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The Gas-Weed

by Stanton A. Coblentz

IN all respects but one, there was nothing unprecedented about the ball of fire that startled the western hemisphere toward the end of the year 1968. A meteor of exceptional brilliancy, it was first observed somewhere far above the Arizona desert, traveling westward at a prodigious speed; and a few seconds later, after terrifying the natives of Southern California with its baleful red light, long phosphorescent trail and ominous hissing, it went to its rest on a forsaken beach of the Pacific. For ten or twelve days it was not even known where it had struck; observers generally were of the opinion that it had plunged into the ocean; and while newspapers bore a flaming account of the event and even the scientific journals took some note of it, astronomers were agreed that phenomena as spectacular had been observed before: as witness the records of innumerable fireballs, beginning with that declared by Plutarch to have fallen in Thrace as far back as the year 470 E. C.

Had it not been for a chance observation, the theory that the meteor had vanished beneath the waves might long have remained current. But it happened that Clifton Herrick, an aviator flying low over the coast in the Intercontinental War, noticed an enormous mound or crater of earth reminding him of the shell hole made by an exploding projectile, except that it was incomparably vaster than any shell hole he had ever seen. Though its depth was not more than a score of yards, it measured between a quarter and a third of a mile from rim to rim. Herrick's first theory was that it indicated some previously unexplained volcanic action; and this view

was apparently confirmed by the seething heat that drove him away when he attempted to approach closely, and by the scorched and withered state of the once abundant beach grass surrounding the place. Military experts, however, when told of the discovery, were of opinion that it represented some nefarious device by the foe; and only after the cautious investigation by the War Department did the astonishing truth reveal itself. A scientist of the investigating party, attracted by scattered masses of iron of a telltale composition, proclaimed that the eruption incontestably was of meteoric origin: the largest meteorite ever seen to fall by man lay buried here on the seacoast!

Even so, the announcement occasioned no great flurry. The world at that moment was engaged so busily in the practice of war, that scientific observations of a nonmilitary nature aroused but passing interest. Little did men dream of the transcendent importance of this particular bit of scientific news! Little did they suspect that it was to prove more momentous than any war that man had ever waged! There were none who foresaw the gruesome, unthinkable events that were to convulse the world within the next year or two; for there were none who, at that day, could have known of the one respect in which that meteorite was different from all its predecessors, and of the tragic significance of the single point of variance.

Ignorant of the peril that they were releasing upon their fellows, a small group of scientists began a minute investigation of the meteorite. As soon as it had cooled sufficiently to permit them to work in comfort,

they undertook their excavations, burrowing on all sides and even beneath the enormous mass, and at the same time blowing off some huge fragments by means of dynamite. These they subjected to chemical analysis, finding them to be composed of the same alloy of iron and nickel as that of countless smaller meteorites. It was only after they had penetrated deep down into the fallen mass that they discovered anything of scientific note; and then the observations, while unusual, did not seem in any way significant. At a depth of about forty feet, the dynamite of the excavators revealed a rich vein of some quartzlike rock—not precisely like any terrestrial quartz in appearance, yet of a flinty hardness and of the same chemical composition as quartz. What was more important—but what the observers, in their haste, did not note until later—was that thousands of minute black specks were embedded in the quartz, no larger than pinpoints and presenting under the microscope a smooth polished surface and a shape not unlike that of the common bean. Had any of the scientists at that time taken notice of the black particles, he would probably not have been impressed, for they would have seemed to him to be mineral matter of no extraordinary nature; and no steps, accordingly, would have been taken to prevent them from escaping in their myriads into the world at large. And this is profoundly regrettable, for it means that, once the dynamite had released the unsuspected peril, no human agency would be able to check it at its source, or prevent its spreading.

WEEKS went by. The world, unaffected, hastened fiercely about its other affairs. The Intercontinental War was blazing more hotly than any other conflict in history; the great trans-Pacific invasion was being undertaken, with the loss of a hundred million lives in India and China; airplanes were laying waste

the leading cities of the Pacific seaboard, and poison gas was annihilating whole populaces in Australia and western Europe; and mankind, with one half of the white race and one half of the yellow race ranged against the other half of the white race and the other half of the yellow, was waging a desperate and apparently losing battle for existence. Had any one suggested that, while the guns were flaming and the shrapnel bursting, the most powerful arbiters of all lay strewn about a Pacific beach in the shape of some microscopic black particles, the idea would certainly have met with wholesale ridicule; yet the simple truth, which we of today realize all too bitterly, is, that each of those black specks contained more diabolical potentiality than a thousand tons of high explosive.

