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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GREEN GREW THE LASSES ***



GREEN GREW THE LASSES

By RUTH LAURA WAINWRIGHT

Illustrated by DICK FRANCIS

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Since evils cancel out, avoid odd numbers of them ... even if you have to get an odder one!

The September evening was hot and humid, and Helen Raymond, watching her husband pace nervously about the living room, grew tenser by the minute. Robert would walk up to an open window, sniff abstractedly, move to the next window, and repeat the performance.

"For goodness' sakes, Robert, what *are* you snuffling about?" she finally demanded in exasperation. She had been on edge ever since her cousin Dora had arrived that afternoon. Dora had lost another of a long succession of short-lived jobs and, as usual, had descended on them without warning for an indefinite visit. Wasn't it enough to have to bear, that and the heat, too, without Robert's acting up?

"Smog's getting worse all the time," Robert complained.

Dora lifted her nose to sniff daintily. "It *is* an odd smog. Now in New York we don't—" Her voice trailed off and left the sentence hanging as she drew in another sample of the night air.

Helen sniffed, too. "We look like a bunch of rabbits," she thought irritably. But Dora was right. It was an odd smog, sort of sweet and bitter at the same time. Not sulphuric like most of the smog they were used to, or the spoiled-onions-frying-in-rancid-fat smell of oil wells when the wind was off the land. This odor made her think of rank tropical weeds, a jungle miasma, though she had never been near a jungle.

There was something familiar about it, though, and then she remembered that her hands had smelled like that the morning after she had weeded the tiny garden alongside their house. The flowerbed had been cluttered with weeds of a kind she had never seen before, horrible-looking things. Could they be the cause of that awful smell? They had sprung up everywhere lately, and, while she had pulled them out of their own garden, they were growing all over, and she couldn't very well weed the whole town, could she?

"I think—wait, I want to get something," she said, and ran outdoors.

She came back with a sample of the weed, one that she pulled from the garden of the vacant house next door. The plant was about a foot high, with a straight, stiff stem, of a bright metallic green, with a single row of inch-wide rosettes of chartreuse leaves or petals down one side of the stem. There could be no doubt about its being the cause of the unpleasant odor, and Helen held it out at arm's length.

"What the heck is that?" Robert asked.

"Smell!" she said.

"Phew! So that's it. What is it, anyway?"

Helen shook her head. "Never saw anything like it until recently. I pulled 'em out of our garden, but they're all over."

Helen carried the offending plant to the back door. When she came back, Robert peered at her intently, shut his eyes and shook his head quickly, and then stared at her again.

"Think you'll know me next time you see me?" she asked, annoyed.

"First good look I've had at you this evening. What kind of face powder is that you're using? Don't tell me that peculiar shade is the latest fashion?"

Puzzled, Helen put her hand to her face as if she should be able to feel the color.

"Mom's green!" chortled eight-year-old Bobby. "You ought to see yourself!"

"Green?" Helen asked worriedly.

"Green," Robert said. "You feel all right?"

"Anemia," Dora declared positively. "You don't eat properly. Not enough vitamins. Now, while I'm here—"

A quick look in the mirror, and Helen told herself that she wasn't really a *green* green, just sort of greenish, if you looked at her in the right light. By morning, the odd color ought to be all gone. There was no sense in worrying. Anybody could look sort of off-color now and then. Maybe Dora was right—she was anemic.

But she was stunned by the first sight of herself in the mirror the next morning. There was no mistaking it this time. She was as green as grass, and Dora, too, was beginning to show signs of becoming that unbecoming color.

Reluctantly, Dora conceded that it might not be the diet, after all. She hadn't been there long enough for it to have that much effect.

Robert and Bobby were still shockingly normal.

"What—whatever can it be?" Helen asked shakily, holding out her green hands. The only answer was hysterical screaming that sent them all racing to the front door.

The Raymonds lived in a typical California court, with four small houses facing four other small houses across a central walk that ran at right angles to the street. On this walk most of the tenants were now gathered, and the Raymonds and Dora joined them.

Helen didn't know whether to feel relieved or more dismayed when she saw that all the women and girls were as green as she, and just as terrified.

Someone, of course, had called the police, and a prowler car hummed to a stop at the curb. A harrassed, white-faced policeman leaned out of the window.

"We're doing all we can," he called. "It's like this all over town. Don't know yet what caused it, but we're investigating." The car sped away.

