

L'uomo vegetale (Vegetable Man, The)

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The following is the story told to me by the green man:

'It is only natural, Sir, that you are surprised by the color of my face. That color is why for months now I have not exposed myself to people's eyes. Because it is not a story I could tell to everyone who saw me. But with you it is a different matter. You have seen me, you are my neighbour, you have enquired after my health and, what is more important, you are an intelligent and balanced man. So I will keep no secrets from you and, please, believe what you are about to hear, even if it seems rather strange and improbable.

'My name is Dr. Benito Olivares. I was born in Santos, Brazil, and received a degree in Natural Sciences. Let this suffice for an introduction.

'Later I will tell you the reason why I left my native country and am here in Italy.

'But it is not my private adventures that would interest you, even if I wished to recount them. You asked about my health, so I will tell you without hesitation about the origin of my illness.

'I told you that I am Brazilian and I imagine that you already know the reputation of my country: a vast region, larger than Europe, almost half of it as yet unexplored.

'What do we know about the impenetrable Amazon, or about the mysterious Mato Grosso?

'Our ignorance about this wonderfully fertile and seductive land ignited in me the desire to discover its mysteries.

'With the ardor of a young pioneer and the zeal of a scientist, science being a matter of faith and martyrdom, I penetrated the virgin forests, discovering the remote sources of some of our magnificent rivers, measuring myself against death in that poisonous climate, risking the horrible bites of the deadly snakes that live in the mysterious jungle shadows.

'I wrung countless secrets out of that vegetable environment that knows no bounds, that rises to the highest glory of free and lush flora, seeming almost to declare its domination over the fertile land, as if jealously guarding its most beautiful and hidden mysteries, wanting to revenge itself on any intruder.

'Two years passed in this manner, and I found myself lost in the solitude of the Amazon Basin near the boundaries of Mato Grosso, traveling in the middle of flora that was at once magnificent and imbued with almost supernatural charms. My poor style of speech, Sir, can give but a very shabby idea of that inexpressible spectacle, that triumph of plant life and sunshine, of the wonderful contrast of cold shadows and dazzling color, of the silent and titanic struggle made of indestructible embraces and horrendous tangles.

'But a silent and insidious weapon rules the mute combat of the vegetable kingdom: the liana.

'It is the octopus of the forest, the paralyzing tentacle, the noose that cuts off the circulation of the sap and produces vegetable suffocation and gangrene.

'You could see the Cipo matador, the killer liana, encircling the magnificent trunks of rubber trees or rosewood with its treacherous and slow embrace. Gradually its arms tighten into small rings that only an axe can break and then they rise up from the tips, like fluid fingers becoming solid as they ascend, until finally a real plant sheath surrounds and suffocates the peaceful giants of the forest, preventing the sap from circulating, denying it breath and life.

'So one day, while admiring one of these battles of nature and, I must tell you, becoming entangled in a large bush of liana, a plant I had never seen before suddenly caught my eye, absorbing all my attention. Can you imagine? A new plant.

'What delight, what triumph, what delirium it is for a botanist to make such a discovery. Trembling with emotion I approached this new specimen and began to study it minutely and lovingly.

'No, the first glance had not deceived me. I really was in the presence of an example of some unknown species, which I tried in vain to classify.

'Great God, that plant seemed to have been created deliberately to upset all of my botanical science. It was in fact a living contradiction. As soon as I tried to give it the particular characteristic of a species, another detail diametrically opposite jumped out, and then another,

until my mind became lost in that futile work of classification.

'In the end I came to the conclusion that that admirable plant was in itself an order, family, species, and variety. It was, in short, the progenitor of an order the descendants of which were unknown to me. My wonder and happiness knew no limits.

'What I can tell you regarding the outward appearance of this unique specimen is the following: it was a shrub as tall as a normal man, with palmate leaves that were thick and fleshy. Its branches had a reddish meat color to them that almost filled me with a feeling of disgust. They seemed... Well, they seemed like human limbs without skin.

