

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Greener Than You Think, by Ward Moore

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

Title: Greener Than You Think

Author: Ward Moore

Release Date: January 11, 2008 [EBook #24246]

Language: English

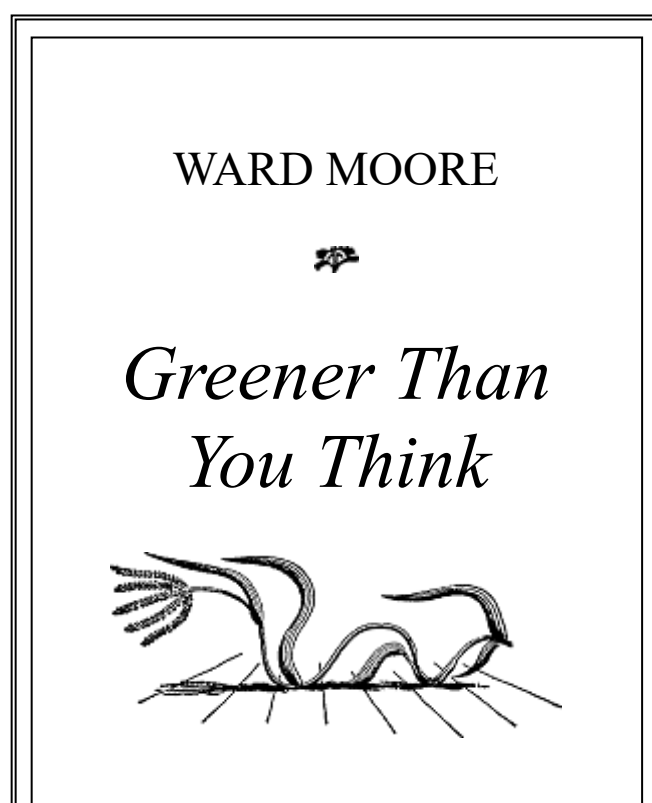
Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GREENER THAN YOU THINK ***

Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

GREENER THAN YOU THINK

Also by WARD MOORE
Breathe the Air Again



WILLIAM SLOANE ASSOCIATES, INC.
Publishers New York

Copyright, 1947, by
WARD MOORE

First Edition



MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES

Transcriber's Note:

Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. The text intentionally contains non-standard contractions, unhyphenated combination words and other informal styles and spellings, which, except for minor typographical errors, have all been transcribed as printed.

For
BECKY
1927-1937

"... I knew there was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen, and 'a babbled of green fields. 'How now, Sir John!' quoth I; 'what, man! be o' good cheer.' So 'a cried out, 'God, God, God!' three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hop'd there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet...."

Henry V

<i>One:</i>	Albert Weener Begins	1
<i>Two:</i>	Consequences of a Discovery	47
<i>Three:</i>	Man Triumphant I	99

<i>Four:</i>	Man Triumphant II	159
<i>Five:</i>	The South Pacific Sailing Discovery	255
<i>Six:</i>	Mr Weener Sees It Through	327

Neither the vegetation nor people in this book are entirely fictitious. But, reader, no person pictured here is you. With one exception. You, Sir, Miss, or Madam—whatever your country or station—are Albert Weener. As I am Albert Weener.

✂ONE✂

[1]

Albert Weener Begins

I. I ALWAYS KNEW I SHOULD WRITE A BOOK. Something to help tired minds lay aside the cares of the day. But I always say you never can tell what's around the corner till you turn it, and everyone has become so accustomed to fantastic occurrences in the last twenty one years that the inspiring and relaxing novel I used to dream about would be today as unreal as Atlantis. Instead, I find I must write of the things which have happened to me in that time.

It all began with the word itself.

"Grass. Gramina. The family Gramineae. Grasses."

"Oh," I responded doubtfully. The picture in my mind was only of a vague area in parks edged with benches for the idle.

Anyway, I was far too resentful to pay strict attention. I had set out in good faith, not for the first time in my career as a salesman, to answer an ad offering "\$50 or more daily to top producers," naturally expecting the searching onceover of an alert salesman, back to the light, behind a shinytopped desk. When youve handled as many products as I had an ad like that has the right sound. But the world is full of crackpots and some of the most pernicious are those who hoodwink unsuspecting canvassers into anticipating a sizzling deal where there is actually only a warm hope. No genuinely highclass proposition ever came from a layout without aggressiveness enough to put on some kind of front; working out of an office, for instance, not an outdated, rundown apartment in the wrong part of Hollywood.

[2]

"It's only a temporary drawback, Weener, which restricts the Metamorphizer's efficacy to grasses."

The wheeling syllables, coming in a deep voice from the middleaged woman, emphasized the absurdity of the whole business. The snuffy apartment, the unhomelike livingroom—dust and books its only furniture—the unbelievable kitchen, looking like a pictured warning to housewives, were only guffaws before the final buffoonery of discovering the J S Francis who'd inserted that promising ad to be Josephine Spencer Francis. Wrong location, wrong atmosphere, wrong gender.

Now I'm not the sort of man who would restrict women to a place in the nursery. No indeed, I believe they are in some ways just as capable as I am. If Miss Francis had been one of those wellgroomed, efficient ladies who have earned their place in the business

world without at the same time sacrificing femininity, I'm sure I would not have suffered such a pang for my lost time and carfare.

But wellgroomed and feminine were alike inapplicable adjectives. Towering above me—she was at least five foot ten while I am of average height—she strode up and down the kitchen which apparently was office and laboratory also, waving her arms, speaking too exuberantly, the antithesis of moderation and restraint. She was an aggregate of cylinders, big and small. Her shapeless legs were columns with large flatheeled shoes for their bases, supporting the inverted pediment of great hips. Her too short, greasespotted skirt was a mighty barrel and on it was placed the tremendous drum of her torso.

"A little more work," she rumbled, "a few interesting problems solved, and the Metamorphizer will change the basic structure of any plant inoculated with it."

Large as she was, her face and head were disproportionately big. Her eyes I can only speak of as enormous. I dare say there are some who would have called them beautiful. In moments of intensity they bored into mine and held them till I felt quite uncomfortable.

"Think of what this discovery means," she urged me. "Think of it, Weener. Plants will be capable of making use of anything within reach. Understand, Weener, anything. Rocks, quartz, decomposed granite—anything."

[3]

She took a gold victorian toothpick from the pocket of her mannish jacket and used it energetically. I shuddered. "Unfortunately," she went on, a little indistinctly, "unfortunately, I lack resources for further experiment right now—"

This too, I thought despairingly. A slight cash investment—just enough to get production started—how many wishful times Ive heard it. I was a salesman, not a sucker, and anyway I was for the moment without liquid capital.

"It will change the face of the world, Weener. No more usedup areas, no more frantic scrabbling for the few bits of naturally rich ground, no more struggle to get artificial fertilizers to wornout soil in the face of ignorance and poverty."

She thrust out a hand—surprisingly finely and economically molded, barely missing a piledup heap of dishes crowned by a flowerpot trailing droopy tendrils. Excitedly she paced the floor largely taken up by jars and flats of vegetation, some green and flourishing, others gray and sickly, all constricting her movements as did the stove supporting a glass tank, robbed of the goldfish which should rightfully have gaped against its sides and containing instead some slimy growth topped by a bubbling brown scum. I simply couldnt understand how any woman could so far oppose what must have been her natural instinct as to live and work in such a slatternly place. It wasnt just her kitchen which was disordered and dirty; her person too was slovenly and possibly unclean. The lank gray hair swishing about her ears was dark, perhaps from vigor, but more likely from frugality with soap and water. Her massive, heavychinned face was untouched by makeup and suggested an equal innocence of other attentions.

"Fertilizers! Poo! Expedients, Weener—miserable, makeshift expedients!" Her unavoidable eyes bit into mine. "What is a fertilizer? A tidbit, a pap, a lollypop. Indians use fish; Chinese, nightsoil; agricultural chemists concoct tasty tonics of nitrogen and potash—where's your progress? Putting a mechanical whip on a buggy instead of inventing an internal combustion engine. Ive gone directly to the heart of the matter. Like Watt. Like Maxwell. Like Almroth Wright. No use being held back because youve only poor materials to work with—leap ahead with imagination. Change the plant itself, Weener, change the plant itself!"

[4]

It was no longer politeness which held me. If I could have freed myself from her eyes I would have escaped thankfully.

"Nourish'm on anything," she shouted, rubbing the round end of the toothpick vigorously into her ear. "Sow a barren waste, a worthless slagheap with lifegiving corn or wheat, inoculate the plants with the Metamorphizer—and you have a crop fatter than Iowa's or the Ukraine's best. The whole world will teem with abundance."

Perhaps—but what was the sales angle? Where did I come in? I didnt know a dandelion from a toadstool and was quite content to keep my distance from nature. Had she inserted the ad merely to lure a listener? Her whole procedure was irregular: not a word about territories and commissions. If I could bring her to the point of mentioning the necessary investment, maybe I could get away gracefully. "You said you were stuck," I prompted, resolved to get the painful interview over with.

"Stuck? Stuck? Oh—money to perfect the Metamorphizer. Luckily it will do it itself."

"I don't catch."

"Look about you—what do you see?"

I glanced around and started to say, a measuring glass on a dirty plate next to half a cold fried egg, but she stopped me with a sweep of her arm which came dangerously close to the flasks and retorts—all holding dirtycolored liquids—which cluttered the sink. "No, no. I mean outside."

I couldnt see outside, because instead of a window I was facing a sickly leaf unaccountably preserved in a jar of alcohol. I said nothing.

"Metaphorically, of course. Wheatfields. Acres and acres of wheat. Bread, wheat, a grass. And cornfields. Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois—not a state in the Union without corn. Milo, oats, sorghum, rye—all grasses. And the Metamorphizer will work on all of them."

[5]

I'm always a man with an open mind. She might—it was just possible—she might have something afterall. But could I work with her? Go out in the sticks and talk to farmers; learn to sit on fence rails and whittle, asking after crops as if they were of interest to me? No, no ... it was fantastic, out of the question.

A different, more practical setup now.... At least there would have been no lack of prospects, if you wanted to go miles from civilization to find them; no answers like We never read magazines, thank you. Of course it was hardly believable a woman without interest in keeping herself presentable could invent any such fabulous product, but there was a bare chance of making a few sales just on the idea.

The idea. It suddenly struck me she had the whole thing backwards. Grasses, she said, and went on about wheat and corn and going out to the rubes. Southern California was dotted with lawns, wasnt it? Why rush around to the hinterland when there was a big territory next door? And undoubtedly a better one?

"Revive your old tired lawn," I improvised. "No manures, fuss, cuss, or muss. One shot of the Meta—one shot of Francis' Amazing Discovery and your lawn springs to new life."

"Lawns? Nonsense!" she snorted, rudely, I thought. "Do you think Ive spent years in order to satisfy suburban vanity? Lawns indeed!"

"Lawns indeed, Miss Francis," I retorted with some spirit. "I'm a salesman and I know something about marketing a product. Yours should be sold to householders for their lawns."

"Should it? Well, I say it shouldnt. Listen to me: there are two ways of making a discovery. One is to cut off a cat's hindleg. The discovery is then made that a cat with one leg cut off has three legs. Hah!

"The other way is to find out your need and then search for a method of filling it. My work is with plants. I don't take a daisy and see if I can make it produce a red and black

[6]

petaled monstrosity. If I did I'd be a fashionable horticulturist, delighted to encourage imbeciles to grow grass in a desert.

"My method is the second one. I want no more backward countries; no more famines in India or China; no more dustbowls; no more wars, depressions, hungry children. For this I produced the Metamorphizer—to make not two blades of grass grow where one sprouted before, but whole fields flourish where only rocks and sandpiles lay.

"No, Weener, it won't do—I can't trade in my vision as a downpayment on a means to encourage a waste of ground, seed and water. You may think I lost such rights when I thought up the name Metamorphizer to appeal on the popular level, but there's a difference."

That was a clincher. Anyone who believed Metamorphizer had salesappeal just wasn't all there. But why should I disillusion her and wound her pride? Down underneath her rough exterior I supposed she could be as sensitive as I; and I hope I am not without chivalry.

I said nothing, but of course her interdiction of the only possibility killed any weakening inclination. And yet ... yet.... Afterall, I had to have *something*....

"All right, Weener. This pump—" she produced miraculously from the jumble an unwieldy engine dragging a long and tangling tail of hose behind it, the end lost among mementos of unfinished meals—"this pump is full of the Metamorphizer, enough to inoculate a hundred and fifty acres when added in proper proportion to the irrigating water. I have a table worked out to show you about that. The tank holds five gallons; get \$50 a gallon—a dollar and a half an acre and keep ten percent for yourself. Be sure to return the pump every night."

I had to say for her that when she got down to business she didn't waste any words. Perhaps this contrasting directness so startled me I was roped in before I could refuse. On the other hand, of course, I would be helping out someone who needed my assistance badly, since she couldn't, with all the obvious factors against her, be having a very easy time. Sometimes it is advisable to temper business judgment with kindness. [7]

Her first offer was ridiculous in its assumption that a salesman's talent, skill and effort were worth only a miserable ten percent, as though I were a literary agent with something a cinch to sell. I began to feel more at home as we ironed out the details and I brought the knowledge acquired with much hard work and painful experience into the bargaining. Fifty percent I wanted and fifty percent I finally got by demanding seventyfive. She became as interested in the contest as she had been before in benefits to humanity and I perceived a keen mind under all her eccentricity.

I can't truthfully say I got to like her, but I reconciled myself and eventually was on my way with the pump—a trifling weight to Miss Francis, judging by the way she handled it, but uncomfortably heavy to me—strapped to my back and ten feet of recalcitrant hose coiled round my shoulder. She turned her imperious eyes on me again and repeated for the fourth or fifth time the instructions for applying, as though I were less intelligent than she. I went out through the barren livingroom and took a backward glance at the scaling stucco walls of the apartmenthouse, shaking my head. It was a queer place for Albert Weener, the crackerjack salesman who had once led his team in a national contest to put over a threepiece aluminum deal, to be working out of. And for a woman. And for such a woman....

2. **E**VERYTHING IS FOR THE BEST, IS MY PHILOSOPHY and Make your cross your crutch is a good thought to hold; so I reminded myself that it takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown and no one sees the bright side of things if he wears dark glasses. Since it takes all kinds to make a world and Josephine Spencer Francis was one of those kinds, wasn't it only reasonable to suppose there were other kinds who would buy the stuff she'd invented? The only way to sell something is first to

sell yourself and I piously went over the virtues of the Metamorphizer in my mind. What if by its very nature there could be no repeat business? I wasn't tying myself to it for life.

[8]

All that remained was to find myself a customer. I tried to recall the location of the nearest rural territory. San Fernando valley, probably—a long, tiresome trip. And expensive, unless I wished to demean myself by thumbing rides—a difficult thing to do, burdened as I was by the pump. If she hadn't balked unreasonably about putting the stuff on lawns, I'd have prospects right at hand.

I was suddenly lawnconscious. There was probably not a Los Angeles street I hadn't covered at some time—magazines, vacuums, old gold, nearylons—and I must have been aware of green spaces before most of the houses, but now for the first time I saw lawns. Neat, sharply confined, smoothshaven lawns. Sagging, slipping, eager-to-keep-up-appearances but fighting-a-losing-game lawns. Ragged, weedy, dissolute lawns. Halfbare, repulsively crippled, hummocky lawns. Bright lawns, insistent on former respectability and trimness; yellow and gray lawns, touched with the craziness of age, quite beyond all interest in looks, content to doze easily in the sun. If Miss Francis' mixture was on the upandup and she hadn't introduced a perfectly unreasonable condition—why, I couldn't miss.

On the other hand, I thought suddenly, I'm the salesman, not she. It was up to me as a practical man to determine where and how I could sell to the best advantage. With sudden resolution I walked over a twinkling greensward and rang the bell.

"Good afternoon, madam. I can see from your garden you're a lady who's interested in keeping it lovely."

"Not my garden and Mrs Smith's not home." The door shut. Not gently.

The next house had no lawn at all, but was fronted with a rank growth of ivy. I felt no one had a right to plant ivy when I was selling something effective only on the family Gramineae. I tramped over the ivy hard and rang the doorbell on the other side.

"Good afternoon, madam. I can see from the appearance of your lawn you're a lady who really cares for her garden. I'm introducing to a restricted group—just one or two in each neighborhood—a new preparation, an astounding discovery by a renowned scientist which will make your grass twice as green and many times as vigorous upon one application, without the aid of anything else, natural or artificial."

[9]

"My gardener takes care of all that."

"But, madam—"

"There is a city ordinance against unlicensed solicitors. Have you a license, young man?"

After the fifth refusal I began to think less unkindly of Miss Francis' idea of selling the stuff to farmers and to wonder what was wrong with my technique. After some understandable hesitation—for I don't make a practice of being odd or conspicuous—I sat down on the curb to think. Besides, the pump was getting wearisomely heavy. I couldn't decide exactly what was unsatisfactory in my routine. The stuff had neither been used nor advertised, so there could be no prejudice against it; no one had yet allowed me to get so far as quoting price, so it wasn't too expensive.

The process of elimination brought me to the absurd conclusion that the fault must lie in me. Not in my appearance, I reasoned, for I was a personable young man, a little over thirty at the time, with no obvious defects a few visits to the dentist wouldn't have removed. Of course I do have an unfortunate skin condition, but such a thing's an act of God, as the lawyers say, and people must take me as I am.

No, it wasn't my appearance ... or was it? That monstrously outsized pump! Who wanted to listen to a salestalk from a man apparently prepared for an immediate gasattack? There is little use in pressing your trousers between two boards under the mattress if you

discount such neatness with the accouterment of an invading Martian. I uncoiled the hose from my shoulder and eased the incubus from my back. Leaving them visible from the corner of my eye, I crossed the most miserable lawn yet encountered.

It was composed of what I since learned is Bermuda, a plant most Southern Californians call—with many profane prefixes—devilgrass. It was yellow, the dirty, grayish yellow of moldy straw; and bald, scuffed spots immodestly exposed the cracked, parched earth beneath. Over the walk, interwoven stolons had been felted down into a ragged mat, repellent alike to foot and eye. Perversely, onto what had once been flowerbeds, the runners crept erect, bristling spines showing faintly green on top—the only live color in the miserable expanse. Where the grass had gone to seed there were patches of muddy purple, patches which enhanced rather than relieved the diseased color of the whole and emphasized the dying air of the yard. It was a neglected, unvalued thing; an odious appendage, a mistake never rectified.