It was soon apparent that only Mimosa Beach was affected. Why, no one could guess. Some said it was all a publicity stunt of some kind, advertising a movie or television show, or a chlorophyll product, perhaps, but they couldn't explain how it worked, or why only women and girls were affected. And how could it possibly help sell anything?

Overnight, Mimosa Beach became famous, and infested with reporters and color photographers, all male. There would have been a mass exodus if there had been any place to go. But other communities, fearing that their womenfolk would "catch" the greenness, like measles, refused to let them in. Besides, in Mimosa Beach they had the dubious comfort of all being alike, while elsewhere they would have been freaks.

There was so little they could do to make themselves look attractive. The cosmetics they had or that were available were all wrong. But they did the best they could, though there was no hiding that ghastly green complexion.

"What a shame your hair isn't red," Dora said one day to Helen. "Amy Olson, now, her hair really goes with green skin." Cocking her head to one side, she studied the younger woman intently. "Your hair—that mousy brown—wonder if we couldn't touch it up just a *wee* bit?"

Helen clenched her teeth against the coy, criticizing voice. "I'm not the flamboyant type," she said.

Dora was as green as Helen by this time, and it certainly wasn't a bit more becoming to her. She seemed to be enjoying the publicity, though. Besides, it gave her a good excuse for not leaving.

If only the greenness had come before Dora—they might have been spared *one* calamity!

Four girls moved into the house next to the Raymonds, the last house in the row.

Neither the Raymonds nor Dora noticed that they had moved in; they came so quietly. The houses in the court were furnished and they must have paid the rent, obtained the keys, and walked in, all settled as soon as they closed the door behind them. It wasn't until they rang the Raymonds' doorbell in the early evening that anyone in the household was aware of them.

"We move next door," one of them said brightly to Helen when she answered the door. "We come see you, get acquainted. We come in?"

"Of course," Helen said, and they trooped in. "We're the Raymonds, and this is my cousin, Dora Hastings."

The new neighbor who had spoken first pointed to her companions, one by one. "Patricia Pontiac," she said. "Clara Ford. Mary Maroon. Me," poking a thumb at her own midriff, "Jack Jones."

"Jack Jones?" Helen repeated. "That's a man's name."

"Man?" the girl asked blankly.

"Man!" Robert said impatiently. "Like me."

The four girls noticed him for the first time, and then they saw Bobby. They stared at the two of them, their mouths slightly open, their eyes wide with horror. They drew closer to each other, as if for protection, and shivered.

Robert and Bobby looked at each other in bewildered embarrassment.

"My husband and son," Helen said tartly. Did these odd creatures think all males were wolves, including eight-year-old Bobby?

"That—that color!" Mary Maroon quavered. "Not green!"

"Only dames are green," Bobby scornfully said.

"Imagine!" Dora tittered nervously. "Afraid of Robert and Bobby!"

"Won't you sit down?" Helen asked. This nonsense of being scared of her menfolk had gone on long enough. She didn't want them to sit down. She wanted them to go. But she could hardly ask them to do that.

Naturally, they sat down.

Bobby turned on the television for a space opera, and the four new neighbors watched it avidly. When the spaceship landed on what was supposed to be Venus, they giggled behind their hands and looked at each other sidewise. Hadn't they ever seen a show like that before? What was so unusually funny about this one?

When the commercial came on, Robert turned off the sound. Mary Maroon looked at Bobby, and then at Helen, who was sitting with her arm around her son.

"You—baby?" she asked.

Helen smiled proudly. "Yes, this is my baby."

Bobby squirmed indignantly.

Mary Maroon then turned to Robert. "You got baby?"

Robert said, "Sure, this is my baby," patting Bobby on the knee. To Helen, he muttered, "What does she think, anyway?"

The four stared at Robert and Bobby and Helen in such obvious confusion that Robert jumped up nervously to turn the sound back on.

After the girls had gone home, Bobby was sent off to bed, and Robert, loosening his tie, demanded, "What's the matter with them, anyhow? Do they have to stare at me as if I were a damned biological error? Don't they know what a man is, for heaven's sake?"

"Really, Robert," Dora protested, blushing a deeper green.

"Well, for gosh sakes—"

"Those names!" Helen said. "Clara Ford, that's not too bad. I'm not so sure about Mary Maroon."

Dora nodded. "Mary White. Mary Black. So why not Mary Maroon? But Patricia Pontiac!"

Helen threw up her hands. "They must have made that one up. But *Jack Jones!*"

"Crazy, if you ask me," Robert said, "pretending they were scared of me and Bobby."

