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# SEEDS FROM SPACE

By

JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

(Author of *Earth's Mausoleum*, *Invaders from Time*, *Mathematica*, etc.)

First published *Tales of Wonder*, No. 1, 1937.

*A Titanic Weed Whose Seed Came from Mars Enveloped Earth in its Grip . . . But the  
Creeping Menace Saved Mankind from a Far Greater Disaster*

John Russell Fearn is an English author who has made his name in America for his startling conceptions of Super-Science. Here he gives us an amazing picture of the whole world enwrapped in stupendous plant growths which spring from a vast cloud of spores spewed into space from an alien planet. Simultaneously, warring humanity is stricken with a mysterious malady which leaves men dead, yet alive . . . And at the back of it all is a strange scientist, of unearthly intellect, and his marvellous machines. . . .

## CHAPTER I

### The Spore Doom

For several minutes Price Driscoll had been silent, eyes fixed on the summer dust at his feet. It seemed that he had forgotten the park in which he was seated, the warm sunshine, and the girl by his side.

A cough from the girl aroused him. He looked up with a guilty start to find her blue eyes upon him.

“Well, it’s not before it’s time!” she commented frankly.

“I’m sorry, Lucy.” He smiled apologetically. “I’m worried. There’s something coming to this old world of ours that never came before.”

“I know—but it *has* been before,” the girl answered promptly. “You mean war?”

“Good heavens, no—something infinitely more terrible than war! A menace that will make war seem like a child’s pastime by comparison. You see, it’s my job to know all about it. And because I dared to tell what I know to be the truth I have been asked to resign my position. A fine thing to befall a young astronomer full of ideals, isn’t it?”

The girl’s eyes went wide. “You mean you’ve—you’ve lost your post? Oh, Price, I’m so —”

“I know; you’re sorry. That’s all anybody can say. If only they would *listen* to me instead! Me, the only man in the world who knows what is coming, and I’m not heeded.

“The entire Earth is doomed to destruction! And, so far as I know, there’s no remedy. One can take precautions, of course; but since I’m discredited, what’s the use?”

Lucy Harridge compressed her lips. “Price, what *is* the matter?” she demanded. “Tell me!”

“Well, until I was dismissed, I was, as you know, a responsible young astronomer at the observatory. One night recently, I made a remarkable discovery in connection with the planet Mars, a discovery which would have been impossible without the aid of our giant telescopic-reflector. . . . Briefly, I saw a colossal cloud of seed-spores literally spewed into space from the planet.”

“Seed-spores? Mars?” Lucy was clearly baffled.

“Let me explain. Mars, if you know anything of astronomy, is subject to terrific wind and dust storms. The planet also possesses a type of plant life, not unlike our ivy, which grows very fast in the Martian deserts. These markings, until the installation of our new reflector, were mistaken for water-channels. The famous ‘canals,’ you know. . . .

“Naturally, this plant life casts off seeds, which immediately take root, but according to my observations the terribly dry state of Mars’ surface hinders growth enormously. That brings me to my second point. . . .

“Whilst observing this wind storm on Mars I distinctly saw one vast mass of seeds blown into the Martian atmosphere with such terrific force that the relatively weak pull of the planet’s gravity did not bring them down again. They just scattered into the void. You understand?”

Lucy nodded slowly. “I see what you mean. I suppose that once they passed into space they would be seen no more because of the blackness of the void?”

“Exactly. Which brings me to the theory of the great scientist, Svante August Arrhenius.”

“Whom?”

“He was an eminent Swedish scientist who put forward the theory that life could, and no doubt did, travel from other worlds and germinate on entirely different planets. You see, seeds are absolutely impervious to the frightful cold of space, and after being blown from their native planet’s surface they move through space, to eventually fall on a neighbouring world, maybe. There, granting favourable conditions, they germinate and sprout. Our life probably began like that.”

“Go on.”

“I saw those spores blown from Mars about eight weeks ago, and whilst I was interested, I did not think a great deal more about the matter. But this morning I saw a small notice in the newspaper—a seemingly unimportant little thing, but it spells the approach of a grave menace to mankind. Listen to this.”

Price tugged a morning paper from his pocket, and after some searching began to read:

“The liner *Baltic*, just docked from New York, reports a curious occurrence in the Atlantic Ocean, two hundred miles from the shores of Ireland. According to the Captain, the liner ran into a mass of brown seaweed; but investigation revealed this ten-mile carpet to be actually composed of billions of tiny seeds, similar to those of the sweet-pea. The mass is apparently sinking to the ocean floor. After some delay, caused by the seeds entangling with the screw, the *Baltic* continued on her way.’ ”

Price stopped, his face set. The girl’s eyes were upon him.

“Then, Price, you think that—that those seeds you saw——?”

“Exactly! This morning I told Professor Webster of my theory, and we had a group of experts consider it. The damned fools! They decided I was letting fancy run away with common sense, and I’m to leave in a month. When I ’phoned you and asked you to meet me down here, I knew that you, at least, would listen to me.”

“Of course; but are you sure there’s a connection between Martian seeds and Atlantic seaweed? How can you be so certain that those seeds would strike Earth, with all the other planets there are?”

“It’s mathematical law! We’re the nearest to Mars. I’ve checked up on everything: the direction the spores took, the positions of Earth and Mars, their comparative nearness—every detail.

“There can be no mistake! That ten-mile carpet of brown seed spells the dawn of humanity’s destruction. And to think that a few tons of dynamite dropped on them now could stop the whole business! It’s enough to make a man go mad!”

“That’ll get you nowhere,” the girl said quietly. “England will come to its senses when things begin to happen—never fear.”

Price grunted. “It doesn’t just mean England. It means the whole world! Those seeds will thrive in the salt water of the ocean, absorbing moisture. They once lived in a salty desert, the floor of what once was an ocean on Mars’ surface. Imagine them now—roots in the sea-bed, thrusting out their branches along the ocean floor until they reach land!

“Then indeed will things begin to happen!”

### **The Strange Paralysis**

The furious heat of July changed into the close enervation of the London August. None in the metropolis gave a thought to the fact that the unusually hot summer also existed in mid-

Atlantic, where now, according to report, the ten-mile carpet of brown seeds had diminished to one mile; and that, too, was rapidly vanishing.

To Price Driscoll the news was ominous. The heat was a deadly foe. It would hasten the trouble which he insisted was certainly coming.

Though something of his early fear had subsided in the interval. His new post in an analytical laboratory gave him little time for conjecture; and whilst he worked, the threat of a second World War hung ever more imminent above human activity. Mars was indeed influencing Earth, both in the literal and abstract sense.

Early in July of the following year, Price was able to snatch a week's rest. With Lucy, now his wife, he chose a Somerset farm in a little village called Mandory, which they found distinctly suited to their taste after the noise and bustle of the capital.

"It is just eighteen months since you were worrying over that dead sea-wrack," Lucy remarked casually, as they strolled, hand in hand, down a deserted country lane, hedged in on either side.

"Is it?" he said, in some surprise, and suddenly stopped in his stride.

"Yes; and it's a good job for you that you found a steady job."

"Perhaps you're right," he agreed, and fell into step beside the girl as they walked on.

Presently they halted again and sat down on the grass at the side of the lane.

"Not a bad view," Price commented, approvingly. "Now the hedge has ended we can see it all. Lovely, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is," the girl murmured. "Oh, Price, how can men and women think of war in such a glorious world?"

"Men don't think of that when they want something," Price answered grimly. "They just seem to——"

He paused, and a puzzled look came into his eyes. Shielding his gaze, he stared fixedly into the distance for a space.

"What is it?" the girl questioned, lazily.

"A flash." Price's voice was strange. "H'mm; do you feel anything?"

The girl did not answer for a moment, then sat up with a sudden effort.

"Yes, I do," she admitted slowly. "As though I've lost control over my limbs! I—I feel ill!"

She passed a puzzled hand over her forehead. Price slipped an arm round her shoulders and looked again into the distance at a square, massively built structure raised upon a hill, dominating the whole of this stretch of countryside.

