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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

When the Flame-Flowers Blossomed

By LESLIE F. STONE

A bizarre fantasy of strange life on the planet Venus, and the dangerous adventure of two men from our own planet

ONE moment the forest was serenely quiet, somnolent; the next it was in an uproar. For it was not every day that a space-ship dropped out of the swirling mists that topped the waving fern-crown of the tallest and most ancient of the great Ancadus tree-ferns, furrowing the rich dark loam of the clearing floor.

Not that the Ancadus guessed the long black cylinder to be a space-ship. Their conception of the universe was limited to that space beneath the gray cloud-masses that enfolded their world. Nor could they conceive of a vehicle of transporta-

tion. For their life began in an over-large, hard-cased seed-spore that grew into a free-moving young tree-fern that made the best of its god-given activity until the urge to root itself came; then one stood ever upright, living and dreaming, conversing with one's neighbors, ever ready to flip forth a tentacle to ensnare one of the silly, unthinkable animals that foolishly accepted the lure of the fleshy, false fruits that the Ancadus dangled as bait for just that purpose.

Nevertheless, they were stirred, curious. From amid the stationary boles of their elders came the young ferns, bal-



"Intermingled with the unnamable creakings and cracklings were the cries of the dying race."

ancing themselves upon their five walking-roots, eager to see what they could see, just as young Earthlings would have pushed themselves forward between the bodies of their elders had such a strange phenomenon taken place on their Main Street.

Unmolested by the cutting ax of Man, with no other enemy than the encroaching life-choking parasitic vines that the

Ancadus, by means of their long flexible tentacles, kept to the background, the great tree-ferns were truly the monarchs of all they surveyed. Since Mother Nature had failed to provide cross-pollination in the form of insects, and since their giant seed-spores were too heavy for the soft, gentle winds of Venus to bear aloft, they had developed perambulatory movement in the young so that all the

planet might know them, and that the young should not choke the old.

Early in their life history they had discovered a predilection for animal blood, and to satisfy this unnatural lust they had brought forth large flesh-flowers that the gurgura, the ruswan, the petrus and the bav could not resist. Wisely the great Ancadus tree-ferns did not kill outright, but took their toll of blood from each passing creature, leaving it to crawl away as best it could, knowing that as soon as it had replenished its life-fluid the silly little beast would come again and again to the bait.

Innocent-looking enough were these vampire trees with their pale, white trunks topped with snowy crowns of crackling fronds wherein nestled the furled tentacles, curled, like rosettes, just above the dead black band which was the eye-circle. But those selfsame tentacles, sometimes a hundred feet long, endowed with the twin senses of hearing and smelling, were as deadly as the cobra, and the eye-circle gave vision in every direction.

Now the Ancadus were filled with questions.

"What is it?"

"Is it animal or vegetable?"

"Whence did it come?"

"How did it get here?"

"Has anyone ever seen such life before?"

These were but a few of the questions coming from all sides, for during the long millenniums of their evolution the great Ancadus tree-ferns had evolved speech and thought. Not speech such as Man uses, nor voice tones like those of the lesser animals. No mechanism could have recorded the speech of the tree-ferns, since it possessed no sound as animal life knows sound. But it was there, within the consciousness of the trees themselves.

Suddenly there was an end to the questions. Old Gorn, the patriarch, standing on the edge of the clearing, was voicing his thoughts. And when he spoke, all else were silent.

"Children," said he, "a strange visitant has come among us. Never in all my long centuries have I seen the like. None of us knows what this thing may portend for us. But only it can answer our questions. Therefore, let us commune with it, wait for it to break the silence. Only the foolish ask questions of the infinite."

AS IF his words were the thing the black cylinder awaited, the cylinder spawned, there before their eyes, two six-foot high, free-moving creatures.

Never had the great Ancadus tree-ferns known such life. Tunnux and Nushu, two newly rooted tree-ferns, were too excited to heed the patriarch's warning. Softly they conversed between themselves.

"What can they be? Certainly they are quite unlike any trees I ever saw in all my roving days," whispered Tunnux.

"Adolescents, unquestionably," murmured Nushu, "since they have freedom of movement and walk upright. No animal moves so. Only trees are thus gifted!"

"But how sparse grow their fern-crowns! Poor things, there is small beauty in their family if they are truly representative of their species."