'Thin white hair made of resistant filaments, similar to the stamen of the maize-cob fell over the entire plant from its top. It had no flowers if by flowers one means a blossom or variously colored corolla. But, on its branches two oval scutellum had formed that looked like eyes. Yes, two eyes, neither more nor less. See for yourself, Sir, for here in this glass case is a specimen.'

Moved by a lively curiosity, I approached the glass case indicated by the green man's paralyzed gaze and could not repress the shudder that coursed through my every limb: on the shelf I saw a large leaf that had an appearance not unlike that of the prickly pear. But on its surface I did indeed see two eyes, formed with wonderful precision – two very human eyes that seemed to stare out at me in an unpleasant and sinister way. I stepped back, utterly appalled by the sight.

'It's marvelous,' I said, still shivering in spite of myself. 'Those eyes are remarkably real.'

The green man nodded his head.

'It is the gaze of my destiny,' he murmured in a dull voice, and continued his story.

'Wanting to take possession of that strange flower, I stretched out my hand to detach it from the trunk, but in doing so let out a cry of great pain. Some very sharp and curved thorns that I had not previously noticed had bitten deep into my hand. The strangest thing was that, as I regarded them carefully, I noticed that a drop of an intensely green-colored liquid had been emitted from the tip of each of them. In short, they were something like the teeth of a viper.

'And those pricks were quite painful. For a brief period I felt a violent burning, followed by a chill that wound through my veins and ascended suddenly to my heart. Overcome, I was compelled to sit on the ground.

'For a period my body was filled with this violent discomfort, so that I became seriously afraid I had been poisoned by the plant's sap. But then, little by little, every symptom faded away, and soon I could get up again and turn my attention to my botanical discovery.

'With great caution I collected a few leaves and flowers and took them with me, carefully preserved. Intoxicated as I was by my glorious discovery, I lent my name to that strange bush, declaring it the *Olivaria vigilans*, since, with its many open eyes and treacherous thorns, it watched and kept vigil over its own inviolability and security.

'At the same time, however, I was led to an unpleasant observation. The painful phenomena that had taken place after I had been stung by the thorns began to recur. At first it was only at long intervals, but gradually it became more frequent. A feeling of cold passed through my veins and heart, accompanied by a general numbness of the limbs and extreme weakness. I ascribed it to my long stay in the deadly climate of the Amazon and prepared to return to the coast.

'Meanwhile, shortly after the discovery of the *Olivaria vigilans*, two incidents occurred that disturbed my peace of mind, leaving me rather unsettled.

'One day while I was in my tent writing some notes concerning my plant, I saw near me a native of my escort, a Guaraní of the Amazon. I had the idea that he, as an expert on these forests, could give me some information on the mysterious plant. So I called him over and questioned him, showing him the flowers and leaves.

'But as soon as the Indian saw them, he let out a cry of terror and amazement. He stared at me for a moment with the deepest dismay, and then ran off into the forest like a madman. And he never came back and I never heard of him again.

'A few days later, I arrived at a large village of courteous and hospitable Indians. While staying there, I questioned the old tribal chief, who was considered a true wise man. I asked him about a plant that I longed to find and described it to him completely, but without mentioning that I had, in fact, already found it. To my astonishment, even the old cacique began to tremble and show signs of the liveliest terror, trying his best to evade my question. Struck with curiosity, I asked him again and again, and insisted on getting an explanation, even offering the old chief a shotgun in exchange for information.

'My insistence and gift won out over his scruples.

'With a strange caution, he said, "That which you look for, foreigner, is a plant unlike any other. It is the Inhuacoltzi, the great spirit of the plants. Do not look for it, foreigner, for if you find it, it will make you like itself."

'These were the strange words of the old cacique and nothing more could I coerce out of his mouth. I smiled at this strange superstition, for who could believe that there was a deity of plants? I returned to Santos and revealed the specimens I had discovered to the scientific world, resulting in a great deal of furor and discussion. The leaves and flowers that I had brought I donated to the Museum of Natural History in Buenos Aires, keeping for myself the specimen I have shown you.

'And now, Sir, I will tell you the truly horrible part of my case.