It was little more than a month before the first portents of disaster appeared. A party of chemists and astronomers, returning by airplane to conduct a fresh investigation of the meteorite—which had lain unheeded for several weeks—were startled to observe the altered appearance of the beach where it had fallen. All of them were sober men of science, yet all, as they afterwards confessed, rubbed their eyes and gaped and wondered if they were dreaming—it seemed almost as if the beach had disappeared! Or, rather, the sands of the beach had disappeared; and, at the same time, the crater caused by the meteor had almost vanished! But for hundreds of yards where the sands had been, and for other hundreds where the crater had gaped like a ghastly sore, there was a thick reddish growth of some mysterious vegetation! Weirdly translucent, and dense as the foliage of a tropical jungle, it fringed the ocean to a height of twenty feet, and, unaffected by the brine, stretched out into the water for well over a quarter of a mile!

It would be pointless to describe this strange vegetation in detail, for it has since grown familiar as grass to every child. Let it

suffice to state that it was then in a half developed, sprouting stage, somewhat like a leguminous plant with the cotyledons^[1] still clinging to it. But even so, it presented an appearance sufficiently fantastic and imposing. It can be most nearly likened to a gigantic fungus, since it possessed no leaves at all; it consisted merely of a mass of tendrils, weaving and interweaving like a pile of intertangled cotton yarn; and its feelers, sprouting out in all directions as thickly as bristles from a brush, showed a tendency to curl like a corkscrew, and in many cases ended in clawlike protuberances that have been compared to the talons of eagles.

But as if these points of novelty were not sufficient, the plants showed other and still more striking peculiarities. The first of these was that, here and there among the wilderness of tendrils, there was an opaque round mass double the size of a man's head, deep purple in color, and surmounted by a growth of shoots and stems that bore a remarkable similarity to hair. And, to complete the likeness to a human head, there were several orifices corresponding remotely to mouth and eyes; and these were seen to open and contract for no known reason, giving the illusion of a face grimacing with the most horrible, distorted malevolence and mockery. Scientists were afterwards to explain that these were mere centers of growth, corresponding roughly to the trunk of a tree; but there are thousands who, to this day, remain unconvinced, and contend that the supposed plants were really not plants at all, but represented some inexplicable cross between vegetable and animal life. . . .

SUBSEQUENT events developed numerous

¹These are the so-called seed leaves, which are what we eat in the leguminous plants. If you see a bean seedling just pushing up its head you will see the two cotyledons, which have protected the tender leaflets on their way through the soil.

arguments to support this view. One of them was to be found in the second marked peculiarity of the plants. This was discovered—and in a most unfortunate way—by the members of the scientific party upon their investigation of the curious growth. For, after they had alighted from their airplane and started on foot toward the plants, they encountered an unexpected obstacle. When they were within a hundred yards of the fringe of vegetation, a queer odor came to their nostrils, vaguely sweet, pungent, indescribable and as distinctive as the odor of ether, and more subtly unpleasant than they could explain. They had no thought, however, of possible danger, and continued on their way until the foremost was within twenty yards of the plants. Then suddenly an extraordinary thing happened. A pale greenish-yellow cloud, of the color of chlorine gas shot toward them from the plants, as though forced out of nozzles under high pressure. Before they had had time to retreat, the gas was drifting all about them. And the foremost of the scientists reeled, gasped, and sank with a deep sigh to the earth.

Two of his comrades, a little to his rear, likewise gasped and staggered, then wilted like men who have been shot, and dropped to earth. The remaining five members of the party, not quite in the line of attack, coughed heavily and felt their heads dizzily swimming, but somehow remained on their feet. Stumbling like drunken sailors, they struggled forward to aid their companions—only to succumb to a new wave of the gas, which leapt forth in a vehement burst from the tendrils of the plants. And when the second wave had passed, seven silent forms lay strewn about the beach.