"Trees indeed! Look again, my friends," an older tree was speaking. "Did ever you see trees with bark that grows as theirs grows, *away* from the bole? And look you to the shortness of the upper tentacles. Ugh, they're clawed, clawed like the animals. And see—no eye-circle either, merely two ugly seeing-balls set in pinkish bark. Then they possess but one sucker and those queer smelling-appendages such as animals use to smell out our flowers! Trees indeed!

Soon they'll come seekig our fruits to feast upon. Look you and see how like they are to that cacmu that I bled two days since, and from which I am still feeling indisposed."

On all sides other discussions were carried on. Two camps were formed; those that likened the spawn of the cylinder to themselves, and those that likened them to the animals. That they walked upright as no animal walked upright, and wore a fern-crown, sparse though it was, made them comparable to the tree-ferns. But on the other hand, who had ever heard of trees with seeing-balls, single suckers, clawed tentacles and the like?

Too, if they were trees they had small intelligence (no one expected an animal to have intelligence), for they failed to grasp Gorn's simplest communication. And now they were acting as no other tree, or animal either, for that matter, had ever acted.

Very rarely there occur on the planet great wind storms, storms strong enough to sway the great Ancadus tree-ferns from side to side. Once, a decade back, there had been a storm that had actually bent the boles of the younger, slenderer trees half-way to the ground. Thus, the Ancadus had thought they knew something of bending. Yet here were the spawn of the black cylinder doing more than that. They were bending themselves in two!

And no wonder! Some of the young trees had to snicker. To pluck something from the ground the poor creatures had to bend themselves double for the simple reason that their grasping tentacles could not reach the ground. To think of it!

So engrossed were the trees over this ridiculous predicament of the visitors they had not bothered to notice what the creatures were picking up from the ground, were gathering together into a heap not

far from the open mouth of the cylinder. When they did notice, it was something else to laugh over. The silly things, going to the trouble of collecting those things . . . twigs, sticks, desiccated remains of old fronds dropped by the Ancadus. Could one actually believe it? They must be related to the petrus that collects such trash upon which to lie down after tiring themselves by running here and there on their inadequate walking-roots.

But wait, what was this?

Before the very eye-circles of the trees they did it, bringing the old dead things to life once more. And such life!

Several young trees that had pushed close to the edge of the clearing all but lost their balance and toppled over in their surprize, and a great sigh went up from the whole watching forest. Who would have believed that such beautiful flowers dwelt in that old dead cellulose? Not even Gorn was able to name those dancing convolutions. For to the great Ancadus, fire was as unknown as were the men that had brought it into being.

What could the Ancadus know of fire in their mist-clothed world where even lightning was so rare a thing that Gorn, older than the oldest civilization of Man, had had no experience with it?

Ohing and ahing, the forest stared at the new beauty, enthralled. It was for Elsel, one of the youngest free-moving fern-trees, to consider investigating it.

Carefully—oh so carefully!—so as to draw no attention to himself, he lowered his longest tentacle, unfurling it inch by inch, his eye-circling upon those gorgeous flowers that bloomed and died as rapidly as do the flowers of the xmaur bush. And so fully were his senses trained upon those dancing efflorescences that he was not aware of the latest findings of his people concerning the intruders.

From downwind, across the clearing, Naxum, an old tree, was reporting. He

had the scent. And to the adult trees the brilliance of the saltant flames was paled, all else was as nothing to this new intelligence. Blood and flesh. Blood! Blood!

BY THE forest right Gorn, the patriarch, should be first to taste the blood. As oldest of the clan it was his due when strange, new delicacies wandered thither. But the ancient tree-fern was wise. He had seen what had overtaken tree-ferns that had dined unwisely, for not all animal blood is beneficial to tree-life.

Not far from where he stood there leaned the remains of a tree-fern that had sipped the blood of a pocus, a creature tradition taught was poisonous. It had been at a time of famine, and Daxur, the rash tree, had not listened to Gorn's sage wisdom when that soft-fleshed beast came into the forest. In consequence, Daxur no longer answered when spoken to. Bark had scaled from his sides, leaving ugly raw wounds, and he could no longer stand upright, but leaned against his nearer neighbors that would gladly have allowed him to fall had they been capable of moving their own rooted boles.

Therefore, Gorn suggested caution. He asked that lots be drawn, that but one of their number taste the blood of the strangers. That one's reward, in turn, would be that of a hero—or a martyr, as the case might be.

"Wherefrom come this pair, therefrom will come others. Bide your time, and when the black cylinder spawns again all shall dine; else leave the creatures strictly alone, according to the findings!"