'I have already mentioned that once back home the alarming symptoms produced by the prick of the *Olivaria vigilans* returned with ever increasing frequency. Far from decreasing in severity, the phenomena became increasingly violent.

'Adding to my discomfort, and filling me with dismay, was a new phenomenon as well: My skin was becoming green. Yes, at first it was just a slight tint all over my body, which both I and the doctors who diagnosed me thought was an attack of jaundice. But then, despite all the remedies, the color began to take on a richer tone, while my circulatory disorders became more acute and disturbing.

'A dreadful nightmare began to weigh upon my soul. Recalling the mysterious words of the old cacique and the strange fear of my Guaraní servant, an insidious doubt began to poison my spirit.

'One day I made a decisive experiment on myself, examining a drop of my blood under the microscope. And I saw the truth. It revealed itself in all its terrible reality, and the nightmare took on a form, and the dream a palpable consistency.

'A horrible battle was raging in my blood. I don't know if you have ever observed under the microscope the blood of a person affected by sleeping sickness, and seen the stages of the battles fought between the red corpuscles and the trypanosome destroyer? If so, you would know that the red blood cells are being incessantly agitated into a fantastic and continuous turmoil by countless beings animated by a surprising vitality of movement. The erythrocytes, pushed against, driven, destroyed, cluster together, swaying, bouncing elastically in order to avoid the damaging contact with those small bodies shaped like snakes that contort themselves in every possible way. Then in the following weeks you would observe the vital red corpuscles drastically diminish in number while their implacable enemies dramatically increase and begin to dance, intoxicated by destruction.

'A similar spectacle presented itself to me in a drop of my own blood. It was not, however, deadly trypanosomes that were warring against my blood cells, but, rather, numerous other foreign cells, of an intensely green color, which were rapidly moving against them, overpowering and destroying them.

'I was terrified, for they were plant cells! It was vegetable sap that crept slowly through my veins, replacing life-sustaining red fluid.

'The doctors to whom I submitted the extraordinary question had to shrug their shoulders and declare themselves incompetent when faced with a phenomenon that evaded both their knowledge and science.

'I told them what had happened, describing my fears and the strange words I had heard from the mouth of the cacique. They just smiled and, after prescribing ineffective remedies, no doubt to allay their consciences more than for any other reason, shrugged their shoulders once more.

'Believe me, I felt that my body was being transformed, that I was no longer myself, that my blood was not my own, that I was going to meet a grim fate from which my every thought turned away in disgust.

'So I fled my country, trying a change of climate, as all sick people do when they have one foot in the grave. I tried alternately very cold climates and equatorial climates, until a few months ago I came to your wonderful Italian soil.'

The doctor paused thoughtfully, lowering his head.

'I am leaving tomorrow, Sir,' he added after a moment. 'I will end my existence in my own country, which will have to hold the remains of a man who, on that great day, will no longer be a man.'

'You seem surprised. But you are still ignorant of the most terrible part of my awful existence.

'But, tell me, would you like to know everything?

'Do you feel strong and fearless enough to endure the sight of something truly terrible?

'Well, then, now you shall know, Sir. You see me motionless in this chair, my legs inert and hands

enveloped in these silk gloves. You believe that I am paralyzed, is that not so? Now I will show you my hands, and you will understand. My other limbs are similar to these, or soon will be. Now you will see, Sir, so be strong.'

He asked me to ring an electric buzzer on the wall. I did so, and immediately a devoted servant, one of the doctor's fellow countrymen, appeared and went to stand next to his chair.

The doctor looked at him.

'Take off my gloves, Alonso,' he said in Spanish, in a low voice.

And then—good God! What a sight met my eyes, which became dilated with horror! No! It must have been a hallucination. I could not believe my senses. After the gloves had been removed, the hands of the paralytic appeared. Hands? No, it was not hands that I saw. No! They were leaves, meaty leaves, similar to those of a prickly pear—two large green leaves attached to repulsive-looking trunks like human arms without skin. And, horrifying vision, on those two short formless fleshy masses sat the same sinister and terrible eyes that I had seen on the leaf enclosed in the glass case.

I let out a terrible cry and fled hastily.