[10]

"Madam," I began, "your lawn is deplorable." There was no use giving her the line about I-can-see-you-are-a-lady-who-cares-for-lovely-things. Anyway, now the pump was off my back I felt reckless. I threw the whole book of salesmanship away. "It's the most neglected lawn in the neighborhood. It is, madam, I'm sorry to say, no less than a disgrace."

She was a woman beyond the age of childbearing, her dress revealing the outlines of her corset, and she looked at me coldly through rimless glassing biting the bridge of her inadequate nose. "So what?" she asked.

"Madam," I said, "for ten dollars I can make this the finest lawn in the block, the pride of your family and the envy of your neighbors."

"I can do better things with ten dollars than spend it on a bunch of dead grass."

Gratefully I knew I had her then and was glad I hadn't weakly given in to an impulse to carry out the crackpot's original instructions. When they start to argue, my motto is, they're sold. I took a good breath and wound up for the clincher.

I won't say she was an easy sale, but after all I'm a psychologist; I found all her weak points and touched them expertly. Even so, she made me cut my price in half, leaving me only twofifty according to my agreement with Miss Francis, but it was an icebreaker.

I got the pump and hose, collecting at the same time an audience of brats who assisted me by shouting, "What ya goin a do, mister?" "What's at thing for, mister?" "You goin a water Mrs Dinkman's frontyard, mister?" "Do your teeth awwis look so funny, mister? My grampa takes his teeth out at night and puts'm in a glass of water. Do you take out your teeth at night, mister?" "You goin a put that stuff on our garden too, mister?" "Hay, Shirley—come on over and see the funnylooking man who's fixing up Dinkman's yard."

[11]

They were untiring, shrilling their questions, exclamations and comments, completely driving from my mind the details of the actual application of the Metamorphizer. Anyway, Miss Francis had been concerned with putting it in the irrigation water—which didn't apply in this case. I thought a moment. A gallon was enough for thirty acres; half a pint should suffice for this—more than suffice. Irrigation water, nonsense—I'd squirt it on and tell the woman to hose it down afterward—that'd be the same as putting it in the water, wouldn't it?

To come to this practical conclusion under the brunt of the children's assault was a remarkable feat. As I dribbled the stuff over the sorry devilgrass they kicked the pump—and my shins—mimicking my actions, tripping me as they skipped under my legs, getting wet with the Metamorphizer—I hoped with mutually deleterious effect—and generally making me more than ever thankful for my bachelor condition.

Twofifty, I thought, angrily squirting a fine mist at a particularly dreary spot—and it isn't even selling. Manual labor. Working with my hands. I might as well be a gardener.

College training. Wide experience. Alert and aggressive. In order to dribble stuff smelling sickeningly of carnations on a wasted yard. I coiled up my hose disgustedly and collected a reluctant five dollars.

"It don't look any different," commented Mrs Dinkman dubiously.

"Madam, Professor Francis' remarkable discovery works miracles, but not in the twinkling of an eye. In a week you'll see for yourself, provided of course you wet it down properly."

"In a week you'll be far gone with my five dollars," diagnosed Mrs Dinkman.

[12]

While this might be superficially true, it was an unfair and unkind thing to say, and it wounded me. I reached into my pocket and drew out an old card—one printed before I'd had an irreconcilable difference with the firm employing me at the time.

"I can always be reached at this address, Mrs Dinkman," I said, "should you have any cause for dissatisfaction—which I'm sure is quite impossible. Besides, I shall be daily in this district demonstrating the value of Dr Francis' Lawn Tonic."

That was certainly true; unless I made a better connection. Degradating manual labor or not, I intended to sell as many local people as possible on the strength of having found a weak spot in the wall of salesresistance before the effects of the Metamorphizer became apparent. For, in strict confidence, and despite its being an undesirable negative attitude, I was a little dubious that those effects—or lack of them—would stimulate further sales.

3.

MY ALARMCLOCK, AS IT DID EVERY MORNING, Sundays included, rang at sixthirty, for I am a man of habit. I turned it off, remembering instantly I had given Miss Francis neither her pump nor her share of the sale. Of course it was more convenient and timesaving to bring them both together and I was sure she didnt expect me to follow instructions to the letter, like an officeboy, any more in these matters than she had in her restriction to agricultural use.

Still, it was remiss of me. The fact is, I had spent her money as well as my own—not on dissipation, I hasten to say, but on dinner and an installment of my roomrent. This was embarrassing, but I looked upon it merely as an advance—quite as if I'd had the customary drawingaccount—to be charged against my next commissions. My acceptance of the advance merely indicated my faith in the future of the Metamorphizer.

I dissolved a yeastcake in a glass of water; it's very healthy and I'd heard it alleviated dermal irritations. Lathering my face, I glanced over the list culled from the dictionary and stuck in the mirror the night before, for I have never been too tired to improve my mind. By this easy method of increasing my vocabulary I had progressed, at the time, down to the letter K.

[13]

While drinking my coffee—never more than two cups—it was my custom to read and digest stock and bond quotations, for though I had no investments—the only time I had been able to take a flurry there was an unforeseen recession in the market—I thought a man who didnt keep up with trends and conditions unfitted for a place in the businessworld. Besides, I didnt expect to be straitened indefinitely and I believed in being ready to take proper advantage of opportunity when it came.

As a man may devote the graver part of his mind to a subject and then turn for relaxation to a lighter aspect, so I had for years been interested in a stock called Consolidated Pemmican and Allied Concentrates. It wasnt a highpriced issue, nor were its fluctuations startling. For six months of the year, year in and year out, it would be quoted at 1/16 of a cent a share; for the other six months it stood at 1/8. I didnt know what pemmican was and I didnt particularly care, but if a man could invest at 1/16 he could double his money overnight when it rose to 1/8. Then he could reverse the process by selling before it went down and so snowball into fortune. It was a daydream, but a harmless one.

Satisfying myself Consolidated Pemmican was bumbling along at its low level, I reluctantly prepared to resume Miss Francis' pump. It seemed less heavy as I wound the hose over my shoulder and I felt this wasn't due to the negligible quantity I'd expended on Mrs Dinkman's grass. I just knew I was going to have a successful day. I had to.

In moments of fancy I often think a salesman is more truly a creative artist than many of those who arrogate the title to themselves. He uses words, on one hand, and the receptivity of prospects on the other, to mold a cohesive and satisfying whole, a work of Art, signed and dated on the dotted line. Like any such work, the creation implies thoughtful and careful preparation. So it was that I got off the bus, polishing a new salestalk to fit the changed situation. "One of your neighbors ..." "I have just applied ..." I sneered my way past those houses refusing my services the day before; they couldn't have the Metamorphizer at any price now. Then it hit my eyes.

[14]

Mrs Dinkman's lawn, I mean.

The one so neglected, ailing and yellow only yesterday.

It wasn't sad and sickly now. The most enthusiastic homeowner wouldn't have disdained it. There wasn't a single bare spot visible in the whole lush, healthy expanse. And it was green. Green. Not just here and there, but over every inch of soft, undulating surface; a pale applegreen where the blades waved to expose its underparts and a rich, dazzling emerald on top. Even the runners, sinuously encroaching upon the sidewalk, were deeply virescent.

The Metamorphizer worked.

The Metamorphizer not only worked, but it worked with unbelievable rapidity. Overnight. I knew nothing about the speed at which ordinary fertilizers, plant stimulants or hormones took hold, but commonsense told me nothing like this had ever happened so quickly. I had been indulging in a little legitimate puffery in saying the inoculant worked miracles, but if anything that had been an understatement. It just went to show how impossible it is for a real salesman to be too enthusiastic.

Nerves in knees and fingers quivering, I walked over to join the group curiously inspecting the translated lawn. I, I had done this; out of the most miserable I'd made the loveliest—and for a paltry five dollars. I tried to recapture the memory of what it had looked like in order to relish the contrast more, but it was impossible; the vivid present blotted out the decayed past completely.

"Overnight," someone said. "Yessir, just overnight. Wouldn't of believed it if I hadn't noticed just yesterday how much worse an the city dump it looked."

"Bet at stuff's ten inches high."

"Brother, you can say that again. Foot'd be closer."

"Anyhow it's uh fattestlookin grass I seen sence I lef Texas."

[15]

"An the greenest. Guess I never did see such a green before."

While they exclaimed about the beauty and vigor of the growth, my mind was racing in high along practical lines. Achievement isn't worth much unless you can harness it, and in today's triumph I saw tomorrow's benefit. No more canvassing with a pump undignifiedly on my back, no more manual labor; no, bold as the thought was, not even any more direct selling for me. This was big, too big to be approached in any cockroach, build-up-slowly-from-the-bottom way. It was a real top deal, in a class with nylon or jukeboxes or bubblegum. You could smell the money in it.

First of all I'd have to tie Josephine Francis down with an ironclad contract. Agents; dealerships; distributors and a general salesmanager, Albert Weener, at the top. Incorporate. Get it all down in black and white and signed by Miss Francis right away.

For her own good. An idealistic scientist, a frail woman, protect her from the vultures who'd try to rob her as soon as they saw what the Metamorphizer would do. Such a woman wouldn't have any business sense. I'd see she got a comfortable living out of it and free her from responsibility. Then she could potter around all she liked.

Incorporate. Interest big money. Put it on a nationwide basis. A cut for the general salesmanager on every sale. Besides stock. Take the patent in the company's name. In six months I'd be on my way to being a millionaire. I had certainly been right up on my toes in picking the Metamorphizer as a winner in spite of Miss Francis' kitchen and her lack of aggressiveness. Instinct, the unerring instinct of a wideawake salesman for the right product—and for the right market. I mustn't forget that. Had I been content with her original limitation I'd still be bumbling around trying to interest Farmer Hicks in some Metamorphizer for his hay.

"Ja notice how thick it was?"

"Well, that's Bermuda for you. Tell me they actually plant it on purpose in Florida."

"No kiddin?"

"Yessir. Know one thing—even if it looks pretty right now, I wouldn't want that stuff on my place. Have to cut it every day."

[16]

"Bet ya. Toughlookin too. I rather take my exercise in bed."

That's an angle, I thought—have to get old lady Francis to modify her formula or something. Else we'll never get rich. Slow down the rate of growth, dilute it—ought to be more profitable too.... Have to find out how cheaply the inoculant can be produced—no more inefficient hand methods.... Of course the fastness of growth wouldn't affect the sale to farmers—help it in fact. No doubt she'd had more than I originally thought in that aspect, I conceded generously. We could let them apply it themselves ... mailorder advertising ... cut costs that way.... Think of clover and alfalfa—or weren't they grasses? Anyway, imagine hay or wheat as tall as Iowa corn and corn higher than a smalltown cityhall! Fortune—there'd be a dozen fortunes in it.

I began perspiring. The deal was getting bigger and bigger. It wasn't just a simple matter of cutting in on a good thing. All the angles, which were multiplying at a tremendous rate, had to be covered before I saw Miss Francis again; I daren't miss any bets. I needed a staff of agricultural experts—anyway someone who could cover the scientific side. Whatever happened to my freshman chemistry? And a mob of lawyers; you'd have to plug every loophole—tight. But here I was without a financial resource—couldn't hire a ditchdigger, much less the highpriced talent I needed—and someone else might get a brainstorm when he saw the lawn and beat me to it. I visioned myself cheated of my million....

Yes ... a really fast worker—some unethical promoter willing to stoop to devious methods—might pass at any moment and grasp the possibilities, have Miss Francis signed up before I'd even got the deal straight in my mind. How could he miss, seeing this lawn? Splendid, magnificent, beautiful. No one would ever call this stuff devilgrass—angelgrass would be more appropriate to the implications of such a heavenly green. Millions in it—simply millions....

"Say—aren't you the fellow put this stuff on?"

[17]

Halfadozen vacant faces gaped at me, the burdening pump, the caudal hose. Curiosity, interest, imbecile amusement argued in their expression with the respect due the worker of the transformation; it was the sort of look connected with salesresistance of the most obstinate kind. They distracted me from thinking things through.

"Miz Dinkman's sure looking for you. Says she's going to sue you."

Here was an unfortunate development, an angle to end all angles. Unfavorable publicity, the abortifacient of new enterprises, would mean you could hardly give the stuff away. My imagination raced through columns of newsprint in which the Metamorphizer was made the butt of reporters' humor. Mrs Dinkman's ire would have to be placated, bought off. Perhaps I'd better discuss developments with Miss Francis right away, afterall.

Whatever I decided, it was advisable for me to leave this vicinity. I was in no financial position to soothe Mrs Dinkman and it was dubious, in view of her attitude, whether it would be possible to sell any more in the immediate neighborhood. Probably a new territory was the answer to my problem; a few sales would give me both cash in hand and time to think.

While I hesitated, Mrs Dinkman, belligerency dancing like a sparkling aura about her, came out of her garage with a rusty, rattling lawnmower. I'm no authority on gardentools, but this creaking, rickety machine was clearly no match for the lusty growth. The audience felt so too, and there was a stir of sporting interest as they settled down to watch the contest.

Determination was implicit in the sharply unnatural lines of her corset and the firm set of her glasses as she charged into the gently swaying runners. The wheels turned rebelliously, the mower bit, its rusty blades grated against the knife, something clanked forcibly and the machine stopped. Mrs. Dinkman pushed, her back arched with effort—the mower didnt budge. She pulled it back. It whirred gratefully; the clanking stopped and she tried again. This time it chewed a handful of grass from the edge, found it distasteful and quit once more.

[18]

"Anybody know how to make this damn thing work?" Mrs Dinkman asked exasperatedly.

"Needs oil" was helpfully volunteered.

She retired into the garage and returned with a lopsided oilcan. "Oil it," she commanded regally. The helpful one reluctantly pressed his thumb against the wry bottom of the can, aiming the twisted spout at odd parts of the mower. "I dunno," he commented.

"I don't either," said Mrs Dinkman. "You—Greener, Weener—whatever your name is!"

There was no possibility of evasion. "Yes, mam?"

"You made this stuff grow; now you can cut it down."

Uncouth guffaws from the watching idiots.

"Mrs Dinkman, I—"

"Get behind that lawnmower, young man, if you don't want to be involved in a lawsuit."

I wasnt afraid of such a consequence in itself, having at the moment nothing to attach, but I thought of Miss Francis and future sales and that impalpable thing known as "goodwill." "Yes, mam," I repeated.

I discarded pump and hose to move reluctantly toward the mower. Under my feet I felt the springiness of the grass; was it pure fancy—or did it truly differ in quality from the lawns I'd trod so indifferently the day before?

I took the handle. If oiling had improved the machine, its previous efficiency must have been slight. It went shakily over the first inch of grass and then, as it had for Mrs Dinkman, it stopped for me.

By now the spectators had increased to a small crowd and their dull humor had taken the form of cheerfully offering much gratuitous advice. "Tie into it, Slim—build up the old muscle." "Back her up and take a good run." "Go home an do some settinup exercises—come back next year." "Got to put the old back behind it, Bud—give her the gas." "Need

a decent mower—no use trying to cut stuff like that with an antique." "Yeah—get a good mower—one made since the Civil War." "No one around here got an honest god lawnmower?"

[19]

The last query evidently nettled local pride, for soon a blithe, beamshouldered little man trundled up a shiny, rubbertired machine. "This'll do the business," he announced confidently as I relinquished the spotlight to him with understandable readiness. "It's a regular jimdandy."

It certainly was. The devilgrass came irreverently above the wheels and flowed with graceful inquisitiveness over the blades, but the brisk little man pushed heartily and the mechanism revolved with a barely audible clicking. It did not balk, complain or hesitate. Cleanly severed ends of grass whirled into the air and floated down on the neat smooth swath left behind. Everyone smiled relievedly at the jimdandy's triumph and my sigh was loudest and most heartfelt. I edged away as unobtrusively as I could.

4. I HAVE NO SYMPATHY WITH WEAKLINGS WHO complain of the cards being stacked, but it did seem as though fate were dealing unkindly with me. Here was a good proposition, coming just at the time I needed it most and it was turning bad rapidly. Walking the short distance to Miss Francis' I was unable to settle my mind, to strike a mental balancesheet. There was money; there had to be money—lots and lots of it—in the Metamorphizer, but it was possible there was trouble—lots and lots of it—also. The thing was, well, dangerous. What was the use of expending ability in selling something which could have kickbacks acting as deterrents to future sales? Of course a man had to take risks....

The door, after a properly prudent hesitation, clicked brokenly. Miss Francis looked as though she'd added insomnia to her other abstentions, otherwise she had not changed, even to her skirt and the smudge on her left nostril. "If you've come about the icebox you're a week late. I fixed it myself," she greeted me gruffly.

"Weener," I reminded her, "Albert Weener—remember? I'm selling—that is, I'm going to sell the product you invented to make plants eat anything."

[20]

"Oh. Weener—yes." She produced the toothpick and scratched her chin with it. "About the Metamorphizer." She paused and rubbed her elbow. "A mistake, I'm afraid. An error."

Aha, I thought, a new deal. Someone's offered to back her. Steal her brainchild, negate all my efforts to make her independent and cheat me of the reward of my spadework. You wouldn't think of her as a frail credulous woman, easily taken in by the first smooth talker, but a woman is a woman after all.

"Look, Miss Francis," I argued, "you've got a big thing here, a great thing. The possibilities are practically unlimited. Of course you'll have to have a manager to put it across—an executive, a man with business experience—someone who can tap the great reservoir of buying power by the conviction of a new need. Organize a sales campaign; rationalize production. Put the whole thing on a commercial basis. For all this you need a man who has contacted the public on every level—preferably doortodoor and with a varied background."

She strode past the stove, which had gathered new accretions during the night and looked in the cloudy mirror as though searching for a misplaced thought. "No doubt, Weener, no doubt. But before all these romantically streamlined things eventuate there must be a hiatus. In my haste I overlooked a detail yesterday, trivial maybe—perhaps vital. I should never have let you start out so soon."

This was bad; I was struggling now for my job and for the future of the Metamorphizer. "Miss Francis, I don't know what you mean by mistakes or trivial details or how I could have started out too soon, but whatever the trouble is I'm sure it can be smoothed out

easily. Sometimes, you know, obstacles which appear tremendous prove to be nothing at all in experienced hands. I myself have had occasion to put things right for a number of different concerns. Really, Miss Francis, you mustnt let opportunity slip through your fingers. Believe me, I know what a big thing your discovery is—I've seen what it does."

[21]

She turned those too sharp eyes on me uncomfortably. "Ah," she said, "so soon?"

"Well," I began, "it certainly acted quickly ..."