But for the first time in his patriarchy his people had not wanted to listen to Gorn. One only to be chosen to the repast? Was Gorn in his dotage? Nay, here was blood, and according to Naxum its odor was savory. The pocus, they all knew, was poisonous. Was that reason

enough to condemn the new animals likewise? Nay, if Gorn refused his right, then the rest would adhere to the Law. The Law!

And the next instant the forest bloomed like a fairy glade as every Ancadus within a quarter of a mile of the clearing, excepting Gorn, blossomed with brilliantly tinted false fruits that they brought at will from an excrescence at the tip of the long grasping tentacles. Henceforth, everything depended upon the prey itself; they would choose that fruit most attractive, and to whomsoever selected went the spoils. That was the law of the forest.

Never in the history of the Ancadus had any red-blooded creature refused the lure, and certainly they had no expectation that the newcomers would ignore it. Such a thing was unheard of. Yet the men gave but a long, wondering glance at the floral display, turning back to the strange, shiny object they had in the meantime dragged from the cylinder, a queer affair of queerer angles.

How were the Ancadus to know this for a radio with which the men intended to contact their home planet, to advise it of their safe arrival? Space, time, radio—these were as nothing to the Ancadus. They knew only consternation at this untoward event. Such a happening was without precedent in their annals. It went against all tradition. An animal to disregard their lush, richly odorous fruit? Unthinkable! Unwilling to believe that the creatures would not rise to the bait sooner or later, they waited, tense.

However, not all the Ancadus were thus aroused. Little Elsel, the young free-moving tree-fern, was not at all concerned in the blood of the cylinder's spawn. Not until he had rooted himself would he bother himself about fleshy animals. It was the flowering flames of the campfire that intrigued him. By inching

his tentacle forward over the ground he had reached a point midway between the fire and himself without having been detected by either the fire-breeders or the tree-ferns.

The radio, which the pair were setting up, likewise meant nothing to him; its squareness was something outside his comprehension. Only in the infinitesimal does Nature produce cube shapes, and the object before him was as *outré* to him as a three-dimensional object would be to a two-dimensional creature. All the senses of the young tree-fern were concentrated upon the campfire with its ebullient blossoms rising and dying in one breath. So it happened that he did not notice that one of the pair had turned its seeing-balls in his direction.

Rising from the spot upon which he had folded himself, the creature shuffled across the clearing to where Elsel's tentacle tip lay.

FRIGHTENED, the perambulatory tree-fern froze into immobility; his tentacle lay like a dead end of a creeper vine. It gave him shivers to see the beast bend down to inspect it with near-sighted eyeballs, and he sighed a great sigh of relief when the creature went back to the fire.

Waiting until he was settled once more, Elsel again took up his march to the flames. It was purely accidental that he brushed the stumpy walking-root of the second creature bending over that squarish object by the fire. Nor was he prepared for the wild yell the thing emitted, causing the pair of them to dash away in wild confusion. That, however, was to be expected; for did not all animals respect and fear the great Ancadus?

Only Elsel had not expected them to return so quickly, to pick up his offending tentacle. It made him cringe, that touch of warm, resilient animal flesh. Not until he had taken root could he

know excitement at such close proximity. But when the same creature thrust an exploring claw inside one of his rubbery sucking-cups that covered the underside of his tentacle, his reaction in closing over the claw was entirely involuntary. If the creature had not screamed in fear and shaken him loose, Elsel would have released him anyway. Still, he was wholly unprepared for the next moment, when the tentacular feeler fell into the fire.

To think that those lovely, dancing flowers could be so bitter, so cruel! The agony of Elsel's cry resounded throughout all the forest. The pain was of a proportion the like of which he had never dreamed. No wonder he writhed, beating the air, the ground, in his wild anguish. Again he screamed. Gradually, as the shock died away, he regained sufficient composure to withdraw his wounded appendage. Nursing his pain he turned away, halting now and then to unfurl the bedeviled member and plunge it deep into the cool, rich loam of the forest floor wherein there seemed to be a slight balm.

One would think that the Ancadus would have taken warning from that direful experience of the young tree-fern. They had all seen, and they had heard. Yet the smell of the blood that Elsel had drawn was too intoxicating.

Simultaneously a dozen or more long tentacles shot across the clearing to the cylinder into which the men had darted to escape the flaying whip. They avoided the fire, but beyond that the tree-ferns were insensible to any danger that might arise from their action.

