

SUPER-SCIENCE

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WORLD OF CREEPING TERROR

by J. W. ROSE

Flora was supposed to be a safe and harmless planet. Why then was the young Earthman attacked by so many vicious and dangerous creatures in so short a time?

“I’M worried,” said the Captain to his Mate. “The shades of night are falling fast, and Boney is two hours overdue.”

The nickname, alas, was due to no fancied resemblance to one Napoleon Bonaparte, but rather to the meagerness of the meat that covered the junior crew member’s lanky arms and legs.

The Mate sneered: “He probably thinks his scoutmaster training on Mars equips him for solo expeditions on Flora.”

The Captain frowned. “He could get in trouble. I hope he has a full supply of xanthine tablets with him.”

At that precise moment, Boney *was* in trouble.

Hours of trudging through the flower-jungles had convinced him that the planet Flora was aptly named: a florist’s delight, but hardly stimulating to a novice explorer. He was so bored by the endless expanses of lush vegetation and the ever-present heavy perfume—rather like the dizzying scents that some girls wore, he thought—that he completely forgot to take his xanthine tablet every hour on the hour. As a matter of fact, he wondered why the Skipper had insisted on his taking along the repellent drug at all. So far he had seen no animal life.



He stood now on the bank of a wide stream, looking across at more of the same enormous, drowsy flowers on the far side, and debating whether to turn right or left or return to the ship, when he heard the rustling a few yards behind him. It was more like the rustling of an expanse of dead leaves stirred by a light breeze.

He drew his electronic pistol from its holster and took a few cautious steps in the general direction of the sound, in full confidence that the weapon could kill or at least stun any beast this side of a mastodon. With his free hand he reached out and thrust aside a bower of large red blossoms. There was nothing in sight. Then he looked down at the ground, and his blood turned to ice water.

The ground was swarming, as far as the eye could see, with great black driver ants, fully an inch in length. He jumped back as one of the insects, ferocious mandibles spread wide, crawled up on his boot, and stamped it loose, crushing it under his heel. He turned the blaster on full force and swept it over a wide area within its range. After fifteen

seconds he turned it off. A hundred square yards of flowers and shrubs had been reduced to powdery ashes, and thousands of the driver ants gone up in puffs of smoke and steam. But then, like a wave breaking over a reef, the slaughtered hosts were replaced by a seemingly endless wave of crawling blackness.

Boney felt his skin crawl as though he were already being explored by the first vanguard of savage ants. He made a quick decision and ran to his right along the edge of the stream. A few yards later he came to a dead halt, the hairs rising on the back of his neck. The horde had swept to the edge of the water.

He turned back and ran in the opposite direction, and turned pale when he found that escape was also blocked in that direction. There was no question whatever of trying to make a dash through the rustling carpet of insects, which now blackened the ground and even the shrubs as far as he could see.

He tried one more blast with the electronic weapon, not really expecting too much. He was

right. The ants crisped and crackled and cindered by the millions, but when the blue flame shut off, wave after wave seemed to well up from the ground itself. He thrust the pistol back into its holster.

The seething milling carpet of black insects now formed a crescent around him, and closed in slowly. He knew that when they got his scent, the gap would close with a rush, and he would go down screaming, a writhing, shapeless mass covered with layers of coldly efficient little machines, each carrying off as much flesh as it could tear away from his bones.

He turned and faced the stream. His wind had never been too good, but he could swim in fashion, and the current did not seem too rapid. He pulled off the heavy boots with regret, and tossed them out into the water as crude buoys to test the rapidity of the stream. He felt the blood drain from his face.

The seemingly innocent stream erupted into splashing, turbulent violence as his boots were torn apart by a swarm of silvery fish a foot long, their

slim bodies dominated by an over-sized mouth with a full complement of razor-sharp teeth.

Tales of the piranhas and other carnivorous fish of earth's tropical rivers thronged through his mind. He wondered despairingly why previous explorers of this apparently mild and harmless planet had made no reports of either driver ants or the finny ferocity that was now in the process of reducing his leather boots to shreds.