I stopped when I saw she wasnt hearing me. She sat down in the only empty chair and drummed her fingers against big white teeth. "Even under a microscope," she muttered, "no perceptible reaction for fortyeight hours. Laboratory conditions? Or my own idiocy? But I approximated ..." Her voice trailed off and for a full minute the absolute silence of the kitchen was broken only by the melodramatic dripping of a tap.

She made an effort to pull herself together and addressed me in her old abrupt way. "Corn or wheat?"

"Ay?"

"You said youve seen what it does. I asked you if you had applied it to corn or wheat—or what?"

She was looking at me so fixedly I had a slight difficulty in putting my words in good order. "It was neither, mam. I applied some of the stuff to a lawn—"

"A *lawn*, Weener?"

"Y-yes, mam."

"But I said—"

"General instructions, Miss Francis. I'm sure you didnt mean to tie my hands."

Another long silence.

"No, Weener—I didnt mean to tie your hands."

"Well, as I was saying, I applied some of the stuff to a lawn. Exactly according to your instructions—"

"In the irrigation water?"

"Well, not precisely. But just as good, I assure you."

"Go on."

"A terrible lawn. All shot. Last night. This morning—"

"Stop. What kind of grass? Or don't you know?"

"Of course I know," I answered indignantly. Did she think I was an idiot? "It was devilgrass."

"Ah." She rubbed the back of her hand against her singularly smooth cheek. "*Bermuda. Cynodon dactylon*. Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could I have been so blind? Did I think only the corn would be affected and not the weeds in the furrows? Or that something like this might not happen?"

[22]

I didnt feel like wasting any more time listening to her soliloquy. "This morning," I continued, "it was as green—"

"All right, Weener, spare me your poetry. Show it to me."

"Well now, Miss Francis ..." I wanted, understandably enough, to discuss future arrangements before she saw Dinkman's lawn.

"Immediately, Weener."

When dealing with childish persons you have to cater to their whims. I rid myself of the pump—I'd never dreamed I'd be reluctant to part with the monster—while she made perfunctory and unconvincing motions to fit herself for the street. Of course she neither washed nor madeup, but she peered in the glass argumentatively, pulled her jacket down decisively, threw her shoulders back to raise it askew again and gave the swirl of hair a halfhearted pat.

"I'd like to go over the matter of organizing—"

"Not now."

I was naturally reluctant to be seen on the street with so conspicuous a figure, but I could hardly escape. I tried to match her swinging stride, but as she was at least six inches taller I had to give a sort of skip between steps, which was less than dignified. Searching my mind to find a tactful approach again to the subject of proper distribution of the Metamorphizer, I felt my opportunity slipping away every moment. She, on her part, was silent and so abstracted that I often had to put out a guiding hand to avert collision with other pedestrians or stationary objects.

I doubt if I'd been gone from Mrs Dinkman's threequarters of an hour. I had left a small group excited at the free show consequent upon the too successful beautification of a local eyesore; I returned to a sizable crowd viewing an impressive phenomenon. The homely levity had vanished; no one shouted jovial advice. Opinions and comments passed in whispers accompanied by furtive glances toward the lawn, as though it were sentient and might be offended by rude speculation. As we pushed through the bystanders I was suddenly aware of their cautious avoidance of contact with the grass itself. The nearest onlookers stood a respectful yard back and when unbalanced by the push of those behind went through such antics to avoid treading on it, while at the same time preserving the convention of innocence of any taboo that they frequently pivoted and pirouetted on one foot in an awkward ballet. The very hiding of their inhibition emphasized the new awesomeness of the grass; it was no longer to be lightly approached or frivolously treated.

[23]

Now I am not what is generally called a man of religious sensibilities, having long ago discarded belief in the supernatural; and I am not overcome at odd moments by mystical feelings. Furthermore I had been intimate with this particular patch of vegetation for some eighteen hours. I had viewed its decaying state; I had injected life into it; I had seen it in the first flush of resurrection. In spite of all this, I too fell under the spell of the grass and knew something compounded of wonder and apprehension.

The neatly cut swaths of the little man with the jimdandy mower came to a dramatic end in the middle of the yard. Beyond this shorn portion the grass rose in a threatening crest, taller than a man's knees; green, aloof and derisive. But it was not this forbidding sight which gave me such a queer turn. It was the mown part; for I recalled how the brisk man's machine had cut close and left behind short, crisp stems. Now this piece was almost as high as when I'd first seen it—grown faster in an hour than ordinary grass in a month.

5. I STOLE A LOOK AT MISS FRANCIS TO SEE HOW SHE was taking the sight, but there was no emotion visible on her face. The toothpick was once more in play and the luminous eyes fixed straight ahead. Her legs were spread apart and she seemed firmly in position for hours to come, as though she would wait for the grass to exhaust its phenomenal growth.

[24]

"Why did they quit cutting?" I asked the man standing beside me.

"Mower give out—dulled the blades so they wouldnt cut no more."

"Going to give up and let it grow?"

"Hell, no. Sent for a gardener with a powermower. Big one. Cut anything. Ought to be here now."

He was, too, honking the crowd from the driveway. Mrs Dinkman was with him, looking at once indignant, persecuted, uncomfortable and selfrighteous. It was evident they had failed to reach any agreement.

The gardener slammed the door of the senescent truck with vehement lack of affection. "I cut lots a devilgrass, lady, but I won't tie into this overgrown stuff at that price. You got no right to expect it. I know what's fair and it's not reasonable to count on me cutting this like it was an ordinary lawn. You know yourself it isn't fair."

"I'll give you ten dollars and that's my last word."

"Listen, lady, when I get through this job I'll have to take my mower apart and have it resharpened. You think I can afford to do that for a tendollar job?"

"Ten dollars," repeated Mrs Dinkman firmly.

The gardener appealed to the gallery. "Listen, folks: now I ask you—is this fair? I'm willing to be reasonable. I understand this lady's in trouble and I'm willing to help, but I can't do a twentyfivedollar job for ten bucks, can I?"

It was doubtful if the observers were particularly concerned with justice; what they desired was action, swift and drastic. A general resentment at being balked of their amusement was manifest in murmurs of "Go ahead, do it." "What's the matter with you?" "Don't be dumb—do it for nothing—you'll get plenty business out of it." They appealed to his nobler and baser natures, but he remained adamant.

Not to be balked by his churlishness, they passed a hat and collected \$8.67, which I thought a remarkably generous admission price. When this was added to Mrs Dinkman's ten dollars the gardener, still protesting, reluctantly agreed to perform.

[25]

Mrs Dinkman prudently holding the total, he unloaded the powermower with many flourishes, making quite an undertaking of oiling and adjusting the roller, setting the blades; bending down to assure himself of the gasoline in the small tank, finally wheeling the contraption into place with great spirit. The motor started with a disgruntled put! changing into a series of resigned explosions as he guided it over the lawn crosswise to the lines of his predecessor. Miss Francis followed every motion with rapt attention.

"Did you expect this?" I asked.

"Ay? The abnormally stimulated growth, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Yes and no. Work in the laboratory didn't indicate it. My own fault; I didn't realize at once making available so much free nitrogen would have such instant results. But last night—"

"Yes?"

"Not now. Later."

The powermower went nicely, I might almost say smoothly, over the stuff cut before, muttering and chickling happily to itself as it dragged the panting gardener, inescapably harnessed, in its wake. But the mown area was narrow and the machine quickly jerked through it and made the last easy journey along the wall of untouched devilgrass beyond.

The gardener, without hesitation, aimed his machine at the thicket of grass. It growled, slowed, coughed, spat, struggled and thrashed on and finally conked out.

"Ah," said Miss Francis.

"Oh," said the spectators.

"Sonofabitch," said the gardener.

He yanked the grumbling mower back angrily, inspecting its mechanism in the manner of a mother with a wayward son and began again. There was desperate determination in his shoulders as he added his forward thrust to the protesting rhythm. The machine went at the grass like a bulldog attacking a borzoi: it bit, chewed, held on. It cut a new six inches readily, another foot slowly—and then with jolts and misfires and loud imprecations from the gardener, it gave up again.

[26]

"You," judged Mrs Dinkman, "don't know how to cut grass."

The gardener wiped his sweaty forehead with the inside of his wrist. "You—you should have a law against you," he answered bitterly and inadequately.

But the crowd evidently agreed with Mrs Dinkman's verdict, for there were mutterings of "It's a farmer's job." "Get somebody with a scythe." "That's right—get a scythe." "Got to have a scythe to cut hay like that." These remarks, uttered loudly enough for him to hear, so discouraged the gardener that after three more futile tries he reloaded his equipment and left amidst jeers and expressions of disfavor without attempting to collect any of the money.

For some reason the failure of the powermower lightened the atmosphere. Everyone, including Mrs Dinkman, seemed convinced that scything was the solution. Tension relaxed and the bystanders began talking in something above a whisper.

6. "THIS WILL JUST ABOUT RUIN OUR SALES," I SAID.

Miss Francis suspended the toothpick before her chin and looked at me as though I'd said dirty words in the presence of ladies.

"Well it will," I argued. "You can't expect people to have their lawns inoculated if they find out it's going to make grass act this way."

Her eyes might have been microscopes and I something smeared on a slide. "Weener, you're the sort of man who peddles *Life Begins at Forty* to the inmates of an old peoples' home."

I couldn't see what had upset her. The last idea had sound sales appeal, but it was a low income market.... Oh well—her queer notions and obscure reactions undoubtedly went with her scientific gift. You have to lead individuals of this type for their own good, otherwise they spend their lives wandering around in a dreamy fog, accomplishing nothing.

[27]

"I still believe you've got something," I pointed out. "You yourself said it wasn't perfected, but perhaps you haven't realized how far from marketable it actually is yet. Now then," I went on reasonably, "you're just going to have to dilute it or change it or do something to it, so while it will make grass nice and green, it won't let it grow wild like this."

The fixed look could be annoying. It was nearly impossible to turn your eyes away without rudeness once she caught them. "Weener, the Metamorphizer is neither fertilizer nor plant food. It is a chemical compound producing a controlled mutation in any treated member of the family Gramineae. Dilution might make it not work—the mutation might not take place—but it couldn't make it half work. I could change your nature by forcibly injecting an ounce of lead into your cerebellum. The change would not only be irrevocable, but it wouldn't make the slightest difference if the lead were adulterated with ironpyrites or not."

"But, Miss Francis," I expostulated, "you'll have to do *something*."

She threw her hands into the air, a theatrical gesture even more than ordinarily unbecoming. "Why?"

"Why? To make your discovery marketable, of course."

"Now? In the face of this?"

"Miss Francis," I said with dignity, "you are a lady and my selfrespect makes me treat you with the courtesy due your sex. You advertised for a salesman. Instead of sneering at my honest efforts to put your merchandise across to the public, I think youd be better advised to worry about such lowbrow things as keeping faith."

"Am I to keep faith in a vacuum? You came to me as a salesman and I must give you something to sell. This is simple morality; but if such a grant entails concomitant evils, surely I am absolved of my original contract."

"I don't know what youre talking about," I told her frankly. "Your stuff made the grass grow too fast, that's all. You should change the formula or find a new one or else ..." [28]

"Or else youll have been left with nothing to sell. I despair of making the point about changing the formula; your trust in my powers is too reverent. Again, I'm not an arrogant woman and I'll admit to some responsibility. Make the world fit for Alfred Weener to make a living in."

"It's Albert, not Alfred," I corrected her. I'm not touchy, goodness knows, but afterall a name's a piece of property.

"Your pardon, Albert." She looked down at me with such a placatory and genuinely feminine smile I decided I'd been foolish to be offended. She's a nut of course, I thought indulgently, someone whose life is bounded by theories and testtubes, a woman with no conception of practical reality. Instead of being affronted it would be better to show her patiently how essential my help was to her.

"Of all people," she went on, searching my face with those discomfiting eyes, "of all people Ive the least cause for moral snobbery. Anxious to get a few dollars to carry on my work—and what was such anxiety but selfindulgence?—I threw the Metamorphizer to you and the world before I realized that it was not only imperfect, but faulty. Hell is paved with good intentions and the first result of my desire to benefit mankind has been to injure the Dinkmans. Meditation in place of infatuation would have shown me both the immediate and ultimate wrongs. I doubt if youd been gone an hour yesterday when I knew I'd made a blunder in permitting you to go out with danger in both hands."

"I don't know what youre getting at," I said stiffly, for it sounded as though she were regarding me as a child.

"Why, as I was sitting, composing my thoughts toward extending the effectiveness of the Metamorphizer beyond gramina, it suddenly became clear to me I'd erred about not knowing how long the effect of the inoculations would last."

"You mean you found out?" If she brought the thing under control and the effect lasted a specified time there might be repeat business afterall. [29]

"I found out a great deal by using speculation and logic for a change instead of my hands and memory. I sat and thought, and though this is an unorthodox way for a scientist to proceed, I profited by it. I reasoned: if you change the genetic structure of a plant you change it permanently; not for a day or an hour, but for its existence. I'm not speaking of chance mutations, you understand, Weener, coming about over a course of generations, generations which include sports, degenerates, atavars andsoforth; but of controlled changes, brought about through human intervention. Inoculation by the Metamorphizer

might be compared to cutting off a man's leg or transplanting part of his brain. Albert—what happens when you cut off a man's leg?"

I was tired of being talked to like a grammarschool class. Still, I humored her. "Why, then he has only one leg," I answered agreeably if idiotically.

"True. More than that, he has a onelegged disposition. His whole ego, his entire spirit is changed. No longer a twolegged creature, reduced, he is another—warped, if you like—being. To come to the immediate point of the grass: if you engender an omnivorous capacity you implant an insatiable appetite."

"I don't catch."

"If you give a man a big belly you make him a hog."

A chevvy coupe, gently breathing steam from its radiator cap, interrupted. From its turtle hung the blade of a scythe and on the nervously hinged door had been hopefully lettered *Arcangelo Barelli, Plowing & Grading*.

While the coupe was trembling for some seconds before quieting down, I sighed a double relief, at Miss Francis' forgetfulness of the money due her and the soothing of my fears for the lawn's eating its way downward to China or India. The remark about gluttonous abdomens was disturbing.

"And of course there will be no further sale of the Metamorphizer," she concluded, her eyes now totally concerned with the farmer who was opening the turtle with the air of a man expecting to be unpleasantly astonished.

Mr Barelli came as to a deathbed, a consoling but hopeless smile widening his narrow face only inconsiderably. At the scythe cradled in his arms someone shouted, "Here's old Father Time himself." Mr Barelli wasn't amused. Brushing his forehead thoughtfully with tender fingers he surveyed with saddened eye the three graduated steps of grass. The last step, unessayed by his predecessors, rose nearly four feet, as alien to the concept of lawn as a field of wheat.

[30]

"Think you can cut it?" one of the audience asked.

Mr Barelli smiled cheerlessly and didn't answer. Instead, he uprooted from his hip pocket a slender stone and began phlegmatically to caress the blade of the scythe with it.

"Hay, that stuff's not goin to stop growin while you fool around."

"Got to do things right," explained Mr Barelli gently.

The rhythmic friction of stone against steel prolonged suspense unbearably. All kinds of speculation crowded my mind while the leisurely performance went on. The grass was growing rapidly; faster than vegetation had ever grown before. Could it grow so quickly the farmer's scythe couldn't keep up with it? Suppose it had been wheat or corn? Planted today, it would be ready to harvest next week, fully ripe. The original dream of Miss Francis would pale compared with the reality. There was still—somewhere, somehow—a fortune in the Metamorphizer....

Ready at last, Mr Barelli walked delicately across the stubble as if it were a substance too precious to be trampled brutally. Again he measured the rippling, ascending mass with his eye. It was the look of a bridegroom.

"What you waitin for?"

Unheeding, he scraped bootwelt semicircularly on the sward as though to mark a stance. Once more he appraised the grass, crooked his knee, rested his hands lightly on the two short, upraised handholds. Satisfied at length with his preparations, he finally drew the scythe back with a sweeping motion of both arms and curved it forward close to the

ground. It embraced a sudden island lovingly and a sheaf of grass swooned into a heap. I was reminded of old woodcuts in a history of the French Revolution.

[31]

The bystanders sighed in harmony. "Nothing to it ... should a had him in the first place ... can't beat the old elbowgrease. No, sir, musclepower'll do it every time ... guess it's licked now all right, all right...." Mr Barelli duplicated his sweep and another sheaf fell. Another. And another....

"One of the oldest human rituals," remarked Miss Francis, swaying her body in time with the farmer's. "An act of devotion to Ceres. But all this husbandman reaps is *Cynodon dactylon*. A commentary."

"Progress," I pointed out. "Now they have machines to harvest grain. All uptodate farmers use them; only the backward ones stick to primitive tools and have to make a living by taking on odd jobs."

"Progress," she repeated, looking from the scythewielder to me and back again. "Progress, Weener. A remarkable conception of the nineteenth century...."

The less intense spectators began to move off; not, to be sure, without backward glances, but the metronomic swing of Mr Barelli's blade indicated it was all over with the rank grass now. I too should have been on my way, writing off the Metamorphizer as a total loss and considering methods for making a new and more profitable connection. Not that I was one to leave a sinking ship, nor had I lost faith in the potentialities of Miss Francis' discovery; but she either wasn't smart enough to modify her formula, or else ... but there really wasn't any "or else". She just wasn't smart enough to make the Metamorphizer marketable and she was cheating me of the handsome return which should be rightfully mine.

She'd made the stuff and deceived me by an unscrupulously worded advertisement, now, no longer interested, she asked airily if further effort were essential. Who wouldn't be indignant? And to cap it all she suddenly ejaculated, "Can't dawdle around here all day" and after snatching up a handful of the scythings, she left, rolling her large body from side to side, galloping her untidy hair up and down over her neck as she took rapid strides. Evidently the attractions of her messy kitchen were more to her taste than the wholesome air of outdoors. Pottering around, producing another mare's nest and eventually, I suppose, getting another victim....

[32]

7. BUT I COULDN'T LEAVE SO CAVALIERLY. EVERY leaf, stem, and blade of the cancerous grass held me in somewhat the same way Miss Francis' intense eyes did. It wasn't an aesthetic or morbid attraction—its basis was strictly practical. If it could have been controlled—if only the growth could be induced on a modified and proper scale—what a product! A fury of frustration rocked my customary calm....

The stretch and retraction of the mower's arms, the swift, bright curving as the scythe cut deeper, fascinated me. An unscrupulous man—just as a whimsical thought—might go about in the night inoculating lawns surreptitiously and appear with a crew next day to offer his services in cutting them. Just goes to show how easy it is to make dishonest speculations ... but of course such things don't pay in the long run....