But in the form of the eighth victim, still prostrate upon the sand, there might have been observed some signs of life. One man, a little further than his fellows from the reddish growth, might have been seen to move his

limbs in random, feeble gestures, somewhat like a beetle that has been trodden upon. Gradually, in the course of what may have been hours, his movements began to take on a little force and direction; and there came a time when, with a sick sensation in the head and the unsteadiness of one who walks a hurricane swept deck, he precariously regained his feet, and by turns stumbled and crawled away from the plant toward the waiting airplane. . . .

He it was who, in a condition halfway between life and death, appeared on the following day in the western offices of the War Department, stammering forth a story of some incredible new poison gas contrivance, which resembled a reddish plant and lured one on to destruction. Such were his ravings and mutterings that many were inclined to believe him a madman, although he spoke in the manner of one who has actually survived some appalling catastrophe, and was eventually identified as none other than Sherman Crass, the world-renowned chemist. But it was only because of the outstanding name and influence of the man, and not because any one believed there could be a particle of truth in his fantastic story, that a small party was sent to investigate the patch of beach of which he gave such lurid warning.

When, after three days, no member of the investigating party had returned, the War Department began to take a somewhat more serious interest. And when, after another three days, still another investigating party had gone forth and remained unreported, it came to be recognized with alarm that possibly there was more than a shadow of truth to Kris's narrative. Rumors that the foe had seized the coast in force now began to circulate; it was common gossip that they had found a base for their poison gas attacks somewhere along the California beaches. And it was for this reason that the War Department, now thoroughly aroused, commissioned a fleet of sixty air

scouts and ten dirigibles, well equipped with guns and gasmasks, to fly to the alleged military base and attack the enemy in mass.

The experiences of this expedition are among the most memorable of which our records tell us. Few persons have ever received a more bewildering surprise than did the crew of the great air fleet when, approaching the spot indicated in Krass's report, they found the beach overgrown for half a dozen miles with translucent reddish shoots. But the plants were not twenty feet high, as Krass had indicated; they averaged forty feet or more! And the great purple masses that stood out here and there among them were each as large as half a dozen human heads!

The fleet alighted at a distance of several hundred yards; and a dozen volunteers were ordered to approach as nearly as possible to the vegetation. Their fate, however, might have been foretold; they were still far from touching distance when there was an eruption of the greenish vapors, and the men staggered, toppled groaning to earth, and were still. Thenceforth, upon the orders of the commander, every member of the expedition was required to wear his gasmask.

Even with this precaution, however, they found their task no easy one. They did not, it is true, succumb to the gas attacks, for their masks were of the latest style, and were proof even against the recently developed sulpho-cyanide vapors, one whiff of which would kill a man; but they did find themselves the targets of an attack, even more direct and unexpected in its nature. For, when they strode within the shadow of the reddish vegetation, the invisible seemed to open up its arms against them; long, spinelike blades shot out with amazing speed from concealed scabbards amid the undergrowth. It would be impossible to give an idea of the swiftness and suddenness of the assault; before they had had time to defend themselves, half a dozen men

had been pierced and slain. Some with thorax and abdomen ripped open, others with heads broken and shattered, they toppled to earth, where they lay in crimson masses that quivered for an instant, and then were still. And meanwhile the blades, with poniard thin edges, curved and gleaming like scimitars, flashed back again into their hidden scabbards.

Thunderstricken, the remaining troops stopped short barely in time to save themselves. Some fled screaming, as though pursued by demons; others remained rooted to the ground, their hair fairly bristling in their fright. To one and all it was apparent that no ordinary enemy confronted them. And to the commanders, observing the horror from safe vantage points in the rear, the conviction came that the fibrous wall before them was not a wall of vegetation at all, but rather some deathtrap contrived with diabolical ingenuity by the foe. For had any such plants as this ever been known before? And had any plants, however strange, ever been seen to strike out like human beings? The idea was unthinkable, preposterous! Accordingly, with the belief that human enemies lay unseen in ambush behind the reddish screen, the leaders ordered a wholesale attack by means of aerial bombing guns, small field artillery, bayonets, and hand grenades. And, as a preliminary to the assault, they directed that the men be all arrayed in those steel coats of mail and helmets which had come to be part of the paraphernalia of modern warfare.

It was the massed attack of several thousand men that brought the greatest surprise of the day. The plantlike growth, though apparently soft and flexible, proved to be actually hard and impermeable as granite! Again and again the attacking bayonets struck with a clatter as of iron against rock; again and again the blades were warped or broken. And the hand grenades and the aerial bombs exploded without causing any visible damage; the shells of the field artillery made only

narrow gaps, which closed almost instantly, leaving all as before! The supposed plants were really stronger than steel!