It came to him suddenly that he and his wife were on an absolutely unbeaten track; and as he looked at the building another brilliant flash radiated from it, akin to a mammoth mirror reflecting sunlight. He felt himself become limp; his legs tingled queerly.

"Damned odd!" he muttered. "Lucy, there's something strange here. Perhaps it's the heat. Surely that mirror can't have anything to do with it——?"

The girl lay back, her face pale. "I don't believe my legs will bear my weight!" she said, presently.

"Mine aren't much better," Price answered grimly; then, with sudden determination, he struggled to his feet. "Come on, let's get into the shade. We've got sunstroke or something. Ah! That flash again——! Come on!"

But the girl seemed quite incapable of standing up, despite all her efforts. She gained her knees, then rocked sideways into the grass again, to lie there without making any further

attempts. Scarcely a whit the better, seized with that uncanny paralysis, Price staggered forward, clutched her, and dragged her with superhuman effort into the shade of the hedge a short distance away.

For perhaps ten minutes they lay there, then gradually strength returned, and at last they got to their feet. Puzzled, they dusted their clothes and looked about them.

“What was it?” the girl asked finally, baffled. “That was no sunstroke!”

“It certainly was not,” Price agreed grimly. “It was something else; something very different to anything we’ve ever known before. Perhaps some newfangled weapon of destruction.”

He paused, then drew her to him, filled with a sudden impulse to protect her. “We’ll find out about it,” he murmured. “To-night.”

“To-night?” Her eyes were startled.

“Afraid?” he chided gently, and at that she shook her head vehemently.

“Not with you, Price. I wish I knew what it was, though.”

Price moved forward and looked round the end of the hedge towards the squat edifice on the hill. Thoughtfully he stroked his chin.

“I’m convinced it’s a weapon of warfare!” he declared again. “You notice how that building on the hill is fenced round with seven-foot high railings, and also has an inner wall of metal? Why such unusual precautions? If there is something in that building that is a menace to humanity it has got to be destroyed!”

“Yes, Price.” The girl’s reply was quiet and submissive. Then she shook his arm as he still stood gazing around. “Suppose we get on the move? This place isn’t particularly pleasant now, after what’s happened.”

“Yes—we’ll go.” Price drew her arm through his and held her to his side as they made the return journey up the lane.

It was as they walked, absorbed in their own thoughts, that their eyes suddenly became aware of something at their feet. Imbedded in the dust lay motor-car wheel tracks. Once again perplexity settled on Price’s face.

“A car? Along here?” he muttered. “That’s strange! It leads direct to that building on the hill.”

“So it does!” The girl moved forward to look more closely, only to jump quickly aside as a high-powered car suddenly swept into view, coming away from the building on the hill, advancing amidst a cloud of choking dust.

In an instant it had passed, and went bumping away along the iron-hard ruts, lost in the clouds of dust it had created. Wind-blown and ruffled, Price Driscoll and his wife joined each other again and stood staring after it. Presently it became dimly visible again, heading for Mandory village, its yellow colour quite discernible.

“That’s what I call hogging!” Price snapped. “Never even saw the fellow at the wheel, more’s the pity. If we hadn’t have jumped we wouldn’t have stood an earthly chance!”

“I wonder who he was?” the girl murmured, thoughtfully. “Obviously he’s connected with that mysterious building. Do you think we should tell the police?”

Price shook his head. “No, it’s no ordinary matter; it requires personal investigation. We’ll stick to the original plan and look the place over to-night. Now let’s carry on—we’ll be back in comfortable time for tea.”

They resumed their trudging and, a considerable time later, topped the rise of the lane to behold sleepy Mandory before them, broiling in the sun. There was something else, too; a



yellow car outside the portico of Mawson's Farm. Upon the little portico itself sat a hardly distinguishable figure, drinking with apparent enthusiasm.

"Good Lord, there he is!" Price ejaculated, pointing. "The chap with the yellow car! Come on!"

### **"I Am Out to Stop War . . ."**

A hurried run across the square and they were both up the portico steps, facing the man, who seemed not the least perturbed by their sudden appearance before him. He quietly finished his drink and laid down the glass.

Inwardly, Price and Lucy were willing to admit that he had no sinister appearance whatever. His face was calm, intelligent, and remarkably handsome. The hair was black, the forehead expansive, and the eyes a strange shade of grey. Even when seated, he was obviously a man of considerable stature and strength.

"Good afternoon," he said presently, in a mellow voice.

It became increasingly hard to dislike him when he spoke. With feelings of discomfiture, Price and his wife slowly sat down and faced him.

"A little while ago you came along the lane," Price said finally. "You nearly ran us down! Do you know that?"

"Did I?" The man's face evinced surprise. "I am very sorry. Frankly, the lane was so dusty I didn't see anything to either side of it. I am sure you will both accept my deepest regrets, won't you? By the way, Benton is my name—Hugh Benton. I am a scientist."

"Don't think I'm inquisitive or anything," Price went on, "but what sort of a place is that of yours on the hill? It is yours, isn't it?"

Hugh Benton shrugged. "It is my home and laboratory." He smiled, reservedly. "You see, I have strange ways of living. Perhaps you might call me a super-philanthropist as well as a scientist."

"Philanthropist!" Price echoed, derisively. "If you call it philanthropic to make my wife and I thoroughly ill with some kind of paralysis, you certainly have strange ideas! What sort of a stunt were you up to this afternoon? You made the pair of us as weak as table jellies!"

"Dear me, how very awkward," Benton muttered. "That means I shall have to take you into my confidence. I had hoped that would never become necessary. However, I think I can trust you. . . . I—er—I am out to stop war."

"Men have tried that before, sir—and failed."

"Truly, but I am privileged in that I have an infallible method. The only way to stop men warring is to stifle the minds and bodies of those who fight! I have that something—an all-potent weapon, with an all-embracing power.

"It so happened that you and your wife came within range of my apparatus this afternoon, whilst I was experimenting. . . . Naturally, you want to know all about it?"

"All!" Price said unwaveringly.

"Very well, then. What I do is to use a machine which emits electric waves, these waves being identical with those issuing forth from the sun itself. They are known as inazan waves, and exist some distance below infra-red frequency. You will know that the sun can bring heat-prostration and sunstroke; popular belief is that the heat does it. That isn't so; it is the pure inazan waves of the sun which are responsible, for they affect the brain and create mild paralysis.

“Now, my machine, issuing forth these waves, produces a paralysis that is entirely complete. Everything possessing active life falls beneath its influence, and remains so until I use my counteracter. Also, my machine has the power to encircle the entire world if necessary, or, if desired, it can affect any specific part of the world. So, should a war be in progress, I have merely to exert it over the offending parties and they will immediately collapse, to stay thus, apparently lifeless, until my counteracter is operated. You understand?”

“Perfectly,” Price nodded; “but if your power encircles the world why wasn’t everybody affected this afternoon when Lucy and I were?”

“Because, as I have said, it was a test. I was using only eight per cent of the power possible—and, unfortunately, I had no idea you were so near at hand when I experimented. I set the apparatus so that the village would not be affected, but I didn’t expect you would be in the countryside; it’s usually so deserted. Luckily I used my counteracter as well, otherwise you would still be paralysed.

“Really, I am sorry. . . . Suppose, as a slight consolation, you come and view my machinery for yourselves to-night? I feel sure that you’ll be interested.”

“Well, thanks, sir,” Price said sheepishly. “That’s very kind of you. I’m awfully sorry to have made such an ass of myself. Forgive me, won’t you?”

“There is nothing to forgive, Mr. —. What is your name, by the way?”

“Oh—I’m Price Driscoll, an analyst from London. This is my wife, Lucy.”

“Charmed,” Benton smiled. “You see, up there in my isolated abode I make many experiments; indeed I never leave unless urgency compels me. That happened this afternoon when I ran out of some chemicals and had to come to the chemist’s here for fresh supplies. However, with so many walls and railings round my dwelling I fancy my apparatus is quite safe. . . . And now, how about a drink together?”

