

RUTH LAURA WAINWRIGHT

GREEN GREW THE LASSES

Ruth Wainwright
Green Grew the Lasses

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Green Grew the Lasses

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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 prowl 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.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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