Having learned something of the flexibility of those long, questing arms, the men did not quit the protective shadow of their space-ship immediately, and at sight of those feelers lashing out toward them they ran again within the confines of the cylinder. Before they could bar-

ricade themselves, half the tentacles had followed them in, feeling with sensitive tip-ends for the pair, forbidding the shutting of the ship's mouth by their bulk.

Instantly, three tentacles fastened themselves upon the fighting form of one of the men. Somehow the other managed to hide himself, and no matter how the remaining feelers searched they could not find him. Though they possessed scent, they were blind, depending upon the eye-circles set just below the fern-crown of the tree, and the animal smell of the two was thick inside the cylinder.

Even after the captive had been withdrawn inch by inch, battling every step of the way, those others failed to locate his companion, concealed in some crevice. They withdrew at last, only to remain outside, waiting. . . .

GEEB, Masur and Jadan argued among themselves over their victim, each claiming himself in rightful possession as they dragged the man across the clearing, lifted him screaming and struggling into the air. Then Masur fastened his suckers upon the pink bark of the creature's arm and imbibed deeply of the rich life-fluid. That was too much for the others. Forgetting their quarrel, they realized that part of the feast is better than none at all. Here was one creature who would not be allowed to crawl away half dead, to return again on the morrow. They would suck him dry and toss the husk away.

But it had not entered the thoughts of the Ancadus that the second man would actually come to the rescue of his brother creature. The Ancadus were individualists, banding together only when concerned with the common weal of their species. They could not conceive of unselfishness in another. Therefore, those that guarded the cylinder mouth had

permitted their appendages to grow lax, and they were wholly unprepared to act instantly as the second man came hurtling into the open in answer to the pleas of his fellow.

Elsel had taught him how the Ancadus reacted to even a minor burn, and he had good reason to be glad that the campfire was ready at hand. Grasping a lighted brand, he flung it among the serpentine coils that held his friend aloft. And again the forest listened to the agony shriek of their kind in answer to the bite of the flame-blossoms. Unconsciously Masur and Jadan flinched, and in so doing loosed their hold upon their victim. Then as a second and third flaming brand came flying through the air they dropped the captive.

Weakened by loss of blood, and dazed by the twelve-foot fall, the man was slow in reorganizing his faculties, and before he succeeded in regaining his upright position, two more tentacles reached out and grasped him. In their gluttony the rest of the tree-ferns disregarded the menace of the flame-flowers.

Only no more brands came flying through the air as those tentacles in the clearing sought out the avenger. To each he was forced to give his baptism of fire before they were willing to leave him to his own devices.

But they served to reduce his ammunition, and to replenish it the man had to leave the fire, dash here and there to gather such sticks as lay close at hand. Twice a tentacle all but tripped him, but he danced safely away each time, and with the new supply of torches renewed the succor of his friend.

Reluctantly the constricting coils released the captive, who managed to climb to his walking-roots and stagger several steps before another blood-crazed tree-fern plucked him up.

Shaking a balled-up claw at the trees,

the fire-breeder went farther afield to collect more fuel, taking a lighted torch for his own protection.

Now, all this while old Gorn had thoughtfully been considering the scene. It had come to him that without a replenishment of his campfire the fire-breeder was powerless. Thereupon he transferred his surmise to his people, pointing out that if they but prevented the creature from gathering more fag-gots there could be no more fire-blossoms. Acting instantly upon the suggestion, a threatening circle was formed just out of reach of the fire itself.

But Gorn had not taken to account that inexplicable force driving the man to the aid of his companion. Finding his way barred on all sides he refused to acknowledge defeat. Turning upon himself he tore away part of what to the trees appeared to be his outer bark and threw it into the fire. Appalled, they saw him pluck it out flame-covered, and toss it into the air.

Taking the form of the fusim, the only flying thing of Venus, the coat slithered toward the captive man. Straightway Huj and Herul, his captors, dropped him just in time as the burn-thing enfolded him, falling flame-side out. That large chunk of burning life was too much for the horrified tree-ferns.

Had the great Ancadus tree-ferns but guessed the deadliness of those licking flame-tendrils they would have suffered the agonies of hell to stamp them out; but all they did was to gaze jealously, waiting for the fire-blossoms to fade away that they might again seize their prey. Those that had not been beset by the fire as yet were dubious, only half believing that the golden-red flowers were as hurtful as the screams of those who had felt their scorching breath made them out to be. Still, because they half believed, they stood back—waiting.