“No, allow *me!*” Price interjected firmly. “My wife and I are staying here on a short holiday. I insist that you accept my invitation, after all I’ve said to you.”

“Very well,” Benton smiled.

“Right; that’s settled then,” Price said in satisfaction, and went off in search of the husky farmer who owned the small establishment.

Between Lucy and Hugh Benton a sudden silence fell. For some odd reason the girl’s mind had reverted to those spores of seed that had been lying far out on the Atlantic. . . .

## CHAPTER II

### Man or ——?

Hugh Benton kept his promise, and that same evening drove Price and Lucy to his isolated abode. The two did not attempt to calculate how many gates and doors they passed through before they finally entered a large room equipped after the fashion of some super powerhouse. Upon every side reposed gleaming machines of unusual design, with Benton hovering in the midst of them, a calm and explanatory host.

For the second time he went through the exposition of how his apparatus worked, tapped this and that machine, and finally led the way to two machines standing side by side.

“Most interesting devices,” he commented. “Look at them, each in turn. Stand close and I’ll start them up for you.”

Deeply interested, Lucy and Price stood by as directed, watching the mysterious engines, fascinated by the display of electrical power actuated by the moving of a switch.

“And is all this apparatus necessary for inducing paralysis?” Price asked when the display was over.

“Not altogether; these machines serve other purposes as well,” was Benton’s ambiguous reply. Then, in a different tone: “Doesn’t it strike you as peculiar that I, one man alone, should be gifted with the genius to evolve all this apparatus? Apparatus to save a world from itself . . .”

“You must be wonderfully clever, sir,” Lucy remarked admiringly, her blue eyes very bright.

Hugh Benton shook his head; his answer was surprising.

“Not clever, young lady; just possessed of an intellect several times greater than any other being on Earth. That is not egotism; it is pure fact.”

The girl looked away, half frightened. His deep, mysterious, grey eyes were upon her. She felt in them a sense of terrific solitudes, of loneliness supernal, of coldness—the utter coldness of interstellar space itself. It came to her in a suddenly vivid thought that Hugh Benton was not a man at all. He was . . .

But that was impossible. She straightened up to find him serenely smiling again.

“I hope you have both enjoyed the demonstration?” he asked politely. “Perhaps I am not altogether the perfect host, but it pleases me to show you my machines. I love them, take a pride and joy in their upkeep and maintenance.”

As he talked he led the way into a comfortable lounge, where he provided a light and palatable refreshment. During a lull in the conversation, Price looked at the strange scientist with a very direct gaze.

“Mr. Benton, there is something which I feel you ought to know,” he said quietly. “I am, of course, a scientist—though nothing approaching your cleverness ever happened to me—and I feel you ought to know that something far worse than any war is threatening the world. Namely, destruction by plant life.”

“Indeed?” Benton’s eyebrows rose. “In what way?”

Quickly and concisely Price related once more his theory of the spores from outer space, the story of how they had been seen on the Atlantic eighteen months before, and of the hot, scorching summer that undoubtedly must have aided their growth.

“Remarkable,” Benton said finally, thinking. “Your theory is, of course, correct; but you may take my word for it that no harm will befall the Earth. There is nothing to fear.

“I am sorry to hear that you were discredited by so-called experts, but it does not surprise me when one considers the narrow limits of the average human brain. I can only repeat: there is nothing to fear.”

“You are certain of that?” Lucy demanded quickly.

Benton shrugged. “Absolutely, Mrs. Driscoll.” Then he stood in silence for a space, and Price and the girl again felt that air of intangible mysticism hanging over him.

“I—I think, Mr. Benton, that we’d better be getting along,” Price ventured at length. “Please don’t think us discourteous, but——”

“Quite so, quite so,” Benton responded pleasantly. “I’m to blame for having kept you so long. Come; my car is at your disposal.”

Again followed the curriculum of door-locking and gate-slamming, then the return journey along the narrow lane commenced. Benton sat in silence at the wheel, lost in thought, his driving purely mechanical. Price and Lucy watched him, fascinated.

Who was he? What was he? Just an enigma, with a personality as obscure and unplumbed as space itself.

### **The Alien Growths**

Hugh Benton did not make his presence felt again at the farm, and Price and Lucy, as the days of their holiday slipped by, could not help but wonder why he had so suddenly and mysteriously come into their lives and then as suddenly vanished. Once they debated the idea of a second visit to him, but the memory of calm yet strangely friendless grey eyes made them decide otherwise.

Consequently, they spent the waning time in almost childish pursuits. On the day before they were due to return to London, they became explorers of forest undergrowth a mile away from the farm. With sandwiches in haversacks upon their backs, hatless and happy-go-lucky man and woman were suddenly transformed by the irresistible magic of perfect summer weather into a boy and girl again.

No sense of things unexpected touched them until, in a mad gambol for the shelter of a tree where they might lunch, Lucy tripped headlong over a hidden root and went sprawling into a mass of cool bracken and fern. In a moment Price was after her, had hauled her laughing to her feet.

Then, with solemn pomp, he returned to the offending root and kicked it vengefully. To his stupefied amazement, a brilliant, sickly green sap oozed from the abrasion to the ground below.

The sap’s colour was remarkable enough; but even more astounding was the fact that from its treacherously unpleasantness there sprang up what appeared to be thousands of tiny weeds, exactly similar to the parent branch. There was something nauseating, repulsive, about its stupendous rate of growth.

“Good Lord!” Price said at last, in utter amazement.

“Whatever makes it grow like that?” the girl asked, wide eyes fixed on the now eight-inch high weeds as they quivered into more leaf and stem. “It’s uncanny!”

For a long time Price stood quite still, his eyes fixed on that tumultuous growth. Even as he looked the things spread. With another savage kick he broke four of them; they oozed sap, and more weeds sprang up to take their place.

“Lucy, it’s come!” he exclaimed at last, clutching her arm. “The spores from Mars!”

The girl looked at him, stupefied. He seized her by the shoulders and shook her, to bring her to her senses.

“Lucy! Lucy! Don’t you begin to understand? All this time—these eighteen months—those spores that settled on the Atlantic have pushed their roots right the way to land, up through the soil of England. This great log here is but one of the roots.

“You can’t stop it growing! As fast as you break it, it drips more sap, and that in turn transforms into plants. Oh, God! Why didn’t I warn the world when I had the chance?”

With an effort, Lucy tore her eyes from the swaying, thriving weeds. “But, Price, Mr. Benton said——”

“Damn Benton! This convinces me! He didn’t know what he was talking about. These weeds will be everywhere before long. . . . Come on; let’s get out of this confounded wood; it gives me the creeps!”

Clutching the girl by the hand, Price forced her along at a rapid pace. As they ran they realised for the first time that the plants on all sides of them were identical to the miniature ones they had seen growing. The place was a mass of the deadly weed!

Panting and hot, they arrived at last in the lane near which the wood was situated. Price’s face was grim and perspiring; the girl’s flushed and troubled.

“Well, what now?” she asked, breathlessly. “Even if we have found the weed, what can we do about it? See Benton?”

Price shook his head. “Useless, I’m afraid. Besides, he’s such a queer sort of chap. . . . No, we’d better get back to London to-morrow—away from all this.”

So, the picnic forgotten, they retraced their steps to the village and farmhouse. On the way they beheld further evidences of alien growth. Here and there were outcroppings of the silently swaying, growing vegetation. At first it seemed it was the wind blowing them; then the two realised with a jolt that it was—*expansion!*

Everywhere, it seemed, the ground was infested with Martian plant life. The seal of danger and insecurity had settled upon Earth’s face . . .

## War!

Back in London again, the memory of the holiday and Hugh Benton rapidly becoming forgotten, Price wondered whether the strange plant life that he and Lucy had encountered had not, after all, been something akin to the rapidly growing puff-ball. Once or twice he examined the saner aspects of the matter and finally decided that, even if the affair had been genuine, nobody would believe him in any case. Besides, he had a lot of work to catch up with.