But no sign of a human enemy was discovered by any of the assaulting party. And at length the commanders, turning from the attack in a sort of dazed astonishment, were forced to admit themselves defeated. When finally, baffled and bewildered, they returned home, it was with the report that the enemy had contrived some inexplicably powerful, destructive mechanism, infinitely superior to any previously known.

NOW it was that the world was really aroused. Now it was that scientists and militarists alike began to recognize that the bristling reddish growth represented a discovery of major importance. The idea that it was not a thing of human contrivance, that it was something strange, unearthly, sinister beyond all reckoning, was already beginning to gain credence in certain quarters; and the demand for a thorough explanation and investigation was growing louder and more insistent. The American government, throwing open its treasury, in alarm that was daily deepening, offered a reward of one hundred thousand dollars to whoever would satisfactorily account for the red plant. And at the same time it provided unbounded facilities, in the shape of military equipment and scientific apparatus, to all who desired to participate in the investigation. Meanwhile, from all sections, a cry of "Make haste, make haste!" began to arise. For an appalling fact was coming to light, a fact that argued incontestably against the human origin of the spiny reddish thing. The "gas-weed," as it was now popularly called, was still growing with phenomenal speed, and had already attained a height of one hundred feet. Worst of all, it was spreading, not only along the beach, but inland, wiping out every other plant as effectively as a prairie wipes out dried grass.

An area estimated at over forty square miles had already been conquered by the spreading peril!

It was through the efforts of that celebrated chemist, Sherman Krass, that the world gained its first partial solution of the mystery. Ever since his narrow escape from death at the hands of the unknown, Krass had devoted himself unsparingly to the investigation of the gas-weed. And he it was who first traced its definite connection with the fireball of 1968. Remembering that its first appearance had been in the vicinity of the crater caused by the meteorite, and that it had originally been observed not long after the meteor's fall, he conceived a daring theory which he at once set out to demonstrate scientifically. Tearing apart small fragments of the meteorite and examining them beneath the microscope, he discovered the tiny bean shaped particles; he also discovered how, when split apart, they displayed curious lines and veining, not unlike the veining of a leaf. Next he subjected some of the black dots to qualitative analysis, and in so doing discovered them to be exceedingly complex in structure, composed primarily of a silicon compound, but with the inclusion of quantities of oxygen, hydrogen, carbon and various other elements to be found in organic substances. And yet the silicon was so abundant that, as Krass afterwards confessed, he doubted for a while whether the resemblance to anything organic could be more than superficial. He did not, however, refrain from making a final experiment—and to this experiment the world owes the first great stride toward the mastery of the unknown; he distributed a few score of the black dots in flowerpots filled with a moist sandy soil, covered them with a thin coating of earth, and resolutely waited.

He did not, however, have to wait long. On the following day he observed something red and fibrous just beginning to peep above the earthen surface of the

flowerpots. At first he thought it was perhaps merely some chance weed; but he was swiftly to be disillusioned. Even as he watched, he saw translucent shoots pushing themselves out of the soil with movements so rapid as to be perceptible to the attentive eye!

THERE could be no further doubt. The discovery was nothing short of revolutionary! Wild-eyed with amazement, Krass rushed off to broadcast his secret. He had penetrated the enigma of the gas-weed! He knew now that it was not of this earth! Its seeds had been borne to us by the meteorite; it had issued from some other world, some other universe!

Such was the startling fact that Krass proclaimed. But mankind at large, with its customary skepticism when the unusual is concerned, did not share in his enthusiasm. Many at first smiled incredulously, and declared themselves unwilling to accept a tale that so flatly contradicted all previous experience. How, asked the critics, could a meteorite come to bear seeds within it? How preserve them, so that they were capable of germination after possibly millions of years? And how, even granting their existence, could they sprout upon the earth, in an environment probably totally different from that known to their kind?

