

All Stories Complete

Weird Tales

MARCH

25c

The Unique Magazine

"STRANGE ORCHIDS"

a goose-flesh story of weird happenings, lovely girls, and gorgeous flowers.

By DOROTHY QUICK

- Eando Binder
- G. G. Pendarves
- Earl Peirce, Jr.
- Robert Bloch
- Henry Hasse



Bruce

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 29 CONTENTS FOR MARCH, 1937 Number 3

Cover Design	Margaret Brundage	
<i>Illustrating "Strange Orchids"</i>		
Strange Orchids	Dorothy Quick	258
<i>A goose-flesh story of the weird fate that befell eighteen lovely girls</i>		
Rescued	Edgar Daniel Kramer	273
<i>Verse</i>		
The Brood of Bubastis	Robert Bloch	274
<i>A shuddery tale of a ghastly charnel crypt in the hills of Cornwall</i>		
Resting-Place	Clarence Edwin Flynn	285
<i>Verse</i>		
The Guardian of the Book	Henry Hasse	286
<i>A tale of cosmic horror, and the Outer Ones from beyond our universe</i>		
Death of the Artist	Felix Kowalewski	304
<i>Verse</i>		
The Dark Star	G. G. Pendarves	305
<i>Unutterable horror lay in wait in the cloudy depths of an evil picture</i>		
The Last Archer	Earl Peirce, Jr.	326
<i>A tale that begins in the days of the Crusades and ends in our own time</i>		
The Elixir of Death	Eando Binder	345
<i>The story of an alchemist whose sins brought down upon him a terrible doom</i>		
The Werewolf Snarls	Manly Wade Wellman	352
<i>A brief story with a breath of icy horror in it</i>		
Eric Martin's Nemesis	Jay Wilmer Benjamin	356
<i>What was the weird shape that pursued the murderer of the prison guard?</i>		
The Seeds from Outside	Edmond Hamilton	361
<i>A strange weird-scientific tale about two beings that came to Earth in a meteor</i>		
The Anatomy Lesson	William J. Makin	365
<i>The skeleton grinned and grinned, as if enjoying a huge joke</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Picture in the House	H. P. Lovecraft	370
<i>A popular story from WEIRD TALES of thirteen years ago</i>		
The Eyrie		378
<i>Our readers exchange opinions</i>		

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription rates: One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

Copyright 1937, by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company.

COPYRIGHTED IN GREAT BRITAIN



WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Strange Orchids

By DOROTHY QUICK

A goose-flesh story of the weird and tragic fate that befell eighteen lovely girls—a gripping tale of strange happenings, and gorgeous flowers

IF I HAD not gone to Muriel's party, I wouldn't have met Angus O'Malley and I would have been spared the horror and despair of the tragic events in which the strange orchids played so terrible a part.

Often as I look at my white hair—the legacy that those happenings left me—I wonder if my life would have been happier had I followed my first impulse and remained away from Muriel's. But almost instantly the question is answered for me and I know that despite the white hair—despite the horror that put it there—I am glad I went to Muriel's.

For even if I did meet Angus O'Malley that night, I also met Rex Stanton, and if the one brought me terror beyond comprehension the other brought me such joy that it overbalanced everything else. And the very fact that neither Rex nor I can quite forget the things that happened has only served to bring us closer together.

The reason I hesitated about going to Muriel's was that one never knew whom one would meet at her studio. I'm not a snob, but I do dislike being thrown into close contact with a gangster or the leading female impersonator who talks with a lisp and rouges his cheeks. I had on previous occasions been introduced to both at Muriel's. On the other hand, there were rumors that Splondowski would be at the party with his violin, and it was because of Splondowski that I finally went. I couldn't resist hearing him play

even though I had to sit next to Public Enemy Number 1 to do it.

It was while I sat listening to the magic notes of Splondowski that I saw Angus O'Malley for the first time.

He was standing near the door when I happened to look up. His eyes caught mine and held them with strange magnetism. I felt as though they were stripping my body bare of the Paris gown I was so proud of—as though I must snatch something to cover myself with, even though I knew I was perfectly clothed. The impulse was almost overpowering, but much as I wanted to give in to it, I couldn't. His eyes, deep black like a mysterious unfathomed pool, would not have let me. I sat staring into them as though I had been a bird fascinated by a snake.