The lush area was being reduced, but perhaps not with the same rapidity as at first when Mr Barelli was at the top of enthusiastic—if the adjective was applicable—vigor. Oftener and oftener and oftener he paused to sharpen his implement and I thought the cropped shocks were becoming smaller and smaller. As the movement of the scythe swept the guillotined grass backward, the trailing stolons entangled themselves with the uncut stand, pulling the sheaves out of place and making the stacks ragged and inadequate looking.

Behind me a cocky voice asked, "What's cooking around here, chum?"

I turned round to a young man, thin as a bamboo pole, elegantly tailored, who yawned to advertise gold inlays. I explained while he looked skeptical, bored and knowing simultaneously. "Who would tha flummox, bah goom?" he inquired.

"Ay?"

He took a pack of playingcards from his pocket and riffled them expertly. "Who you kidding, bud?" he translated.

[33]

"No one. Ask anybody here if this wasnt a dead lawn yesterday and if it hasnt grown this high since morning."

He yawned again and proffered me the deck. "Pick any card," he suggested. To avoid rudeness I selected one. He put the pack back and said, "You have the nine of diamonds. Clever, eh?"

I didnt know whether it was or not. He accepted the pasteboard from me and said, peering out from under furry black eyebrows, "If I brought in a story like that, the chief would fire me before you could say James Gordon Bennett."

"Youre a reporter?"

"Acute chap. Newspaperman. Name of Gootes. Jacson Gootes, *Daily Intelligencer*, not *Thrilling Wonder Stories*."

I thought I saw an answer to my most pressing problem. One has to stoop occasionally to methods which, if they didnt lead to important ends, might almost be termed petty; but afterall there was no reason Mr Jacson Gootes shouldnt buy me a dinner in return for information valuable to him. "Let's get away from here," I suggested.

He fished out a coin, showed it to me, waved his arm in the air and opened an empty palm for my inspection. "Ah sho would like to, cunnel, but Ahve got to covah thisyeah sto'y—even if it's out of this mizzble wo'ld."

"I'm sure I can give you details to bring it down to earth," I told him. "Make it a story your editor will be glad to have."

"Glad!" He pressed tobacco into a slender pipe as emaciated as himself. "You don't know W R. If he got a beat on the story of Creation he'd be sore as hell because God wanted a byline."

He evidently enjoyed his own quip for he repeated several times in different accents "... God wanted a byline." He puffed a matchflame and surveyed the field of Mr Barelli's effort. "Hardworkin feller, what? Guess I better have a chat with the bounder—probably closest to the dashed thing."

"Mr Gootes," I said impressively, "I am the man who applied the inoculator to this grass. Now shall we get out of here so you can listen to my story?"

[34]

"Sonabeesh—thees gona be good. Lead away, amigo—I prepare both ears to leesten."

I drew him toward Hollywood Boulevard and into a restaurant I calculated might not be too expensive for his generosity. Besides, he probably had an expenseaccount. We put a porcelaintopped table between us and he commanded, "Give down." Obediently I went over all the happenings of yesterday, omitting only Miss Francis' name and the revealing wording of the ad.

Gootes surveyed me interestedly. "You certainly started something here, Acne and/or Psoriasis."

Humor like his was beneath offense. "My name's Albert Weener."

"Mine's Mustard." He produced a plastic cup and rapidly extracted from it a series of others in diminishing sizes. "I wouldnt have thought it to look at you. The dirty deed, I mean—not the exzemical hotdog. O K, Mister Weener—who's this scientific magnate? Whyre you holding him out on me?"

"Scientists don't like to be disturbed in their researches," I temporized.

"No more does a man in a whorehouse," he retorted vulgarly. "Story's no good without him."

That was what I thought and I'm afraid my satisfaction appeared on my face.

"Now leely man—no try a hold up da press. Whatsa matter, you aready had da beer and da roasta bif sanawich?"

"Maybe you better repeat the order. You know in these cheap places they don't like to have you sit around and talk without spending money."

"Money! Eh, laddie—I'm nae a millionaire." He balanced a full glass of water thoughtfully upon a knifeblade, looking around for applause. When it was not forthcoming he meekly followed my suggestion.

"Listen, Gootes," I swallowed a mouthful of sandwich and sipped a little beer. "I want to help you get your story."

He waved his hand and pulled a handkerchief out of his ear.

"The point is," I commenced, sopping a piece of bread in the thick gravy, "if I were to betray the confidence involved I couldnt hope to continue my connection and I'd lose my chances to benefit from this remarkable discovery."

[35]

"Balls," exclaimed Gootes. "Forget the spiel. I'm not a prospect for your lawn tonic."

I disregarded the interruption. "I'm not a mercenary man and I believe in enlightening the public to the fullest extent compatible with decency. I'm willing to make a sacrifice for the general good, yet I—"

"—'must live.' I know, I know. How much?"

"It seems to me fifty dollars would be little enough—"

"Fifty potatoes!" He went through an elaborate pantomime of shock, horror, indignation, grotesque dismay and a dozen other assorted emotions. "Little man, youre fruitcake sure. W R wouldnt part with half a C for a tipoff on the Secondcoming. No, brother—you rang the wrong bell. Five I might get you—but no more."

I replied firmly I was not in need of charity—ignoring his pointed look at the remains on my plate—and this was strictly a business proposition, payment for value received. After some bargaining he finally agreed to phone his managingeditor and propose I'd "come clean" for twenty dollars. While he was on this errand I added pie and coffee to the check. It is well to be provident and I'd paid for my meal in more than money.

Jacson Gootes came limply from the phonebooth, his bumptiousness gone. "No soap." He shook his head dejectedly. "Old Man said only pity for the lower mammals prevented him from letting me go to work for Hearst right away. Sorry."

His nerves appeared quite shattered; capable of restoration only by Old Grandad. After tossing down a couple of bourbons he seemed a little recovered, but hardly quite well enough to use an accent or perform a trick.

"I'm sorry also," I said. "Since we can be of no further use to each other—"

"Don't take a powder, chum," he urged plaintively. "What about a last gander at the weed together?"

As we walked back I reflected that at any rate I was saved from submitting Miss Francis to vulgar publicity. Everything is for the best—I've seen a hundred instances to prove it. Perhaps—who knew—something might yet happen to make it possible for me to profit by the freak growth.

[36]

"Needs a transfusion," remarked Gootes as we stood on the sidewalk before it.

Indeed it was anemically green; uneven, hacked and ragged; shorn of its emerald beauty. A high fog filtered the late afternoon light to show Mr Barelli's task accomplished and the curious watchers gone. It was no smoothly clipped carpet, yet it was no longer a freakish, exotic thing. Rather forlorn it looked, and crippled.

"Paleface pay out much wampum to get um cut every day."

"Oh, it probably won't take long till the strength is exhausted."

"Says you. Well, Ive got half a story. Cheerio."

I sighed. If only Miss Francis could control it. A fortune ...

I walked home, trying to figure out what I was going to do tomorrow.

8. I THOUGHT I WAS PREPARED FOR ANYTHING AFTER the shocks of the day before; I know I was prepared for nothing at all—to find the grass as I'd left it or even reverted to its original decay. Indeed, I was not too sure that my memory was completely accurate; that the thing had happened so fantastically.

But the devilgrass had outdone itself and made my anticipations foolish. It waved a green crest higher than the crowd—a crowd three times the size of yesterday's and increasing rapidly. All the scars inflicted on it, the indignities of scythe and mower, were covered by a new and even more prodigious stand which made all its former growth appear puny. Bold and insolent, it had repaired the hackedout areas and risen to such a height that, except for a narrow strip at the top, all the windows of the Dinkman house were smothered. Of the garage, only the roof, islanded and bewildered, was visible, apparently resting on a solid foundation of devilgrass. It sprawled kittenishly, its deceptive softness faintly suggesting fur; at once playful and destructive. My optimism of the night before was dashed; this voracious growth wasnt going to dwindle away of itself. It would have to be killed, rooted out.

[37]

Now the Dinkman lawn wasnt continuous with its neighbors, but, until now, had been set off by chesthigh hedges. The day before these had contained and defined the growth, but, overwhelming them in the night, the grass had swept across and invaded the neat, civilized plots behind, blurring sharply cut edges, curiously investigating flowerbeds, barbarously strangling shapely bushes.

But these werent the ravages which upset me; it was reasonable if not entirely comfortable to see shrubbery, plants and blossoms swallowed up. Work of men's hands they may be, but they bear the imprimatur of nature. The cement sidewalk, however, was pure artifice, stamped with the trademark of man. Indignity and defeat were symbolized by its overrunning; it was an arrogant defiance, an outrageous challenge offered to every man happening by. But the grass was not satisfied with this irreverence: it was already making demands on curbing and gutter.

"Junior, youve got a story now. W R fired three copyboys and a proofreader he was so mad at himself. Here." Jacson Gootes made a pass in the air, simulated astonishment at the twentydollar bill which appeared miraculously between his fingers and put it in my hand.

"Thank you," I replied coolly. "Just what is this for?"

"Faith, me boy, such innocence I've never seen since I left the old sod. 'Tis but a little token of esteem from himself, to repay you for the trouble of leading me to your scientist, your Frankenstein, your Burbank. Lead on, my boy. And make it snappy, brother," he added, "because I've got to be back here for the rescue."

"Rescue?"

"Yeah. People in the house." He consulted a scrap of paper. "Pinkman—"

[38]

"Dinkman."

"Dinkman. Yeah—thanks—no idea how sensitive people are when you get their names wrong. Dinkmans phoned the fire department. Can't get out. Rescue any minute—got to cover that—imperative—TRAPPED IN HOME BY FREAK LAWN—and nail down your scientist at the same time."

I was very anxious myself to see what would happen here so I suggested, since I could take him to the discoverer of the Metamorphizer any time, that we'd better stay and get the Dinkman story first. With overenthusiastic praise of my acuteness, he agreed and began practicing his sleight-of-hand tricks to the great pleasure of some children, the same ones, I suspect, who had plagued me when I was spraying the lawn.

His performance was terminated by the rapidly approaching firesiren. The crowd seemed of several minds about the purpose of the red truck squealing around the corner to a stop. Some, like Gootes, had heard the Dinkmans were indeed trapped in the house; others declared the firemen had come to cut away the grass once-and-for-all; still others held the loud opinion that the swift growth had generated a spontaneous combustion.

But having made their abrupt face-in-the-ground halt, the truck (or rather the firemen on it) anticlimactically did nothing at all. Helmeted and accoutered, ready for instant action, they relaxed contentedly against the engine, oblivious of grass, bystanders, or presumable emergency. Gootes strolled over to inquire the cause of their indolence. "Waiting for the chief," he was informed. Thereupon he borrowed a helmet (possibly on the strength of his presscard) and proceeded to pull from it such a variety of objects that he received the final accolade from several of his audience when they told him admiringly he ought to be on the stage.

The bystanders were not seduced by this entertainment into approval of the firemen's idleness and inquired sarcastically why they had left their cots behind or if they thought they were still on WPA? The men remained impervious until the chief jumped out of his red roadster and surveyed the scene napoleonicly. "Thought somebody was pulling a rib," he explained to no one in particular. "All right, boys, there's folks in that house—let's get them out."

[39]

Carrying a ladder the men plunged toward the house. Their boots trod the sprawling runners heavily, spurning and crushing them carelessly. The grass responded by flowing back like water, sloshing over ankles and lapping at calves, thoroughly entangling and impeding progress. Panting and struggling the firemen penetrated only a short way into the mass before they were slowed almost to a standstill. From the sidelines it seemed as though they were wrestling with an invisible octopus. Feet were lifted high, but never free of the twining vegetation; the ladder was pulled angrily forward, but the clutch of the grass upon it became firmer with every tug.

At length they were halted, although their efforts still gave an appearance of advance. Thrashing and wrenching they urged themselves and the now burdensome ladder against the invincible wall. The only result was to give the illusion they were burying themselves in the clutching tentacles. Exertions dwindled; the struggle grew less intense; then they retreated, fighting their way out of the enveloping mass in a panic of desperation, abandoning the ladder.

The chief surveyed them with less than approbation. "Cut your way in," he ordered. "You guys think those axes are only to bust up furniture with?"

Obediently, wedges of bright steel flashed against the green wall.

"Impatiently I await the rescue of fair Dinkmans from this enchanted keep," murmured Gootes, vainly trying to balance his pipe on the back of his hand.

It looked as though he would have to contain his impatience for some time. The firemen slashed unenthusiastically at the grass, which gave way only grudgingly and by inches. Halfanhour later they triumphantly dragged out the abandoned ladder. "Stuff's like rubber—bounds back instead of cutting."

"Yeah. And in the meantime those people been telephoning again. Want to know what the delay is. Want to know what they pay taxes for. Threaten to sue the city."

[40]

"Let'm sue. Long as theyre in there they can't collect."

"Funny as a flat tire. Get going, goldbrick."

9. ANOTHER FIRETRUCK ROLLED UP AND THERE WAS much kidding back and forth between the two crews. This was clearly no situation in which lives or property were at stake; it was rather in line with assisting distraught cats down from tops of telephonepoles or persuading selfimmolated children to unlock the bathroom door and let mommy in; an amusing interval in a tense day. Perhaps those manning the second truck were more naturally ingenious, possibly the original workers sought more diverting labor; at any rate the futile chopping was abandoned. Instead, several long ladders were hooked together and the synthesis lowered from the curb to the edge of Dinkman's roof. It seemed remarkably fragile, but it reached and the watchers murmured approval.

No longer beset by novelty, the men took easily to the swaying, sagging bridge. They passed over the baffled grass, the leader carrying another short ladder which he hung from the roof, stabbing its lower rungs down into the matted verdure below. The crossing was made with such insouciance the wonder was they hadnt done it at first, instead of wasting time on other expedients.

The firemen went down the vertical ladder and forced an entrance into the choked windows. Mrs Dinkman came out first, helped by two of them. She kept pinching her glasses into place with one hand and pulling her skirt modestly close with the other, activities leaving her very little to grasp the ladder with. The firemen seemed quite accustomed to this sort of irrationality, and paying no heed to the rush of words—inaudible to us on the street—bursting from her, they coaxed her expertly up onto the roof. Here she stood, statuesquely outlined against the bright sky, berating her succorers, until Mr Dinkman, rounded, bald, and calm, joined her.

[41]

At first Mrs Dinkman refused to try the bridge to the street, but after some urging which was conveyed to us by the gestures of the firemen, she ventured gingerly on the trembling ladders only to draw back quickly. One of the firemen demonstrated the ease and simplicity of the journey, but it was vain; Mrs Dinkman was carried across gallantly in traditional movie style, with Mr Dinkman and the crew following sedately behind.

"A crime," Mrs Dinkman was saying when she came within earshot. "A crime. Malicious mischief. Ought to be locked up for life."

"Don't upset yourself, my dear," urged Mr Dinkman. "It's very distressing, but afterall it might be worse."

"'Worse!' Adam Dinkman, has misfortune completely unhinged your mind? Money thrown in the gutter—imposed on by oily rascals—our house swallowed up by this ...

this unnatural stuff—and the final humiliation of being pulled out of our own home in front of a gawking crowd." She turned around and shouted, "Shoo, shoo—why don't you go home?" And then to Mr Dinkman again, "'Worse' indeed! I'd like to know what could be worse?"

"Well now—" began Mr Dinkman; but I didn't hear the rest, for I was afraid by "rascals" Mrs Dinkman referred, quite unjustly, to me and I thought the time opportune to remind Gootes he hadn't yet completed his assignment.

"Right," he agreed, suddenly assuming the abrupt accents of an improbable Englishman, "oh very right, old chap. Let's toddle along and see what Fu Manchu has to say for himself. First off though I shall have to phone in to Fleet Street—I mean to W R."

"Fine. You can ask him at the same time to authorize you to give me the other thirty."

Gootes lost his British speech instantly. "What other thirty, bum?"

"Why, the balance of the fifty. For an introduction to Mi—to the maker of the Metamorphizer. To compensate me, you know, for my loss of revenue."

"Weener, you have all the earmarks of a castiron moocher. Let me tell you, suh—such methods are unbecoming. They suggest damyankee push and blackmail. Remember Reconstruction and White Supremacy, suh."

[42]

If I were hypersensitive to the silly things people say, I should have given up selling long before. I pretended not to hear him. We walked into a drugstore and he dropped a nickel into a payphone, hunching the receiver between ear and shoulder. "Fifty your last word?" he asked out of the corner of his mouth.

I nodded.

"Hello? *Gencer*? Gootes. Hya, beautiful? Syphilis all cleared up? Now ... now, baby ... well, if you're going to be formal—gimme W R." He turned to me and leered while he waited.

"... Chief? Gootes. Got the Dinkman story. You know—Freak Growth Swallows Hollywood Mansion. Yeah. Yeah. I know. But, Chief—this was what I wanted you for—on the followup; I have the fellow who put the stuff on the grass. Yeah. Sure I did. Yeah. And the sonofabitch wants to hold us up for another thirty. Or else he won't sing. Yeah. Yeah. I know. But I can't, Chief. I haven't got a lead. I don't know, Chief, not much of a one, I guess. Wait a minute."

He turned to me. "Listen, little man: Mr Le ffaçasé"—he pronounced it l'fassassy and he pronounced it with awe. I too was properly solemn, for I hadn't realized before to whom he referred when he talked so lightly of "W R." I knew—as what newspaper reader didn't—of William Rufus Le ffaçasé, "The Last of the Great Editors," but I hadn't connected him with the *Daily Intelligencer*—"—Mr Le ffaçasé will shoot you another sawbuck and no more. What's the deal?"

Now, the famous editor's reputation was such that you didn't tell him to go to the devil, even through the medium of an agent; it would have been like writing your name on the Lincoln Memorial. It was reluctantly therefore that I shook my head. "I'm sorry, Mr Gootes," I apologized, "I'd certainly like to oblige—"

He cut me off with a waving hand and turned cheerfully back to the telephone. "No soap, Chief. O K. O K. All right—put the rewrite man on." And for the next ten minutes he went over the events at the Dinkmans', carefully spelling out all names including the napoleonic firechief's. I began to suspect Gootes wasn't so inefficient a reporter as he appeared.

[43]

The story given in, he hung up and turned to me. "Well, so long, little man—been nice knowing you."

"But—what about meeting the discoverer of the Metamorphizer?"

"Oh, that. Well, W R thinks we don't need him anymore. Not enough in that angle."

I suspected he was bluffing; still it was possible he wasn't. In such a delicate situation there was nothing I could do but bluff in turn. If you are a good salesman, I always say, you must have psychology at your fingertips. "Very well, Mr Gootes; perhaps I shall see you again sometime."