So came the return to monotony. He went to and from his work every day, dreaming of ideals and vaguely realising that he had not the finance with which to mature them. Lucy, for her part, pursued an equally unremarkable course in keeping the little out-London bungalow presentable.

Then, like a bombshell, came—war! Two of the world’s principal countries had declared war against the remainder of the world. The outcome was inevitable. There would be a terrific, all-embracing battle. Nobody knew just what the war was about. It was just . . . well, war.

Price found himself called upon to enlist within four days. The news was half expected, but bitter. On the verge of securing for himself a sound position in life, he was now to be plunged into the welter of ruin and chaos. . . .

Grim-faced, disillusioned, he stood in the drawing-room two nights before he was due to depart for the front.

“And after all that fool Benton had to say!” he growled. “He was going to stop war! I don’t know what he wasn’t going to do! And look at the world—just inside out! Civilisation against civilisation, Lucy, and there’s only one end to that! Wholesale annihilation! For years mankind has simmered on the brink of such an outburst as this, and now it has come I shudder to think of the results.”

“If only we could find Benton again,” the girl said, thoughtfully. “I feel sure, in spite of all you say, Price, that he spoke the truth. I read it once in his eyes. There was something in them that was . . . well, godlike! I can’t explain it.”

“Pshaw!” Price snapped irritably. “Switch on the radio, will you? We might as well learn how much butchery is going on since I’m to be in it.”

The girl reached out and pressed the switch. Followed a few slight adjustments, then the early news bulletin from London came through. For a space the announcer rambled through irrelevant preliminaries, then——

“A remarkable state of affairs has arisen on the First Frontier. Reports from an official source state that the entire front line of infantry collapsed to-day whilst advancing on the opposing side. The opposers, believing they had an easy victory, advanced to the attack, when they too were overtaken by some strange form of paralysis which petrified them at their posts.

“Surgeons have conducted rigorous examinations and are quite at a loss to account for the malady. It seems to be a condition of advanced catalepsy, in which state the victim is alive, and yet apparently dead. The heartbeats drop to minimum, and there is only just enough respiration to keep the victim alive.

“How long the condition will last cannot be conjectured; the latest bulletin reports no change in the men’s condition, and the cause is equally unaccountable. A germ attack could be the probable cause, were it not for the fact that both armies are suffering from the same trouble. It is understood that the malady is rapidly spreading. . . .”

The announcer paused, and Price looked round amazedly.

“Benton!” he expostulated. “He spoke the truth after all! He’s stopping the war, and——”

“A further remarkable news item in this troubled world comes from Cornwall,” the announcer continued. “The inhabitants of the little village of Rendford reports the appearance of a strange type of plant life that seems to have its roots in the sea. It is rapidly growing, and the English Channel is green with the mysterious weed as far as the eye can see.

“According to accounts, nothing can be done about it. It seems impervious to fire; indeed, it extinguishes fire, and cutting only makes it grow the faster. The report has yet to be verified, but steps are being taken to ensure its authenticity. That concludes the——”

With a hand that shook slightly Lucy switched the instrument off and got to her feet.

“Price,” she said slowly, “that plant we saw wasn’t a dream. It was all too real. And you were right! That thing we found must have been a root. Now the plant is appearing from the Atlantic as well, where the spores originally fell.”

“I know, and that might not have been the only place they fell,” Price replied, sombrely. “They may have been disseminated all over the world, for all we know.”

He stopped, thinking deeply, then resumed in a grim voice. “Lucy, I’m not going to the war, even though I’ve enlisted. For one thing, there will soon be no war to demand my presence; and for another, this weed is getting a hold. It will grow and grow . . . unless a means is found to stop it.”

“But what *can* stop it?”

“I don’t know off-hand, but being an analyst I can find out. Ultra-violet might do it, or germs of some kind. . . .

“You know, I still can’t fathom why Benton said that weed meant nothing. He lied!”

“Perhaps he was only diplomatic,” Lucy corrected, quietly.

## CHAPTER III

### “It’s the End of the World . . .!”

Paralysis, mysterious and complete, overtook all the armies on every battlefield the following day. Not only the soldiers, airmen and surgeons were affected, but also the sailors at sea. From every quarter of the globe flashed frenzied messages of universal paralysis creeping over the entire world. Nobody was dead, and yet nobody was alive!

The affair was taking on a deadly seriousness. War? What time was there for that now? Man had turned to fighting a common enemy, a mysterious disease that made life a perpetual sleep from which there was perhaps no awakening.

Whole countries began to get uneasy. Price Driscoll and his wife became uneasy, too, when they learned that the decision to cease hostilities had not stopped the paralysis.

It was rapidly spreading to affect everybody. Already the entire American continent was dead from Maine to California, and those liners which were midway between England and the United States had come to a standstill, passengers and crew somnolent, rigid.

“This is going too far!” Price breathed, the following evening. “One more day and the whole world will go under! What on Earth does Benton think he’s playing at, I wonder? I understood he was only going to stop war, not wipe out mankind. It’s—it’s unthinkable! Isn’t it?”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Lucy admitted. “Why don’t we go and see him again? He could tell us something, no doubt.”

Price considered for a moment, then nodded quickly.

“All right, we will! Get dressed and I’ll get the car out.”

Fifteen minutes later they were on their way through London’s busy thoroughfares, a few odds and ends slung in the car’s rumble-seat. Knowing the drive was to be a long one, Lucy made herself comfortable in the corner of the two-seater, and alternately dozed and watched the darkening countryside.

The sun had been set for some time; darkness came with the slowness common to summer. Still the little car rattled on, its engine humming strongly, keeping up an almost constant speed of forty miles an hour along the deserted country roads.

Blackness came at last. The headlights flooded into being. Wearied, Lucy tried to compose herself for a brief sleep. Her thoughts had trailed off into dim channels when suddenly she heard Price give a sharp exclamation. Shot out of her doze, she jerked upright, then screamed in alarm.

A mighty wall of livid green was directly in front of the car’s bonnet, stretching across the lane. The steering-wheel flew round in a circle, and the car veered off to the left. A second later, it slid down a bank, turned over, and crashed heavily on to its side.

Dazed, but not hurt, Price clambered from beneath the overturned vehicle, dragging Lucy after him. A quick examination revealed that they had suffered nothing worse than abrasions.

“What on earth was it?—a hedge?” Lucy demanded, pushing back her disordered hair and trying to see her husband’s face in the rising moonlight.

“Hedge nothing!” he retorted savagely. “It was a huge branch of that weed! Come back with me, and we’ll have a look at what’s going on.”



They scrambled up the bank to the slightly rising ground bordering the road. At the sight they beheld, horror clutched at their hearts, and they stood utterly dumbfounded.

The Moon was now clear of horizon-mist, and in its yellow light lay a scene never before witnessed by living creatures. From their slightly higher vantage point the two could see right across the countryside, and upon every hand, like a vast sea, there stretched billowing green—writhing, struggling green that swayed sickeningly in the silence. Leaves upon leaves, branches upon branches, countless millions of feet of tendrils. A plant, smothering the entire south of England in a steadily advancing blanket!

Even as the two stood, stunned, the nearer branches and shoots of the incredible stuff were coming down the road. Dimly, Price realised that it was the sea of vegetation with which he had nearly collided.

“Great heavens!” he said at last. “Now I begin to understand why nobody is recovering from the paralysis. Don’t you see? Benton must have been overwhelmed—killed, before he could use his counteracter. It’s—it’s the end of the world, Lucy! *The end of the world!*”

### **Tendrils of Death**

The girl clung closer to him. Her voice broke. “What—what can we do?”

“Get back to London at top speed. It’s the only chance of survival!”

They raced back to the overturned car and set about trying to right it. It was only a small two-seater, but all the same its weight was considerable. Desperately they heaved and pushed. The engine, still in order, roared fitfully, but the frantic spinning of the one wheel remaining on the ground did nothing save move dirt.

At last, panting and drenched with perspiration, the two ceased their struggles. Price swore softly, while Lucy mopped her face.

