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*A Mighty Nove of The Red World*

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# Flowering Evil

by MARGARET ST. CLAIR

**Like all her other plants from far-off worlds, Aunt Amy hoped the Venusian Rambler would win a prize. It hoped so too.**

CAPTAIN BJORNSON SHOOK A grizzled head. "I never saw a plant I liked the looks of less," he said. "I don't know how he got it through the planetary plant quarantine. You take my advice, Amy, and watch out for it." He took another of the little geela nut cookies from the quaint old lucite platter, and bit into it appreciatively.

Mrs. Dinsmore sniffed. "I don't know what you're driving at," she said coldly, "or why you're so prejudiced against my poor little Rambler. You know perfectly well that Robert would never send me anything the least bit dangerous."

Captain Bjornson paused with another cookie half-way to his lips and looked at her. "Wouldn't send you anything dangerous!" he exclaimed. "Why, Amy, have you forgotten how your face was swelled up for two weeks from that tree cutting he sent you? The doctor said it was a contact poison worse than sumach, and he tried to get you to go to the hospital. What about the time that cactus from the Blue Desert went to seed, and I spent thirty-six hours picking spines out of you? What about—" Mrs. Dinsmore gave a warning sniff.

"Well, all right," Bjornson said. "I know how fond you are of Bob, and I know you don't like me to mention his mistakes. I'll grant you he means well. So what? He's flighty, scatter-brained, and brash. To use an expression that was current when I was a boy, Bob is a twerp."

Mrs. Dinsmore pulled the lucite platter so far over to her own side of the table that Bjornson couldn't get another cookie from it without getting up and stretching out along the table cloth. "I don't agree with you," she said distantly. "Robert is a splendid fellow, so thoughtful and considerate. He takes a real interest in my

soap carvings, and how many young men with an important position like his, third mate on a space freighter with a regularly scheduled run, would remember to send back plants from every port of call to an aunt on earth? I shouldn't be surprised if I won a blue ribbon at the flower show again this year; my Golden Rain plant is about to bloom. Robert tells me it's a lovely thing."

The captain cast a wistful look at the cookie plate. "Well, don't say I didn't warn you," he replied. "When's Bob due in port?"

Mrs. Dinsmore's face relaxed. "Around the twenty-fifth," she said, "he sent me a 'gram. Here, have another cookie. I must think up some little thing to cook for him as a surprise."

The captain snaffled a handful of cookies from the plate and stood up to go. "Your ordinary cooking's good enough for me," he declared, "but, if you mean something like those little shrimps fried in batter you had the last time he was here, go ahead. And watch for that plant." He stalked off across the lawn.

He's getting old, thought Amy Dinsmore, watching the gruff old codger limp around a flower bed (Bjornson had had prosthetic surgery after he lost his foot and, though it had been successful, grafts were never as flexible as natural members), positively old. He ought to see a geriatrician right away. She'd tell him so the next time he came to see her. Talking about Robert that way!

She set the dial on the robot gardener on the front lawn to "Weeding: dandelions" and started along the path that led to the little hothouse where most of the plants Robert had sent her were growing; even in the deep tropics Terra was, with few exceptions, too cold and dry for them.



*She knew exactly what was going to happen.*

The Martian subjects, on the other hand, were in a psychroplex lean-to, with hygrosopes and a battery of infra-red lamps to keep the temperature up during the day.

The heavy moist air of the hothouse made Amy Dinsmore pant a little as she entered it—but how *interesting* it was! Even the leaves of her Venusian plants were fascinating, thick and leatherlike, thin and dry and hard like parchment, hanging in heavy serpentine coils or bristling pointed and sharp as so many spears. And their coloring ranged from cerise through a silky taupe and indigo around to an angry bright metallic blue. As for their flowers—oh, my. Amy Dinsmore had never seen anything like them. All you

could do was stand in front of them with your mouth open and stare. When she wasn't looking at her Martian succulents, they were her favorites of anything she grew.

She halted in front of the plant Robert had sent her last. Yes, Hjalmar Bjornson was getting definitely senile. How could anybody think that this poor little dried-up thing could be harmful? It was a mere bundle of desiccated stems, with only a tiny new leaf or two to indicate that it was alive. It looked a little better than it had yesterday, though; the colchine solution must have been good for it. Amy brushed a few dead flies from the ledge behind it into her hand and threw them

into the composter. She liked to have things neat.

Now, what should she cook as a surprise for Robert? He was fond of sweet things, of course, but it always seemed to her that he praised her meat dishes and entrees most. He liked her cooking so much because her roast turkeys and grilled steaks had a crust on them; electronically cooked food was quick to prepare and it might be as good for you as they said it was, but the outside looked like the inside, and it all tasted flavorless and grey. What was the use of saving time in cooking if you ended up with food that wasn't any fun to eat?

