

The Orchid

Horror

By John Blunt

SO the four of us, Helen Chadwick, Dufresne, who was our host, Loring, and I, went into the conservatory. The argument, begun at dinner, as to whether the sensitive plant is responsive to the breath as well as to the touch, had to be settled. Dufresne, laughing, promised that we should soon see how wrong we were—how little we really knew.

The warm damp of the place was a trifle disagreeable to me. I would much rather have kept my seat at table, where the port and cigarettes were, than to have made one of this pseudo-scientific investigating party. But, idly drawn into the discussion at first, nothing would do save that I come along and have my chance-expressed opinions beaten to earth under the demonstrated truth of Dufresne's assertions.

He and the girl had paused near the door of the hot-house to admire a rhododendron in full bloom: I was loitering a little way behind them on the brick-paved walk—when it happened. Nothing more thoroughly unexpected could have been imagined. Loring, who had wandered a bit farther along, suddenly turned and came hurtling toward us, his jaw hanging, eyes a-bulge, the light of stark madness on his face!

I took a step forward.

"What, in the name—"

And then he was upon the two beside the pink-blossomed bush. Dufresne, knocked clean off his feet, with a stifled cry and a

wild upflinging of his arms, sank from view in a whirlpool of swishing leaves into the foliage beside the path. Miss Chadwick, sent spinning to the opposite edge of the walk by a glancing blow from Loring's shoulder, staggered a moment, strove ineffectually to regain her balance by clutching at the near-by shrubbery, then toppled ungracefully to her knees in the moist loam.

"Loring!" I cried out. "In pity's name, man—"

Side-stepping quickly, I reached out and tried to hold him. As well try to detain a runaway express-train. My grip on his shoulder was off in a twinkling, and on he plowed, with huge, swift strides toward the conservatory door.

Another moment and he had gone.

Dazed, I stared at the aperture through which he had fled. Behind me I heard fat Dufresne struggling to get out of the branches into which he had fallen; vaguely gathered that he had at last extricated himself and approached the girl, inquiring with wheezing solicitude as to her state.

Loring was sane when he came into the green-house. Sane up to thirty seconds ago. And then—mad.

What in the world—

Then I came to myself with a start. Loring was my friend. I had brought him to this house to-night. In a way, I was responsible for his actions. Curse the fellow! Yet he hadn't cut up as he had because he wanted to be eccentric. Something

had happened to him. Something back there along the walk, had given him a bad scare. Something, terrifying enough to unbalance his reason.

Great Heaven, he was at large now in the crowded drawing-rooms beyond! What might he not be up to? I was his friend, accountable to my host and hostess.

Swiftly I turned and went out of the door. No trace of him, or of any freakish action of which he might have been guilty, appearing among the gay party in the ground-floor rooms, I mounted the stairs to the chamber set apart for the men's hats and coats, and there found Loring's things. Evidently he had not left the house.

"Beg pardon, sir!" the servant at the front door met me at the foot of the stairway. "The gentleman who came in with you this evening, sir. I thought I ought to say something to you. Left without a thing on his head, just the way you are now. Mr. Murdock, not ten minutes ago. First I thought he was going after something he'd left behind in the motor you came in. But he ain't come back. I thought—"

I had run up-stairs, got into my overcoat and hat, and was descending the steps of the stoop in another two minutes. The fellow was mad! Whatever had upset him in the conservatory had driven him in a panic of fright from the very house itself, bare-headed, coatless.

I was frightfully worried. Unconsciously my steps were taking me in the direction of our club, where, I suppose, I had an unformed idea he might have run. As I entered the place, the first man I saw was—Loring!

He sat at a table nearest the open door of the café. His dress-coat had been exchanged for a dinner-jacket; there was something liquid in a glass before him. I crossed to his side. He did not look up. To all outward appearance, he was as cool and collected as ever I had seen him.

"Well?"

I let a pent breath escape me, and dropped into the opposite chair. I stared, speechless, at the man. And what a man he was! Six feet three, huge in proportion, with a bronze-skinned, smooth-shaven face. A man to look at with an involuntary straightening of the shoulders, inflation of the chest, and general attempt at "bigening"—if I may coin the word—in instinctive imitation of his splendid physique. Indeed, a man!

