

The Last Weed Seed.

A FANTASY

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The professor's night-light shed a feeble glimmer in a corner of his study. It glinted weirdly on the polished metal-work of a tall microscope and touched with uncertain beam the rim of a miniature crucible. Its brightest ray it reserved for the great man's desk, betraying the presence of a colored diagram, a small glass tube filled with black, triangular seeds, several phials of various colored liquids, a small card-board box and a gigantic model of a grain of wheat lying on its celluloid scutellum like a newly-opened oyster. But the night-light, with almost human perversity, seemed more concerned about the grotesque shadows it produced than the number and variety of the objects it cheered with its beams. Whether it was that a coquettish moth began to flutter around it, or a puff of wind reached it from the open window, at any rate it began to caper and dance like a thing of life. The gaunt shadows jostled each other on the wall and bowed to each other on the floor like figures in a dance.

At this moment the glass tube on the desk rolled over and a big, fat seed that had hitherto been hidden from view by his companions struggled to the surface. He was like a giant newly awakened from his slumbers. For a little he seemed to cogitate. Then he pulled himself together, and, as it were, buttoned his coat.

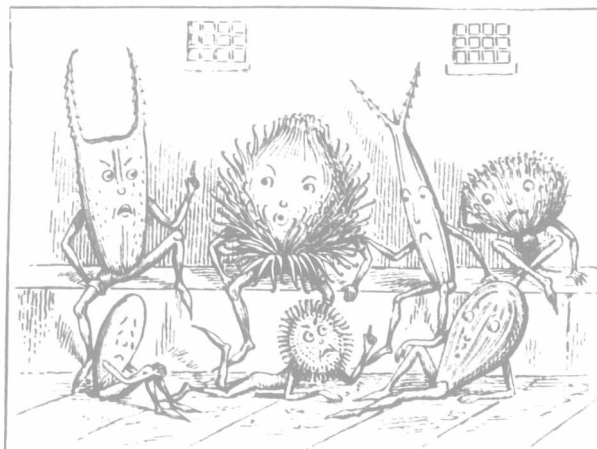
"My friends," said he at length with great solemnity, "to-night an unenviable distinction awaits us. Like the young politician, who in the simplicity of his heart,—ahem!—confides some piece of raw intelligence to the constituency he is nursing, I beg leave to inform you, in all sincerity,—ahem!—that I have it directly from the professor's own lips. Doubtless, many of you wondered why such pains were taken to bring us together; for although we are admittedly a small body, we nevertheless have in our midst representatives from nearly every state and province in America. It may even have occurred to the less critically discerning among you that something is about to be done to preserve us from the ravages of our all too numerous enemies; that, in a manner of speaking, we are assembled in convocation like so many churchmen—Peace! Peace! Our black coats warrant the allusion, gentlemen!—to deliberate upon the most efficacious method of ameliorating our condition. But let us not delude ourselves! We, the one-time aristocrats of the field, are here penned up in a bottle, like prisoners in the Bastille, waiting the will of the hated Robespierre—our professor. Gentlemen all, our doom is sealed. The black shadow of death is over us. You can hear the rustle of his vampire wings. To put it plainly, bluntly, reverently—we are the "Last of the Mohicans!" To-night, before a concourse of the world's great scientists, we shall undergo the penalty of all created things. The latent life within us shall perish. If I were a moralist I might reflect upon this our sad condition under several heads. But what boots it? We suffer, not because of any transgression on the part of our first parents, but because of a vain and froward generation which believed in a blind adherence to primal conditions. Unlike the buckwheat they never courted the favor of the great. A spend-thrift, purblind race they were, content to wander the face of the earth, tasting its joys to the full and recking little of its sorrows, batten on the land and leaving nothing but an interminable trail of trouble behind them. Wanderers though they were, and capable though they may have been of penetrating to the remotest point where man might establish himself, they never were, in the fullest sense of the word, pioneers. They had wit enough, however, to attach themselves to the careless and the ignorant, thereby securing a certain if not altogether honest livelihood. But a day of reckoning was at hand. For them, the confines of the world seemed suddenly to narrow down. Their room was preferable to their company it was found. Their habits of rapine bred, as it always does, a spirit of indifference. They were impervious to all good counsel. Accordingly, when war was proclaimed against the whole fraternity of weeds, our complainant ancestors looked upon it as a piece of scientific pleasantry. But as one by one the old familiar faces began to disappear, it became apparent that Science was a force to be reckoned with. The first to go was the shepherd's purse, a most amazing fact when you consider its extraordinary power of reproduction. I never saw a specimen of the plant myself. It was dead and all but forgotten before I saw the light. But I have heard it said—the old will talk, you know, and in a period of decay become obtrusively eminent—I have heard it said that if all the railroads in America had for any reason become abandoned, it would have been possible two hundred years later to have traced their routes from coast to coast simply by the presence of *Capsella Bursa Pastoris*. As showing the important place that weeds once occupied in the world of commerce, there is still among elevator men a practice of "docking" the farmer so much per bushel. The explanation is this. The agriculturist of a former day was "docked" because he had weed seeds among his grain. The farmer of to-day is "docked" because he has not any. Nobody pretends to understand it, but as Portia

