungle raged in response.

Ferguson jerked to a halt, missing Sampson. He turned, to see the lead-suited figure still within the entrance of the cave, stamping through the twisting vines, a gleaming chisel in one gloved hand, the lead box in the other. Ferguson's stomach lurched as he saw what Sampson was doing.

The chisel dug frantically at the glowing radium that coated the cave wall.

"Sampson!" Ferguson shouted, his voice lost in the crying that rose from the trees of Eden. "You fool! Don't touch that."

Sampson worked on unheeding. Perhaps he did not notice the way the stone wall winced away from his sharp chisel. Perhaps he did not understand that the very rock was alive, and—could feel.

The cave mouth quivered. And—began to close!

Sampson saw his danger then. He dropped the chisel and began to run, but the vines on which he trod impeded his progress. He stumbled! . . .

The mouth of the cave closed, with a screaming of riven rock.

Sick and dizzy, Ferguson turned and observed Jacklyn's discarded lead suit lying beside the path. Hurriedly he ripped off his own, then raced after the scientist and his daughter, half

deafened by the yelling of the forest. All around him the breathing rocks were battling the living vines. The great veins of the boulders spilled thick purple blood.

Trees had their limbs locked in aerial combat, dragging one another from the ground by shrieking roots.

One brown-skinned tree had torn a long branch from an adversary, and Ferguson saw that the branch was jointed like an arm; he could see the broken bone standing white from the brown bark. He had a momentary, giddy wonder if this might not be the answer to what had finally happened to Jacklyn's vanished Indios.

He caught up with Jacklyn and helped him drag the panting girl onward. The earth was rolling now beneath their stumbling feet. Clusters of flowers were reaching out avid, sucking mouths. But for the most part the jungle was lost in its own suicidal frenzy as it tore itself to fragments through all the screaming valley.

They came to the cleft in the cliff at last, bruised and ripped, breathless and bleeding, but alive. The narrow gorge was breathing as all the rocks of the valley were breathing now, in heavy panting convulsions. The narrow opening grew still narrower, then gaped apart again.

Ferguson glanced at the girl. She was gasping, as though the tumult in Eden had its echo in her mind.

Ferguson's voice was inaudible above the tumult, but he pointed to the cleft. Jacklyn nodded. The girl tried to pull free. Ferguson slid his arm around her waist and urged her on.

On each side the rock walls groaned. They narrowed. Ferguson felt them brush his shoulders as he squeezed through the last few feet.

Behind him the gorge crashed shut.

It opened, rocks screaming, and Ferguson turned.

For the last time—he saw Eden.

Jacklyn had seen Eden's creation, but Ferguson saw the Garden's ending.

The earth was opening.

From the center of Eden a pit broadened, engulfing forest and shrieking stones and all that incredible land where a new race had found birth and perished. Across the valley the gulf spread.

The earth swallowed Eden.

From the depths came the sound of a cataclysmic explosion, a thunderous booming as of crashing worlds, and a shaft of scarlet light flamed upward toward the sky.

The cleft in the rock screamed shut. This time it did not open.

Ferguson stumbled back a few steps. He could see Jacklyn, could see the girl, and the girl had changed. The inhuman pallor was gone from her flesh, and the alien darkness had vanished from her black eyes.

"She's human," Jacklyn breathed. "Ferguson, she's come back. It didn't change her so much that she—she couldn't revert."

But Ferguson was watching the burning shaft that slowly faded against the sky beyond the barrier of rock. His lips moved silently.

"He placed at the east of Eden . . . a flaming sword . . . to keep the way of the tree of life. . . ."