Boney was by nature and conviction opposed to the idea of suicide, but he knew grimly that he was not going to let himself make a meal for either the millions of bellies of the remorseless ants, or the fewer but no less voracious fish. He drew the blaster from the holster and turned the flared muzzle toward his own head. His finger tightened briefly, then quickly relaxed again, and he cursed himself for a fool.

The xanthine tablets! Of course! He plunged the pistol back into the holster and reached into an inner pocket with trembling fingers and drew out a small plastic tube.

He tapped out one large white tablet and popped it under his tongue, and felt it dissolve rapidly and absorb into his blood stream. It would, they had told him, cause his body to emit an odor that would repel hungry, hostile creatures, although he himself would not detect it.

While he waited for the drug to dissolve in his mouth, he saw several giant scouts at the nearest edge of the living, undulating carpet wave their antennae in his direction, then head straight for him, followed by obedient streams of warrior ants. Evidently the drug did not repel insects. . .

Boney muttered a quick prayer and waded out into the warm water of the stream, not a second too soon. The black wave swept up to the very edge, the ferocious hordes tumbling over each other layer upon layer in a tangled wall of milling legs, bodies, feelers and snapping pincers. From the closest rank now, wriggling bodies began to detach themselves and fall into the water, where they floated toward him in hungry persistence.

He took a deep breath and launched himself into the mid-

dle of the stream, lashing the water into foam with his flailing arms and legs. He beat his way slowly and awkwardly toward the far bank, expecting at any moment to feel needle-sharp teeth tear at his flesh from the muddy waters beneath him.

But nothing happened. Flora's piranhas had disappeared as abruptly as they had come. He reached the other side and pulled himself up on the bank. When he was completely out of the water, he threw himself down on his back and drew in great, hungry gasps of air, and let his limbs grow limp as rags.

HE woke with a start. Flora's sun was low in the planet's west, and the air was turning a misty blue peculiar to twilight there. The complete relaxation, combined with the heady odor of the universal flowers, had caused him to fall asleep.

He bit his lower lip, wondering how to get back to the spaceship before nightfall. He strained his eyes toward the opposite bank, but in the dim-

ming light could not be sure whether the black shadows on the ground were merely ashes, or a rearguard of the ant army, waiting patiently for his return.

He shuddered. He dared not go back that way. He made a quick mental calculation and decided to strike out to the north, where the stream seemed to curve gradually away from him and back in the general direction of the ship.

He set out with hurrying footsteps, as much afraid of the Captain's tongue as of alien fangs lurking in the foliage. They would be just about getting ready to send out a rescue party, foregoing evening chow to find him.

He plodded on in his stockinged feet, bitterly wishing he could have been able to swim across the stream with his boots on. The ground was not hard or stony, but was persistently wet and slushy, as if the firm, dry soil at the start of his journey was giving way to mud or wet sand. A few hundred feet further along the course of the river, and he realized that the ground was much too soft.

Indeed, he saw with a start,

that his feet were sinking ankle-deep into the soft stuff. He paused and peered about blindly through the thickening blue haze that preceded the pitch-black of the coming night. Flora had no moon, and the stars were spread thinly in this segment of the galaxy.

He decided to go a little farther, and then to turn back if the ground did not get firmer. He lifted his right foot to take the first step, pulling it out violently with a sucking *plop*, and set it down again.

He failed completely to extricate the other foot, and his stomach dropped sickeningly when he realized that he had sunk into the mire up to a point midway between ankle and knee. He braced himself and pulled, and his right leg sank up to the knee in muck of the consistency of soft butter.

He struggled and wallowed in vain, and his violent contortions only pushed him deeper, and he felt the cold, damp mud press up suddenly against his groin. Quicksand! He put his face in his hands and groaned. He raised his head again, cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted again and again.

But his cries died away in the suffocating silence, and only silence answered him.

