

The Flowering of the Strange Orchid

H. G. Wells

The buying of orchids always has in it a certain speculative flavour. You have before you the brown shrivelled lump of tissue, and for the rest you must trust your judgment, or the auctioneer, or your good luck, as your taste may incline. The plant may be moribund or dead, or it may be just a respectable purchase, fair value for your money, or perhaps—for the thing has happened again and again—there slowly unfolds before the delighted eyes of the happy purchaser, day after day, some new variety, some novel richness, a strange twist of the labellum, or some subtler colouration or unexpected mimicry. Pride, beauty, and profit blossom together on one delicate green spike, and, it may be, even immortality. For the new miracle of nature may stand in need of a new specific name, and what so convenient as that of its discoverer? “John-smithia”! There have been worse names.

It was perhaps the hope of some such happy discovery that made Winter Wedderburn such a frequent attendant at these sales—that hope, and also, maybe, the fact that he had nothing else of the slightest interest to do in the world. He was a shy, lonely, rather ineffectual man, provided with just enough income to keep off the spur of necessity, and not enough nervous energy to make him seek any exacting employments. He might have collected stamps or coins, or translated Horace, or bound books, or invented new species of diatoms. But, as it happened, he grew orchids, and had one ambitious little hothouse.

“I have a fancy,” he said over his coffee, “that something is going to happen to me to-day.” He spoke—as he moved and thought—slowly.

“Oh, don’t say that!” said his housekeeper—who was also his remote cousin. For “something happening” was a euphemism that meant only one thing to her.

“You misunderstand me. I mean nothing unpleasant... though what I do mean I scarcely know.

“To-day,” he continued, after a pause, “Peters’ are going to sell a batch of plants from the Andamans and the Indies. I shall go up and see what they have. It may be I shall buy something good unawares. That may be it.”

He passed his cup for his second cupful of coffee.

“Are these the things collected by that poor young fellow you told me of the other day?” asked his cousin, as she filled his cup.

“Yes,” he said, and became meditative over a piece of toast.

“Nothing ever does happen to me,” he remarked presently, beginning to think aloud. “I wonder why? Things enough happen to other people. There is Harvey. Only the other week; on Monday he picked up sixpence, on Wednesday his chicks all had the staggers, on Friday his cousin came home from Australia, and on Saturday he broke his ankle. What a whirl of excitement!—compared to me.”

“I think I would rather be without so much excitement,” said his housekeeper. “It can’t be good for you.”

“I suppose it’s troublesome. Still ... you see, nothing ever happens to me. When I was a little boy I never had accidents. I never fell in love as I grew up. Never married... I wonder how it feels to have something happen to you, something really remarkable.

“That orchid-collector was only thirty-six—twenty years younger than myself—when he died. And he had been married twice and divorced once; he had had malarial fever four times, and once he broke his thigh. He killed a Malay once, and once he was wounded by a poisoned dart. And in the end he was killed by jungle-leeches. It must have all been very troublesome, but then it must have been very interesting, you know—except, perhaps, the leeches.”

“I am sure it was not good for him,” said the lady with conviction.

“Perhaps not.” And then Wedderburn looked at his watch. “Twenty-three minutes past eight. I am going up by the quarter to twelve train, so that there is plenty of time. I think I shall wear my alpaca jacket—it is quite warm enough—and my grey felt hat and brown shoes. I suppose—”

He glanced out of the window at the serene sky and sunlit garden, and then nervously at his cousin’s face.

“I think you had better take an umbrella if you are going to London,” she said in a voice that admitted of no denial. “There’s all between here and the station coming back.”

When he returned he was in a state of mild excitement. He had made a purchase. It was rare that he could make up his mind quickly enough to buy, but this time he had done so.

“There are Vandas,” he said, “and a Dendrobe and some Palaeonophis.” He surveyed his purchases lovingly as he consumed his soup. They were laid out on the spotless tablecloth before him, and he was telling his cousin all about them as he slowly meandered through his dinner. It was his custom to live all his visits to London over again in the evening for her and his own entertainment.

“I knew something would happen to-day. And I have bought all these. Some of them—some of them—I feel sure, do you know, that some of them will be remarkable. I don’t know how it is, but I feel just as sure as if some one had told me that some of these will turn out remarkable.

“That one”—he pointed to a shrivelled rhizome—“was not identified. It may be a Palaeonophis—or it may not. It may be a new species, or even a new genus. And it was the last that poor Batten ever collected.”

“I don’t like the look of it,” said his housekeeper. “It’s such an ugly shape.”

“To me it scarcely seems to have a shape.”

“I don’t like those things that stick out,” said his housekeeper.