And he had been thrown into a paroxysm of fear so great that heedlessly he had knocked down his host of the evening and a frail woman, then bolted from the house to flee through the streets without stopping for proper covering, temporarily a lunatic through excessive fright—*this* near-giant, as badly scared as that?

"Well?" I repeated eagerly after him. "What's it all about?"

He said nothing.

"Don't you mean to talk?" I blurted, amazed. "Am I entitled to an explanation—or not?"

His eyes had not yet met mine.

"Can't you see," he said through his set teeth, "that I've had a shock, and a bad one? I'm trying to hold myself together. It isn't easy. I'd be obliged to you if you wouldn't ask questions. Not just now, anyway."

I sat back, gnawing my mustache. Could any but a strong man have held himself even thus well in check after the way he had gone to pieces not a half-hour before? Yet, if he was strong-willed enough for that, what could have shaken him so completely at Dufresne's house? Curiosity such as mine could not be concealed under even the wettest blanket.

"Will you tell me this?" I said after a while. "What threw you into such a funk?"

In silence he tore the bar-check between his fingers into tiny bits.

"You didn't see a reptile in the greenhouse?" I hazarded. "There wasn't a tarantula hidden on some transplanted bush? Nothing like that?"

He gave a scornfully negative gesture.

"Well, what the deuce was it?" I rapped out. "Dufresne, the girl, and myself were the only living human beings besides yourself in the place. We didn't do anything to alarm you surely. Did you go stark, staring mad on account of the silly flowers themselves?"

At last he looked full at me.

"What would you say," he almost whispered in his intensity, "if I told you it was the flowers? A little cluster of exotic plants that you didn't see in the far corner of the room, and that I didn't see either, but that I smelled? That those drove me clear out of my mind for a minute and more—eh?"

He leaned back.

"What would you say?" he went on. "You'd have nothing to say, because you

don't understand. You don't know the past. It won't make pleasant telling, I promise you. But you must know. Very well. Listen to me.

"Nine years ago I sat in this very club. Thirty at the time, I had realized every ambition in life but one. I had money, plenty of it, all earned by myself. Thirty, you understand, and with a fortune means hard work. I had worked hard. Harder than most men ever do. I guess; but I was built for doing hard things.

"The one attainment I lacked was a wife. No woman so far had pleased me. If that sounds egotistical, remember that my financial success had convinced me that I was the sort of a man capable of entertaining for a woman that thing known as a 'grand passion'; that I must pick and choose the girl upon whom to lavish a powerful love with care. Hence I had been waiting all these years, waiting for the one woman.

"But I was tired of waiting. And that night a man came and sat in the next lounge-chair to mine in the billiard-room and gave me hope that perhaps my waiting was over. A queer-looking individual he was. A new member of the club, I believe. A corpse was what he would have reminded you of; his yellow skin was drawn tight over his cheek-bones; there was far too little flesh on his limbs to make him an attractive figure to contemplate; and his eyes—I don't like to think of those burned holes in a sheepskin even now.

"His talk was full of a wonderful collection of exotic plants he had seen in a house near Washington Square. To my monosyllables of polite interest he brought forth an invitation to visit the place and look at the collection. I protested myself ignorant in such matters. That made no difference. Said he; I would enjoy seeing this botanical display, he was sure. Besides, the collector had a daughter. I would surely like to see *her*.

"And then, for a solid hour, the emaciated stranger poured into my ear a description of a woman such as no one ever listened to, I'll take oath upon, since the world began. Impassioned, inspired of his theme, he set my brain on fire with the picture of his friend, the daughter of the floramaniac.

"I jumped to my feet.

"'Take me there!' I exclaimed. 'I want to see—these wonderful plants.'