"There's a Patricia Beauty Shoppe next to the Pontiac agency," Dora suggested. "Maybe—"

"Funny way to get a name. Where the heck are they from?" Robert wondered.

"Must be from right here in town," Helen reminded him. "Otherwise they wouldn't be green."

"You know, the greenness looks sort of natural on them," Dora said thoughtfully. "Well, think I'll go to bed."

After she had gone, Helen said wistfully in a whisper, "If only awful things could sort of counteract each other the way some poisons do." She started making up the davenport bed; Dora

had their room. "First Dora's coming, and our turning green, and now those crazy girls right next door. But three poisons—no, it wouldn't come out even."

It was a day or two later when Helen found her new neighbors working in the little flowerbed alongside their house. They were busily transplanting weeds of the kind responsible for the unpleasant odor.

"For goodness' sake!" Helen exclaimed, disgusted. "What in the world do you want with that stuff? Why, it took the rest of us here in the court days to get it all out and now you want to bring it back. Throw it away!"

"Oh, no!" Patricia Pontiac objected, holding a bunch of the weeds against her heart protectingly. "It's faneweed!"

"You mean you've seen the stuff before?"

Patricia nodded. "We have it all over where we came from. Must have faneweed."

"But you couldn't have come from some place else," Helen pointed out. "You wouldn't be green if you did."

"All green where we come from," Mary Maroon said.

"I don't know where that stuff—faneweed, you call it?—came from," Helen said, refusing to pay any attention to their claim that they came from some place else where everyone was green. There just wasn't any such place!

"We drop seed other time we come," Patricia said. Then she added indignantly, "You no believe we come from other place?"

"What other place?" asked Helen, with weary politeness.

"You call it Venus."

"That picture the other night," Clara Ford giggled. "Not like Venus at all. So funny!"

Helen could stand no more. "So are you!" she said rudely, and went into the house.

They were even crazier than she'd thought. Greener, too, when you saw them in broad daylight. Did the greenness affect the mind, and the greener you got, the zanier you became? Would she get to be like that? The idea frightened her.

"No turn green?" Patricia Pontiac asked Robert plaintively one day, as if she were blaming him for her bewilderment.

"No!" he answered shortly. "But I don't blame you for envying us men. It must be tough to be that lousy-looking color."

"Green is *good* color!" Mary Maroon declared stoutly. "You no have baby yourself?"

"Of course not!"

Patricia turned to Helen. "Then what she for?"

"*He!*" Robert corrected, and then added sarcastically, "Papa works to buy baby shoes. Now, does that answer your question?"

Helen sighed. There was just no use trying to explain anything to those four girls.

Fall and winter passed. The dull monotony of being green was accented now and then by articles and pictures in newspapers and magazines, and by rumors, always proved false, that a remedy had been found, though chemists, biologists and doctors continued hunting for the cause of the catastrophe. Autopsies provided no clue. Women protested that the doctors were looking at them with a wishful drop-dead expression, as if the *next* autopsy might be the one that would supply the answer.

The greenness was still confined to Mimoso Beach. Other communities kept up their quarantine. The four girls next door to the Raymonds were as zany as ever, and Dora Hastings stayed on, of necessity.

And then the monotony was broken by greater calamities.

First, there was the matter of Patricia Pontiac's approaching motherhood. While this, of course, made no difference as far as the town was concerned, Dora was greatly perturbed, and, ever being one to insist on others keeping within the limits of her own narrow paths, she took the girl to task.

"Patricia," she insisted sternly, "there simply *must* be a man to blame for your condition! You *must* marry him. Think of the baby! You want him to be fatherless?"

"Fatherless? Him?" Patricia repeated, frowning in perplexity. "What you talking about? My little baby girl all mine. This man business I don't understand."

"Nonsense! You're just trying to pretend innocence."

"Oh, give it up, Dora," Helen urged wearily. "She doesn't know what you're talking about."

Dora raised skeptical eyebrows. "In *her* condition?"

After that, Dora went around with a great air of virtue condescending to help the wayward. It must be a burden, Helen felt, to have to feel superior because of other people's faults. Such a negative sort of superiority.

During the next few weeks, Dora had plenty of chance to feel superior. Other unmarried girls and women besides Patricia became pregnant and, like Patricia, they insisted no man was responsible. But they were not complacent about it the way Patricia was; to them it was an indignity they did not deserve.