I was immediately confronted by a Frenchman, affable, volatile, affectionate. "Ah cher ami, do not leave me with the abruptness. You desolate mon coeur. Alors—return to me the twenty dollars."

"But, Mr Gootes—"

"None of it, bud." He whisked the cards out and showed them to me, the ace of spades ghoulishly visible, its ominousness tempered only by the word "Bicycle" printed across it. "Don't hold out on your Uncle Jacson or I might have the boys take you for a little trip. A block of concrete tastefully inscribed 'A Weener' ought to make an amusing base for a birdbath, say."

"Listen, Gootes." I was firm. "I'm reasonably certain you've been authorized to advance me the other thirty, but I hope we're both sensible people and I'll be glad to sign a receipt for the full amount if you'll let me have twenty-five."

"Albert, you're a fine fellow—a prince." On a page from his notebook he wrote, *Of Jacson Gootes, \$50 U.S.* and I signed it. He handed me another twenty-dollar bill and put his wallet away. "Charge the other five to agent's fees," he suggested. "Lead us to your Steinmetz."

[44]

You just can't expect everyone to have the same standards of probity, so philosophically I pocketed my loss and gains together. Life is full of ups and downs and take the bad with the good. Gootes was in high spirits after his piece of chicanery and as we went down the street he practiced, quite unsuccessfully, a series of ventriloquial exercises.

10.

THE APPEARANCE OF THE APARTMENTHOUSE drew the comment from him that it was a good thing for their collective bloodpressures the Chamber of Commerce and the All Year Club didn't know such things existed in the heart of Hollywood. "It's no better than I live in myself," he added.

He whistled at the dismal livingroom and raised his eyebrows at the kitchen. Before I could mutter an introduction, Miss Francis growled without turning around, "If you've come about the icebox—"

"Zounds!" exclaimed Gootes. "A female Linnaeus. Shades of Dorothy Dix!"

"I don't know who you are, young man, but you're extremely impudent to come tramping into my kitchen, adding nothing to the sum of knowledge but a confirmation of my sex which would be plain to any mammal. If you've—"

"Nein, Fräulein Doktor," said Gootes hastily, "about z' kelvinators I know nossing. I represent, Fräulein Doktor, z' *Daily Intelligencer* zeitung—"

Miss Francis pierced his turgid explanation with a sharp spate of words in what I took to be German. Gootes answered with difficult slowness, but he fumbled and halted before long and abandoning the Central European, became again the Southern Gentleman. "I quite understand, mam, how any delicately reared gentlewoman would resent having her privacy intruded upon by rude agents of the yellow press. But consider, mam: we live in a progressive age and having made a great contribution to Science you can hardly escape the fame rightfully yours. You are a public figure now and must stand in the light. Would

it not be preferable, mam, to talk as lady to gentleman (I am related to the Taliaferros of Ruffin County on the distaff side) than to be badgered by some hack journalist?"

[45]

Miss Francis squatted ungracefully on her heels and looked up from the flowerpot she had been engaged with. "I havent any objection to publicity, hack or otherwise," she said mildly. "I am merely impressed again by the invulnerability of newspapers to thousands of important discoveries and inventions, newsworthy 'contributions to Science' as you call them in your bland ignorance of semantics, in contrast to their acute, almost painful sensitivity to any mischance."

Gootes, unjointing disproportioned length carelessly against the sink to the peril of several jars of specimens, didnt reply. Instead he fluttered his arms and produced a halfdollar, apparently from Miss Francis' hair, which after exhibiting he prudently pocketed.

"Tell me, Dr Francis—"

"Miss. Show me how you did that trick."

"In a minute, Miss Francis. It's a honey, isnt it? Paid fourbits to a funhouse in Utica, New York, for it. Tell me, how did you come to make your great discovery?"

"I was born. I went to school. I read books. I reached maturity. I looked through a microscope."

"Yes?" prodded Gootes.

"That's all."

"Lassie," urged Gootes, underlining the honey of his voice with a tantalizing glimpse of a rapidfire snatching of three colored handkerchiefs out of the air, "tis no sensible course ye follow. Think, gurr! what the press can do to a recalcitrant lass like yoursel. Ye wouldna like it if tomorrow's paper branded you—and I quote—'an unsexed harpy, a traitor to mankind, a heartless, soulless—'"

"Oh, shut up. What do you want to know?"

"First," said Gootes briskly, "what is this stuff?"

"The Metamorphizer?"

He nodded.

"You want the chemical formula?"

[46]

"Wouldnt do me or my readers the least bit of good and you wouldnt give it to me if I asked. Why should you? No, enlighten me in English."

"It is a compound on the order of colchicine, acting through the somaplasm of the plant. It is apparently effective only on the family Gramineae, producing a constitutional metabolic change. I have no means of knowing as yet whether this change is transmissible through seed to offspring—"

"Hay, wait a minute. 'Producing a constitutional metabolic change.' How do you spell metabolic—never mind, the proofreaders'll catch it. What constitutional change?"

"Are you a botanist, young man?" Gootes shook his head. "An agrostologist? Even an agronomist? Then you can't have the slightest idea what I'm talking about."

"Maybe not," retorted Gootes, "but one of my readers might. Just give me a rough idea."

"Plants absorb certain minerals in suspension. That is, they absorb some and reject others. The Metamorphizer seems to give them the ability to break down even the most

stable compound, select what they need, and also fix the inert nitrogen of the air to nourish themselves."

"Themselves," repeated Gootes, writing rapidly. "O K. If I get you—which is doubtful—so far it sounds just like a good new fertilizer."

"Really? I tried to make myself clear."

"Now don't get sore, Professor. Just give out on what made the grass go wild."

"I can only hazard a guess. As I told Weener, if you create a capacity, you engender an appetite. I imagine that patch of *Cynodon dactylon* just couldn't stop absorbing once it had been inoculated."

"Aha. Like giving a man a taste for bourbon."

"If it pleases you to put it that way."

"O K. O K. Now let's have an idea how this growth can be stopped. Theoretical, you know."

"As far as I know," said Miss Francis, "it cannot be stopped."

➤ TWO ➤

[47]

Consequences of a Discovery

II. "BUT IT'S GOT TO BE STOPPED," EXCLAIMED Gootes.

Miss Francis turned silently back to her flowerpot as though she'd forgotten us. Gootes coursed the kitchenfloor like a puzzled yet anxious hound. "Damn it, it's got to be stopped." He halfway extracted his pack of cards, then hastily withdrew his hand as though guarding the moment's gravity.

"Otherwise ... why, otherwise it'll swallow the house." He decided on the cards after all and balanced four of them edgewise on the back of his hand. Miss Francis immediately abandoned the flowerpot to stare childishly at the feat. "In fact, if what you say is true, it will literally swallow up the house. Digest it. Convert it into devilgrass."

"*Cynodon dactylon*. What I say is true. How much elementary physics is involved in that trick?"

"But that's terrible," protested Gootes. He regarded a bowl of algae as if about to make it disappear. Mentally I agreed; one of the greatest potential moneymakers of the age lost and valueless.

"Yes," she agreed, "it is terrible. Terrible as the starvation in a hive when the apiarist takes out the winter honey; terrible as the daily business in an abattoir; terrible as the appetite of grown fish at spawning time."

"Poo. Fate. Kismet. Nature."

"Ah; you are unconcerned with catastrophes which don't affect man."

[48]

"Local man," substituted Gootes. "Los Angeles man. *Pithecanthropus moviensis*. Stiffs in Constantinople are strictly AP stuff."

"It seems to me," I broke in, "that you are both assuming too much. I don't know of anything that calls for the word catastrophe. I'm sure I'm sorry if the Dinkmans' house is swallowed up as Gootes suggests, but it hasn't been and I'm sure the possibility is exaggerated. The authorities will do something or the grass will stop growing. I don't see any point in looking at the blackest side of things."

Gootes opened his mouth in pretended astonishment. "Wal, I swan. Boy's a philosopher."

"You are not particularly concerned, Weener?"

"I don't know any reason why I should be," I retorted. "I sold your product in good faith and I am not responsible—"

"Oh, blind, blind. Do you imagine one man can suffer and you not suffer? Is your name Simeon Stylites? Do you think for an instant what happens to any man doesn't happen to everyman? Are you not your brother's keeper?" She twisted her hands together. "Not responsible! Why, you are responsible for every brutality, execution, meanness and calamity in the world today!"

I had often heard that the borderline between profundity and insanity was thin and inexact and it was now clear on which side she stood. I looked at Gootes to see how he was taking her hysterical outburst, but he had found a batch of empty testtubes which he was building into a perilously swaying structure.

"Of course, of course," I agreed soothingly, backing away. "You're quite right."

She walked the floor as if her awkward body were a burden. "Is the instant response to an obvious truth—platitude even—always a diagnosis of lunacy? I state a thought so old no one knows who first expressed it and a hearer feels bound to choose between offense to himself and contempt for the speaker. Believe me, Weener, I was offering no exclusive indictment: I too am guilty—infinately culpable. Even if I had devoted my life to pure science—perhaps even more certainly then—patterning myself on a medieval monastic, faithful to vows of poverty and singleness of purpose; even if I had not, for an apparently laudable end, betrayed my efforts to a base greed; even if I had never picked for a moment's use such an unworthy—do not be insulted again, Weener, unworthiness is a fact, insofar as there are any facts at all—such an unworthy tool as yourself; even if I had never compounded the Metamorphizer; even if I had been a biologist or an astronomer—even then I should be guilty of ruining the Dinkmans and making them homeless, just as you are guilty and the reporter here is guilty and the garbageman is guilty and the pastor in his pulpit is guilty."

[49]

"Guilty," exclaimed Gootes suddenly, "guilty! What kind of a lousy newspaperman am I? Worrying about guilt and solutions in the face of impending calamity instead of serving it redhot to a palpitating public. Guilty—hell, I ought to be fired. Or anyway shot. Where's the phone?"

"I manage a minimum of privacy in spite of inquiring reporters and unemployed canvassers. I have no telephone."

"Hokay. Hole everything's. I return immediate."

I followed him for I had no desire to be left alone with someone who might prove dangerous. But his long legs took him quickly out of sight before I could catch him, even by running, and so I fell into a more sedate pace. All Miss Francis' metaphysical talk was beyond me, but what little I could make of it was pure nonsense. Guilty. Why, I had never done anything illegal in my life, unless taking a glass of beer in dry territory be so accounted. All this talk about guilt suggested some sort of inverted delusions of persecution. How sad it was the eccentricity of genius so often turned its possessors into cranks. I was thankful to be of mere normal intelligence.

12.

BUT I WASTED NO MORE THOUGHT ON HER, putting the whole episode of the Metamorphizer behind me, for I now had some liquid capital. It was true it didnt amount to much, but it existed, crinkled in my pocket, and I was sure with my experience and native ability I could turn the *Daily Intelligencer's* forty dollars into a much larger sum.

[50]

But a resolve to forget the Metamorphizer didnt enable me to escape Mrs Dinkman's lawn. Walking down Hollywood Boulevard, formulating, rejecting and reshaping plans for my future, I passed a radioshop and from a loudspeaker hung over the door with the evident purpose of inducing suggestible pedestrians to rush in and purchase sets, the latest report of the devilgrass's advance was blared out at me.

"... Station KPAR, The Voice of Edendale, reaching you from a portable transmitter located in the street in front of what was formerly the residence of Mr and Mrs Dinkman. I guess youve all heard the story of how their lawn was allegedly sprinkled with some chemical which made the grass run wild. I don't know anything about that, but I want to tell you this grass is certainly running wild. It must be fifteen or sixteen feet high—think of that, folks—nearly as high as three men standing on each other's shoulders. It's covered the roof halfway to the peak and it's choking the windows and doorways of the houses on either side. It's all over the sidewalk—looks like an enormous green woolly rug—no, that's not quite right—anyway, it's all over the sidewalk and it would be right out here in the street where I'm talking to you from if the firedepartment wasnt on the job constantly chopping off the creeping ends as they come over the curb. I want to tell you, folks, it's a frightening sight to see grass—the same kind of grass growing in your backyard or mine—magnified or maybe I mean multiplied a hundred times—or maybe more—and coming at you as if it was an enemy—only the cold steel of the fireman's ax saving you from it.

"While we're waiting for some action, folks—well, not exactly that—the grass is giving us plenty of action all right—I'll try to bring you some impressions of the people in the street. Literally in the street, because the sidewalk is covered with grass. Pardon me, sir—would you like to say a few words to the unseen audience of Station KPAR? Speak right into the microphone, sir. Let's have your name first. Don't be bashful. Haha. Gentleman doesnt care to give his name. Well, that's all right, quite all right. Just what do you think of this phenomenon? How does it impress you? Are you disturbed by the sight of this riot of vegetation? Right into the microphone...."

[51]

"Uh ... hello ... well, I guess I havent ... uh anything much to say ... pretty color ... bad stuff, I guess. Gladsnotgrowing myyard...."

"Yes, go right on, sir. Oh ... the gentleman is through. Very interesting and thank you.

"Theyre bringing up a whole crew of weedburners now—going to try and get this thing under control. The men all have tanks of oil or kerosene on their backs. Wait a minute, folks, I want to find out for sure whether it's oil or kerosene. Mumble. Mumble. Well, folks, I'm sorry, but this gentleman doesnt know exactly what's in the tanks. Anyway it's kerosene or oil and there are long hoses with wide nozzles at the end. Something like vacuumcleaners. Well, that's not quite right. Anyway theyre lighting the nozzles now. Makes a big whoosh. Now I'll bring the microphone closer and maybe you can catch the noise of the flame. Hear it? That's quite a roar. I guess old Mr Grass is cooked now.

"Now these boys are advancing in a straight line from the street up over the curb, holding their fiery torches in front of them. The devilgrass is shriveling up. Yessir, it's shriveling right up—like a gob of tobaccojuice on a hot stove. Theyve burned about two feet of it away already. Nothing left but some smoking stems. Quite a lot of smoking stems—a regular compact mass of them—but all the green stuff has been burned right off. Yes, folks, burned clean off; I wish we had television here so I could show you how that thick pad of stems lies there without a bit of life left in it.

"Now they're uncovering the sidewalk. I'm following right behind with the microphone—maybe you can hear the roar of the weedburners again. Now I'd like to have you keep in mind the height of this grass. You never saw grass as tall as this unless you've been in the jungle or South America or someplace where grass grows this high. I mean high. Even here at the sidewalk it's well over a man's head, seven or eight feet. And this crew is carving right into it, cutting it like steel with an acetylenetorch. They're making big holes in it. You hear that hissing? That noise like a steamhose? Well, that's the grass shriveling. Think of it—grass with so much sap inside it hisses. It's drying right up in a one-two-three! Now the top part is falling down—toppling forward—coming like a breaking wave. Oops! Hay.... It put out one of the torches by smothering it. Drowned it in grass. Nothing serious—the boy's got it lit again. Progress is slow here, folks—you've got to realize this stuff's about ten feet high. Further in it's anyway sixteen feet. Fighting it's like battling an octopus with a million arms. The stuff writhes around and grows all the time. It's terrific. Imagine tangles of barbedwire, hundreds and hundreds of bales or rolls or however barbedwire comes, covering your frontyard and house—only it isn't barbedwire at all, but green, living grass.... Just a minute, folks, I'm having a little trouble with my microphone cable. Nothing serious, you understand—tangled a bit in the grass behind me. Those burnt stems. Stand by for just a minute...."

[52]

"This is KPAR, The Voice of Edendale. Due to mechanical difficulties there will be a brief musical interlude until contact is resumed with our portable transmitter bringing you an onthespot account of the unusual grass...."

"Kirk, Quork, krrmp—AR's portable transmitter. Here I am again, folks, in the street in front of the Dinkman residence—a little out of breath, but none the worse off, ready to resume the blowbyblow story of the fight against the devilgrass. That was a little trouble back there, but it's all right now. Seems the weedburners hadn't quite finished off the grass in the parkwaystrip between the curb and the sidewalk and after I dragged my microphone cable across it, it sort of—well, it sort of came to life again and tangled up the cable. It's all right now though. Everything under control. The boys with the weedburners have come back and are going over the parkwaystrip again, just to make sure.

[53]

"I want to tell you—this stuff really can grow. It's amazing, simply amazing. You've heard of plants growing while you look at them; well, this grows while you don't look at it. It grows while your back is turned. Just to give you an example: while the boys have been busy a second time with the parkwaystrip, the grass has come back and grown again over all they burned up beyond the sidewalk. And now it's starting to come back over the concrete. You can actually see it move. The creepers run out in front and crawl ahead like thousands of little green snakes. Imagine seeing grass traveling forward like an army of worms. An army you can't stop. Because it's alive. Alive and coming at you. It's alive. It's alive. It's al—"

"This is Station KPAR. We will resume our regular programs immediately following the timesignal. Now we bring you a message from the manufacturers of Chewachoc, the Candy Laxative with the Hole...."

I continued thoughtfully down the street. The *Daily Intelligencer* was spread on a newsstand, a smudgy black bannerhead fouling its pure bosom. CITY COUNCIL MEETS TO END GRASS MENACE.

I trusted so. Quickly. I was tired of Mrs Dinkman's lawn.

13.

"WEEENER SAHIB, FATE HAS TIED US TOGETHER."

I hoped not. I was weary of Gootes and his phony accents.

"On account of your female Burbank, your scientess (scientistess is a twister. Peder Piber et a peg of piggled pebbers) won't play ball with W R. The chief offered her a fabulous

sum—"much beer in little kegs, many dozen hardboiled eggs, and goodies to a fabulous amount"—fabulous for W R, that is—to act as special writer on the grass business. J S Francis, World Renowned Chemist, exclusively in the *Intelligencer*. You know. Suppress her unfortunate sex. ORIGINATOR OF WILD GRASS TELLS ALL.

"Anyway she didnt grasp her chance. Practically told W R to go to hell. Practically told him to go to hell," he repeated, evidently torn between reprehension at the sacrilege and admiration of the daring.

[54]

Miss Francis plainly had what might be described as talent that way. I debated whether to inform Gootes of my discovery of her craziness and decided against it on the bare possibility it would be unwise to lower the value of my connection with the Metamorphizer's discoverer. I was soon rewarded for my caution.

"O Weeneru san," continued Gootes, evidently in an oriental vein traveling westward, "not too hard for you to be picking up few yen. You do not hate fifty potatoes from Editor san yesterday?"

"Forty," I corrected.

"Forty, fifty—what's the difference so long as youre healthy?" He produced a card, showed it, tore it in half, waved his hand and exhibited it whole and unharmed. "No kidding, chum; the old man has the bug to make *you* a special correspondent—on my advice yunderstand—always looking out for my pals."