He gritted his teeth and reached out through the now-total darkness, slicing the air with his arms as he searched for a hand-hold. The chill muck reached his navel. He threw his arms upward and clawed at the indifferent sky. He brushed something with the back of his hand, and flailed about wildly, trying to find it again.

There it was! A thick vine or liana of some kind, dangling within reach, but just barely, teasing his grazing fingertips with a lazy swinging motion that he could not see in the velvety blackness. It was now or never; another inch or two into the sucking grip of the slime and it would be forever beyond his reach.

He strained upward as if he would stretch his taut body like rubber, and then his fingertips found the dangling rope of salvation and wrapped themselves around it with a desperation that squeezed blood beneath his nails. He held on and began to pull himself up slowly against the combined forces of gravity and suction, feeling his tendons

begin to tear and his joints creak.

The muscles in his arms and shoulders bulged and twisted into agonizing knots. A red mist began to form behind his eyes, and his ears roared with blood. The breath whistled through his nostrils and his thigh and stomach muscles spasmed as he fought to wrench them from the quicksand.

A long moment of torture on the rack of his own effort, suspended between heaven and hell, and then he felt the clammy vise loosen its grip around his hips. Another pain-lanced contortion of his thin body, and his legs were free, dangling blessedly free in the air.

The sudden release gave new strength to his arms, and he pulled himself up hand over hand, exulting in the newfound lightness of his body, until his bleeding fingertips met the reassuring firmness of a stout tree-limb.

He heaved himself upward with a last convulsion of effort and straddled the limb and leaned back weakly against the friendly solidity of the tree-trunk and breathed with deep,

shuddering gasps until the muscles of his chest and ribs ached. After a while, it might have been minutes or hours, he wearily removed his sweat-soaked shirt and used it to secure his thighs to the limb he straddled, tying the arms of the shirt into a knot beneath the branch.

He removed his belt and tried to pass it around the tree, but the bole was too thick. He explored the air just over his head with leaden arms, and found another smaller branch jutting over his left shoulder. He passed the belt under his arm pits and over the second branch and tightened the buckle, giving his upper body support. Thus reinforced, his eyes closed in sudden and utter relaxation. He slept.

The searching party returned to the ship later that night, led by the sour-faced Mate.

"No sign of Junior," he snarled. "Can we eat now?"

The Captain waved his permission and turned to the ship's medic with furrowed brow.

"Could anything happen to the lad?"

The physician pursed his

lips. "I hardly think so. Every crew member was selected for emotional stability. He also has the indubitable advantage of youth. As for the possibility of physical dangers, that's your province, not mine."

"Well," the Captain sighed with a measure of relief, "then he's all right. Flora has been proved to be absolutely safe."

BONEY awoke to the sound of birds and the light of a pearly grey dawn filtering through his eyelids. He opened his eyes, rubbing gritty grains from each corner, and looked up at an innocent blue sky. He yawned and stretched, then groaned at the protesting ache of weary muscles. He reached down to his waist to undo the belt that had held him upright through the night.

His waist? He vaguely remembered having looped the belt under his arm pits the night before, and the thought occurred to him at the same time that his fumbling hands encountered the thick, cold, dry band around his waist—a band as thick as the calf of his leg. He took a cautious breath and looked down.

His scouting experience on earth had given him some experience with snakes, but not with anything this big. His heart stopped for a long moment, then tried to bound out through his chest. He turned his head slowly to avoid waking the reptile, his eyes following the scaly curves from the segment that snuggled around his middle, along the loop that wrapped itself once around the limb, and then down to the flat, ugly head dangling some ten feet below.

He realized now that this was the 'vine' he had used to pull himself out of the bog, but somehow could not feel very grateful. With infinite slowness and caution, he reached up and undid the belt that supported him from the upper limb, then untied the shirt-sleeves that fastened his legs to the branch he was straddling, and dropped them to the ground.

He braced his hands against the lower branch, pulled in his stomach until it almost pressed against his backbone, and tried to ease himself out of the deadly gray coils. No use. The thick tube of muscle and sinew was

coiled too snugly for him to get his hips through. Then he felt the strength drain from his body as he realized that his efforts had only served to arouse the drowsing anaconda.