Then the girl started at a light touch on her ankle. She glanced down, puzzled, then uttered a scream. A thin, whip-like tendril, similar to that of Virginia creeper, had securely noosed itself round her leg!

“Price! Price!” she shouted frantically, starting to run forward; but three more powerful tendrils reached out and clutched her flailing arms, her waist. She toppled over helplessly, unable to retain her balance.

“Good God!” Price gasped in horror, wheeling round, to behold in the moonlight a mighty streamer of the advancing weed cascading over the bank and smothering all before it.

He had a vision of his struggling, screaming wife in the midst of the frightful stuff, wrapping round her body like cotton round a reel. . . . She moved within it, struggling feebly. It gained the car and rapidly began to bury it in bands of swelling green.

Price saw his wife in danger of death from strangulation unless he acted at lightning speed. Already she was difficult to see through the tangle of branches and speeding tendrils. Whipping off his coat, he snatched his penknife from his pocket, snapped open the largest blade, and charged to the attack.

In another second he was in the midst of the awful mass, fighting the most terrific and nauseating battle of his life. Branches writhed away to the ground as he cut them asunder. Brilliant green sap flew through the air, dropped to the smothered ground, and sprouted. Tendrils pulled at his legs, tore at his arms, curled round his neck.

Right and left he slashed, the keen blade cutting the stuff through in all directions, until at last he reached his wife’s side. She was unconscious, and yet, strangely enough, the stuff no

longer tried to curl round her now that she was still. Six more cuts, and the main stems that clamped about her were slashed in twain. With desperate speed, Price cut the remaining coil that was twisted about her neck.

Glancing round, he was staggered to see how far the weed had travelled. It was hemming him in on every side. Tossing the girl over his shoulder, he battled his way back again, hacking and hewing like a madman, stumbling and falling, his clothes spattered with the evil, green sap. Until finally, utterly spent, he staggered through the edge of the advancing stuff and went reeling away, drunk with horror and strain.

Yet even now there was no respite. The plant was still advancing. He picked Lucy up once more and staggered on across the adjoining meadow, heart bursting with the exertion.

As he reeled crazily onwards he cast horrified glances over his shoulder towards that behemoth sea of vegetation, so silent yet so invincible, spreading through the moonlight. Then he found he had reached the road again.

Here, exhausted, he paused for a moment, then set about reviving his wife. It took him five minutes, but by that time she was able to stand on her feet again. It was curious to note that she had sustained but little physical injury; the awful shock had been mainly responsible for her collapse.

She stood now, panting and shaky, in the moonlight, drawing her torn clothes together.

“Now what?” she asked finally, anxiously. “We can’t outstrip it, Price.”

“That’s what’s worrying me,” he answered, breathing hard. “I’m about all in, and I can’t think of any——”

He paused and looked up with a puzzled frown as a sudden deep, beating hum came upon the air. It became louder, until at last two pairs of eyes were treated to the surprising sight of a silvery, peculiarly-shaped air machine—wingless, remarkably enough—speeding along close to the ground, not a mile away.

Presently it swung round and headed towards the road. It seemed to actually stop in mid-air, then dropped in a straight, vertical line to earth.

The two onlookers did not stop to consider the machine’s unorthodox behaviour; they screwed up all their remaining energy and raced towards the spot where it had alighted. As they reached it a door opened in the glittering side, and a tall, familiar figure became visible.

“Hugh Benton!” Price gasped in amazement.

“How well you remember names, my young friend,” the strange scientist responded. “Get inside, both of you. I’ll explain later. Hurry! The weed is moving fast!”

Without further ado, Price and Lucy tumbled into the softly sprung seats at the rear of Benton’s machine. The door closed by some automatic process, then the remarkable craft, quite different to an ordinary aeroplane, rose vertically into the air and swept over the billowing sea of vegetation.

Gazing down, Price and Lucy both shuddered involuntarily. One slip and it meant doom of the most horrible kind in the midst of that all-destructive plant. But Hugh Benton did not seem in the least perturbed. He drove steadily towards the south, high above the seething life below, and never uttered a single word.

### **Drugged . . .**

To the complete amazement of both young people, Hugh Benton’s dwelling on the hill, when eventually they reached what had been the Somerset countryside, was the only place

free from the all-embracing, wriggling plant-life. The sea of leaves reached to the railings of his abode and there stopped, as though an unseen power had bidden them advance no further. . . .

With the same calmness of manner, Benton brought his strange air-machine round in a wide circle, then dropped direct to the flat roof below. A slight jolt, and the flyer was still.

Silently he opened the rear door, assisted the two to alight, then led the way down through a trapdoor into his familiar laboratory. Passing through this—and as they went Price and Lucy both noticed that the strange machines were now humming with power—he preceded them into the lounge, switching on an electric fire and light by a synchronic switch.

“Make yourselves at home,” he invited, cordially. “The sooner you get into practice, the better.”

“You mean——? You mean we’re prisoners?” Price demanded; but Benton shook his head.

“Not my prisoners, Mr. Driscoll—prisoners of the weed,” he responded quietly. “In fact . . .”

He hesitated, stood thinking for a moment, then shrugged. “It doesn’t matter now. Later, perhaps. I will bring you some refreshment. I am sure you must both be tired and nerve-racked after your ordeal. I’ll return in a moment.”

When he came back he was carrying a bottle in his hand.

“Champagne,” he explained, in response to the glances of the two. “It will revive you wonderfully after its first effects have passed off. My—er—champagne is different to most brands in that it leaves no after-effects the following morning. You really must try it.”

Without waiting for an acceptance, he crossed to the sideboard and filled two glasses to the brim; for some curious reason he omitted himself, and handed them to his two guests. A faintly amused smile hung about his lips as he watched them drain the glasses to the last drop.

“By jove, sir; it’s marvellous,” Price declared emphatically. “Sets you on fire! What do you say, Lucy?”

“Never tasted anything quite like it!” she affirmed, passing an uncertain hand over her forehead. “What—what brand is it? Do you mind telling us?”

“I have no objection to telling you; but the trouble is that it is quite unobtainable except by me. However, we can discuss that later. I would suggest that you retire now without having any food. This particular champagne does not agree with food. I had a very comfortable room in the south wing of this building which will amply suit your needs. It was just as well I knew you were coming and saved you from the weed.”

His strong hands helped the exhausted pair to their feet and piloted them down an adjoining corridor, up a broad staircase, and finally into a wide and expansive bedroom, tastefully furnished, the window draped in red velvet curtains.

“I feel sure you will be comfortable here,” he said, his face full of smiles. “You will find a bolt on the inside of this door. Lock the door; I shall not be offended. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goo’ ni!” Lucy exclaimed, with a wild wave of her arm flopping on to the billowing bed; and Price’s response was a loud bass hiccup.

Quietly, Benton closed the door behind him, then locked two outer bolts as well. Manifestly, the fact that the two could lock themselves in did not prevent him from ensuring that they could not leave. The bolts moved very silently; then, with the same calmness, Benton strolled up the passage.

Within the bedroom, after a befuddled effort to move over the bolt, Price fell full length on the bed beside the stupefied Lucy. Almost instantly, they both fell into a deep, drugged sleep. So deeply did they sleep, indeed, that they failed to hear, for a period lasting from two until four in the morning, a persistent stabbing of powerful Morse from a super radio-transmitter, or the seeming echo of those messages in a strong loud-speaker somewhere downstairs.

Hugh Benton did not attempt to sleep; it seemed to be the thought furthest from his extraordinary mind. Instead he viewed the approaching dawn with a wakefulness and calmness foreign to the strongest man. . . .

## CHAPTER IV

### The Creeping Menace

Price Driscoll awoke with a start. Why, he did not exactly know. He swivelled an eye round and found sunlight streaming through a niche in the red velvet curtains.

Remarking his amazement at finding no trace of stiffness or headache after the champagne of the night before, he scrambled off the broad bed and dropped to the floor. For a moment he was puzzled at finding himself dressed in the remnants of his previous night's clothing; then, with a grim smile, he remembered. . . .

