

moonflowers  
and  
mary

by . . . George Whitley

**The man with a green thumb is always valuable—especially on the moon. But at times, like our Adam, he can be just a little too green.**

*The age-long speculation as to whether there is or ever was life on Earth's single satellite seems in a fair way to be answered shortly. But until the drab truths, whatever they may be, are actually recorded, science fiction writers like George Whitley can continue to concoct such delightful Luny fantasies as this little gem.*

HIS NAME WAS Adam Ormandy and he was a gardener. He was a big man, a fraction of an inch over six feet tall, and broad to match. His hair was yellow and he usually had at least one day's stubble softening the strong lines of his not unhandsome jaw. His eyes were of that mild blue so often, in this' case so erroneously, associated with men who work in the open air. His face and his hands were deeply tanned—he, as well as his plants, derived benefit from the ultra-violet lamps so essential to vegetable wellbeing.

When his shift was over he liked nothing so much as a long walk. After his walk he would make for the Colony's bar—the one reserved for the use of minor technicians—and there drink two, never more nor less, glasses of fruit squash undiluted by any form of alcohol. He did not approve of drinking but he liked occasional company. He would play one game or darts with Delchev and Gruen, both tractor drivers, and Dombey, one of the junior cartographers.

Ormandy would then retire to his little room in the single men's quarters and, before sleeping, browse through the pages of the latest seed catalogues and dream wistfully of the plants that he would grow if only Ferson, Head Gardener and Air Conditioning Engineer, would allow him lights and tanks for his own use and just a few ounces of personal mass in the next ship.

His meals he ate in the tank rooms during his shift—packets of thick sandwiches cut and wrapped by Mary Blair, one of the waitresses in the canteen. He was sorry he was no longer able to repay her kindness—but Ferson, that hard practical man, more engineer than gardener, had been so unpleasant when Miss Hume, the Stewardess, had reported to him that one of her staff had been seen wearing a tiny spray of tomato and pumpkin flowers, presumably given her by one of Ferson's men, that Adam had never dared to repeat the gesture. And Ferson, he was sure, kept a personal tally of every fruit grown in the tanks.

Once or twice, when her free hours coincided with his, Mary Blair had accompanied him on his walks. But she had not really enjoyed them. Adam saw the plains and craters as they must have been eons ago, before air and water had broken the weak hold of gravity and escaped into empty space, during the pitifully brief efflorescence of Lunar life.

Mary saw only harsh sunlight and black shadow and the death that must, sooner or later, overtake all the worlds. And at night, in spite of the heating unit in her spacesuit, she shivered—with fear of the stars and the cold and the darkness, even of the great globe of Earth, hanging high in the Southern sky, that seemed to her always about to fall and to crush its satellite.

Had Adam been able to take her into his arms and comfort her, as she wished to be comforted, she would have found the walks at least bearable. But it is hard to comfort a girl properly when both you and she are attired in thick rubberized asbestos-and-metal-mesh fabric, when a metal-and-plastic helmet prevents even the most innocent kiss.

So it was that she preferred the life inside the domes. Adam would see her, as he paused briefly outside the recreation-room door on his way from the bar to his own room, playing table tennis, perhaps, with some junior technician or gliding around the floor to the strains of the Colony's own dance band.

He would wonder then why she ever bothered with such a dull fellow as himself, would feel a vague surprise that she should still trouble to make up his sandwiches for him. And he would be sorry, he knew, when, in six months' time, her contract having expired, she would return to Earth.

His own contract still had two years to run and, conscious that he was doing useful and important work, he had every intention of renewing it. He wished that a shift to the married quarters were possible—but, Mary having announced her intention of returning to Earth as soon as possible, he had never asked her to marry him.

He was thinking of Mary as he trudged at a steady pace over the surface of the crater floor. He was wishing he were capable of entering more into the social life of the colony or, conversely, that she could take a greater interest in hydroponics.