"We went straight to the house, a large brown stone dwelling of the old-fashioned type. The conservatory was in the rear of the building. My breath caught in my throat as I entered the heated room. Orchids, nothing but orchids, thousands, tens of thousands of the flowing, multi-shaded flowers, hung from the walls and ceiling of the place. Having seen nobody but the servant at the door, my corpse-like acquaintance told me that doubtless the collector was too busy at the moment to welcome me; however, he assured me that it was all right; I might stay as long as I chose; then he left me.

"As I stood gazing around the room I felt my senses swaying within me in time to the languorous nodding of the rows upon rows of trailing blossoms everywhere in view. What was this feeling? I looked down at my outstretched hand. Steady as a rock. Yet all inside my arm, the nerves, the tissue, the blood, the muscle, were in motion, in swaying motion.

"How long I stood entranced, deliciously thrilled by that movement within me which the rhythmical moving of the flowers inspired, I cannot say. Perhaps it was five, ten minutes—perhaps an hour, two—that I stood spellbound, hypnotized, incapable of any other sensation but that one of inner motion. And then—

"Before my eyes the rows of orchids bent apart. Slowly, with exquisite grace, it was like the waving open of a lane in a wheat field caused by the wind. Yet there was no wind, not the faintest breeze, in the room. Wider became the opening of that aisle in the blossoms' close ranks. Suddenly at its end I saw—the collector's daughter.

"How the man who had brought me here had lied. She was a million times more perfect than he had pictured her. Beautiful, she transcended beauty. A tall woman, lithe, well-rounded as to figure, black-haired and with eyes and lips which were the only 'rememberable' features of her face for me at the moment, I felt love at first sight—a stirring of my grand passion at last!—at my first glimpse of her, this goddess of the orchids.

"Slowly, with the languid grace of the swaying flowers, she advanced toward me through the lane they had made, as though by her royal command. She put out her hand. I took it in mine. The words I would have said to explain my presence

there did not pass my lips. What use were words—between us? Eye to eye, hand clasped in hand, it was as if all the words in the world had already been spoken to perform our introduction.

"After a while we talked. What of it no matter. Hours later I left the house—alone. The next afternoon I returned. The day following found me there as well. Days sped into weeks, the weeks into a month, and we were engaged. I did not declare my love. I had no need to do so. It was plain without speech—as was her regard for me.

"When will you marry me, my Goddess of the Orchids?" I whispered.

"At first she hesitated. She could not leave her father; he was very old; she was all he had, and he would be unhappy without her. I remarked that his unhappiness could not be of long standing, surely, if she came with me, since he had never manifested enough interest in her welfare even to see me from the first time I came into the house.

"You do not understand," she told me gently. "My father's way is strange, perhaps, but he loves me. Next to his flowers I come only second in his heart. If he lost me he would grieve. I cannot cause him pain. There is only one way—"

"She stopped.

"What is the one way?" I asked.

"There's an orchid," said she, "that he would give his life to possess if he could. So rare is it that not one has ever been seen by a white man; only rumors of its existence have come through the natives in the region of its growth. If my father could own one of that rare species, a single specimen—well, don't you see that he would be so happy, so completely absorbed in its possession, that he would not mind the shock of giving me up—not till long after you had brought the *Cattleya Trix-semptia* back and we were married, at all events."

"I am to bring him this orchid, am I?" I smiled.

"You love me?" she asked, anxiously.

"We were sitting on the ledge of a splashing fountain in the center of the conservatory. I rose and took her hands.

"You shall see," I said. "Tell me where this flower grows. I will get it. Not till I have proved my love for you will I look into your eyes again."

"We parted. That night I made one at

a dinner given in honor of a celebrated Englishman who was a professional orchid-hunter. Bound for South America next day, to the section of the country, indeed, near which I had been told the plant I sought was to be found, I decided that I would be in luck if I could persuade this experienced traveler to let me accompany him into that strange land. Of course, after we arrived in Venezuela our ways would part; he was after a type of orchid different from the species I desired, and, in hunting his quarry, he would go along one route inland, I another.

"He was sincerely glad of my offer to join him. I explained that I wanted to go on an orchid hunt 'just for the adventure.' Next morning we took steamer together; in a week had reached South America, and then—a queer thing fell out.