"YOU aren't looking well, Amy," Captain Bjornson said three or four weeks later. He looked at her with the critical attention of an old friend. "You've got on a lot of cosmi-lac, but you still look peaked. What's the matter, worried about Bob? Ships don't get hurt in meteor swarms any more." He looked down at his grafted foot reminiscently. "Not like it was when I was a third mate."

Amy Dinsmore shook her head. She picked up one of the brightly-colored hexagons—they had been playing a desultory game of Maroola in the airy coolness of the side stoa—and fiddled with it.

"I haven't been sleeping well," she confessed at last. "I've had such unpleasant dreams. Horrid things."

"What about?" Bjornson asked. "That blasted plant? Honestly, Amy, it looks like some kind of spider to me."

"No! I don't know why you can't leave my Venusian Rambler alone! Robert told me it was a very valuable plant, rare even in its own habitat. It's doing so nicely, too. A spider! I wish you'd stop trying to spoil it for me."

"I'm sorry," Bjornson apologized. "Forget it. Go on, tell me about your dreams."

"Well, on Tuesday—or was it Wednesday?—no, it must have been Tuesday because that was the day after I flew over to Hartford—I was down by the hothouse and I found the most unpleasant thing beside the path." She shuddered. "I've been dreaming about it ever since."

"What was it?" Bjornson urged.

"Oh, a—I guess it must have been a rabbit once. One of the wild ones. Only it was nothing except some fur and some bones. Not decayed, Hjalmar, you understand, just gone. I can't imagine what had happened to it."

"Better see a mental hygienist," the Captain advised after a pause. "Nightmares can be very serious."

"I suppose so. I really dread going to sleep."

THE next morning, very early, Amy turned on the fluor with unsteady fingers. What a horrid dream it had been! She could hardly believe that it hadn't been real and that she was safe and sound in her own bedroom after all.

Outside, the noise that had wakened her—the jagged, unearthly caterwauling of a couple of tomcats promenading in the moonlight—came again. Ordinarily it was a noise Amy disliked very much—the poor things always sounded as if they were in deadly agony—but now she was glad to hear it. Heavens, if it hadn't been for those cats crying and waking her up, she might still be asleep and dreaming. Dreaming about—about—*blood* . . .

She turned the ceiling selector to "summer sky," lay back on her pillow, and tried to relax. It was her favorite of all the ceilings her bedroom had, so lovely and calm and blue, and right now she needed something lovely and calm. One thing was sure, she wasn't going to stand this much longer. She didn't believe in pampering herself, but, if she had that dream once more she was going to take Bjornson's advice and see a mental hygienist.

She'd think about something pleasant. Amy tried to fix her mind on her gardening, on how well her plants were doing, but it wasn't a success. When she tried to keep her thoughts on her Venusian Rambler (why did they call it a Rambler?—it was turning into a large, stocky, compact bush more like an outsized Camellia than anything else Amy Dinsmore could think of), they kept veering back to her dream and all that—all that—

Well, then she'd think about Robert. She was a lucky woman to have a nephew like him. She'd worked out several menus,

all the things he liked best, but she wished she could think of something a little different. There were so few kinds of meat, when everything was said and done. Lamb and beef and musk ox and bollo and pork. And she always thought bollo was stringy and tough.

Gradually Amy's nerves began to quiet. The cats had grown quiet too, except for an occasional outburst that sounded like lightning made audible. Her thoughts drifted lazily from Robert to her soap carving. After a while she went to sleep . . .

The morning was sunny and bright, and she felt almost ashamed of herself for having let a dream affect her so seriously. She had finished her matutinal inspection of the hothouse and the succulent growing-shed and had started back to the house when she came on a bundle lying by the hothouse wall. At first she didn't recognize it for what it was, and stooped over it, poking at it with a stick.

After an instant she straightened, nauseated, remembering where she had last seen that ginger-colored fur. The bundle was the not very bulky remains—bones, and some patches of hide—of a cat. Hadn't there been some pieces of white fur too?—of two cats.

She'd better call Hjalmar. It might be dangerous. There must be some wild animal living near her hothouse, a lynx or ferret or wildcat or stoat. Mrs. Dinsmore wasn't strong on zoology, but she knew exactly what sort of an animal she had in mind—something lithe and dark and blood-thirsty. Goodness. It was quite frightening.

On the other hand, Robert would be in port in a couple of days. If she asked Hjalmar to help her, he'd either make an enormous masculine fuss over it (she still remembered the time she'd asked him to put up a towel rack for her and he'd arrived with a set of socket wrenches, a hand electric drill, four pairs of pliers, and a portable arc welding outfit) or he'd pooh-pooh and pish-tush her into silence. Either way, it wouldn't be satisfactory. She'd wait for Robert; Robert was so comforting. If only she didn't have more of those dreams!

3—Planet—Summer

**D**ESPITE her apprehensions, her next night's slumber was profound and sweet. She hadn't felt so rested and refreshed in weeks. She put the sonnispay (maybe if she'd thought to use it before she wouldn't have had those horrid nightmares) back in the closet and decided that she'd do some soap-carving after breakfast. She felt in the mood for it, and Robert would be disappointed if she didn't have something new to show him that she'd carved since he had last been in port. Besides, she might be able to think of the special dish she wanted to make for him while she was working: she'd found from experience that some of her best culinary ideas came to her while she was making a statuette or plaque out of soap.