A ripple of vast, indolent strength ran through the twenty foot length of reptile, and the spade-shaped head began to rise in a lazy, deadly arc. Boney pressed himself back against the bole of the tree, breathing with short, shallow breaths, and holding himself motionless in the hope that the giant snake would ignore him.

But it was both curious and hungry, and in a few seconds the snub-nosed head was on a level with his, and the cold, expressionless eyes stared into his, a mere foot away.

He felt the tickle in his nostrils and tried valiantly to suppress the sneeze. He succeeded only to the extent of emitting a grunting cough, and that was enough. He felt the coil around his waist tighten a little. He closed his eyes and muttered a prayer, then extracted the electronic pistol from its holster. Better to perish in a mutual holocaust of snake and man than to undergo agonizing

death. He pointed the muzzle at the flat head and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. He realized that he must have exhausted the temporary charge on the ant hordes the day before. He threw the empty weapon at the weaving, bobbing head, but missed. He exhaled, and the coil snuggled tighter. He knew that would happen. Contrary to popular belief, such snakes did not crush their victims to death. They waited for each exhalation, and as the belly and chest of the prey relaxed a little, coiled still tighter, until the helpless quarry died of slow suffocation.

He felt his eyes bulge in their sockets and the veins begin to stand out on his forehead. He attempted to outwit his relentless captor by breathing in short, quick gasps, but it instantly sensed every movement of his muscles and responded with a further tightening of the vise of muscle and sinew. His ears began to ring and a mist formed before his bulging eyes, when he cursed himself for a fool and thought suddenly of the xanthine tablets. But would it work on reptiles?

He reached with one arm into his trousers pocket and pulled out the plastic vial with fingers that had grown suddenly numb and cold. He fumbled and dropped the vial, but not before he had managed to palm one of the white tablets. He inserted it into his mouth beneath his tongue as instructed, and felt it dissolve quickly. Then he felt the mighty band draw tighter, with a sudden, impatient spasm of hunger in the huge gray snake, and his head dropped forward as blackness swept over him.

WHEN he came to, there was no sign of the reptile. The repellent drug had evidently worked. He raised himself shakily to his feet, then descended painfully to the ground from branch to branch. When he reached bottom, he staggered on again in the generally northern direction he had chosen the day before, following the curve of the river.

In his blind fatigue and hysterical haste to get back to the ship, he forgot everything else, and lurched onward, shoeless, shirtless, beltless, and minus his weapon and the rest of the

protective tablets, leaving them where they had fallen and scattered on the ground at the base of the tree.

The planet's big, blue sun rose higher in the sky, and its ultra-violet-rich rays stabbed through the tree-tops with invisible lances of fire, slowly baking and blistering his naked torso. His legs were turning to lead, growing heavier with each step, and his feet had turned to numbed stumps. As the morning grew warmer, the ever-present enormous flowers began to pour their chloroform-heavy perfume into the air, and his head swam as if he had been drugged. He cupped his hands to his dry lips and tried to *halloo!* but only a c r o a k came from his dry throat.

Ignoring the warning of possible polluted water, he dropped to his belly on the bank of the river and plunged his cupped hands into the stream and poured turgid gulps of water down his parched gullet. When his thirst was slaked, he slopped the cool water over his face and head and on his burning shoulders and back.

He pressed his feverish body gratefully against the cool,

damp soil of the river's edge, feeling his blood pump renewed strength through his limbs and the bone-racking fatigue recede in ever-diminishing waves. Perhaps half an hour passed before he felt his second wind, and raised himself slowly on his hands and knees. He leaped suddenly to his feet, the hairs standing up on the nape of his neck as he heard a slow, ominous growl. He turned around slowly.

It was the size of a lion, and black and evil, and looked very hungry and determined.

THE Captain looked at his wrist watch and bit his lower lip. "Getting near noon," he muttered anxiously, "and still no sign of Boney." He turned on the medic.

"Are you certain nothing could have happened to him?"