Suddenly recollecting his wife, he turned to find her face downwards on the heavy quilt, arms outflung, hands clutching the heavy material as though she were afraid of slipping off it—a silent revelation of her previous night's thoughts.

She shook her head as Price tapped her on the shoulder, then twisted into a sitting position and rubbed her tousled hair sleepily.

"How are you?" Price asked.

"All right; never felt better. That champagne of Mr. Benton's is about the best thing I've struck. . . . H'mm!" She cast a disapproving eye down her ripped garments. "Wonder if there are any clothes anywhere?"

Price shrugged. "We can but ask. Let's get moving; I'm hungry."

He crossed to the window and flung back the curtains, then stood gripping them, staring transfixed with shock for a moment. From this high position he could see the entire countryside, and everywhere except the scientist's lonely abode was buried in a turbulent mass of green.

It was as though an entire Sargossa Sea had arisen overnight. Mile upon mile of it, in every direction, swelling and swaying in the exuberance of bounding growth, increasing its pace now under the rays of the hot summer sun.

"We certainly were lucky to be picked up," Lucy commented quietly, looking over her husband's shoulder. "This stuff is smothering the world."

Plexplexity settled on her brow. "I still can't fathom why this place is left untouched. See, down there by the railings it isn't getting a hold at all. But out there there's nothing but weed. Price, dear, do you think we're in a dangerous position?" she asked worriedly, turning to him.

"Not inside here," he replied; and, satisfied with the view, he turned to the door and slipped back the bolt. Timidly, like children, they both crept out into the corridor, ragged, dirty, and faintly apprehensive.

"Ah, good morning, my young friends. I trust you are feeling better?"

It was Hugh Benton himself, standing behind them, immaculate in a lounge suit. That faint suggestion of an amused smile still hung about his lips.

"Oh—er—good morning, sir," Price stammered, and Lucy took refuge in a faint smile.

"You seem ill at ease," Benton remarked in surprise. "I assure you that you have nothing to fear. I may be strange in manner, but I am the perfect host. Breakfast is awaiting us downstairs; after we have had it I will arrange clothing for you. Come along."

At breakfast Benton ate little; instead he watched his guests detachedly, as though studying them. Not that this made the pair self-conscious; they were too hungry to care.

When they were satisfied, Benton looked at them thoughtfully.

“To-day, my young friend, we will tour the world and see how far this weed has moved,” he announced. “We can be back before dark, and still have fairly long stays in London, New York, Berlin, and other principal cities.

“I am anxious to see how things are progressing. I could use television, but I prefer to see with my own eyes. Besides, I think you will enjoy the trip.”

“Did—did you say the *world*?” Price asked, incredulously. “Back before dark?”

“Easily,” Benton nodded, calmly. “My air-machine moves at half the speed of light itself; namely, ninety-three thousand miles a second, when at maximum. I rarely use maximum speed, of course. We can soon cover the globe on half that rate. You will be interested, surely?”

“Oh, very!” Price agreed dazedly, almost convinced he was dealing with a lunatic.

“Very well, then. Run along and smarten up a bit; you will find several articles of clothing in your room, which have been put there whilst we breakfasted. I have a mechanical servant. You need fresh clothes. Also, if your faces are any guide, you missed the shower and washbowl in the corner of your room, behind the curtain. With all due deference to both of you, use it. I’ll prepare my ship meantime.”

### **The Smothered Metropolis**

Half an hour later the two were seated comfortably in the rear of Benton’s amazing air-machine. He clambered up in front of them, flicked a button, and the engine purred softly. It had none of the harsh, blasting roar of an aeroplane; its smooth rhythm was something to wonder at.

A lever moved, then with easy grace the machine rose in vertical ascent, turned, and began to gather terrific momentum as it shot across the sea of vegetation below. Price and Lucy, enthralled by the view, forgot the mysterious personality of their host as they gazed down upon the massive banks of weed struggling and battling with each other to reach the hot sunlight.

With almost incredible speed—yet, strangely enough, without any unpleasant effects, despite the tremendous acceleration—the vessel ate up distance. The roar of the wind outside became distinctly noticeable through the immensely thick walls, a point which presently brought a question from Price.

“Mr. Benton, if you travelled at your maximum rate of ninety-three thousand miles a second, surely the friction of the atmosphere would burn up your entire ship?”

“Not the metal of this machine,” Benton replied. “It is known as Oilian steel, and has a melting point several thousand degrees Centigrade above tungsten, one of Earth’s toughest metals. Besides that, Oilian steel is very light; and again, between the inner and outer walls of this ship is a perfect vacuum—or, at least, the nearest approach to one—which stops either cold or heat affecting the interior. The wind you hear is from the window-sockets, not the walls. Sound can’t pass through a vacuum.”

Price digested these remarks before speaking again.

“I can’t understand why, with such knowledge as yours, you don’t make money!”

“Probably because money doesn’t interest me,” came the grave response; and Price said no more. . . .

Seven minutes later London was reached. Switches moved and clicked once more, and the air-machine became stationary.

“I use a radio-motor,” Benton explained, turning to read the wonder in the faces of the two passengers. “Generated from my abode is a special class of radio-waves, which propel my motor, the motor being attuned to those waves. Since these waves are powerful enough to encircle the world, I travel round the world *in* them. That is why my machine can achieve such terrific velocity, because radio waves move at the same speed as light—one hundred and eighty-six thousand miles a second. I find, though, that half that speed is a safe maximum; once I get past it my automatic acceleration neutralisers and gyroscopic-seats behave faultily, being unable to cope with the excessive inertia . . .

“The radio-waves also explain why I can go up and down vertically, and why I can remain stationary in mid-air. Since this vessel has a radio-motor at each end, controlled from this switchboard, an equal pressure can be radiated from both ends; hence the ship remains still. You understand?”

“Vaguely,” Price said doubtfully.

“Well, why try?” Benton asked, smiling. “Look down there! Interesting, is it not?”

The three turned to the windows. The air-machine was hovering over Trafalgar Square, permitting a wide view of London on every hand. Never in their lives had Price or Lucy expected to see what they did then.

For London was already being attacked by the weed. During the night it must have moved at tremendous speed from the south country, besides having burst out in various other quarters of the city of its own accord. It was clear that, in the main, the mighty weed had come up the river, for from end to end the wide bosom of the Thames was choked with crawling, struggling green life.

It stretched forth its squirming tentacles on both sides of the river. The Westminster, Tower and Waterloo Bridges were already cloaked in green, making them appear oddly like medieval castles with a covering of ivy.

Directly below, people were lying prone in the streets, hundreds upon hundreds of them, obviously first stricken down by the amazing paralysis. And towards them, covering them, rolled and expanded the monstrous columns of Martian vegetation.

A colossal main branch, quite eight feet in diameter, lay down the centre of the Strand. The taller buildings, too, made excellent holds for the stuff. Big Ben had already vanished amidst the smother. Fleet Street, place of ink and news, had also succumbed.

### **A World Engulfed**

Even as the trio watched, the weed continued to envelope the city with almost uncanny speed. The dark, natural green of Hyde Park was gradually obliterated as the mass crept over it. Building after building disappeared; streets and people vanished before that irresistible tidal wave of astounding growth.

Presently Lucy’s voice broke the silence.

“Those poor people down there! The stuff will kill them—choke them!”

“On the contrary,” Benton answered, shaking his head. “The Martian weed, from the tests I have made of it, will not strangle or even harm a sleeping or unconscious person or animal. It is the things which give resistance, like struggling people or animals, which it chokes.

“That is why you were in danger last night, when you tried to fight free from the weed. The instant you became unconscious and limp it ceased to try and overcome you. No

buildings will suffer, either, because they offer no resistance. They will be covered, yes; but nothing more.”

“You seem to know a lot about it, sir,” Price ventured. “Why on Earth don’t you remove the paralysis from the world? You said it was to stop war, and you managed it. But why let the world go to pot?”

“When I realised that the weed would cover the Earth I decided to increase the power of my paralysis-machine and render every living soul unconscious. Dead, and yet alive. In that way the weed will grow over them, and they will not suffer because they offer no resistance.