To all these questions Krass listened patiently, and to each he offered an answer. Torn from the surface of some remote planet by some tremendous cataclysm, some volcanic eruption, some collision of worlds, the meteor could easily have borne within it a portion of rock or soil containing seeds awaiting germination; and these, if small enough and if fortified sufficiently by ancestral adaptation to extremes of pressure and of cold, might be preserved within the meteor's iron heart, proof against any change of temperature and unaffected by the passage of years. And finding on earth a propitious environment—which is to say an environment

that included sunlight, air, and a moderately warm soil—they at once were brought to life, and developed as readily as though on their native sod. In all this, as Krass took pains to make clear, there was really nothing extraordinary, any more than in the importing of an Australian plant into North America, or of a North American plant into Australia; the real marvel was that such a transplanting had never happened before, unless, indeed, it had happened a thousand times without our knowing it, and was one of the obscure causes of the origin of species.

Within a few days, a number of other extraordinary facts about the gas-weed had been made public by Krass. For one thing, he had conducted a chemical analysis of the young shoots, when they were still relatively soft and tender and had not attained anything of that steel-like rigidity characteristic of the developed plants. He had discovered that, in common with the seeds, they were composed of a silicon compound, so highly complex that its chemical formula defied analysis, and differed fundamentally from any other substance ever known on earth. Krass's theory—based, it is true, upon incomplete researches, but later thoroughly substantiated—was that the gas-weed had a totally different chemistry from any terrestrial organism: instead of the chlorophyll common to all green plants, it had a reddish pigment which enabled it to utilize the sunlight as a source of growth; while, in place of the well-known protoplasm, with carbon and nitrogen as its basis, it had a molecular construction equally elaborate, but with silicon as the essential ingredient. This, in Krass's belief, explained not only why the weed thrived so well in the sandy soil of the beach, where silicon dioxide existed in inexhaustible quantities, but why it was able to build up walls of the flinty construction for which various silicon compounds are noted. Such are the feldspars, trap rock and others. And this

also explained, in the view of scientists, why it was a thing so difficult to compete with, a thing inimical to human life. For that it was inimical to life, as much in the role of aggressor as when deliberately attacked, was fast becoming manifest. Apparently thriving upon success, the plant had continued to develop at a rate that would have been deemed impossible had not the sober facts forbidden denial. From occupying forty square miles of territory, it had come to spread over eighty, then over a hundred and twenty, then over two hundred, then over five hundred, then over a thousand square miles! And this vast conquest was accomplished within a period of weeks! No army known to history had ever subdued territory so utterly and so indisputably. Advancing away from its first field of attack, it was spreading inland, was moving over cultivated ground and crowding out orchards and vineyards as easily as forest trees crowd out grass. Even houses and small towns were not immune to its attack; they disappeared before it as mysteriously as though they had been but phantoms; the translucent ruddy shoots would weave their way through brick and wood, seizing all in a strangle grasp and grinding it to fragments; and when the advance guard had once arrived, in a few days there would remain only a tall reddish tangle, with here and there a purple head shaped mass, uplifted like the face of some inscrutable sentinel watching and warning. . . .

THE worst of the matter was that the devastation did not confine itself to a single area. Bad as it was to see a section of the fertile California seaboard succumbing to the invader, it was inconceivably worse to find a dozen, twenty, fifty spots falling victims. How the terror could spread into widely separated districts was not at first apparent, but ultimately an explanation did come. The plants, as Sherman Krass discovered, were already putting forth seeds; and these minute

black particles such as he had already investigated, were equipped with tiny down-like wings, much like the wings of dandelion seeds, except that they were lighter and might blow even further field. Thus, as the facts incontestably showed, they had been borne fifty, a hundred, in some cases two hundred miles from their point of origin; and, in widely scattered regions, among the orange groves of Riverside and in the fig orchards and vineyards of Fresno County, the gas-weed had lifted its rank growth, laying waste some of the richest agricultural regions of the State, and spreading, spreading, spreading, always silently and malignantly spreading.

It was less than six months before the intruder had ceased to be recognized as a matter of merely local concern, and in many quarters had come to be regarded as a worldwide peril. In some way that has never been positively ascertained—whether due to the chance passage of the seeds on the person of some traveler, or to their deliberate transportation as a means of military aggression—the gas-weed gained a foothold first in Europe, then in Asia, then in Africa, then in Australia. Before long there was no part of the world, civilized or uncivilized, that did not know its baneful presence.