“It shall be put away in a pot to-morrow.”

“It looks,” said the housekeeper, “like a spider shamming dead.”

Wedderburn smiled and surveyed the root with his head on one side. “It is certainly not a pretty lump of stuff. But you can never judge of these things from their dry appearance. It may turn out to be a very beautiful orchid indeed. How busy I shall be to-morrow! I must see to-night just exactly what to do with these things, and to-morrow I shall set to work.”

“They found poor Batten lying dead, or dying, in a mangrove swamp—I forget which,”

he began again presently, “with one of these very orchids crushed up under his body. He had been unwell for some days with some kind of native fever, and I suppose he fainted. These mangrove swamps are very unwholesome. Every drop of blood, they say, was taken out of him by the jungle-lice. It may be that very plant that cost him his life to obtain.”

“I think none the better of it for that.”

“Men must work though women may weep,” said Wedderburn with profound gravity.

“Fancy dying away from every comfort in a nasty swamp! Fancy being ill of fever with nothing to take but chlorodyne and quinine—if men were left to themselves they would live on chlorodyne and quinine—and no one round you but horrible natives! They say the Andaman islanders are most disgusting wretches—and, anyhow, they can scarcely make good nurses, not having the necessary training. And just for people in England to have orchids!”

“I don’t suppose it was comfortable, but some men seem to enjoy that kind of thing,” said Wedderburn. “Anyhow, the natives of his party were sufficiently civilised to take care of all his collection until his colleague, who was an ornithologist, came back again from the interior; though they could not tell the species of the orchid, and had let it wither. And it makes these things more interesting.”

“It makes them disgusting. I should be afraid of some of the malaria clinging to them. And just think, there has been a dead body lying across that ugly thing! I never thought of that before. There! I declare I cannot eat another mouthful of dinner.”

“I will take them off the table if you like, and put them in the window-seat. I can see them just as well there.”

The next few days he was indeed singularly busy in his steamy little hothouse, fussing about with charcoal, lumps of teak, moss, and all the other mysteries of the orchid cultivator. He considered he was having a wonderfully eventful time. In the evening he would talk about these new orchids to his friends, and over and over again he reverted to his expectation of something strange.

Several of the Vandas and the Dendrobium died under his care, but presently the strange orchid began to show signs of life. He was delighted, and took his housekeeper right away from jam-making to see it at once, directly he made the discovery.

“That is a bud,” he said, “and presently there will be a lot of leaves there, and those little things coming out here are aerial rootlets.”

“They look to me like little white fingers poking out of the brown,” said his housekeeper. “I don’t like them.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. They look like fingers trying to get at you. I can’t help my likes and dislikes.”

“I don’t know for certain, but I don’t think there are any orchids I know that have aerial rootlets quite like that. It may be my fancy, of course. You see they are a little flattened at the ends.”

“I don’t like ‘em,” said his housekeeper, suddenly shivering and turning away. “I know it’s very silly of me—and I’m very sorry, particularly as you like the thing so much. But I can’t help thinking of that corpse.”

“But it may not be that particular plant. That was merely a guess of mine.”

His housekeeper shrugged her shoulders. “Anyhow I don’t like it,” she said.

Wedderburn felt a little hurt at her dislike to the plant. But that did not prevent his talking to her about orchids generally, and this orchid in particular, whenever he felt inclined.

“There are such queer things about orchids,” he said one day; “such possibilities of surprises. You know, Darwin studied their fertilisation, and showed that the whole structure of an ordinary orchid flower was contrived in order that moths might carry the pollen from plant to plant. Well, it seems that there are lots of orchids known the flower of which cannot possibly be used for fertilisation in that way. Some of the *Cypripediums*, for instance; there are no insects known that can possibly fertilise them, and some of them have never been found with seed.”

“But how do they form new plants?”

“By runners and tubers, and that kind of outgrowth. That is easily explained. The puzzle is, what are the flowers for?”

“Very likely,” he added, “my orchid may be something extraordinary in that way. If so I shall study it. I have often thought of making researches as Darwin did. But hitherto I have not found the time, or something else has happened to prevent it. The leaves are beginning to unfold now. I do wish you would come and see them!”

But she said that the orchid-house was so hot it gave her the headache. She had seen the plant once again, and the aerial rootlets, which were now some of them more than a foot long, had unfortunately reminded her of tentacles reaching out after something; and they got into her dreams, growing after her with incredible rapidity. So that she had settled to her entire satisfaction that she would not see that plant again, and Wedderburn had to admire its leaves alone. They were of the ordinary broad form, and a deep glossy green, with splashes and dots of deep red towards the base. He knew of no other leaves quite like them. The plant was placed on a low bench near the thermometer, and close by was a simple arrangement by which a tap dripped on the hot-water pipes and kept the air steamy. And he spent his afternoons now with some regularity meditating on the approaching flowering of this strange plant.