“In perhaps sixteen or seventeen hours Earth will be covered from end to end. From here we will fly northwards and see how the rest of the world is faring. Those Martian seeds, contrary to your belief, were not confined to the Atlantic Ocean. They were widely scattered, some falling in the Atlantic, some in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, and others in various parts of different continents. Don’t question how I know all this . . .”

The controls moved again, and the journey across England to Scotland was covered at a stupendous rate. Central England had so far escaped the creeping menace, but it was rapidly approaching from the Irish and North Seas.

Then began the most amazing journey Price and his wife had ever known. Flying with unremitting velocity, they travelled over a weed-infested sea to Iceland, to find that country entirely obliterated, and so across a super-Sargossa to Greenland. Here, near the Arctic Circle, the weed was not so prolific. The cold was hindering it somewhat, but nevertheless it was growing inevitably, forcing great roots through the massive ice-packs.

The whole edge of the Arctic Circle, right into the misty reaches of the Arctic itself, was a pounding, beating mass of spray, ice and weed . . . and the weed was winning!

The air-machine turned, flew across the blocked Atlantic to North America, which was completely out of sight, there being no distinction between sea and land, so thick had the growth become. Touching the now vanished frontiers of Alaska, the machine swung back to the Pacific Ocean and across South America, which was just as thickly covered with the relentless plant.

So on and on, searching assiduously, across the Indian Ocean to Australia, then high above the Philippines to the vast continent of Asia. Here some parts were still visible, but manifestly doomed. During much of the journey the speeding flyers were enveloped in darkness, but powerful searchlights in the base of their machine made the scene of utter destruction below only too clearly visible. . . .

Over Asia, Benton turned at last, flew back across buried Africa, and so to the British Isles again. The setting sun smote the hurtling air-machine as it neared the weed-infested shores of England. A slackening of speed, a vertical descent, and the journey was ended.

### **Some Mysteries Explained**

“I feel,” Benton said, when dinner was over, “that you are entitled to some explanations. Some of these explanations I shall give you now, and others I shall reserve until a more opportune time.

“For one thing, I knew you were coming to see me the other night because, ever since I met you down here on your vacation, I have kept you constantly in range with a radio-televisor. This instrument is tuned to the frequencies of people, or objects, and follows them constantly if they be movable, no matter how far they may go, reproducing their movements



upon a screen, even viewing them through solid buildings. All sounds made by these people are likewise trapped and reproduced through a loud-speaker. So, you see, I have watched over you both ever since that evening when you came up here to look round.

“You remember that I asked you to examine two machines? One of those automatically registered your frequencies—your electrical body-energy—and after that my radio-televisor had merely to be tuned to those frequencies in order to follow you everywhere. The other machine emitted, all unknown to you, a force which made you both incapable of being affected by my paralysis-machine.

“That is why you escaped the effects. I, too, being likewise treated, also came to no harm, although the rest of the world succumbed when I extended the waves, instead of concentrating them upon the warring armies.”

“But why did you bother to watch us?” Price asked puzzled.

“Because I admired you both from the first moment I met you. You were young and fresh, full of ideals and hopes. There was another reason, too. You knew about the spores from Mars; you two were the *only* ones who knew about them, and I felt it was only fair you should see your once despised theory bear fruit.

“I saw you find that root in the wood, too . . .”

“What amazing knowledge you have!” Lucy exclaimed. “You’re a genius!”

“Maybe I am,” Benton admitted with a faint smile. “As for our meals here, they are synthetic; practically everything here is synthetic or automatic. Everything you have found—beds, clothes, and so forth, I created specially for you. For my own part, I rarely sleep.”

“You think up all these things and yet rarely sleep?” Price breathed. “Then who on Earth are you, sir? *What* are you? There’s something about you——”

“All in good time,” the scientist interrupted, evasively. “I trust I have explained everything else?”

“Not altogether, sir. There’s that champagne of yours, and also why the weed has not attacked your home. Why, when you can stop the weed, do you allow it to go on?”

“In that, my friend, you probe too deeply. Later, perhaps.”

Benton took out his watch and regarded it. “At midnight precisely, according to my calculation, the entire Earth will be covered in the weed, buried under a dense, impenetrable blanket that no power can smash or break. A vast, super shock-absorber.”

“You sound as though you’ve premeditated it, sir!”

“Twenty feet thickness of rebounding weed,” Benton went on, his voice suddenly tense. “If everything has gone to plan, there is nothing to fear.”

He put his watch back, calm and serene again. “Another hour will bring midnight,” he commented. “I suggest that we adjourn to the laboratory, and there I think I can promise you the most astounding experience you’ve had so far. . . . This way.”

## CHAPTER V

### “Earth is Saved!”

Benton closed the door of the laboratory softly and for a time inspected his gently humming machinery; then he crossed to a massive lever and pulled it over. From somewhere on the roof came a grinding roar that soon subsided.

“That was a thick metal sheathing covering the roof of my home,” he explained. “Only the windows are free, and they are unbreakable.”

“But what’s it all for?” Price questioned in bewilderment.

“You will learn only too soon.”

Benton hesitated for a moment, as though considering some inner thought, then resumed in a meditative voice. “I have something to tell you both . . .

“A million and a half years ago—so long ago that earthly man has no record of the incident—Earth’s surface was rendered a pitted and scarred ruin by a bombardment from outer space. Geologists believe it was Earth’s internal upheavals that produced its mountains and sea-beds. They are wrong, as I have reason to know. The sea-beds were blasted out of the then fairly malleable Earth by showers of colossal stones and boulders from interstellar space, and the hills were created by the upward pushing of matter from the displaced areas, later to become the floors of its present-day oceans.

“At that period, a million and a half years ago, Earth, travelling in her orbit, happened to cross the enormously elongated orbit of a slowly-travelling mass of rock and stone. By mass I mean an area some million miles wide, consisting of the remains of a planet which once burst asunder and whose fragments, in the form of titanic rocks, still move through space. Earth became bombarded with these fragments as she crossed this broken planet’s orbit, and the upheavals I’ve mentioned, with several others, took place.

“Then Earth began to recover and man appeared, to invent other explanations for sea-beds and mountain ranges. The disintegrated planet passed on its way in its orbit, and Earth continued in hers. But calculation showed that a million and a half years later the same thing would happen again, when the two orbits crossed once more, and that unless steps were taken to prevent it, Earth would suffer something approaching annihilation—most certainly the destruction of all her cities and all her peoples.

“The time for this terrific second bombardment has now arrived. Thanks to the giant weed, however, the shocks will be reduced to a minimum. Being elastic and springy in nature, as well as amazingly strong, the weed now covering the entire Earth will cause this rain of missiles to rebound somewhat, and so break the tremendous force of their fall. Hence Man and his handiwork will be protected.

“Nor can the frightful heat of these missiles cause any damage, because the weed destroys the phenomenon known as fire and won’t burn. So Man, buried deep beneath twenty feet of vegetation, will be untouched. Being unconscious, he will know and feel nothing. You understand?”

“But—but how do *you* know what happened a million and a half years ago?” Price almost shouted. “And how did the weed happen to appear on Earth so opportunely?”

“Nothing *happens* in the realm of Science; everything is planned,” Benton replied calmly. “Now you know why I placed metal protections around this dwelling, to save it being

destroyed in the approaching bombardment . . .”

### The Meteoric Onslaught

For the remainder of the time until within a few minutes of midnight Benton hovered between the window and his machines. Then, at a minute to twelve, he became feverishly industrious. Seeming to forget the presence of the two young people, he busied himself with a switchboard, pulling over a number of two-pole switches with swift and dexterous hands.

As a result the humming engines in the laboratory became silent. Price shivered involuntarily; Lucy crept closer to him. The atmosphere seemed indescribably eerie.

His work done, Benton stood contemplatively by the window again, gazing out at the starlit sky. Suddenly, with an emotion rare to him, he gave an exclamation and pointed.

“Here they come!” he panted. “Calculation has been justified! Look!”