"But it's not the same," she had told him once. "It's not the same as a garden with good black earth, smelling sweet after the rain, where you can grow what you want to grow, not what old Ferson tells you."

"But this is the only way that we can do it here," he had said.

"Who's talking about doing it *here*?" she had flared in reply.

He thought, *After all, there's still a market for dirt-grown stuff on Earth. But will she wait for me until my contract runs out?*

He tripped, and almost fell, as the toe of his heavy boot crashed into an obstruction. It was a small mound, almost a tiny dome, made apparently of some cement-like substance. These formations, he knew, were fairly common—freaks of the Moon's long-past-and-finished volcanic activity.

But this one was somehow different. He was on the point of walking on when he realized wherein the difference lay. On the floor of the tiny dome, jet black and glistening in the strong sunlight, was a scattering of what could have been beads—or *seeds*.

Adam fell to his knees, staring at his discovery. He saw then that the broken shards of the dome were covered with markings of a regular character which could have been, might have been, written characters in some unknown language. And the more he looked at the tiny black spheroids the more he was sure they were seeds.

He should, he knew well, report this find on his return to the dome. And yet ... Too often he had seen departmental seniors taking the credit for work done or discoveries made by members of their staffs. Stirring vaguely in his mind was the thought that if he, Adam Ormandy, could claim the honor of having grown the first Moonflowers—for so he already thought of them—he would be a person of some consequence in the Colony and Mary Blair might even reconsider her decision to return to Earth.

Too—he could name the flower after Mary. But if he did things according to regulations and if the seeds survived Ferson's bungling, the plant would inevitably be named after the Head Gardener.

"I wouldn't wish that on to a *cabbage*," he muttered. Then, "*Flora Lunaris Blairensis . . .*"

He scooped up the seeds with his clumsy, gloved hands, managed to drop them into the pouch on the front of his suit designed for such purposes. Somehow he was quite sure that they would grow.

He acted then with the cunning of the simple. He walked on until the elapsed time was that usually taken for his outward walk, then turned as always and started his trudge back to the gaily-colored scarlet-and-blue dome. He was halfway back when one of the big tractors, returning from some errand, drew up alongside and the driver, grinning within his airtight cabin, indicated that Adam should climb on board and ride for the rest of the way. Adam wanted to accept the offer—but to have done so would have been out of character.

He managed, after he had stripped off his spacesuit in the locker room, to transfer the seeds from his pouch to the pocket of his shorts. Then, still acting cautiously, he went to the bar for his usual drinks—two glasses of squash, no more and no less—and his usual game of darts.

When the ritual that marked the dosing of his day was over he walked slowly as usual to his own cabin, pausing, again according to routine, at the door of the recreation room to watch Mary playing

table tennis. She waved to him briefly, then went on with her game. For a few seconds he watched her slight, graceful form, her mane of straw-colored hair, then continued on his way.

For the first time since he had come to the Moon his seed catalogues remained undisturbed in their drawer.

This was Adam Ormandy's first exercise in duplicity and he was surprised and more than a little worried by the ease with which his scheme progressed. True, luck was with him. Ferson had cracked an ankle during one of his walks outside and was making of his semi-immobilization an opportunity to catch up with his paper work. Grant, his First Assistant, was easygoing and did not worry much about methods used as long as results were satisfactory.

Adam was able to slip a half dozen of his seeds into a new tank of pineapples, reasoning that any Lunar plant must have been used to a somewhat larger ration of ultraviolet radiation than most Terrain organisms. He did not dare alter the chemical make-up of the nutrient solution—but in any case he could not say with any certainty what it should be in the case of the Moonflowers.

At the end of two days—Earthtime—he was surprised and delighted to find that the round black seeds had split and were sending tiny rootlets down into the water and fragile feathery shoots stretching up towards the U-V lamps. At the end of four days the six Moon-flowers were making themselves conspicuous, their fragile stems towering high above the prosaic pineapples.