"An Indian came to the Englishman with word of an orchid field that lay behind the Orinoco. It was the same spot toward which I had been directed to go. According to the native's story, it was perilous work getting to the place, and would take at least a month of the hardest kind of journeying. But the orchids there were very fine, very rare. If the professional cared to make the attempt—

"Look here," said he to me, "I'm going to have a try for some of those flowers."

"Here was a second stroke of luck. Since there was an entire field of these plants, I could come out with the truth at last that this, I felt certain, was the species of orchid I was hunting on my own hook. There was no longer any danger that the Englishman would hunt the same flower that I wanted if he knew my purpose, and perhaps be lucky enough to 'nose me out' in the search. Plainly, there were enough orchids of this description for all. So, together with this expert huntsman, I could journey to the spot with much less difficulty than alone.

"But I won't take you with me," he went on. "You heard what his nibs the native chief said just now. The trip's mighty dangerous. You couldn't stand it. Sorry, old man, but you've got to be left out of this."

"Just the same," I informed him, "I'm coming." And I told him the business that had brought me from home. "That's all—I'm coming," I added.

"No, you aren't," said he firmly. "That's all right about your hunting this

kind of an orchid. Don't know where you ever heard of it, or what put the notion of finding one into your head. But you've got to give it up. You don't know what you're about. A green hand at the business, and take a journey like this—man, you'd die!

"Will you?" I asked.

"That I can't say," and he shrugged his shoulders. 'I'll stand a better chance of getting to the place than you, though. I'm inured, rather, to this sort of thing. Though I don't mind saying that I'd rather not go on this particular journey. From maps and hearsay of the trail it's going to be a little bit of a crosscut through Hades.'

"Then why go?" I pursued.

"There's an incentive in my case. A group of collectors is behind me, money-coffers open to pay a prize for whatever I get. My reason's clear. But, blame me if I can see yours in wanting to come along with me so headstrong and keen."

"This time I shrugged.

"Oh," said he, "so it's a girl? Been thrown over by some woman, have you, and want to go into danger to forget?"

"On the contrary," and I smiled. "I'm doing it to please the girl I've won."

"Good Lord!" he blurted out, gaping at me. "Good Lord—you mean to tell me a girl, a girl who cares about you, has let you come down here to hunt a trophy in the spot you want to go? Does she know anything about the way orchids are found? Oh, her father's a collector? Then she *does* know."

"He continued to stare at me.

"Look here, Loring," he said suddenly. "Don't mind if I ask you a question. But weren't you introduced to the lady of your choice by a rack-boned skeleton of a man with a yellow skin, deep-burning eyes—sort of an upheaval-from-the-crypt sort of chap?"

"Yes," I exclaimed, my eyes widening.

"I thought so," he said. "And after a moment: 'I see,' he added. 'The same old game. I know the woman who sent you down here. Everybody in the orchid-collecting business knows her, more or less. She's a plant fiend. Same sort of mania as attacks people by way of drugs, the drink, and so on, you know. Seen her collection? It's the finest in the world; pretty nearly every orchid known is there. Shall I tell you how she got them?' He leaned toward

me. 'Through just such fools as you, Loring.'

"I stumbled to my feet, furious.

"Steady on!" he cried. "Hear me out. I want to do you a friendly turn, old fellow; upon my soul I do. Listen. That woman, I tell you, is a fiend. We all know her well. See if this isn't the way she's hoodwinked you. Told you, didn't she, that her father would never be happy if she married and left him; that just one thing might be counted on to take his mind off losing her—a certain rare orchid? Anyway, that's what she's told other men time and again. All of them have started out to bring her the plant, too. Some succeeded. And the reward? She laughs at them, and then tells the truth. There is no doting father. The orchid she wanted for herself. It's all she cares for—orchids. Men are nothing. Orchids—they cost men—they want orchids.

"That's the fate of the men who succeed. But those who fail? Loring, the bones of a dozen, a score of the men who have tried to perform her mission lie bleaching now in the swamps and along the roots of jungle-trees the world over. Only one man failed to bring back the orchid for which he was sent and still lives. Do you know who he is? The man who brought you and the orchid queen together.