Price and Lucy went to his side, craning their necks. Then their gaze became fixed as, out of the blackness of the sky appeared colossal festoons of enormous falling stars, like titanic blazing hailstones thundering to Earth—planetary matter ignited by its terrific rush through the atmosphere.

A remote and persistent drumming became evident. Some of the boulders and stones were striking the roof above their heads.

The drumming became louder, while the skies grew brighter with the hurtling bolts. As far as the eye could see, the heavens were alive with darting, criss-crossing points of blazing effulgence—tens of thousands of gigantic meteors battering Earth’s vegetation-sheathed surface. Many of the celestial rocks fell in showers of white-heat, but the instant they touched the massed plant below they expired strangely into harmless darkness.

For nearly two hours the onslaught persisted, an onslaught which must have taken place in every quarter of the globe as the Earth moved along in its orbit. Then the meteoric rain became less heavy; fewer blazing bodies streaked across the heavens, and the stars, which had been blotted out, commenced to re-appear through the blaze. Presently the drumming on the roof ceased.

“Finished!” Benton breathed, thankfully. “We passed through the tail-end of the shower, instead of the central million-mile expanse. The time proves it. Earth is saved!”

He turned away from the window and seated himself before an immense radio-apparatus. In another moment he had switched on the power and commenced to operate the huge instrument. Immediately, terrific stabs of strange Morse pervaded the laboratory, and after an interval of several seconds, answering stabs, much fainter, came from a loud-speaker sunk in the wall above the transmitter.

Benton listened with the ghost of a smile on his face, and for quite a while the exchange of messages went on. Price, who understood Morse, vainly tried to comprehend the message, only to realise it was not a code with which he was conversant. At length, the communication was over.

“My transmitter is on the roof,” Benton explained. “Queer radio, mine; rather advanced. Works on the infra-red principle.”

“But to whom were you signalling?” Price demanded. “The world is dead!”

“I know . . . but Mars is not dead,” Benton replied, quietly. “You see, I—I am a Martian.”

“A *what?*” Price and Lucy ejaculated, blankly.

“Is it so very strange? I’ll explain in a moment. I must first use the Counteracter to stop the universal paralysis. Also, I must cut out the controls of the machines which force the Martian weed to grow . . .

“Yes, I know what you’re thinking. That weed grew by induced methods—from here. But now the danger is finished. Come with me into the lounge. I have much to tell you.”

### **The Martian’s Story**

“It is, perhaps, a strange story,” Benton began, when they were all three seated. “On Mars I am a scientist, and, naturally, utterly unlike the man you see now.

“My laboratory companion on Mars discovered long ago that Earth was due to be again subjected to the terrific bombardment that ravaged her a million and a half years ago. Martians, you understand, live immeasurably long lives, and my companion was a young man when the previous bombardment of Earth occurred.

“He showed me photographic records of the cosmic event, and we decided we must save our sister planet from a second disaster. Our ultimate experiments resulted in the discovery of a band of electrical energy capable of speeding up growth by some eighteen hundred times its normal rate.

“We tested this discovery upon a fast-growing weed which flourishes in the Martian deserts, and produced colossal growth from primary spores and seeds. We also produced a process which quickly destroyed the results of our experiments and withered the plants to atoms. Then we searched for, and found, a method of inducing harmless paralysis in living organisms. So, gradually, we evolved a scheme, with the consent of our ruler, through which we might save your world from destruction.

“As the time for the second swarm of meteors approached, we fired a vast cloud of plant spores into space and guided them to Earth by directional radio impulses. Then my brain was removed from my own Martian body and transferred to a synthetic one, modelled on terrestrial lines. The study of human beings through our powerful telescopes, which also possess X-ray properties, enabled us to duplicate an Earthly body almost exactly, both in appearance and organic structure.

“So, in human form, I came to Earth, making the journey in a space-ship, and bringing with me the machinery necessary for carrying out the rest of the scheme to a successful conclusion. Once here, I had no difficulty in learning your language, being some ten times as advanced in intellect as the inhabitants of this planet, whom we of Mars have safely delivered from a terrible menace.

“Until you came, nobody suspected that I was anything but a human being, slightly eccentric, perhaps. Knowing the value of the metal on Earth, I transmuted base metals into gold and became fabulously wealthy. I engaged men to build me this place, and installed my machinery, with which I promoted the growth of the weed and created hot summers to stimulate it further. On Mars, of course, we produce our own weather . . .

“You know the rest: how the paralysis-machines were put into operation, how they stopped the war and eventually paralysed the whole of humanity. I have now cut off the waves and started the machines which will destroy the weed in a very short time. My work is finished, and I must return to Mars, to resume my natural body.”

“Hugh Benton” stopped, and for an instant both Price and Lucy saw in his eyes that queer look which the girl had detected before—the light of infinite solitude.

“You were naturally curious,” he went on. “I told you I was out to stop war. I didn’t know at that time how you might upset my plans. To all appearances I was just one of yourselves, and even when I asked you if my knowledge didn’t seem unusual you didn’t grasp the point.

“There is little else to explain. That ‘champagne’ I gave you was a powerful Martian drug. I wanted you asleep whilst I radioed my planet for further information. As I told you, I never sleep, and I very rarely eat. . . . What more is there to say?”

“I cannot believe I am sitting here talking to a Martian,” Lucy breathed.

“Why not? What am I but a distant foreigner? My name is not, of course, Hugh Benton, but Zal-Iked, First in Science of the planet Ralkan, or Mars . . . and I have something here that may repay you for my strange demands upon you.”

“Benton” dived into his pocket, and when he opened his palm there rolled on to the table two immense, glittering objects.

“Good heavens, they’re not——”

Lucy began, hardly daring to say the word.

“Yes—diamonds,” the Martian nodded. “We have thousands of them on my planet and they’re valueless; but I find they are worth something on this world, so take them with my compliments.”

“But they’re as big as hens’ eggs!” Price protested. “We can’t——”

“Don’t be absurd, my young friend. Take them; all the better if they are big. They are the least I can offer after the way I’ve behaved towards you, and they will serve to remember me by . . .

“I shall never return to Earth. A million and a half years hence the same danger will again threaten your planet; but it is up to man to fight it for himself. If he has not the intellect to do it by then . . . well, he deserves to suffer.”

### **Man’s Awakening**

Within two days the weed became a withered mass, crumbling to powder the world over. The power employed, so Benton explained, was similar to that which, used in a lesser degree, had prevented the plant from covering his home.

So, before the eyes of the two young people, now immensely wealthy for the remainder of their lives, the Earth’s face began to reappear from beneath the protective vegetation. The mighty branches wilted into the consistency of fine ash which was blown on the winds to the four corners of the Earth.

Then humanity, the counteracter having done its work, recovered from its insensibility, quite unaware of what had taken place, but utterly amazed at discovering thousands of stones and boulders in every civilised city. These, however, were soon disposed of. Only a few buildings were damaged; for the most part the stones were dumped in the sea.

With the memory of the strange paralysis hanging over mankind, for quite a time a subdued world went about his business; but it was not long before the old order of bickering, villainy and greed reared its ugly head again.

Price and Lucy took their farewell of Hugh Benton with deep regret, though he viewed their departure with that calm detachment so common to him. Back in London, they could well have believed the whole thing a dream save for the massive diamonds, which ultimately netted them a huge fortune, and the vision of countrysides the world over mangled and twisted where the Martian roots had preyed upon weaker vegetation. Buildings had stood the strain,

being immovable, but trees blowing in the wind had immediately offered that resistance that made of the plant a ruthless destroyer.

But Nature took charge of the rest, and the following Spring, after the Martian plant had disappeared, was more redundant with green than ever before.

With the coming of Summer, Price and Lucy went again for their holiday to the farmhouse in Somerset; but when they looked for the massive building on the hill they saw that it was missing. One afternoon they travelled to the actual site, and found only a patch of new grass where the building had been.

Hugh Benton—Zal-Iked, the Martian—had returned to his native planet.

[The end of *Seeds From Space* by John Russell Fearn]