MEANWHILE their erstwhile victim was having his own troubles. Fire is at best a treacherous friend, and though he had tossed the burning cloak from him, curls of fire had already eased themselves into his hair, his clothing. Slapping them did not avail and he dropped to the ground to roll and twist in an effort to put them out, only to aggravate them in a bed of dry brush that lay in his path. True, as long as the fire wreathed him he was safe from the trees, but at the same time his condition was precarious, too weak as he was to fight the fire properly. Piteously he called to the other to save him.

But the fire-breeder was in bad straits himself. Threatened on every side by the enemy, unable to gather more fuel, he had already removed his boots, was coaxing them to burn, when suddenly he spied something he had not seen before, an old log lying in the shadow of the space-ship. Using one charred shoe, in which a flame teased, as a shield he forced several tentacles to give way until he could grasp the log end. Dragging it to the fire, he thrust one end into the fire. But the log refused to burn!

Gorn had forgotten that he had begged his people to let the visitors go un-molested. Now, in high glee he cried out: "He is defeated! And I, in my right, demand his blood. He is *mine!*" And as he spoke his tentacle shot across the clearing—only to dart away again in dismay. Even as he had spoken, the old log began to smoke; a feather of flame ran half-way up its length, died, only to be followed by a second tendril that bit deep into the butt.

Shouting his joy, the fire-breeder waited long enough for the fire to burn merrily; then like a flaming sword he used it to force the enemy to writhe away. One by one the menacing tentacles slithered to one side, opening up the path

that led to the side of the other man-creature who now lay as if dead, soot-blackened.

Beating out the flames that still wreathed him, the fire-breeder picked his comrade up and flung him over one shoulder. Then, pausing long enough to take a better grip upon the torch, he advanced, jabbing savagely at those tentacles not quick enough to give way.

Powerless to halt him, the Ancadus groaned in unison as he reached the cylinder and disappeared within with his burden, sealing the opening. But even as they lamented their loss and nursed their wounds, the cylinder gaped again, and the figure of the fire-breeder stood poised before him.

Exulting, the tree-ferns stared, then in one accord dozens of long arms shot out. This time they would have him! But no, the man was wary enough. Before the opening was resealed for the last time something came arching through the air to land at the roots of old Gorn. It was the flaming torch!

Again the Ancadus turned to their leader for advice. Should they try their strength upon the cylinder, crush it and pluck the creatures like bav from their hole? For the first time in their existence the old patriarch had no advice to give. He was more concerned with the hungry flames at his feet, one of which had already tested the texture of an old gnarled root that had broken through the forest loam.

The next instant the cylinder was taking to the air, filling the forest with an ugly roar. Then it was level with the fern-crowns. For a moment it seemed to hang suspended between land and sky. And to the horror of the Ancadus its rear end seemed to ignite—in a great blast of withering fire.

The fire-breeder had his revenge as the long tongue of flame bit deeply into the

heart of the Ancadus grove. With his departure a new sound came into the forest, a deep throaty roar interspersed with strange unnamable creakings and cracklings wherein were intermingled the cries of the dying race, the loudest of which was the shriek of old Gorn.

Once inoculated with the virus of the fire, the whole world seemed ready to burn as immense flowers reared their angry, licking flames into the tallest perches of the forest, devouring everything in their path.

Elsel, the young free-moving tree-fern who had taken his hurt to the river, a good quarter of a mile from the clearing, there to lave his tentacle in the flood, saw the flame-flowers advance, apparently pushing the small band of perambulatory ferns that hurried ahead of them, toward the river.

All the world burns, the young ferns told Elsel; all are gone—Gorn, Naxum, Tunnux, Nushu, Geeb, Masur—all the great ones, all the middle-aged, all the newly rooted—all, all consumed by the ravenous flame-flowers that the intruders had loosed into their paradise. All were gone. All.

Standing on the river bank they waited, fearful, uncertain. They knew they could launch themselves upon the broad river, float upon its bosom into new lands; or they could cross the river to the salt barrens into which no self-respecting perambulatory tree-fern ever treads.

But their own hesitancy closed the first path as the florescent flames were seen to gather at the river's edge, a few hundred feet below, hissing as their fiery tongues tasted that liquid flood, painting the overhead clouds in their lurid light.

Out in space the fire-breeder saw that same pyrotechnical glow, saw in his mind's eye that calorific hell that he, a modern Prometheus, had engendered upon the bosom of Venus.