"You remember his looks. She put that brand on him down this very way three years ago. Since then he's been trying to win her in the only way that seems possible—through her passion for the flowers. Men like you, big and strong, he seeks out, brings to her so that she can send them forth to complete her collection. When she has a specimen of every orchid ever known, he hopes that she will marry him. That's the living, disgusting truth, old man, as I breathe here before you.

"Believe me, you're designed for a victim like all the rest. I'm telling you the truth. And I'm warning you to turn back before it's too late. Will you take my word—will you go home?"

"No!" I roared. "You lying hound—"

"I think I meant to kill him then with my own two hands. But suddenly reason came to my aid. Evidently it was going to be no easy matter for an untoughened white man to penetrate alone to the spot where the orchids I was after were to be found; I must bring what I had vowed I would back to my affianced. With this man's aid,

I might better be able to do so. What if he had dared to traduce the woman who was to be my wife? I could gloss even that over for the time, for the sake of getting what I sought. Afterward the lies he had told me—the lies, built up on some rumor of the girl's existence which he had come upon, and retailed to me for the purpose of causing me to abandon the field, with the glory of being first to find a new plant, to him—I could cram these down his throat with my fists.

"'I beg your pardon,' I said, appearing to be cool. 'You'll have to overlook what I've just said. I'm a good deal upset over what you've told me. I—I've no doubt you mean to be decent to me.'

"'And you'll quit this idea of hunting the orchid?' he asked eagerly.

"'No,' I replied, and the sneer with which I glanced him over must have been plain. 'I'm going with you.'

"His face reddened.

"'As you like,' he said curtly.

"Followed a week of busiest activity. Our outfit was purchased, porters hired, guides engaged. At length, when everything was in readiness, we assembled, a small army with enough supplies for quite that body, to start the march into the solitude. One month it took us to reach the head of the Orinoco. Then began the real hardships of the journey into the unbroken jungle.

"No such strain could be imagined as was put upon our party in the next fortnight. A bare chronicle of the events that befell us would not convey a tittle of what the suffering really meant. Menaced by reptiles, crawling creatures of every revolting description; attacked by the wild men of that forest region with their deadly blow-guns; racked by swamp fevers, and always pressing on—on into the unknown—in a silence that daily grew more and more oppressive—the memory of that trip will be with me always in its harrowing details.

"And now our chief guide died. Before him had dropped off a third of our original number of porters and choppers. Without the leadership of the native, who knew the general direction in which lay the orchids, we were helpless. A party of Indians were encountered three days later, and, in response to our questions, they waved their hands toward the sun as the course we must follow before the 'poison plants' were in reach. On we fought.

"And in another week a perceptible odor was in the air; an odor which the Englishman said meant that we were nearing the orchids. Each day, as we progressed, this odor became more clearly defined. Finally it was distinctly unpleasant, then disagreeable, lastly uncomfortable. Another day and the scent grew positively menacing. Each breath one drew into the lungs seemed charged with fumes of a poisonous, sickish-sweet drug. Five porters fell senseless on the fifth day as we drew nearer to the source of the noxious aroma.

"And yet the orchids were not yet in sight, seemingly no nearer than when we started. Another day, and the odor in the air was insupportable. The natives refused to go farther. My white companion, the professional hunter, lay senseless in his tracks. I was near swooning myself. With the wind in our faces, blowing that poison off the orchid-field somewhere in advance of us, it was useless to think of keeping on any further.

"Then, and then only, did I believe the truth of what I had heard of the woman who had sent me on this wild-goose chase. Indeed, she must have known something of the perils into which I had gone at her bidding. And she had let me go. I was to have been another victim.

"I cursed her to high heaven, there in the middle of that black, silent forest, with the spirals of the invisible poison-odor coiling around me in the air. And I swore that I would have revenge—the revenge of bringing her what she had driven me out to get!

"Alone, I essayed one final dash forward in the endeavor to reach the flowers which seemed so near, yet were ever so far from my touch. Surely, we could not have halted many miles distant from the field. Perhaps by running, with body bent close to the ground—but it was useless. The wind brought the deadly fumes full in my face, cramming them down throat and nostrils. Reeling, half dead, I returned to the others.