Well, why not? The wheel of Fortune had been a long time turning before stopping at the proper spot. I had never had any doubt I'd someday be in a position to prove my writing ability. Now all those who had sneered at me years before—my English teachers and editors who had been too jealous to recognize my existence by anything more courteous than a printed rejection—would have to acknowledge their injustice. And in the meantime all my accumulated experience had been added to enhance my original talent. I'd sold everything that could be sold doortodoor and a man acquires not only an ease with words but a wide knowledge of human nature this way. Certainly I was better equipped all around than many of these highly advertised magazine or newspaper authors.

"Well ... I don't know if I could spare the time...."

"O K, bigshot. Let me know if the market goes down and I'll come around and put up more margin."

"How much will Mr Le ffaçasé—"

"How the hell do I know? More than youre worth—more than I'm getting, because youre a ninetyday wonder, the guy who put the crap on the grass and sent it nuts. Less than he'd have given Minerva-Medusa. Come and get it straight from the horse's mouth."

[55]

My only previous visits to newspaper offices had been to place advertisements, but I was prepared to find the *Daily Intelligencer* a veritable hive of activity. Perhaps some part of the big building which housed the paper did hum, but not the floor devoted to the editorial staff. That simply dozed. Gootes led me from the elevator through an enormous room where men and an occasional woman sat indolently before typewriters, stared druggedly into space or flew paper airplanes out of open windows. The only sign of animation I saw as we walked what might well have been a quartermile was one reporter (I judged him such by the undersized hat on the back of his head) who enthusiastically munched a sandwich while perusing a magazine containing photographs of women with uncovered breasts. Even the nipples showed.

Beyond the cityroom was a battery of private offices. I will certainly not conceal the existence of my extreme nervousness as we neared the proximity of the famous editor. I hung back from the groundglass door inscribed in shabby, peeling letters—in distinction

to its neighbors, newly and brightly painted—W.R. Le ffaçasé. Gootes, noting my trepidation, put on the brogue of a burlesque Irishman.

"Is it afraid of Himself you are, me boy? Sure, think no more of it. Faith, and wasnt he born Billy Casey; no better than the rest of us for all his mother was a Clancy and related to the Finnegans? He's written so often about coming from noble Huguenot stock he almost believes it himself, but the Huguenots were dirty Protestants and when his time comes W R'll send for the priest and take the last sacraments like the true son of the Church he is in his heart. So buck up, me boy, and come in and view the biggest faker in journalism."

But Gootes' flippancy reassured me no more than did the bare sunlit office behind the door. I had somehow, perhaps from the movies, expected to see an editor's desk piled with copypaper while he himself used halfadozen telephones at once, simultaneously making incomprehensible gestures at countless underlings. But Mr Le ffaçasé's desk was nude except for an enameled snuffbox and a signed photograph of a president whose administration had been subjected daily to the editor's bitterest jabs. On the walls hung framed originals of the more famous political cartoons of the last quartercentury, but neither telephone nor scrap of manuscript was in evidence. [56]

But who could examine that office with detached scrutiny while William Rufus Le ffaçasé occupied it? Somnolent in a leather armchair, he opened tiny, sunken eyes to regard us with less than interest as we entered. Under a shiny alpaca coat he wore an oldfashioned collarless shirt whose neckband was fastened with a diamond stud. Neither collar nor tie competed with the brilliance of this flashing gem resting in a shaven stubblefold of his draped neck. His face was remarkably long, his upperlip stretching interminably from a mouth looking to have been freshly smeared with vaseline to a nose not unlike a golfclub in shape. From the snuffbox on his desk, which I'd imagined a pretty ornament or receptacle for small objects, he scooped with a flat thumb a conical mound of graybrown dust and this, with a sweeping upward motion, he pushed into a gaping nostril.

"Chief, this is Albert Weener."

"How do, Mr Weener. Gootes, who the bloody hell is Weener?"

"Why, Chief, he's the guy who put the stuff on the grass."

"Oh." He surveyed me with the attention due a worthy but not particularly valuable specimen. "You bit the dog, ay, Weener?"

Gootes burst into a high, appreciative cackle. Le ffaçasé turned the deathray of his left eye on him. "Youre a syncophant, Gootes," he stated flatly, "a miserable groveling lowlivered cringing fawning mealymouthed chickenhearted toadeating arselicking, slobbering syncophant."

I couldnt see how we were ever to reach the point this way, so I ventured, "I understand in view of the fact that I inoculated Mrs Dinkman's lawn you want me to contribute—" [57]

"Desires grow smaller as intelligence expands," growled Le ffaçasé. "I want nothing except to find a few undisturbed moments in which to read the work of the immortal Hobbes."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I understood you wished me to report the progress of the wildly growing grass."

"Cityeditor's province," he declared uninterestedly.

"No such thing on the *Intelligencer*," Gootes informed me in a loud whisper. Le ffaçasé, who evidently heard him, glared, reached down and retrieved the telephone from its concealment under the desk and snarled into the mouthpiece, "I hate to interrupt your crapgame with the trivial concerns of this organ men called a newspaper till you got on

the payroll. I'm sending you a man who knows something about the crazy grass. Divorce yourself from whatever pornography you're gloating over at the moment to see if we can use him."

His immediate obliviousness to our presence was so insulting that if Gootes had not made the first move to leave I should have done so myself. I don't know what vast speculations swept upon him as he hung up the telephone, but I thought he might at least have had the courtesy to nod a dismissal.

"You're hired, bejesus," proclaimed Gootes, and of course I was, for there was no doubt a brilliantly successful figure like Le ffaçasé—whatever my opinion of his intemperate language or failure in the niceties of deportment, he was a forceful man—had sized me up in a flash and sensed my ability before I'd written a single line for his paper.

14. THE WAGE OFFERED BY THE *DAILY Intelligencer*—even assuming, as they undoubtedly did, that the affair of the grass would be over shortly and my service ended—was high enough to warrant my buying a secondhand car. A previous unpleasantness with a finance company made the transaction difficult, with as little cash as I had on hand, but a phone call to the paper established my bonafides and I was soon driving out Sunset Boulevard in a tomato-colored roadster, meditating on the long-delayed upsurge of my fortunes.

[58]

The street was closed off by a road barrier quite some distance away and tightly parked cars testified to the attraction of the expanding grass. Scorning these idle sightseers, I pushed and shoved my way forward to what had now become the focus of all my interests.

The Dinkmans had lived in a city block, an urban entity. It was no pretentious group of houses, nor was it a repetitive design out of some subdividing contractor's greedy mind. Moderately sized, medium priced, middleclass bungalows; these were the homes of the Dinkmans and their neighbors; a sample from a pattern which varied but was basically the same here and in Oakland, Seattle and St. Louis; in Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston and Cleveland.

But now I looked upon no city scene, no picture built upon the substantial foundation of daddy at the office all day, fixing a leaky faucet of an evening, painting the woodwork during his summer vacation; or mom, after a pleasant afternoon with the girls, unstintedly opening cans for supper and harassedly watching the cleaning woman who came in once a week. An alien presence, a rude fist through the canvas negated the convention that this was a picture of reality. A cone-shaped hill rose to a blurred point, marking the burial place of the Dinkman house. It was a child's drawing of a cone-shaped hill, done in green crayon; too symmetrical, too evenly and heavily green to be a spontaneous product of nature; man's unimaginative hand was apparent in its composition.

The sides of the cone flowed past the doors and windows of the adjacent houses, blocking them as it had previously blocked the Dinkmans', but their inhabitants, forewarned, had gone. More than mere desertion was implied in their going; there was an implicit surrender, abandonment to the invader. The base of the cone, accepting capitulation and still aggressive, had reached to the lawns beyond, warning these householders too to be ready for flight; over backfences to dwellings fronting another street, and establishing itself firmly over the concrete pavement before the Dinkmans' door.

[59]

I would be suppressing part of the truth if I did not admit that for the smallest moment some perverted pride made me cherish this hill as my work, my creation. But for me it would not have existed. I had done something notable, I had caused a stir; it was the same kind of sensation, I imagine, which makes criminals boast of their crimes.

I quickly dismissed this morbid thought, but it was succeeded by one almost equally unhealthy, for I was ridden by a sudden wild impulse to touch, feel, walk on, roll in the encroaching grass. I tried to control myself, but no willing of mine could prevent me from going up and letting the long runners slip through my half open hands. It was like receiving some sort of electric shock. Though the blades were soft and tender, the stems communicated to my palms a feeling of surging vitality, implacable life and ineluctable strength. I drew back from the green mass as though I had been doing something venturesome.

For, no matter what botanists or naturalists may tell us to the contrary, we habitually think of plantlife as fixed and stolid, insensate and quiescent. But this abnormal growth was no passive lawn, no sleepy patch of vegetation. As I stood there with fascinated attention, the thing moved and kept on moving; not in one place, but in thousands; not in one direction, but toward all points of the compass. It writhed and twisted in nightmarish unease, expanding, extending, increasing; spreading, spreading, spreading. Its movement, by human standards, was slow, but it was so monstrous to see this great mass of verdure move at all that it appeared to be going with express speed, inexorably enveloping everything in its path. A crack in the roadway disappeared under it, a shrub was swallowed up, a patch of wall vanished.

The eye shifted from whole to detail and back again. The overrun crack was duplicated by an untouched one a few inches away—it too went; the fine tentacles on top of the mound reached upward, shimmering like the air on a hot summer's day, and near my feet hundreds of runners crept ever closer, the pale stolons shiny and brittle, supporting the ominously bristling green leaves.

[60]

I hope Ive not given the impression there was no human activity all this while, that nothing was being done to combat the living glacier. On the contrary, there was tremendous bustle and industry. The weedburning crew was still fighting a rearguard action, gaining momentary successes here and there, driving back the invading tendrils as they wriggled over concrete sidewalk and roadway, only to be defeated as the main mass, piling higher and ever higher, toppled forward on the temporarily redeemed areas. For on this vastly thicker bulk the smoky fingers of flame had no more effect than did the exertions of the scythemen, hacking futilely away at the tough intricacies, or the rattling reapers entangling themselves to become like waterlogged ships.

But greatest hopes were now being pinned on a new weapon. A dozen black and sootylooking tanktrucks had come up and from them, like the arms of a squid, thick hoses lazily uncoiled. Hundreds of gallons of dark crudeoil were being poured upon the grass. At least ten bystanders eagerly explained to any who would listen the purpose and value of this maneuver. Petroleum, deadly enemy of all rooted things, would unquestionably kill the weed. They might as well call off all the other silly efforts, for in a day or two, as soon as the oil soaked into the ground, the roots would die, the monster collapse and wither away. I wanted with all my heart to believe in this hope, but when I compared the feeble brown trickle to the vast green body I was gravely doubtful.

Shaken and thoughtful, I went back to my car and drove homeward, reflecting on the fortuitousness of human actions. Had I not answered Miss Francis' ad someone else would have been the agent of calamity; had Mrs Dinkman been away from home that day another place than hers, or perhaps no place at all, might have been engulfed.

On the other hand, I might still be searching for a chance to prove my merit to the world. It seemed to me suddenly man was but a helpless creature afterall.

[61]

15. IT WASNT UNTIL I WAS ALMOST AT MY OWN frontdoor I remembered the purpose of my visit, which was not to draw philosophic conclusions, but to order my impressions so the columns of the *Daily Intelligencer* might benefit by the reactions of one so closely connected with the spread of the devilgrass. I

began tentatively putting sentences together and by the time I got to my room and sat down with pencil and paper, I was in a ferment of creative activity.

Now I cannot account for this, but the instant I took the pencil in my fingers all thought of the grass left my mind. No effort to summon back those fine rolling sentences was of the least avail. I slapped my forehead and muttered, "Grass, grass, Bermuda, *Cynodon dactylon*" aloud, varying it with such key words as "Dinkman, swallowing up, green hill" and the like, but all I could think of was buying a tire (700 x 16) for the left rear wheel, paying my overdue rent, Gootes' infuriating buffoonery, the possibilities for a man of my caliber in Florida or New York, and with a couple of thousand dollars a nice mailorder business could be established to bring in a comfortable income....

I left the chair and walked up and down the cramped room until the lodger below rapped spitefully on his ceiling. I went to the bathroom and washed my hands. I came back and inspected my teeth in the mirror. Then I resumed my seat and wrote, "The Grass—" After a moment I crossed this out and substituted, "Today, the grass—"

I decided the whole approach was unimaginative and unworthy of me. I turned the paper over and began, "Like a dragon springing—" Good, good—this was the way to start; it would show the readers at once they were dealing with a man of imagination. "Like a dragon springing." Springing from what? What did dragons spring from anyway? Eggs, like snakes? Dragons were reptiles weren't they? Or weren't they? Give up the metaphor? I set my teeth with determination and began again. "Not unlike a fierce and belligerently furious dragon or some other ferocious, blustery and furious chimerical creature, a menacing and comminatory debacle is burning fierily in the heart of our fair and increasingly populous city. As one with an innocent yet cardinal part in the unleashing of this dire menace, I want to describe how the exposure of this threatening menace affected me as I looked upon its menacing and malevolent advance today...."

[62]

I sat back, not dissatisfied with my beginning, and thought about the neat little bachelor apartment I could rent on what the *Intelligencer* was paying me. Of course in a few days this hullabaloo would be all over—for though I had little faith in the efficacy of the crudeoil I knew really drastic measures would be taken soon and the whole business stopped—but even in so short a time there could be no doubt Mr Le ffaçasé would realize he needed me permanently on his staff and I would be assured of a living in my own proper sphere. Thus fired with the thoughts of accomplishment, I returned to my task, but I cannot say it went easily. I remembered many great writers indulged in stimulants in the throes of composition, but I decided such a course might blunt the keen edge of my mind and afterall there was no better stimulant than plain oldfashioned perseverance. I picked up the pencil again and doggedly went on to the next sentence.

16. "WHAT THE HELL'S THIS?" DEMANDED THE cityeditor, looking at my neatly rolled pile of manuscript.

I disdained to bandy words with an underling too lazy to make an effort to get at what was probably the finest piece of writing ever brought to him, so I unrolled my story, flattening it out so he might read it the more easily.

"By the balls of Benjamin Franklin and the little white fringe on Horace Greeley's chin, this goddamned thing's been wrote by hand! Arent there any typewriters anymore? Did Mister Remington commit suicide unbeknownst to me?"

"I'm sorry," I said stiffly. "I didnt think youd have any difficulty in reading my handwriting." And in fact the whole business was absurd, for if there's anything I pride myself on it's the gracefulness and legibility of my penmanship. Typewriters might well be mandatory for the ephemeral news item, but I had been hired as a special correspondent and someday my manuscript would be a valuable property.

[63]

The city editor eyed me in a most disagreeable fashion. "I'm an educated man," he stated. "Groton, Harvard and the WPA. No doubt with time and care I could decipher this bid for next year's Pulitzer prize. But I must consider the more handicapped members of the staff: compositors, layoutmen and proofreaders; without my advantages and broadmindedness they might be so startled by this innovation as to have their usefulness permanently crippled. No; I'm afraid, Mr Weener, I must ask you to put this in more orthodox form and type it up."

Just another example of pettish bureaucracy, the officiousness of the jack-in-office. Except for the nuisance, it didn't particularly matter. When Mr Le ffaçasé read my contribution I knew there would be no concern in future whether it was handwritten, typewritten, or engraved in Babylonian cuneiform on a freshly baked brick.

Nevertheless I went over to one of the unoccupied desks and began to copy what I had written on the machine. I must say I was favorably impressed by the appearance of my words in this form, for they somehow looked more important and enduring. While still engaged in this task I was slapped so heartily on the back I was knocked forward against the typewriter and Gootes perched himself on a corner of the desk.

"Working the jolly old mill, what? I say, the old bugger wants to know where your stuff is. Fact of the matter, he wants to know with quite a bit of deuced bad language. Not a softspoken chap, you know, W R."

"I'll be through in a minute or two."

He gathered his pipe apparently out of my left ear and his tobacco pouch from the air and very rudely, without asking my permission, picked up the top sheet and started to read it. A thick eyebrow shot up immediately and he allowed his pipe to hang slackly from his mouth.

[64]

"Purple," he exclaimed, "magenta, violet, lavender, mauve. Schmaltz, real copperriveted, brassbound, steeljacketed, castiron schmaltz. I haven't seen such a genuine sample since my kid sister wrote up Jack the Ripper back in 1889."

The manifest discrepancy in these remarks so confused me my fingers stumbled over the typewriter keys. Evidently he intended some kind of humor or sarcasm, but I could make nothing of it. How could his younger sister...?

"Bertie boy," he said, after I had struggled to get another paragraph down, "it breaks my heart to see you toil so. Let's take in as much as you've done to the chief and either he'll be so impressed he'll put a stenographer to transcribing the rest or else—"

"Or else?" I prompted.

"Or else he won't. Come on."

Mr Le ffaçasé had apparently not stirred since last we were in his office. He opened his eyes, thumbed a pinch of snuff and asked Gootes, "Where the bloody hell is that stuff on the grass?"

"Here it is, Chief. No date, no who what when and where, but very litry. Very, very litry."

The editor picked up my copy and I could not help but watch him anxiously for some sign of his reaction. It came forth promptly and explosively.

"What the ingenious and delightfully painful hell is this, Gootes?"

"As Reported by Our Special Writer, Albert Weener, The Man Who Inoculated the Loony Grass."

"Gootes, you are the endproduct of a long line of incestuous idiots, the winner of the boobyprize in any intelligencetest, but you have outdone yourself in bringing me this verminous and maggoty ordure," said Le ffaçasé, throwing my efforts to the floor and

kicking at them. The outrage made me boil and if he had not been an older man I might have done him an injury. "As for you, Weener, I doubt if you will ever be elevated to the ranks of idiocy. Get the sanguinary hell out of here and do humanity the favor to step in front of the first tentontruck driving by."

[65]

"One minute, Chief," urged Gootes. "Don't be hasty. Seen the latest on the grass? Well, the mayor's asked the governor to call out the National Guard; the *Times*'ll have an interview with Einstein tomorrow and the *Examiner*'s going to run a symposium of what Herbert Hoover, Bernard Shaw and General MacArthur think of the situation. Don't suppose perhaps we could afford to ghost Bertie here?"

Was I never to escape from the malice inspired by the envy my literary talent aroused? I had certainly expected that a man of the famous editor's reputation would be above such pettiness. I was too dismayed and downcast by the meanness of human nature to speak.