The ship's physician sighed patiently, but he did have a tiny wrinkle between his brows. "No, Captain, I don't think so. The boy has a strong heart and is completely without a psychotic streak. And if he has been taking his xanthine tablets regularly, he's in no trouble."

"Still," said the Captain, wringing his hands, "I feel guilty and responsible about the whole thing. I almost wish that one of the other crew members had let it leak out to the lad."

The physician shrugged. "You wanted a control-subject," he replied slowly. "You got one."

BONEY stood limply with his back to the river, wondering dully whether he had time to dive in and swim out of reach of this latest menacing carnivore; and, if he did, whether being picked apart by the piranhas was really preferable to perishing with long fangs in his throat and knife-edged claws ripping into his belly. In any case, he knew that this was *it*. He had no weapon. He didn't have any more repellent tablets with him. There was nothing to do but stand his ground and meet his doom like a man.

The black beast flicked its tail back and forth and raised its snout into the air to sniff its prey before launching into the attack. It growled again, and Boney felt the low-pitched vi-

bration in his backbone. He swallowed the dry lump of fear in his throat and resisted the urges of his churning stomach. The beast made up its mind and crouched for the spring. Boney pulled himself together and thrust out his skinny arms to ward off the impact of three hundred pounds of carnivore.

He stood there like a statue as minutes passed, and a stupid expression spread slowly over his face. He lowered his arms gradually to his sides, his dazed brain drinking in the significance of the stout arrow that had pierced the heart of the beast and killed it instantly. He shook his head to clear it and looked blankly in the direction from whence he thought he had heard the *twang* of a bow, centuries ago.

She stepped out of a bush, her ivory skin in startling contrast with the vivid crimson of the flowers that framed her, and Boney was not too tired or startled to blush. She moved gracefully toward him, wearing nothing but a smile and the five-foot bow slung over one milk-white shoulder. Boney found himself wondering irrele-

vantly how she kept herself from getting sunburned. Then she was standing before him, hands outstretched in friendship.

"Welcome to Flora," she said, with the barest of musical accent. "I am happy to have been of service."

"But you can't *be*," he stammered. "I mean, there aren't supposed to be any humanoids on this planet."

She laughed, and the sound was like silver bells. "I am here," she said. "Touch me. I am quite real."

He did not accept the invitation. "Oh, I believe you," he said hastily. A thought occurred to him. "But you speak English!"

"Of course," she said, regarding him with amused violet eyes. "There have been other visitors here before you, and I am very quick to learn."

But then her amused smile gave way to a frown of concern, and she reached out and caressed one of his blistered shoulders with cool, velvety fingertips. An alternating current of high voltage thrilled through his body.

She looked at the skinned palm and fingers of one hand. "But you are hurt," she murmured in honeyed tones. "You must come with me to where I live. I have herbs and salves that will heal and soothe." She clasped his hand gently in one of hers and led him through masses of flowers until they came to a small hut with a roof of interwoven branches. It was cool and dim inside. She motioned him to a mound of earth covered with broad leaves, and he sat down, his brain whirling.

He followed her gleaming white body as she glided about through the hut, gathering leaves and fruits and pressing their juices in a sort of gourd. Then she sat beside him and poured the liquid into one soft palm a little at a time and smoothed it with velvety strokes over his blistered torso and ragged hands.

The burning heat vanished magically from his skin, while waves of warmth welled up inside him. Automatically, he reached out his arms and put them around her, and she responded without surprise or hesitation. In the hours that followed in the cool, shady

grotto, he learned a number of interesting things that he had not picked up in his scout training.

Late that afternoon he bid her a reluctant goodbye, explaining that he had to report back to his ship. She extracted a promise from him to return, and then pressed a glittering rounded pebble into his hand, something like a diamond in the rough.

"Something to remind you of me," she murmured. He put the crude gem stone in his pocket and stumbled off. He looked back twice, but the hut had been swallowed up in the foliage.