It showed itself able to thrive equally well in any climate and in any soil containing silicon; it began scrambling up the arid mountains of Southern California and Arizona, apparently indifferent to the scarcity of water, and was even reported in the saline waste of the Great Salt Lake desert, and among the dunes of the remote Sahara; it flourished on the sides of stony mountains, sending its roots deep down into quartz and flint; it inhabited the clayey valleys of rivers, and among the tundra of Labrador it began to lift its head as though it were in its native habitat.

Slow as the world in general was to appreciate the scope of the menace, the second

six months brought warnings not to be resisted. For there are some pleas which speak more forcefully than words, and which no man has ever been known to deny; and one of these was to be found in the famine that slowly, stealthily followed in the wake of the reddish invader. The world's food supplies, depleted by the most exhausting war in history, would barely have proved adequate in any case; and the drain caused by the added destruction proved as decisive, as would a sack of lead placed on the back of a tottering laborer. Starvation, already threatening to descend, suddenly reached its bony hand over all realms; wheat and potatoes rose so sharply in price as to be beyond the range of the common man; meat, because of the extensive destruction of grazing land, soared until it had become a luxury of luxuries. And now only the well-to-do went their way without feeling the hunger pangs, while in every city on earth the poverty ridden thousands, standing in line for a plate of soup or a scrap of barley bread, cried out in vain for that with which to appease the clamor of their gaunt and shriveled babes, of their worn and weeping womenfolk.

“End the war! End the war! End the war!” was now the cry in all lands. For while Hunger, with its accomplices, Looting and Riot, went rattling its skeleton fingers about the earth, the lords of empires, themselves with ample bread in their pantries, were still urging their underfed minions forward with bomb and bayonet. And meantime men of science, debating behind locked doors, whispered the opinion that the war must automatically come to a close; but that, even so, only heroic measures could save the human race.

It will be needless to comment upon the further events of those tragic days. There would be no object in enumerating the hundreds of thousands that perished of starvation in China, in Soviet Russia, in

England, in India, in the United States; neither would there be any gain in outlining the course of that great pestilence which attended the famine, and which for a while converted the surface of whole continents into a purgatory defying description. Better to pass over these unhappy events, beside which the Black Plague that once depopulated Europe would seem like a backwoods epidemic; better also not to detail by what steps the predictions of the wise were fulfilled, the man automatically had to abandon the war upon man, in the throes of the still more desperate war for racial survival.

The all-important fact is that the time did come when all the remaining energies of our kind were directed toward the problem of the gas-weed. But how attack that problem? How compete with a foe whose armament was so impregnable, whose methods of combat so different from anything previously known on earth? The heads of the various nations, in a conference wherein for once political bickering were forgotten amid an atmosphere of terror and despair, agreed upon every possible agency of international cooperation: chemists and botanists in large numbers were to study the gas-weed; enormous prizes were to be offered for every important discovery: the laboratories of all lands were to be thrown open to research workers, and the results of their studies were to become the property of all nations alike. So far, so good!—but what if there were to be no results from their studies? So some of the pessimistic inquired, for still the days went by and nothing encouraging was announced, and still the gas-weed, with its prodigious fecundity, kept spreading over garden land and desert alike, devouring, devouring, devouring, insatiable in its greed for prey.

It is impossible to estimate how many brave men, venturing forth to study the gas-weed, perished of its poisonous exhalations or beneath its spiny sabres. It is impossible to

compute how many others took their lives in despair, how many died in madness, how many succumbed to pestilence and famine. There is no means of gathering such statistics, for mankind, in its deathly grip with the invader, could no longer give a thought to the mere numbers of the casualties. All that we can say with certainty is that no less than nine-tenths of the human race had been extinguished, and no less than one-half of the world's arable lands had been laid waste, before chance brought that solution which no man's ingenuity had been able to contrive.

IN an obscure laboratory connected with an eastern medical college, a young physician, Francis Leighton by name, had been conducting researches into the cause of cancer, a disease which had been gaining in virulence of recent years and still seemed far from being vanquished. At the time of the appearance of the gas-weed, Leighton had been gathering cancer cultures in various tubes and jars and artificially feeding them in preparation for microscopic study. But, upon the worldwide development of the new menace, he had turned reluctantly from his cancer researches into the still more difficult research into the nature of the gas-weed. He had acquired a few flowerpots filled with the young plants, whose seeds and translucent shoots he had laboriously studied; but within a few days, like so many investigators, he had found that his laboratory specimens were fairly running away with him, were threatening literally to eat him out of house and home! Being inexperienced, he had not taken the precaution of destroying the young plants with nitric acid during the first three or four days of their growth, when they were still too tender to resist that devouring reagent; and after the first three or four days, when neither fire nor water nor any chemical known to man had any effect upon them, the gas-weeds dug their clutching roots through the clay of the

flowerpots into the wooden floor of the laboratory and the stone foundations, and, drawing nourishment from that difficult source, expanded so rapidly that they seemed likely soon to fill and destroy the building. It was no trifling matter.