"What's this town coming to, anyway?" Dora demanded.

"Parthenogenetic births, maybe?" Helen ventured. "No one would have believed that we'd turn green, but we did. Honestly, Dora, I'm getting so I'd believe almost anything in this nightmare existence of ours, even that *you* were about to have a baby!"

"That," Dora rejoined acidly, "is not at all likely. But are you trying to imply that our turning green could have something to do with these shameful births?"

"I didn't say that, but you could be right."

"Humph!" Dora snorted. "A lot of nonsense!"

The four girls were in the Raymonds' living room one afternoon, a week later, talking with Helen, when Dora, who had been feeling ill and had gone to the doctor's, walked in. She glared at the four girls.

"I'm going to have a baby," she accused them.

Helen drew her breath in sharply. "Oh, no! Not you, too!"

"Of course," Clara Ford said complacently. "Every one have babies. Except Robert and Bobby and the ones like them. Jack and Mary and I have ours before we leave Venus. Have only one each, of course."

"But why am *I* like this? How can *I* have a baby this way?" Dora's voice was shrill with anger and panic.

"How else?" Jack asked calmly.

A little chill of horror raced down Helen's spine. Could these odd girls really be telling the truth? Were they from Venus, as they insisted? She could just imagine them coming to Earth—on a Flying Saucer, maybe—listening to the radio to learn the language. Spying on us, but not learning as much as they thought they did. She choked off a giggle, an incipient hysteria, as another thought struck her.

"Will *I* have one of those—those—?"

"You already have baby," Patricia said. "Can't see how you have baby before we come with fanweed to make you green."

Helen and Dora stared at her.

"You mean," Helen finally was able to ask, "that that weed caused all this? That little weed?"

"But that is what we tell you all along, only you always walk away angry."

All those scientists working so hard, Helen realized bitterly, and all the time what they were looking for was literally under their feet! How could anyone have thought that the fanweed was responsible for anything but the bad smell they had finally become accustomed to?

"Why didn't I listen to these girls, pay more attention to what they said?" Helen asked herself. She might have been able to prevent a lot of things that had happened. She got up from her chair and walked nervously about. Well, she couldn't change the past, but she could stop further evil from the fanweed.

"I'll bet they don't have men on Venus," she said to Dora, "judging from the way they act. Then they'd have to have parthenogenetic births."

She turned to Patricia. "Why did you come to Earth? And why just to Mimosa Beach?"

"We try little place, what you call sample, before we change whole world," Patricia explained. And then she added sadly, "So many of our babies die. Not enough people left on Venus. We think maybe you like to come to Venus with us, so we make you as us."

"That was very, very wicked of you!" Dora said severely.

The four Venusians shrugged resignedly.

"Might as well go home," Mary Maroon said. "They don't like it our way."

"And leave me like this?" Dora demanded shrilly.

"Get rid of faneweeds, be as before," Patricia assured her.

"With a baby I'll have trouble accounting for," Dora said bitterly. "Oh, no, you don't. You stay right here. And, Helen, don't you tell anybody that it's the faneweeds. Then people from other places won't know about my baby, and it won't matter here as long as things are the way they are."

"You come with us," Clara suggested wheedlingly. "You'll like Venus. Venus so pretty! No work, all happiness!"

"No work? No wonder the babies die!" Dora exclaimed.

Helen could see the yeast of reform beginning to work in Dora. The four Venusians looked puzzled. "They do that all the time," Helen thought irritably. Aloud, she said, "Dora, of course I have to tell about the faneweeds. There are others involved, you know."

"I don't suppose," Dora interrupted, "that you girls know anything about diet. Those babies could probably be saved with a little intelligence and some hard work."

When the four Venusians left shortly thereafter for their home, they took along Dora Hastings, who had great plans for their planet.

With the faneweeds on Earth destroyed, the women and girls of Mimosa Beach returned to their original color. Even the parthenogenetic baby girls born as a result of the unfortunate experiment of the Venusians were white.

"Well, the bad things went in pairs, after all," Helen said to Robert when everything was normal again. "The faneweeds was the fourth evil, though we didn't know it. And when we got rid of the faneweeds, the greenness left. The Venusians went away and—and I do hope Dora's all right!"

"She finally got what should be a lifetime job," Robert answered. He crossed his fingers and, looking out of a western window at Venus, bright against the darkening sky, added, "At least, Venus is farther away than New York. That ought to help."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GREEN GREW THE LASSES ***

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