Le ffaçasé snuffed again and looked malevolently at the wall. A framed caricature of himself returned the stare. "Very well," he grudgingly conceded at length, "you're on the grass anyway, so you might as well take this on too. Leave you only twentytwo hours a day to sleep in. You, Weener, are still on the payroll—at half the agreedupon figure."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he turned on me with a snarl; baring yellow and twisted teeth, unpleasant to see. "Weener, you look like a criminal type to me; Lombroso could've used you for a model to advantage. Have you a policerecord or have you so far evaded the law? Let me tell you, the *Intelligencer* is the evildoers' nemesis. Is your conscience clear, your past unsullied as a virgin's bed, your every deed open to search? Do you know what a penitentiary's like? Did you ever hear the clang of a celldoor as the turnkey slammed it behind him and left you to think and stew and weep in a silence accented and made more wretched by a yellow electricbulb and the stink of corrosivesublimite? Back to the cityroom, you dabbling booby, you precious simpleton, addlepat dunc, and be thankful my boundless generosity permits you to draw a weekly paycheck at all and doesn't condemn you to labor forever unrewarded in the subterranean vaults where the old files are kept."

[66]

First Miss Francis and now Le ffaçasé. Were all these great intelligences touched? Was the world piloted by unbalanced minds? It seemed incredible, impossible it should be so, but two such similar experiences in so short a time apparently supported this gloomy view. Horrible, I thought as I preceded Gootes out of the maniac's office, unbelievably horrible.

"Son," advised Gootes, "never argue with the chief. He has the makings of a firstclass apoplexy—I hope. You just keep squawking to the bookkeeping department and you'll get further than coming up against the Old Man. Now let's go out and look at nature in the raw."

"But my copy," I protested.

"Oh, that," he said airily, "I'll run that off when we come back. Deadlines mean nothing to Jacson Gootes, the composers' companion, the proofreaders' pardner, the layoutman's love. Come, Señor Veener, we take look at el grasso grosso by the moonlight."

17. HOWEVER, IT WAS NOT MOONLIGHT
illuminating the weird tumulus, but the glare of a battery of searchlights, suggesting, as Gootes irreverently remarked, the opening of a new supermarket. During my absence the National Guard had arrived and focused the great incandescent beams on the mound which now covered five houses and whose threat had driven the inhabitants from as many more. The powdery blue lights gave the grass an uncanny yellowish look, as though it had been stricken by a disease.

The rays, directed low, were constantly being interrupted by the bodies of the militiamen hurrying back and forth to accomplish some definite task. "What goes on?" inquired Gootes.

The officer addressed had two gleaming silver bars on his shoulder. He seemed very young and nervous. "Sorry—no one allowed this far without special authorization."

"Working press." Gootes produced a reporter's badge from the captain's bars.

[67]

"Oh. Excuse me. Say, that was a sharp little stunt, Mr—"

"Name of Jacson Gootes. *Intelligencer*."

"Captain Eltwiss. How did you learn stuff like that?"

I looked at him, for the name was somehow vaguely familiar. But to the best of my knowledge I had never seen that smooth, boyish face before.

"Talent. Natural talent. What did you say all the shootin was about?"

"Getting ready to tunnel under," answered the officer affably. "Blow the thing skyhigh from the middle and get rid of it right now. Not going to let any grass grow under our feet."

"But I read an article saying neither dynamite, TNT nor nitroglycerin would be effective against the grass; might even do more harm than good."

"Writers." Captain Eltwiss dismissed literature without even resorting to an exclamationpoint. "Writers." To underline his confidence the boneshaking chatter of pneumatic chisels began a syncopated rattle. Military directness would accomplish in one swift, decisive stroke at the heart of things what civilian fumbling around the edges had failed to do.

I looked with almost sentimental regret at the great conical heap. I had brought it into being; in a few hours it would be gone and whatever fame its brief existence had given me would be gone with it.

With swift method the guardsmen started burrowing. In ordered relays, fresh workers replaced tired, and the pile of excavated dirt grew. Since their activity, except for its urgency and the strangeness of the situation, didnt differ from labors observable any time a street was repaired or a foundation laid, I saw no point in watching, hour after hour. I thought Gootes' persistence less a devotion to duty than the idle curiosity which makes grown men gape at a steamshovel.

My hints being lost on him, I ascertained the hour they expected to be finished and went home. Excitement or no excitement, I saw no reason to abandon all routine. My forethought was proven when I returned refreshed in midmorning as the last shovelfuls of dirt came from the tunnel and the explosive charges were hurried to their place.

[68]

There was reason for haste. While the tunneling had been going on, all the grassfighting activity had ceased, for the militia had ordered weedburners, reapers, bulldozers and the rest off the scene. The weed, unhampered for the first time since Mrs Dinkman attacked it with her lawnmower, responded by growing and growing until more and more guardsmen had to be detached to the duty of keeping it back from the excavation—by the very means they had scorned so recently. Even their most frantic efforts could not prevent the grass from sending its most advanced tendrils down into the gaping hole where the wires were being laid to detonate the charge.

There was so much dashing to and fro, so many orders relayed, so many dispatches delivered that I thought I might have been witnessing an outofdate Civilwar play instead of a peacetime action of the California National Guard. Captain Eltwiss—I kept wondering where I'd heard the name—was constantly being interrupted in what was apparently a very friendly conversation with Gootes by the arrival of officiallooking

envelopes which he immediately stuffed into his pocket with every indication of vexation. "Silly old fools," he muttered, each time the incident happened.

Quick inspections made, plans checked, an order was rasped to clear the vicinity. Gootes' agonized protest that he had to report the occasion for the *Intelligencer's* readers was ignored. "Can't start making exceptions," explained Captain Eltwiss. Everyone—workingpress, militia, sightseers and all, had to move back a couple of blocks where intervening trees and houses cut us off from any view of the green hill.

"This is terrible," exclaimed Gootes frantically. "Tragic. Howll I live it down? Howm I going to face W R? Godlike wrath. 'What poolhall were you dozing in, Gootes? Asleep on your bloody feet, ay, somnambulistic offspring of a threetoed sloth?' Wait all night for a story and then not get it, like the star legman on the Jackson Junior Highschool *Jive-Jitterbug*. I'll never be able to hold my head up again. Say something, say something, Weener—Ive *got* to get this."

[69]

"We'll be able to hear the explosion from here," I remarked to console him, for his distress was genuine.

"Oh," he groaned. "Hear the explosion. Albert, Albert ... you have a fertile mind. Why didnt I hide myself before they told us to clear out? Why didnt I get W R to hire a plane? Why didnt I foresee this and do any of a hundred things? A microphone and automatic moviecamera ... Goony Gootes, they called him, the man who missed all bets.... A captive balloon, now.... Hay! What about a roof?"

"Trees," I objected, with a mental picture of him bursting into the nearest house and demanding entrance to the roof.

"Bushwa. Zair's no tree in z' way of z' old box over zair—allons!"

It wasnt till he had urged me inside and up a flight of stairs that I realized the "box" was Miss Francis' apartmenthouse. It had been a logical choice, since its height and ugliness distinguished it even from its unhandsome neighbors. Less than a week had gone by since I had come here for the first time. As I followed Gootes' grasshopper leaps upward at a more dignified pace, I reflected how strangely my circumstances had changed.

The shoddily carpeted halls were musty and still as we climbed, except for the unheeded squeaking of a radio someone had forgotten to turn off. You could always tell when a radio was being listened to, for when disregarded it sulkily gave off painfully listless noises in frustration and loneliness.

I wasnt at all surprised to find Miss Francis among the spectators crowded on the roof in evidence of having no more important occupation. "I somehow expected you. Have you any new tricks?" she asked Gootes coaxingly.

"Ecod, your worship, wot time ave I for legerdemain? Wif your elp, now, I'd be a fine gentleman-journalist, stead of a noverworked ack."

"Ha," she said genially, busy with the toothpick, "youll find enough respectable laboratory mechanics eager to cooperate. How long will it be before they shoot, do you know?"

[70]

Gootes shook his head and I strained my eyes toward the grass. Symmetrical and shimmeringly green, removed as it now was from all connotations of danger by distance and the promise of immediate destruction, it showed serenely beautiful and unaffected by the machinations of its attackers. I could almost have wept as I traced its sloping sides upward to the rounded peak on top. Reversing all previous impressions, it now appeared to be the natural inhabitant and all the houses, roadways, pavements, fences, automobiles, lightpoles and the rest of the evidences of civilization the intruders.

But even as I looked at it so eagerly it moved and wavered and I heard the muffled boom of explosion. The roof trembled and windows rattled with diminishing echoes. The noise

was neither a great nor terrifying one and I distinctly remember thinking it quite inadequate to the occasion.

I believe all of us there, when we heard the report, expected to see a vast hole where the grass had been. I'm sure I did. When it was clear this hadn't happened, I continued to stare hard, thinking, since my highschool physics was so hazy, I had somehow reversed the relative speed of sight and sound and we had heard the noise before seeing the destruction.

But the green bulk was still there.

Oh, not unchanged, by any means. The smooth, picturebook slope had become jagged and bruised while the regular, evenlyrounded apex had turned into a sort of phrygian cap with its pinnacle woundedly askew. The outlines which had been sharp were now blurred, its evenness had become scraggly. The placid surface was vexed; the attempt on its being had hurt. But not mortally, for even with outline altered, it remained; defiant, certain, inexorable.

The air was filled with small green particles whirling and floating downward. Feathery, yet clumsy, they refused to obey gravity and seek the earth urgently, but instead shifted and changed direction, coyly spiraling upward and sideways before yielding to the inevitable attraction.

[71]

"At least there's less of it," observed Gootes. "This much anyway," he added, holding a broken stolon in his fingers.

"*Cynodon dactylon*," said Miss Francis, "like most of the family Gramineae, is propagated not only by seed, but by cuttings as well. That is to say, any part of the plant (except the leaves or flowers) separated from the parent whole, upon receiving water and nourishment will root itself and become a new parent or entity. The dispersion of the mass, far from making the whole less, as our literary friend so ingenuously assumes, increases it to what mathematicians call the n th power because each particle, finding a new restingplace unhampered by the competition for food it encountered when integrated with the parent mass, now becomes capable of spreading infinitely itself unless checked by factors which deprive it of sustenance. These facts have been repeated a hundred times in letters, telegrams and newspaper articles since the project of attempting to blow up the inoculated batch was known. In spite of warnings the authorities chose to go ahead. No, make no mistake, this fiasco has not set *Cynodon dactylon* back a millimeter; rather it has advanced it tremendously."

There was silence while we absorbed this unpleasant bit of information. Gootes was the first to regain his usual cockiness and he asked, "You say fiasco, professor. O K—can you tell us just why it was a fiasco? I know they stuck enough soup under it to blow the whole works and when it went off it gave out with a good bang."

"Certainly. *Cynodon dactylon* spreads in what may be called jumps. That is, the stems are short and jointed. Those aboveground, the true stems, are called stolons, and those below, from which the roots spread, are rhizomes. Conceive if you will twoinch lengths of stiff wire—and this plant is vulgarly called wiregrass in some regions just as it is called devilgrass here—bent on either end at rightangles. Now take these bits and weave them horizontally into a thick mass. Then add, vertically, more of the wires, breaking the pattern occasionally and putting in more in odd places, just to be sure there are no logical fracturepoints. Cover this involved web—not forgetting it has three dimensions despite my instructions treating it as a plane—with earth, eight, ten, or twelve inches deep. Then try to blow it up with dynamite or trinitrotoluene and see if you haven't—in a much lesser degree—duplicated and accounted for the situation in hand."

[72]

Everything now seemed unusually and, perhaps because of the contrast, unreasonably quiet. Downstairs the radio, which had been monotonously soothing a presumptive audience of unsatisfied housewives with languid ballads, raised its pitch several tones as though for the first time it had become interested in what it purveyed.

"... Yes, unseen friends, God is preparing His vengeance for wickedness and sin, even as you are listening. You have been warned many times of the wrath to come, but I say to you, the wrath is at hand. Even now God is giving you a sign of His displeasure; a cloud no bigger than a man's hand. But, O my unseen friends, that cloud has within it all the storms, cyclones, typhoons, hurricanes and tornadoes necessary to destroy you and yours. Unless you repent of your pride and sloth, Judgment will surely come upon you. The Lord has taken a simple and despised weed and caused it to multiply in defiance of all your puny powers and efforts. O my friends, do not fight this grass, but cherish it; do not allow it to be cut down for it is full of significance for you. Call off all your minions and repent, lest if the holy messenger be injured a more terrible one is sent. But now, my friends, I see my time is up; please send your contributions so urgently needed to carry on the Divine Work to Brother Paul care of the station to which you are listening."

"That's one way of looking at it," said Gootes. "Adios amigos."

He went down the stairs at an even more breakneck pace than he had come up. Almost in front of the apartmenthouse door we nearly collided with two officers in angry dispute.

"You mean to tell me, Captain, that not one of the urgent orders to suspend operations came through to you?"

[73]

"Colonel, I haven't seen a thing against the project except some fool articles in a newspaper."

Suddenly I remembered where I'd seen the name Eltwiss. It was on the financial page, not far away from the elusive quotation on Consolidated Pemmican and Allied Concentrates for which I'd been idly searching. "Eltwiss Explosives Cut Melon." Funny how things come back to you as soon as you put them out of your mind.

Miss Francis, who had followed us down was busy collecting some of the stolons which were still floating lazily downward.

18.

AN ILLITERATE PATCHWORK OF LIFELESS AND uninteresting scribbling appeared under my byline day after day in the *Intelligencer*. Not a word, not a thought of my own was left. I was not restrained from protest by the absurd threats of Le ffaçasé, but prudence dictated not throwing away dirty water before I got clean, and the money from the paper, while negligible of course, yet provided my most pressing needs.

As I was being paid for my name while my talents went to waste, I was free to go anywhere I pleased, but I had little desire to leave the vicinity of the grass. It exerted upon me, more understandably, the same fascination as on the merely curious.

But I was not permitted unmolested access to the phenomenon with which I was so closely concerned. An officious young guardsman warned me away brusquely and I was not allowed to come near until I swallowed my pride and claimed connection with the *Intelligencer*. Even then it was necessary for me to explain myself to several nervous soldiers on pain of being ordered from the spot.

I was struck as I had not been before by the dynamic quality of the grass; never the same for successive instants. Constant movement and struggle as the expanding parts fought for room among themselves, pushing upward and outward, seemed to indicate perceptible sentience permeating the whole body. Preparing, brooding, it was disturbed, searching, alert.

[74]

Its external aspect reflected the change. The proportions of height to breadth had altered since the explosion. The peak had disappeared, flattening out into an irregular plateau. Its progress across the ground, however, had been vastly accelerated; it had crossed the streets on all sides of the block and was spreading with great rapidity over the whole district. For the moment no new effort was apparently being made to halt its progress, the

activities of the militia being confined to patrolling the area and shooting decent citizens away. I wondered if a new strategy contemplated allowing the thing to exhaust itself. Since it looked more vigorous with each passing hour, I saw myself on the payroll of the *Intelligencer* for a long time to come.

Captain Eltwiss walked by and I asked him if this were so. "Don't worry," he reassured me. "We're hep now, with the actual, unbeatable McCoy. Park the body and watch what happens to old Mr Grass."

I had every intention of staying and I thought it advisable to remain close to the captain in order, if his boast were wellfounded, to be in on the kill. He was in excellent spirits and although I did not think it tactful to refer to it, it was evident his little difference with the colonel about the unreceived orders had not affected him. We chatted amiably. I mentioned what Miss Francis had said about the weed springing up in new places from each of the shreds dispersed by the explosion, but he merely shrugged and laughed.

"I know these longbearded scientific nuts. They can find calamity around the corner quicker than a drunk can find a bar."

"The discoverer of the Metamorphizer is a woman, so her long beard is doubtful," I told him, just a little irritated by his cocksureness.

He laughed with as much ease at himself as at anything else. "A woman scientist, ay? Funny things women'll do when they can't get a man. But longbearded or flat-chested it's all the same. Gruesome, that's what they are, gruesome. Forget it. After we get this cleaned up we'll take care of any others that start, but personally I don't think there'll be any. Sounds like a lot of theory to me."

[75]

I looked contemptuously at him, for he had that unimaginative approach which disdains Science and so holds Civilization back on its upward path. If the world's future rested with people like this, I thought, we should never have had dynamite or germtheories or airplanes capable of destroying whole cities at a blow.

But Captain Eltwiss was a servant to the Science he looked down on. The answer he had bragged about now appeared and it was a scientific contribution if ever there was one. A division of tanks, twenty or thirty of them with what appeared to be sledrunners invertedly attached to their fronts, rolled into sight. "Wirecutters," he explained with pride. "Same equipment used for barbedwire on the Normandy beachhead. Go through anything like cheese."

The tanks drew up in a semicircle and the drivers came out of their vehicles for lastminute preparations. A final check was made of gas, oil, and the positions of the wirecutters. Maps, showing the location of each house now covered by the grass, were studied and compasspoints checked against them. I admired the thoroughness and efficiency of the arrangements. So did the captain.

"The idea is simple. These tanks are shocktroops. They'll cut their way into the middle of the stuff. This will give us entranceways and a central operating point, besides hitting the grass where its strength is greatest. From there—" he paused impressively—"from there we'll throw everything in the book at it and a few that aren't. All the stuff they used before we came. Only we'll use it efficiently. And everything else. Even hush-hush stuff. Just got the release from Washington. The minute one of these stems shows we'll stamp it out. We'll fight it and fight it until we beat it and we won't leave a bit of it, no, sir, not one bit of it, alive."

He looked at me triumphantly. Behind his triumph was a hint of the vast resources and the slowmoving but unassailable force his uniform represented. It sounded as though he had been correct in his boast and something drastic indeed would "happen to Mr. Grass."

[76]

The tanks were ready to go at last and the drivers climbed back into them and disappeared, leaving the steel monsters looking as though they'd swallowed the men. Like

bubbles of air in a narrow glass tube they began to jerk backward and forward, until at some signal—I presume given by radio—they jumped ahead, their exhausts bellowing defiance of the grass mauled and torn by their treads.

They went onward with careless scorn, leaving behind a bruised and trampled pathway. The captain followed in the track and I after him, though I must admit it was not without some trepidation I put my feet upon the battered and now lifeless mass packed into a hard roadbed, for I recalled clearly how the grass had wrenched the ladder from the firemen and how it had impishly attacked the broadcaster's equipment.

The tanks moved ahead steadily until the slope of the mound began to rise sharply and the runners of grass, instead of flattening obediently behind, curled and twisted grotesquely as the tracks passed over them, lightly slapping at the impervious steel sides. Small bunches, mutilated and crushed, sprang back into erectness, larger ones flopped limply as their props were pushed aside.