Praying that Grant would not notice anything amiss—he rarely came into the tank room in which tropical fruits were grown—Adam shifted his lights so that most of them were to the side of rather than above the tank. The Moon-flowers adjusted themselves to the new conditions and, after a lapse of only two hours, assumed an inconspicuous and horizontal position. At the end of six days the first buds had appeared.

At the end of six days, too, the men of the other two shifts discovered the intruders in the pineapple tank. Howell, whom Adam relieved, was first to broach the subject. "Look at this!" he said. "Whoever made up this shipment of seeds wants his backside kicked! A tank full of weeds!" Then, "But this is funny. These were our own seeds."

"It's an experiment," replied Adam truthfully. Then, less truthfully, "The Old Man wants it kept a secret."

"But what *are* they? Nasturtiums? No—hardly . . ."

"Some fancy plant from South America, I *think*. He said something about some new drug . . ."

"He might have told us. You might have told us."

"I meant to," lied Adam. The way to keep Howell quiet was suddenly obvious. "But you'd better say nothing about it. He'll go off the deep end if he finds out that you've only just noticed them."

The same tactics served to silence Potter on the other shift.

But, Adam realized, he could not maintain his deception much longer. At any moment Ferson—his ankle mended, the back of his clerical work broken—might take it into his head to indulge in one of his whirlwind tours of the tank rooms. And on these occasions, as all the gardeners well knew, he saw everything and approved of nothing.

If only those buds would open! With a bouquet of Moonflowers in his hand Adam would march straight into the office of Dr. Welton, Head of Research, and blurt out his story. The doctor was a fair man, and would see that credit went where credit was due. There would be no risk that the name *Flora Lanaris Fersonis* would ever appear in any standard work on botany.

On the tenth day the buds opened.

It was Adam's shift and he was working on a tank of lemons, inspecting the leaves and stems of the dwarf bushes carefully for any signs of malnutrition or disease. He became aware that he was being watched. He sighed and thought, *Ferson!* Now I'm for it. Deliberately he did not straighten his back, did not turn around until every one of the plants had been examined. Then, slowly, he stood erect and turned round.

The tank room was empty. "I could have sworn . . ."

A flicker of movement caught his eye, a flash of color. It, whatever *it* was, was in the pineapple tank. But there seemed nothing amiss. Then, as he stared, incredulous, he saw one of the Moon-flowers slowly

raise itself erect. There were four blossoms on the stalk, facing him, and they were all of six inches across. The single circular petal was brown and in the centre of it was a smaller disc, shining with the disconcerting blueness of the eyes of a large Siamese cat. In his haste Adam forgot the weak Lunar gravity and his dash to the tank brought him into painful contact with the metal side of it. When he recovered his breath he saw that the plant was still staring at him.

Staring? *Plants don't stare*, he told himself. *Plant can't stare*. He looked closer, saw that the structure of the blossoms was utterly unfamiliar. There was a faint suggestion of stamen and pistils—yet the impression he received was of organs of sense rather than of sex.

He put out a hand to touch one of the flowers. The stem bent back away from him, with a motion that was animal rather than vegetable. Adam persisted, and the stem of the Moonflower writhed beneath his touch almost like the tentacle of some marine monster.

Adam was afraid—afraid of damaging the plant. He was not altogether surprised by its powers of movement—after all there are plants on Earth, with its relatively heavy gravity, such as the Venus Fly Trap, capable of far from sluggish motion.

He was excited—too excited, he realized, to deal with the situation. He knew that it would not be long before one of the other gardeners or Grant or even Ferson himself would visit the tropical fruits tank room, and then his secret would be out for fair.

But he had been the first to see a living Moonflower, the first man to see a life-form indigenous to any world but his own. It was very important to him that Mary Blair should be the first woman to share his experience.

He released the writhing stem and walked reluctantly away from the tank to the telephone in the corner of the room. He picked up the instrument and dialed the number of the Canteen. To the woman who answered he said, "Is Miss Blair in? May I speak to her?"