says of Shylock's pound of flesh "the law allows it." Herein is the irony of the whole struggle. It is not always to those that overcome that the spoils of war belong. After the shepherd's purse disappeared there was a kind of death race among the weeds, as if some honor were attached to the order of their going. The tumble-weed, the stink-weed, the false flax, the goosefoot, the rag-weed, the worm-seed mustard, the pigweed, the blue burr, went one after another. Already, indeed, someone has written a treatise on "Extinct Plants of the Order *Cruciferae*. Only two years ago the thistles went under, uttering their slogan, "Wha daur meddle wi' me?" with painful insistence. And now the curtain is about to be raised on the last sad act in our own grim struggle. To Science is the victory. The world, ever ready to applaud the conqueror, stands smiling by. But hush! the professor is at the door: I hear his voice. Good-bye my brothers! I embrace you all with a sorrowful heart: *neque prae lachrimis jam loqui possum*. (I cannot speak for tears.)"

The handle of the door turned and, sure enough, Professor Lonicera entered. He was a tall old man of immaculate presence. His clean cut features wore an expression of great power; yet his dark blue eyes were lit with an almost boyish brightness. He wore evening dress and carried a great-coat over his arm. Taking up the bottle of bind-weed seeds, he placed it along with two small vials in a tiny card-board box and took his departure.

Two hours later Professor Lonicera found himself among a host of veteran scientists in a brilliantly-lighted apartment. The table before them was covered with a profusion of flowers and two long rows of decanters and wine-glasses interspersed with fruits and comfits of endless variety. The professor was standing in the place of honor, recounting the different phases in the war of the weeds, his audience hanging upon his words and breaking into applause again and again.

"I have here," said the speaker at length, "within the space of this small glass tube, all that is left of the great army of weeds, which, from time immemorial,



"WE, THE ONE-TIME ARISTOCRATS OF THE FIELD."

has hindered the progress of nations. There is no denying that the struggle has been long and bitter. If we have cause to be elated to-night, then, it is not because so much that was worthless has disappeared from God's green earth, or that henceforth life will be pleasanter for those who follow the plow, but because the world has grown suddenly larger—by many million acres, indeed—through the removal of these our enemies. If it were not that there are still innumerable problems in disease to face, I could almost find it in my heart to be sorry that we have arrived at this great consummation. For, with the passing of the weeds my occupation is almost gone. But, heaven be thanked there is no such thing as finality. At best, we can only reach the penultimate. For where there is growth there must of necessity be decay—where there is life there must necessarily be disease and death."

There was a tremendous outburst of cheering as the professor ended. He did not resume his seat at once, however. Taking up a wine-glass he emptied the bind-weed seeds into it. Next, he took a phial of amber-colored liquid from his little card-board box and poured the contents among the seeds. Together they did not more than half fill the glass. He thereupon took up the second bottle, which might have contained little more than a thimbleful of beauty potion, so harmlessly rose-tinted it looked. But its addition to the contents of the wine-glass instantly dispelled the illusion. There was a sudden tumult, as when a piece of red hot iron is immersed in water. A gaseous vapor rose in circles from the lip of the wine-glass. It generated rapidly and floated quickly upwards. Just as suddenly it ceased, leaving only a small quantity of powdery grey ash at the bottom.

Professor Lonicera resumed his seat, his blue eyes sparkling and his cheeks aglow. The applause seemed never-ending. One speaker after another rose to add his mite of praise.

Meanwhile, under the faint shadow of a cluster of sweet-smelling eucharis and just in front of Professor Lonicera, lay a solitary weed seed. He was big, fat and black-coated and triangular.