THE Captain gave him a thorough dressing-down for his carelessness, then listened to an account of his fortunes and misfortunes in the twenty-four hours he had been alone in the forests of Flora. He listened skeptically to the last item in the narrative. He demanded to see the gem stone. Boney rummaged in his pocket but could not find it.

"It doesn't matter," the Skipper grunted. "Even if you did have it, you could have

picked it up yourself. In short, my boy, you dreamed everything."

Boney's jaw dropped. The Captain smiled.

"Look yourself over. Can you find any marks or bruises?"

Indeed, Boney could not. "But—," he started to say, and the Captain interrupted him.

"Uh-uh. Herb juices might soothe, but no wounds and bruises could heal that fast without leaving any trace." Then he put his hand kindly on Boney's shoulder. "I want to apologize for using you as a guinea pig." The young man looked uncomprehending.

"Doctor," said the Captain awkwardly, turning to the ship's medic, "maybe you better take over here."

The physician polished his spectacles reflectively. "Have you ever," he began tentatively, "heard of LSD or mescaline? No? Well, LSD—lysergic acid diethylamide—was a drug discovered in the twentieth century, about a hundred years ago. In very minute doses, it

produced hallucinations similar to those experienced by the mentally ill. Mescaline is a similar drug, found in a cactus, and was used by certain primitive American tribes to produce visions in their religious rites.

"Now, the earlier expeditions to land on Flora thought they were being attacked by all kinds of creatures, yet *there was nothing new or strange about them*. They all had strong resemblances to terrestrial animals, or were even identical in many cases. Stranger still, something always seemed to happen at the last moment—usually the creature turned aside and vanished into the forest, or just melted away, and no one was ever hurt, just as in a nightmare of falling, you never seem to hit the ground.

"They came to a quick conclusion. The heavy perfume given off constantly by the flowers has a weird effect on the human brain—waking nightmares, so to speak. The air of Flora is constantly filled with a volatile substance that produces hallucinations like those of LSD and mescaline."

The medic looked embarrassed. "An antidote was invented to neutralize this drug, and you were the first subject to use it. Naturally, to control the experiment properly, you could not be informed of the real purpose of the xanthine tablets. They are not a repellent at all. If you had taken one every hour with regularity, as instructed, I am sure you would just have had a nice afternoon stroll on Flora."

Boney looked at his hands in a daze. They were unscarred. Gone were the tatters of loose skin, the raw fingertips, the blackened blood under the nails. "Then—then none of it happened at all?" he stammered.

The medic shook his head. "No. And even though you spoiled the experiment by not following directions, in a way it proved our point. Every time you were menaced, but managed to take one of the tablets, the danger promptly disappeared. Yes, I think that with the aid of the antidote, Flora will be rendered safe for preliminary colonization until the settlers have had time to clear away the dream-flowers, at

least in a surrounding area of several square miles. You understand now?"

Boney nodded slowly, but part of his mind was far away from the ship, gazing with nostalgic eyes at the cool, dim, little hut and a lissome, ivory figure standing in the doorway.

"I think I'd like to go to my room," he said, and his eyes were moist.

The Captain nodded and patted him on the back sympathetically. "Never mind, Boney. You did a good job all the same."

The medic and the Captain watched his lank form disappear down the gangway and turn a corner. The Skipper turned to the physician.

"There's just one peculiar thing," he said thoughtfully. "That perfume-drug has never been known to cause anything but unpleasant hallucinations, without exception. How do you

account for his idyllic interlude with the—ah—forest nymph?"

"I really can't say," replied the medic, and his stern face relaxed into an expression of sheer envy.

BACK in his little cubicle, dazed and exhausted, Boney removed his trousers, preparatory to lying down on his bunk. There was a tiny flash, and then a rattle as something fell out of the cuff and rolled under the cot. He knelt down and groped until his hand closed over the object and he brought it out into the light.

He started with surprise, then smiled gently, and his eyes grew misty with remembering as he turned the glittering gem stone in his fingers, over and over.

He decided he was going to be among the first permanent settlers on Flora.

THE END