And at last the great thing happened. Directly he entered the little glass house he knew that the spike had burst out, although his great *Palaeonophis Lowii* hid the corner where his new darling stood. There was a new odour in the air, a rich, intensely sweet scent, that overpowered every other in that crowded, steaming little greenhouse.

Directly he noticed this he hurried down to the strange orchid. And, behold! the trailing green spikes bore now three great splashes of blossom, from which this overpowering sweetness proceeded. He stopped before them in an ecstasy of admiration.

The flowers were white, with streaks of golden orange upon the petals; the heavy

labellum was coiled into an intricate projection, and a wonderful bluish purple mingled there with the gold. He could see at once that the genus was altogether a new one. And the insufferable scent! How hot the place was! The blossoms swam before his eyes.

He would see if the temperature was right. He made a step towards the thermometer. Suddenly everything appeared unsteady. The bricks on the floor were dancing up and down. Then the white blossoms, the green leaves behind them, the whole greenhouse, seemed to sweep sideways, and then in a curve upward.

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At half-past four his cousin made the tea, according to their invariable custom. But Wedderburn did not come in for his tea.

“He is worshipping that horrid orchid,” she told herself, and waited ten minutes. “His watch must have stopped. I will go and call him.”

She went straight to the hothouse, and, opening the door, called his name. There was no reply. She noticed that the air was very close, and loaded with an intense perfume. Then she saw something lying on the bricks between the hot-water pipes.

For a minute, perhaps, she stood motionless.

He was lying, face upward, at the foot of the strange orchid. The tentacle-like aerial rootlets no longer swayed freely in the air, but were crowded together, a tangle of grey ropes, and stretched tight, with their ends closely applied to his chin and neck and hands.

She did not understand. Then she saw from under one of the exultant tentacles upon his cheek there trickled a little thread of blood.

With an inarticulate cry she ran towards him, and tried to pull him away from the leech-like suckers. She snapped two of these tentacles, and their sap dripped red.

Then the overpowering scent of the blossom began to make her head reel. How they clung to him! She tore at the tough ropes, and he and the white inflorescence swam about her. She felt she was fainting, knew she must not. She left him and hastily opened the nearest door, and, after she had panted for a moment in the fresh air, she had a brilliant inspiration. She caught up a flower-pot and smashed in the windows at the end of the greenhouse. Then she re-entered. She tugged now with renewed strength at Wedderburn's motionless body, and brought the strange orchid crashing to the floor. It still clung with the grimmest tenacity to its victim. In a frenzy, she lugged it and him into the open air.

Then she thought of tearing through the sucker rootlets one by one, and in another minute she had released him and was dragging him away from the horror.

He was white and bleeding from a dozen circular patches.

The odd-job man was coming up the garden, amazed at the smashing of glass, and saw her emerge, hauling the inanimate body with red-stained hands. For a moment he thought impossible things.

“Bring some water!” she cried, and her voice dispelled his fancies. When, with unnatural alacrity, he returned with the water, he found her weeping with excitement, and with Wedderburn's head upon her knee, wiping the blood from his face.

“What’s the matter?” said Wedderburn, opening his eyes feebly, and closing them again at once.

“Go and tell Annie to come out here to me, and then go for Dr. Haddon at once,” she said to the odd-job man so soon as he brought the water; and added, seeing he hesitated, “I will tell you all about it when you come back.”

Presently Wedderburn opened his eyes again, and, seeing that he was troubled by the puzzle of his position, she explained to him, “You fainted in the hothouse.”

“And the orchid?”

“I will see to that,” she said.

Wedderburn had lost a good deal of blood, but beyond that he had suffered no very great injury. They gave him brandy mixed with some pink extract of meat, and carried him upstairs to bed. His housekeeper told her incredible story in fragments to Dr. Haddon. “Come to the orchid-house and see,” she said.

The cold outer air was blowing in through the open door, and the sickly perfume was almost dispelled. Most of the torn aerial rootlets lay already withered amidst a number of dark stains upon the bricks. The stem of the inflorescence was broken by the fall of the plant, and the flowers were growing limp and brown at the edges of the petals. The doctor stooped towards it, then saw that one of the aerial rootlets still stirred feebly, and hesitated.

The next morning the strange orchid still lay there, black now and putrescent. The door banged intermittently in the morning breeze, and all the array of Wedderburn’s orchids was shrivelled and prostrate. But Wedderburn himself was bright and garrulous upstairs in the glory of his strange adventure.