But young Leighton, watching in horror as the pest spread uncontrollably, could hardly have known that for once the very rapacity of the foe was to betray it. In his consternation, he did not remember the cancer cultures, which stood unnoticed beneath glass cases in a dozen parts of the laboratory; but the gas-weed, whose hungry grasping arms could overlook nothing—and least of all the silicon bearing glass—was not slow in finding out that which Leighton had forgotten. The tough reddish tendrils, reaching the first of the glass coverings, forced their way through it as though it had been made of straw, bursting it into a thousand fragments, and proceeding greedily to devour it.

But for the first time the intelligence of the gas-weed—if the uncanny force that guided it can be called intelligence—had been guilty of a miscalculation. And the results of that miscalculation were soon to become apparent. No one at first even remotely surmised the cause; yet a change, an extraordinary change, had come over the plant. Within a few hours the ends of the tendrils, though immune to attack by dynamite or steel, began to crumple up and wither; enormous green black swellings commenced to appear at a hundred points among the wilderness of shoots; the huge purple head like masses sagged and contracted, and faded to a pale, sickly yellow; faint, scarcely discernible noises, like a low moaning, could be heard as the writhing reddish arms threshed one against the other in what observers declared to be like the death agony of some sentient creature.

And a death agony it surely was! Within twenty-four hours, every evidence of

life had vanished from the gas-weed. In a fallen, shriveled, blackening heap, loathsome but harmless, it lay upon the floor of the laboratory it had come so close to annihilating.

What had happened to the terrible weed? Leighton, observing in amazement, was at first too bewildered to understand; and it was only by slow degrees that the explanation dawned upon him. The cancer cultures! They had been his saviors! In some unaccountable way, they had attacked and conquered the unconquerable!

Leighton's first impulse was to proclaim the news from every house and hilltop. But, being naturally of a cautious, scientific turn of mind, he restrained his impatience until he had hastily conducted other experiments. Securing new cancer cultures, he deliberately exposed them on the path of the gas-weed—not one time, but fifty! And in every case he got the same result! Within half a day the plants would begin to wither, would develop enormous, hideous swellings, then they would blacken and die!

But why did the change come about? Leighton could not answer, nor could any of the scientists who studied the question. The most that they could state was that the cancer cells, possessing some peculiar property inimical to the life of the gas-weed, had found in the plant an exceptionally fertile soil; while the plant in its turn, having an inherited immunity to all perils except this alone, had not the necessary resistance. One circumstance only was easily explained: the fact that its incredibly hard exterior did not protect it; for its surface, as observers discovered upon investigation of the remains, was covered with a multitude of tiny breathing places or pores through which the cancer cells might readily have entered.

But whatever the complete explanation, the significance of Leighton's discovery was clear enough. The ancient

enemy of mankind had become its deliverer! With the aid of our old foe, cancer, we might strike down the invader!

And with the aid of that old foe, we did indeed strike down the invader! Like wildfire the news of Leighton's findings spread around the earth; and, for the first time in history, cancer patients came into big demand. Operations were performed wherever possible upon victims of the disease; and the cells, dropped from airplanes among the vast jungles of the gas-weed, were scattered far and wide to do their deadly work. And never once did they fail! The plants, withering and blackening, began to recede as rapidly as they had appeared; over areas of thousands of square miles they were exterminated, until not

one living trace of them remained!

Five years have now passed since the appearance of the pestilence. Today no gas-weed survives, except in a few mountainous and desert regions, and among the frigid wastes of the Antarctic Continent, where their destruction is of but slight importance. But even these, it is believed, will be blotted out within a few more passing years.

And meanwhile humanity, left gasping and bewildered on the very verge of extinction, has been courageously husbanding its few remaining resources, still trembling at the doom it has avoided, and yet daily offering up prayers that the heavens shall not open again to cast down some new freight of terror that man may not be able to resist.