"Personal calls are not allowed."

"But please, this is urgent."

"I'm sorry, but Miss Blair has just gone off duty. Oh, hang on, will you? There she is! *Mary!*" he heard faintly. "Mary! Somebody here wants to talk to you. Says it's urgent!"

"Yes?" said Mary into the instrument.

"Mary, this is Adam here. Will you come to the tank rooms? At once?"

"But, Adam, it's not allowed."

"I know it's not. But come!"

"But how will—"

"That's all right, meet you at the door. Hurry, please!"

"All right," she said.

He slammed the instrument back into its rest, looked once more at the Moonflower, saw that whilst he had been talking the other five plants had bloomed. Like the eyes of Siamese cats the great flowers stared back at him.

He left the tank room, carefully shutting the door behind him. He hung a DO NOT OPEN notice on it. He hurried along the alleyway between the rooms, arrived at the gate in time to hear the watchman explaining, very slowly and carefully, that visitors were not, repeat, not allowed in the Hydroponics Department.

"That's all right, Sam," he said. "Miss Blair is a friend of mine."

"I don't care if she's a friend of Adam the first gardener, she's not coming in here."

He saw Mary standing behind the burly form of the watchman. She looked hostile.

"I told you so, Adam," she said, "but you wouldn't listen!"

"I'm sorry, Sam," said Adam. He brought his huge right fist up from knee level and Sam saw it coming, but not in time. The force of the blow lifted him a foot from the floor and he drifted slowly down like some ungainly puppet, collapsing in an untidy heap.

"*Adam!*" screamed Mary. "Have you gone mad?"

"No!" He grabbed her arm, pulled her through the open door. "I want to show you something, something that will make you famous! Something that will make us both famous!"

"Let go, Adam! *Please!*"

He ignored her protests, dragged her along the alleyways. By the time he got to the door, the door marked DO NOT OPEN, a crowd of gardeners had gathered, among them Grant. The First Assistant strode forward angrily.

"Ormandy! What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

"The first public showing of the Moonflowers, sir! Of *Flora Lasnaris Blairensis!*"

"He's off his head. Grab him, you men!"

In the short fight that followed Adam found, to his pleased surprise, that Mary was with him. She kicked the First Assistant's shins, clawed the faces of the two gardeners who were trying to hold Adam. Thanks to her intervention he was able to break free, was able to floor three of his assailants before the arrival of Ferson.

The Head Gardener was furious. He said, his voice icy but with a slight quiver. "This is the finish for you, Ormandy. You return to Earth by the next rocket. And this woman with you."

"Let me open the door, Mr. Person. That's all. Let me show Miss Blair my Moonflowers."

"Moonflowers? What *is* this?"

"It's some queer plant he's got in there, sir—along with the pineapples," volunteered one of the men.

"Why was I not informed?"

"I thought ..."

"*You* thought? I'm the only one round here that's paid for thinking. What *is* this, Ormandy?"

"Some seeds, sir, that I found Outside. I planted them?"

"*You* planted them?"

A man came running along the alleyway. He skidded to a halt as he approached the group outside the tropical fruits tank room, the leaden soles of his boots leaving bright smears on the floor.

"Mr. Person!" he gasped. "The pumps! We've had to stop the pumps!"

"What pumps?" demanded Person.

"The air pumps. The dome's infested with flying insects and they come from in here!"

Grant swore suddenly, beat with his hand at something that had settled on the back of his neck. It was too fast for him and drifted up and away—a long thin spindle of a body supported by gauzy purple wings. The First Assistant stared after the creature and muttered in a thick voice, "They sting. They ..." His voice trailed away. He sat down with elaborate caution and announced, "I shall now skiing you a comic shong ..."

"It wash the good ship Venush,

You really should have sheen ush,

The figurehead wash a shtrawberry bed . . .