"At once we began the homeward march. More than half our corps were dead by the time we had progressed a quarter way back along our trail. Half-way to the coast, and only a miserable handful of our original party remained. How those of us who survived managed to do so is a mystery. But at last four shattered ghosts of human beings, two Indian porters, the Englishman

and myself, returned to the civilization of Venezuela.

"But I was not through. A month's rest, and I was trying to organize another party to start back toward our abandoned goal. Not in the same way we had gone before. I had worked out a plan. By approaching that unseen field of orchids from the opposite side, the wind blowing the other way, a chance might hold good that the flowers could be reached by circumventing the full effect of the poisoned perfume.

"No one would attempt the journey with me. The Englishman was finished—forever, he said, with all orchid-hunting. His motive was now not so strong as mine, I thought with a smile. Money could not tempt him to keep up the search for the *Cattleya Trixemptia*. My revenge, though, kept me in full enthusiasm for the hunt; it was all I thought of, waking or sleeping.

"When I was satisfied that nobody would accompany me, I set back toward the head of the Orinoco myself alone. This time, traveling swiftly because lightly burdened and unaccompanied by any laggards, I made the edge of the jungle in a little over two weeks. The plunge through the forest, however, took longer alone than when I had expert choppers to clear a trail before me. But I made progress somehow.

"Often as I fought my way through the tangle of rank underbrush, waist-high and almost inextricable, I muttered aloud: 'So they picked you for a strong man, eh? A strong, robust man? A good one to send on a difficult mission, yes. Well, I'll show them yet—I'll bring back that flower!'

"And—how I do not know—I reached the orchid field at last! For two days previously the same old noxious odor had been in the air, but not nearly so perceptibly as before, because I had figured well in keeping the wind in my back. Inside an hour all the gathering force of the perfume which had turned our party back on the first attempt was compressed; dizzy, almost stupefied, drugged into partially insensibility, I parted the leaves in the foliage before me—and gazed upon the end of my journey!

"There were the flowers—blue, blue orchids! The only ones ever looked upon by white man's eyes. A thrill ran through me; almost I had the feeling then of the collector, the scientist in untrod fields, the primal discoverer of the miraculous.

"And then—drowsiness, languid heaviness, an overwhelming desire to cast myself

down to sleep then and there, came to replace the momentary feeling of elation. I must pick my blossom, and be quick. The fumes of those waving, ultramarine flowers before my eyes were stealing over me more powerfully than ever before. Quick! I must be quick!

"I advanced. Step by step I drew near the largest cluster of the nodding, swaying poisoned cups of light, dark, dappled blue. Another dozen paces forward. My sensations were those of the opium smoker yielding himself gradually to the influence of the drug, yet withholding full surrender to prolong the delicious agony of complete capitulation. Could I reach an orchid, pluck it, get away, before—before it was—too—late—

"Heavens, I must fly! I could not hold out against that overpowering odor. I wheeled drunkenly. Blindly I lurched forward. Something swept my face. My eyes flew open—it was a cluster of orchids behind me which had been drawn across my cheek. With a scream of fright, I bounded sidewise, tripped over a vine, fell—

"And for that interval I knew no more.

"When I awoke it was to find that the breeze which blew over the tiny clearing where the poison plants were had shifted. Their perfume was no longer in the air. I staggered up. My head ached, and my eyeballs burned. What had I been doing, lying there on the ground?

"It came back to me. I had been overcome by the odor of the flowers. Only for the changing of the wind, preventing more of the fumes entering my lungs as I slept that drugged sleep—I shook myself together. Now was my chance to get away.

"Not for any price on earth would I have sought once again to pluck one of those blossoms so near to me. My plan of revenge against the woman who had sent me into this Gehenna was completely driven from my head. Now—while I yet could—was my chance to get away. Facing about, I started running.