Then, suddenly, the tank we were trailing disappeared. There was no warning; one second it was pursuing its way, an implacable executioner, the next it had plunged into the weed and was lost to sight. The ends of the grass came together spitefully behind it, weaving themselves together, knitting, as we watched, an opaque blanket. It closed over and around so that the smooth track ended abruptly, bitten by a wiry green portcullis.

I was dismayed, but the captain seemed happy. "Now we're getting somewhere," he exclaimed. "The little devils are eating right into the heart of the old sonofabitch."

We stood there gaping stupidly after our lost champion, but the grass mound was enigmatic and offered us no information as to its progress. A survey of the other tracks showed their tanks, too, had burrowed into the heart of the weed like so many hounds after a rabbit.

[77]

"Well," said the captain, who by now had apparently accepted me as his confidant, "let's go and see what's coming in over the radio."

I was glad to be reminded the tanks weren't lost, even temporarily, and that we would soon learn of their advance. Field headquarters had been set up in a house about two blocks away and there, after exchanging salutes, passwords, and assorted badinage, the captain led. The men in contact with the tanks, shoulders hunched, fingers rapid with pad and pencil, were sitting in a row by a wall on which had been tacked a large and detailed map of the district.

In addition to their earphones, a loudspeaker had also been thoughtfully set up, apparently to take care of any such curious visitors as ourselves. The disadvantage, soon manifest, was that no plan had been devised to unscramble the reports from the various tanks. As a consequence, whenever two or three came in together, the reports overlapped, resulting in a jumble of unintelligible sounds from the loudspeaker.

"Brf brf brm," it was saying as we entered the room. "Rrr rrr about three hundred meters khorof khorof khorof north by northeast. Can you hear me, FHQ? Come in, FHQ."

There was a further muddle of words, then, "I think my motor's going to conk out. Shall I backtrack, FHQ? Come in, FHQ."

"Rugged place to stall," commented captain Eltwiss sympathetically, "but we can pull him out in halfashake soon we get things under control."

The loudspeaker, after a great deal of gibberish, condescended to clarity again. "... about five hundred meters. Supposed to join SMT5 at this point. Can't raise him by radio. What do you have on SMT5, FHQ? Come in, FHQ."

I was still speculating as to what had happened to SMT5 when the loudspeaker once more became intelligible. "... and the going's getting tougher all the time. I don't believe

[78]

these goddamned wirecutters are worth a pissinasnowhole. Just fouled up, that's what they are, just fouled up. Got further if theyd been left off."

His grumbling was blotted out. For a moment there was complete babel, then "... if I can guess, it's somehow got in the motor and shorted the ignition. Ive got to take a chance and get out to look at it. This is SMT3 reporting to FHQ. Now leaving the transmitter."

"... stalled so I turned on my lights. Can you hear me, FHQ? Come in FHQ, O K, O K, don't get sore. So I turned on my lights. I'm not going to do a Bob Trout, but I want to tell you it's pretty creepy. I guess this stuff looks pretty and green enough on top, especially in daylight, but from where I am now it's like an illustration out of Grimm's *Fairy Tales*—something about the place where the wicked ogre lived. Not a bit of green. Not a bit of light except from my own which penetrate about two feet ahead and stop. Dead. Yellow and reddishbrown stems. Thick. Interlaced. How the hell I ever got this far I'd like to know. But not as much as how I'm going to get out.

"I'm sticking my head out of the turret now. As far as these stemsll let me. Which isnt far. Theyre a solid mass on top of the machine. And beside it. I'm going to take a few tools and make for the engine. Only thing to do. Can't sit here and describe grassroots to you dogrobbers all day long. See if I can't get her running and back out. Then I resign from the state of California. Right then. This is SMT7 leaving the transmitter for essential repairs and signing off."

For hours the reports kept coming in, all in identically the same vein: rapid progress followed by a slowdown, then either engine trouble or a failure to keep rendezvous by another tank, all messages concluding alike: "Now leaving transmitter." It was no use for field headquarters frantically to order them to stay in their tanks no matter what happened. They were young, ablebodied, impatient men and when something went wrong they crawled out to fight their way through a few feet of grass to fix it. Afterall they were in the heart of a great city. Their machines had burrowed straightforwardly into the grass and no threats of courtmartial could make them sit and look silly till help arrived and they were tamely rescued. So one by one they wormed their way out to fix the ignition, adjust the carburetor, or hack free the cogs which moved the tracks. And one by one their radios became silent and were not heard again.

[79]

The captain went from cockiness to doubt, from doubt to anxiety, and then to anguished fury. He had been so completely confident of the maneuver's outcome that its failure drove him, not to despair, but to anger. He knew most of the tankdrivers personally and the picture of these friends trapped in their tiny, evernarrowing pockets of green sent him into a frenzy. "SMT1—that's Lew Brown. Don't get out, Lew—stay where you are, you jackass. Stay where you are, Lew," he bellowed into the unresponsive loudspeaker.

"Jake White. Jake White's in four. Said I'd buy him a drink afterwards. Joke. He's a cocacola boy. Why can't you stay inside, Jake? Why can't you stay put?"

Unable to bear it longer, he rushed from field headquarters shouting, "Let's get'm out, boys, let's get'm out," and would personally have led a volunteer party charging on foot into the grass if he had not been forcibly restrained and sympathetically led away, sobbing hysterically, toward hospitalization and calming treatment.

The captain's impulse, though impractical, was shared by all his comrades. For the moment the destruction of the grass became secondary to the rescue of the trapped tankmen. If field headquarters had bustled before, it now turned into a veritable beehive, with officers shouting, exhorting, complaining, and men running backwards and forwards as though there were no specific for the situation except unlimited quantities of their own sweat.

[80]

19.

IT WOULD BE FUTILE TO RELATE, EVEN IF I could recall them, all the various methods and devices which were suggested and

rejected or tried and proved failures in the attempt to rescue the tankdrivers. Press and radio followed every daring essay and carefully planned endeavor until the last vicarious quiver had been wrung from a fascinated public. For twentyfour hours there was no room on the front pages of the newspapers for anything but the latest on the "prisoners of the grass," as they were at first called. Later, when hope for their rescue had diminished and they were forced from the limelight to make way for later developments, they were known simply as "heroes in the fight against the weird enemy."

For the grass had not paused chivalrously during the interval. On the contrary, it seemed to take renewed vigor from the victims it had entombed. House after house, block after block were engulfed. The names of those forced from their homes were no longer treated individually and written up as separate stories, but listed in alphabetical order, like battle casualties. Miss Francis, frantically trying to get all her specimens and equipment moved from her kitchen in time, had been ousted from the peeling stucco and joined those who were finding shelter (with some difficulty) in other parts of the city.

The southernmost runners crept down toward Hollywood Boulevard where every effort was being marshaled to combat them, and the northernmost wandered around and seemingly lost themselves in the desert of sagebrush and greasewood about Hollywood Bowl. Traffic through Cahuenga Pass, the great artery between Los Angeles and its tributary valley, was threatened with disruption.

But while the parent body was spreading out, its offspring, as Miss Francis foresaw, had come into existence. Dozens of nuclei were reported, some close at hand, others far away as the Sunset Strip and Hollywoodland. These smaller bodies were vigorously attacked as soon as discovered but of course they had in every case made progress too great to be countered, for they were at first naturally indistinguishable from ordinary devilgrass and by the time their true character was determined so rapid was their growth they were already beyond all possibility of control.

[81]

The grass was now everyone's primary thought, replacing the moon (among lovers), the incometax (among individuals of importance), the weather (among strangers), and illness (among ladies no longer interested in the moon), as topics of conversation. Old friends meeting casually after many years' lapse greeted each other with "What's the latest on the grass?" Radiocomedians fired gagmen with weeks of service behind them for failure to provide botanical quips, or, conversely, hired raw writers who had inhabited the fringes of Hollywood since Mack Sennett days on the strength of a single agrostological illusion. Newspapers ran long articles on *Cynodon dactylon* and the editors of their garden sections were roused from the somnolence into which they had sunk upon receiving their appointment and shoved into doubleleaded boldfaced position.

Textbooks on botany began outselling popular novels and a mere work of fiction having the accidental title *Greener Than You Think* was catapulted onto the bestseller list before anyone realized it wasnt an academic discussion of the family Gramineae. Contributors to scientifiction magazines burst bloodvessels happily turning out ten thousand words a day describing their heroes' adventures amid the red grass of Mars or the blue grass of Venus after they had singlehanded—with the help of a deathray and the heroine's pure love—conquered the green grass of Tellus.

Professors, shy and otherwise, were lured from their classrooms to lecture before ladies' clubs hitherto sacred to the accents of transoceanic celebrities and Eleanor Roosevelt. There they competed on alternate forums with literate gardeners and stuttering horticultural amateurs. Stolon, rhizome and culm became words replacing crankshaft and piston in the popular vocabulary; the puerile reports Gootes fabricated under my name as the man responsible for the phenomenon were syndicated in newspapers from coast to coast, and a query as to rates was received from the *Daily Mail*.

[82]

Brother Paul's exhortations on the radio increased in both length and intensity as the grass spread. Pastors of other churches and conductors of similar programs denounced him as misled; realestate operators, fearful of all this talk about the grass bringing doom

and so depreciating the value of their properties, complained to the Federal Communications Commission; Sundayschools voted him the Man of the Year and hundreds of motherly ladies stored the studio with cakes baked by their own hands. Brother Paul's answer to indorser and detractor alike was to buy up more radiotime.

No one doubted the government would at length awaken from its apathy and counter the menace swiftly and efficiently, as always before in crises when the country was threatened. The nation with the highest rate of production per manhour, the greatest efficiency per machine, the greatest wealth per capita, and the greatest vision per mindseye was not going to be defeated by a mere weed, however overgrown. While waiting the inevitable action and equally inevitable solution the public had all the excitement of war without suffering the accompanying privations and bereavements. The grass was a nuisance, but a nuisance with titillating compensations; most people felt like children whose schoolhouse had burned down; they were sorry, they knew there'd be a new one, they were quite ready to help build it—but in the meantime it was fun.

The *Daily Intelligencer* was gorged with letters from its readers on the subject of the grass. Many of them wanted to know what a newspaper of its standing meant by devoting so much space to an ephemeral happening, while many more asked indignantly why more space wasnt given to something affecting their very lives and fortunes. Communist partymembers, using improbable pennames, asked passionately if this was not a direct result of the country's failure to come to a thorough understanding with the Soviet Union? Terrified propertyholders irately demanded that something, SOMETHING be done before realestate became as valueless in Southern California as it already was in Red Russia.

[83]

Technocrats demanded the government be immediately turned over to a committee of engineers and competent agronomists who would deal with the situation as it deserved after harnessing the wasted energy of the populace. Nationalists hinted darkly that the whole thing was the result of a plot by the Elders of Zion and that Kaplan's Delicatessen—in conspiracy with A Cohen, Notions—was at the bottom of the grass. Brother Paul wrote—and his letter was printed, for he now advertised his radioprograms in the columns of the *Intelligencer*—that Caesar—presumably the state of California—had been chastened for arrogating to itself things not to be rendered unto Caesar and the tankmen had deservedly perished for their sacrilege. The letter aroused fury—the followers of Brother Paul either didnt read the *Intelligencer* or were satisfied their leader needed no championing, if they did—and other letters poured in calling for various expressions of popular disapproval, from simple boycott up through tarring and feathering to plain and elaborated—with gasoline and castration—lynching. The grass was a hot topic.

With its acute perception of the popular taste Le ffaçasé's paper printed not only most of the communications—the unprintable ones were circulated among the staff till they wore out or disappeared mysteriously in the Gents Room—but maps showing the daily progress of the weed, guesses as to the duration of the plague by local prophets, learned articles by scientists, opinions of statesmen, views of prominent entertainers, in fact anything having any remote connection with the topic of the day. The paper even went further and offered a reward of ten thousand dollars to anyone advancing a suggestion leading to the destruction of the intruder. Its circulation jumped at the expense of less perspicacious rivals and the incoming mail, already many times normal, swelled to staggering proportions.

The contest was taken with deadly seriousness, for the livelihood of many of the paper's readers was suddenly threatened by its subject and from a new quarter. In the same issue as the offered reward there appeared an interview with the accredited head of the organized motionpicture producers. This retiring gentleman was rumored to be completely illiterate, an unquestionable slander, for he had written checks to support every cause dedicated to keeping wages where they belonged and seeing the wage earners didnt waste the money so benevolently supplied by their employers.

[84]

I got the details of the interview from the interviewer himself. The magnate—he had no objection to the description—had been irritable and minced no words. The grass was bad alike for production and boxoffice, taking everyone's mind off the prime business of making and viewing motionpictures. It was injuring The Industry and he couldnt conceal the fact that The Industry, speaking through his mouth and with his vocabulary, was annoyed.

"Unless this disgraceful episode ends within ten days," he had said sternly, "the Motion Picture Industry will move to Florida."

It was an ultimatum; Southern Californians heard and trembled. The last time this dread interdiction had been invoked—in the midst of a bitter election fight—it had sent them scurrying to the polls to do their benefactor's bidding. Now indeed the grass menace would be taken seriously.

The next day's paper had news of more immediate concern to me. The governor had appointed a special committee to investigate the situation and the first two witnesses to be called were Josephine Spencer Francis and Albert Weener.

20.

WILLIAM RUFUS LE FFAÇASÉ WAS AS enthusiastic as his phlegmatic nature permitted. He called me into his office and half raised the snuffbox off the desk as though to offer me an unwelcome pinch. "You're a made man now, Weener," he said, thinking better of his generosity and putting the snuffbox back. "Your name will be in headlines from Alabama to Alberta—and all due to the *Intelligencer*."

[85]

I would have resented this as a gross misappropriation of credit—for surely all obligation was on the other side—had I not been deeply disturbed by the prospect of being haled before this committee like a criminal before the bar of justice.

"I'd much rather avoid this unpleasant notoriety, Mr. Le ffaçasé," I protested. "Since the *Intelligencer*, for reasons best known to itself, chooses not to avail itself of my contributions, but prints my name over words I have not written, there could be no possible objection to my slipping away to Nevada until this investigation ends."

His face became a pretty shade of plum. "Weener, you're a thief, a petty, cadging, sly, larcenous, pilfering, bloody thief. You take the *Daily Intelligencer*'s honest dollars without a qualm, aye, with a smirk on your imbecile face, proposing with the cool impudence of the born embezzler to return no value for them. Weener, you forget yourself. The *Intelligencer* picked you out of a gutter, a nauseous, dungspattered and thoroughly fitting gutter, and pays you well, mark that, you feeble-minded counterfeit of a confidenceman, pays you well, not for your futile, lecherous pawings at the chastity of the English language, but out of the boundless generosity which only a newspaper with a great soul can have. And what do you propose to do in gratitude? To run, to flee, to hide from the expression of authority, to bring disgrace upon the very newspaper whose munificence pumps life into your boneless, soulless, gutless carcass. Not another word, not a sound, not a ghoulish syllable from your ineffective vocabulary. Out of my presence before I lose my temper. Get down to whatever smokefilled and tastelessly decorated room that committee is meeting in and do not leave while it is in session, neither to eat, sleep, nor move those bowels whose possession I gravely doubt. You hear me, Weener?"

For some reason the committee was not attempting to get the story of the grass in chronological order. When I arrived, the six distinguished gentlemen were trying to find out all about the crudeoil poured, apparently without effect, in what now seemed so long ago, but which actually had been less than two weeks before.

[86]

Flanked on either side by his colleagues, the little black plug of his hearingaid sticking out like a misplaced unicorn's horn, was the chairman, Senator Jones, his looseskinned

old fingers resting lightly on the bright table, the nails square and ridged, the flesh brownspotted. He adjusted a pair of goldrimmed spectacles, quickly found the improvement in his vision unpleasant, and rumbled, "What did it cost the taxpayers?"

On the stand, the chief of police was settled in great discomfort, so far forward on the rounded edge of his chair that his balance was a source of fascinated speculation to the gallery. He squirmed a perilous half inch forward, but before he had time to reply, old Judge Robinson of the State Supreme Court, who scorned any palliation of his deafness such as Senator Jones condescended to, cupped his left ear with his hand and shrieked, "Ay? Ay? What's that? Speak up, can't you? Don't sit there mumbling."

Assemblyman Brown, head of the legislature's antiracketeering committee, intense concentration expressed in the forward push of his vigorous shoulders and the creased lines on his youthful forehead, asked if it were not true that the oil had been held up by a union jurisdictional dispute? There was a spattering of applause from the listeners at this adroit question and one man in the back of the room cried "Sha—" and then sat down quickly.

Attorney General Smith wanted to know just who had ordered the oil in the first place and whether the propertyowners had given their consent to its application. The attorney general's square face, softened and rounded by fat, shone on the wriggling chief like a klieglight; his lips, irresistibly suggesting twin slices of underdone steak, parting into a pleasant smile when his question had concluded. The other two members of the committee seemed about to inquire further when the chief managed to stammer, he was awfully sorry, gentlemen, but he had been out of town and hadn't even heard of the oil till this moment.

[87]

He was instantly dismissed from the stand and a new witness, from the mayor's office, was called, with no happier results. He, too, was about to be excused when Dr Johnson, who represented Science on the committee, descended from Himalayan abstraction to demand what effect the oil had had on the grass.

There were excited whisperings and craning of feminine heads as Dr Johnson propounded his question. The interest he excited was, however, largely vicarious. For he was famous, not so much in his own right, as in being the husband of the *Intelligencer's* widely read society columnist whose malapropisms caused more wry enjoyment and fearsome anticipation than an elopement to Nevada.

"And what effect did the oil have on the grass?" he repeated.

The query caused confusion, for it seemed the committee could not proceed until this fact had been ascertained. Various technicians were sent for, and the doctor, tall, solemn and benign, looked over his stiff, turned-down collar and the black string tie drooping around it, as though searching for some profound truth which would be readily apparent to him alone.

The experts discoursed at some length in esoteric terms—one even bringing a portable blackboard on which he demonstrated, with diagrams, the chemical, geologic and mathematical aspects of the problem—but no pertinent information was forthcoming till some minor clerk in the Department of Water and Power, who had only got to the stand through a confusion of names, said boldly, "No effect whatever."

"Why not?" asked Judge Robinson. "Was the oil adulterated? Speak up, speak up; don't mumble."

Henry Miller, the Southland's bestknown realtor ("Los Angeles First in Population by Nineteen Ninety Nine"), who had connections in the oil industry, as well as in citrus and walnut packing, frowned disapprovingly. The clerk said he didn't know, but he might venture a guess—

[88]