"Fooled you that time, Fershon, you old sho an' sho . . .

"And the masht a . . ."

Adam did not see Ferson kick Grant contemptuously with his heavy boot, did not hear him say, "You're drunk!" He had caught Mary by the arm, half-dragged, half-led her to the door. He flung it open. Before he could shut it a cloud of the flying things surged out—and after the first sharp cries of pain had subsided the voice of Ferson could be heard leading the company in "The Ball of Kerriemuir" ...

"Both male and female gametes are motile," said Dr. Welton. He took one of his hands from his brow, used it to shake two little tablets from a small bottle on to the surface of his desk. He picked them up, swallowed them, washed them down with a hasty gulp from his water bottle.

"Both male and female gametes are motile," he said again.

Adam reached out for the bottle of tablets. "Doctor," he asked pleadingly, "may I . . .?"

"*No*. That effort of yours has just about exhausted the Colony's supplies." He continued, "It is doubtful if such motility would be possible on Earth, with its heavier gravity. However, possibly the denser atmosphere would compensate for that.

"But we will leave the resolution of such problems to the experts on aerodynamics, who doubtless will be able to determine from this evidence the density of the Lunar atmosphere in the days when life flourished here.

"In time, too, the archaeologists might be able to read the inscriptions on the dome under which you found the seeds. The Selenites, whoever and whatever they were, went to a lot of trouble to save the things from the wreck of their world."

"The Moonflowers themselves, perhaps, were the Selenites," suggested Adam.

"No. Dr. Kretz has been investigating that possibility, and assures me that the plants have about as much intelligence as a rather dumb dog. But let me continue.

"Whether or not the sting was fatal to the inhabitants of the Moon we do not know. This we do know—ordinary aspirin, not these newfangled drugs, prevents any symptoms of—er—hangover.

"However, you realize, of course, Mr. Ormandy, that you cannot stay here. You were guilty of grave breach of contract and by the unwisdom of your actions jeopardized the success of the entire Lunar Project. I do not profess to know what Miss Blair was doing in the tank rooms—but she, with you, will be returned to Earth by the next rocket. And I hope," he muttered, "that the ship brings a full cargo of aspirin."

"May I ask one thing, sir?"

"You may *ask*."

"Well, Dr. Welton—I should hate to think that my Moonflower is going to be named after Mr. Ferson. I thought perhaps Miss Blair . . ."

"Don't worry about that, Mr. Ormandy. Mr. Ferson may have been drunk—but I have not yet forgiven him for starting the orange fight. And now—*Get out!*"

It was eight months later.

Mary Ormandy stood outside her little cottage, waiting for Adam to return from the United Temperance League meeting. A full moon rode high in the clear sky. As the girl watched she saw the distant streak of fire that was the weekly rocket climb high and higher, become a fast-fading star among the stars.

She did not hear Adam's heavy step, started when she heard him say, "Another load of their so-called holiday makers. Another cargo of fools and louts to desecrate what could have been another Eden . . ."

"But the money," she said. "I was reading that at last the Colony's on a paying basis, that they're even considering opening new pleasure domes."

"Pleasure domes," he grunted. "Pleasure domes! And did you read that somebody else wants to stick a dirty big sign all over the face of the Moon—THE MOONFLOWER BAR?"

"You can't complain, Adam Ormandy," she told him. "You've got your wife and your garden and a generous pension. You've more outside interests than you had"—she pointed—"there."

"Ay," he said slowly, "And it may interest you to know that that interfering swine Murchison found out who I am and has had me expelled from the local branch."

"*Adam!*"

"Yes. You should have heard him." He pointed aloft. "The new Eden, he said. You know the way he talks—the new Eden. But there was a serpent ..."

"Adam! How silly! How could he call a *plant* a serpent? Even"—and she sounded a little bitter—"a plant called *Flora Lunaribus Bacchusis*?"

"It wasn't the plant he called the serpent," said Adam. "It was me."