"On and on I sped. Gradually, though, my speed was diminishing. Not from weariness, not from fatigue. Something else. I slackened to a walk. I stopped short in my tracks. Turning about, I sniffed the air. No trace of that odor—no trace—

"Wildly I dashed back toward the clearing and its orchids. *I must have that scent in my nostrils again!* I must go to sleep under its spell once more. I could no more

resist the impulse that brought me back toward the poisonous blossoms than I could voluntarily stop breathing. I burst into the clearing. On tiptoe, I reached up to the nearest cluster of the blue buds, drank deep of the awful, sickish odor—once—twice—

"In my tracks I fell, overcome, a smile on my lips.

"I ought never to have walked again, I know. Yet I did. How long after it was, I have no means of telling. It was still daylight—or was it another day? I was heavy, sluggish, deeply depressed. I felt suddenly so frightened there alone in that clearing with those hideous, mocking plants swaying around me, that I hurled myself upon the ground, screaming, beating the moss with my hands and feet, frantic with fear of my loneliness, my dreadful plight.

"Then that feeling passed. I would get out of here. I would break and run now, and never stop running till I had put the length and breadth of the jungle between me and those ghastly plants. I sprang up. With a wild yell—a sort of farewell to the fearful spot—I leaped away into the neighboring forest.

"This time I did run until I was physically exhausted. I dropped down on a fallen moss-hung log to gather breath. An hour or more I sat there. And when I rose—it was to hobble off in the direction of the *Cattleya Trixsempitia* again, the lustful light in my eyes of the opium fiend returning to his den, the drunkard to his dive!

"I was caught. Useless to try to break away from the spell now. That poisonous perfume of the blue orchids had enchained me to the spot forever. I spent the next interval of time—three days, as near as I could judge—in the heart of the clearing, drugging myself with the scent of the flowers, waking, drugging myself again.

"Why didn't I die? I prayed for death, a release from my agonizing dilemma. Weak, now, to the point of prostration, yet I continued to live. I knew that I had wasted away to a mere skeleton of skin and bones—by no effort could I make my lips meet over my teeth—that I was emaciated by lack of food as well as the injurious effects of the poison I was inhaling, to the point almost of bloodlessness in all my veins—and yet I lived on.

"What was to be the end? I felt only a mild curiosity as to this, so it be soon. Another day went by. I was weaker now. Sixteen hours of the twenty-four, at a guess,

had been spent in drugged sleep on my back in the middle of the clearing.

"With glazed eyes I looked around me. And looked again.

"Was I mad at last?

"There before my eyes stood my Goddess of the Orchids—she who had brought me to this plight!

"Slowly she approached across the noiseless moss. She stretched out her hand. I tottered to my feet. The claw at the end of my broomstick arm went out, encountered her fingers—*real flesh and blood!*

"'Drink this,' she whispered in my ear.

"A flask was held to my chattering teeth. Something scalding hot ran down my parched throat.

"'Now, lean on me'—again her voice, wondrous soft.

"And slowly, carefully she began to lead me out of the clearing, through the jungle. A little way and we met her train of porters and guides. While a rough litter was being made for me I sat upon the ground, leaning against her knees as she stood. Strangely, now that I was with this party I felt no craving for the drugged breath of the blue orchid to which I had been the slave.

"The journey back to the coast I do not remember. Something of my days of convalescence in Venezuela, though, I can recall. There it was that I heard the story of her search for me from the woman who had saved my life.

"Her passion for orchids was really so powerful that she had served men very much as the Englishmen had told me for years. I was to have been treated no better nor worse than the rest. Only—me of all the others she really loved. After she had sent me forth on her mission, she recalled the fate of so many of her suitors who had gone into the wildernesses before; she realized then that she could not let me die or suffer as she knew I would.

"That was the strange point. You see, she knew the dangers that would beset any one upon that trail into the jungle. And, knowing the perils of such a journey, she took it upon herself to save me if she could. Much as she had always loved orchids never once had she sought a rare plant herself. With me, though—she thought me worth seeking after, it seems."

"So, I suppose," I remarked, "you married her and lived happily ever after?"

He looked at me, wild-eyed. "*Married her?*" And he shuddered.