"If I am to live till I am as old as an Egyptian mummy," murmured the fat seed to himself, "it is hardly likely that I shall ever have such a narrow escape as I had a moment ago. For the infinitesimal

fraction of a second I experienced all the pangs of dissolution. However, since the affair has turned out somewhat to my advantage, I am disposed, henceforth to call myself a fatalist. My old companions would hardly approve of such a decision. But after all opinion adjusts itself very much according to your latest point of view. Whate'er betide, I hope I may escape the professor's eye. But no, my black coat betrays me!"

Sure enough, the professor caught sight of him. Without relaxing his attention for a moment from the speaker who was just then predicting a similar conquest over the pests of the insect world, the great man stretched his hand for a comfit, and taking the silvery tin-foil therefrom wrapped it round the body of his enemy. The escape of this solitary seed might have meant the frustration of all his anxious labors. He put the tiny package carefully into a corner of his vest pocket.

It was not till Professor Lonicera was on the point of leaving his dressing-room the following morning that he remembered the fugitive bind-weed seed. Taking it from the pocket of his dress suit he approached the window to examine it as it lay on the chocolate tin-foil.

"In our conflict with the weeds," he soliloquized, "there has been so little room for the exercise of the divine quality of mercy, that the sight of this big black fellow fills me with compassion. It may be that in my capacity as executioner-in-chief, I have too freely favored the desire for complete annihilation. It strikes me now, however, that greater pains might have been taken to effect a change in the character of some of our most excellent foes. As first cousin to one of our most valued plants, the bind-weed might have proved a valuable recruit. Even yet it may not be too late to try reformatory measures. Nature, we know is never dramatic in her actions unless when human interference disturbs the balance. I see no reason, therefore, why the last weed-seed should not, by judicious crossing, say, with *Jagopyrum* (the common buckwheat) become the founder of a long and honorable line of commercial and dietetical importance."

Just at this moment the breakfast gong sounded and Professor Lonicera laid the paper containing the seed on a table close by the open window. The door was scarcely closed behind him when the bind-weed seed began to commune with himself again.

"Is it not a remarkable thing," he said, "that of all the mighty army of weeds not one of either rank or file was possessed of sufficient originality to develop some new characteristic. A beautiful flower, a more succulent leaf, an edible root, or even a flax-like stem might have saved any one of them. In our own case, how easy it would have been to have produced a bigger seed! Heaven knows we were always a prolific race! To have reduced the number and increased the size would have been the only rational way to have met the altered conditions. But a long course of easy living seems to be detrimental to the powers of invention. It is true, our prostrate habit would have stood in the way of any appeal to be considered worthy of cultivation; but in this respect we should have been no worse than vines and hops and peas. How I wish I had been born twenty years ago or in the remote ages of the sickle and the flail! Alas! it is ever the misfortune of the reformer to be born out of time! But stay, how am I to know that, after all, my mission is not to perpetuate the race of bind-weeds and that the lack of followers is the most promising feature? Your fatalist must needs be an optimist; otherwise the doctrine of inevitable necessity becomes, but a thorn in the flesh! Was it for nothing that I was sent hither from a hop field in the distant island of Vancouver? Was it for nothing that I escaped the professor's fiery ordeal? Was it for nothing that I grew to such proportions? Are these vague thoughts that stir within me the result of an acute sense of the danger of annihilation, or are they tiny waves of feeling that have been passed down from one generation to another until they are capable of giving power and direction to my own being? In whatever degree we are conscious of the need of regeneration, in like degree we have the power to amend."

The weed seed had reached this stage in his reflections when a crested jay hopped on the window sill and into the apartment. The morning sun glinted on the metallic blue of his feathers as he moved among the flower pots. A moment he paused, with his head on one side to take a mental inventory of the room's appointments. The little piece of tin-foil attracted him and he hopped toward it. He eyed the seed curiously. Except for its black coat, it was like a miniature beech-nut. He stood on his right foot for a moment, and scratched the region of his eye with his left, like one whose memory is at fault. Then the light of a new intelligence beamed in his beady eye. He recognized the seed as one of a large family which he used to meet frequently, when, as a youngster, he haunted the fields and gardens of the neighborhood. Of late he had not seen it, and it now occurred to him, for your jay is naturally of a reflective habit of mind, that he really must be growing exceedingly self-centred when faces long familiar should, unobserved, sink out of his ken. He turned the nutlet over with his beak, wondering if he might venture to break it open. While he hesitated the door opened, and in bounced two of the professor's grandchildren. The jay instantly fluttered through the window, on to the lawn below. The boys had seen him, however, and rushed across to the table.