The meal concluded, she got out her set of modeling knives and a couple of cakes of soap. Soap was rather hard to get, since most people used synthetic detergents nowadays, but she knew a little store in Perth Amboy that carried it. This last batch had a lovely texture.

Amy rotated the living room on its axis until the light was exactly right, and then sat down in front of her carving desk. What should she make? A statuette? A plaque? A plaque in low relief, a plaque of a flower. Somehow, she didn't want to think about animals right now.

She had sketched in the conventionalized *Hermodactylus* and was beginning to pick it out carefully from the background when it occurred to her that she hadn't been down to the hothouse this morning to see her plants.

Why, that would never do, she mustn't neglect them, it was terribly important. Important. (Her head hurt; how dizzy she felt!) She'd better go at once, she'd better . . . go . . . Cake of soap in one hand, knife in the other, panting a little, Amy set out toward her plants in a stumbling run.

She was half-way to the hothouse before it occurred to her to question the impulse which had taken her incontinently from her carving and set her in blind motion toward the hothouse, and by then it was too late. She was no longer a free agent in any sense of the term. The mental grip which had taken the rabbit and the cats to their death had tightened on her inescapably.

Remote from her body, in a glassy paralysis of fear and impotence, Amy watched her feet moving briskly down the path.

Oh, if she could only cry out, call Hjalmar! She felt the muscles of her throat straining, but no sound came. And now she was standing before the hothouse, and her hand had opened the door.

The Rambler was waiting for her. Very slowly, like a man flexing his arm, it reached out one of the stocky branches toward her. Amy saw that at the end of the branch, well hidden under the dark green, glossy leaves, was a slender, translucent, hollow thorn. It was about the size of the hypodermic needle the doctor had used when, in her last year's physical examination, he'd taken a sample of blood.

Amy knew exactly what was going to happen. First the hollow thorn, until her veins were dry, and then the slowly opening maw, gaping above the big, swollen, meter-wide base the thick leaves of the Rambler had served to conceal. It would take a long time, but Hjalmar would never miss her before it was too late.

The Rambler's branch moved delicately over the surface of Amy's right wrist, the one with the modeling knife. The other branches were drooping limply away from the purple-pink of its swollen base, waiting, while it hunted the exact spot. It hesitated for an instant and then—Amy's mouth drew into a soundless Oh of pain—struck home.

A dark fluid began to stain the hollow thorn. For just a fraction of a second the Rambler's mental grip on Amy Dinsmore relaxed; she could feel its blind concentration on its own black enjoyment. And in that fraction of a second Amy threw the cake of soap in her left hand straight into the Rambler's fleshy maw.

The Rambler gripped at her mind again, but it was a disturbed and feeble grip. Its branches began to move around the fleshy bole they had shielded, slowly, and then in a furious heaving. The thorn which had entered her wrist was jaggedly withdrawn. Amy, her wrist streaming blood, stared at the Rambler for a moment and then lunged

at it with the menacing knife.

**S**ITTING outside on the ground beside the hothouse afterward, her forehead on her hands, feeling sick and faint, Amy had an idea. At first she pushed it from her; it was far-fetched, silly, even a little repulsive.

But was it so silly after all? And as to being unpleasant, well, bollo meat commanded enormous prices in the market and, from everything she'd ever heard, the bollo was the very reverse of a fastidious feeder. Even pigs certainly weren't dainty in their eating habits. If she parboiled it in several waters and then braised it slowly, with a hint of ginger in the sauce . . . Well, after all, why not?

Amy, the modeling knife in her hand, went into the hothouse again . . .

. . . "Gee, Aunt Amy, this meat's good," Robert said. He was talking with his mouth full. "I've eaten indigenous chow on three planets—four, if you call the stuff they serve you on Uranus food—and it's my opinion that there isn't a better cook anywhere in the system than you. Fact. How do you do it, anyhow?"

Amy Dinsmore lowered her eyes. She could feel herself blushing through her cosmi-lac. "Oh . . . thank you, Robert."

"She sure is, Bob," Hjalmar Bjornson said expansively. "That gravy! She's the best cook on Terra all the time, but when you're in port she gets sort of inspired."

"What kind of meat is this, though, Amy? And could I have some more?"

"Of course," Amy said. She refilled Hjalmar's plate. "It's something new I found in the big auto-market in the city," she said vaguely.

"By the way, Aunt Amy," Bob said, laying down his fork, "after I sent you that plant I heard it was supposed to be carnivorous. I forgot to mention it in my last 'gram. You didn't get into any trouble with it, did you?"

"No, it died," Amy said smoothly. "I had to throw it out. Too bad." She brightened. "Pass your plate, Robert dear," she said.