Then an even worse thing happened. I felt as though he had exhausted the possibilities of my body, that now that he knew every line I possessed he must probe still further. With a kind of mental anguish I felt him probing my soul, until eventually he knew that, too. Then he released my eyes and I was completely myself again.

At the same time I realized that Splondowski had played at the most only four bars of music, although it seemed ages ago that I had first looked up at the handsome stranger. I told myself I was a fool with an over-active imagination. The music got me all stirred up and I began feeling things, I thought, and out

of the corner of my eye stole another glance at the man who had produced such an extraordinary effect upon me. He was very tall and very slim, with thick black hair that waved back from a rather low forehead. He wore it longer than most men, and there was a suspicion of curl at the end which gave him a Byronic look. His eyes were, as I have said, black under heavy brows and lids. His nose was fine, chiseled Greek, as were the lines of his face. His mouth was well cut, but easily the most sensu-

ous I have ever seen. Was it this that had made me imagine things? If so, I'd better consult a psychiatrist immediately. Nice, well-brought-up girls of twenty shouldn't have such thoughts of their own volition. I'd never had them before, but I'd never seen anyone like Angus O'Malley, either. I noticed that his skin was very white, extraordinarily fine in texture for a man, and his hands were slender—the hands of an artist or a dreamer. I wondered who he was, and then remembered how I had felt looking



"The small voice whispered again, 'Danger! Danger!' and the orchid petals touched her cheek gently, pityingly."

into his eyes and decided I didn't want to know.

A FEW minutes later Splondowski had finished playing and Muriel came up to me, the man I didn't want to know beside her.

"Mr. O'Malley wants to be presented," Muriel said as if Mr. O'Malley were the King of England conferring a favor.

Muriel made the necessary remarks, "Louise Howard, Angus O'Malley," and rushed away.

Angus O'Malley extended his hand. Reluctantly I put mine into it. He bent low over my fingers and touched them with his lips. It was as though a flame had brushed across my hand.

"You are lovely," he said, and his voice was deep and beautiful. "There is nothing unusual about you, but nevertheless you are lovely."

It was an odd compliment, especially as he said it rather regretfully.

I drew my hand away.

"Do you like unusual things?" I asked. I somehow wanted to be impersonal with this man.

"It is only the unusual that gives zest to life. See." He touched his coat lapel, and for the first time I noticed that it contained, instead of the carnation that from a distance I had credited him with wearing, a single lavender orchid. It was an exquisite flower, a very pale shade with a purple heart. Even as I admired it I thought what an odd thing it was for a man to wear in his buttonhole.

O'Malley continued speaking almost as though he guessed my thought. "I wear orchids because they are not commonplace. I wear unusual ones when I can; otherwise I content myself with the better known varieties. Just now I have nothing worth exhibiting, but some day I shall show you my orchids."

He took it for granted that I would

want to see them, which I emphatically did not.

"That flower seems exquisite to me," I said.

"It gives me nothing," he shrugged. "Still, it will do until another blooms."

There was the anticipation of a true collector in his eyes for a few seconds; then it died away as they concentrated on me.

"But we waste time talking of something that does not interest you. Besides, I want to tell you that I am attracted to you. I have looked upon you and searched your inmost thoughts, and you please me."

Again the king-like touch—Louis XIV condescending to a peasant; more than that, for it came to me that he was expressing in actual fact the feelings I had had while Splondowski played. A panic swept over me. I wanted to run away.

He leaned toward me. "Look at me," he commanded.

I was afraid. I didn't dare meet his gaze again. I looked about the room, hoping to catch the eye of someone I knew. Everyone I could have signaled was looking the other way. Then, out of a mass of unfamiliar faces, one looked into mine—a kindly, straightforward face, bronzed skin, steady blue eyes and brown hair, and a humorous mouth that was both firm and tender. His tall, well-knit, muscular body stood out above the others by sheer force of personality. I smiled in his direction, hoping my need for his help would somehow or other miraculously be conveyed to him.

"Look at me," O'Malley's voice was in my ear and it seemed to be weaving a spell around me. I knew in another minute or two I should meet his eyes, and I was afraid—afraid of what might happen when I did.

Just then the miracle happened—a new voice broke the tension between us

—a gay, cheerful voice that was like a mountain stream running over stones, crystal clear. "I'm so glad to see you again."

I looked up into the blue eyes of the young man to whom I had sent the S. O. S. and was able to forget the deep black ones I was so anxious to evade.

"I'm glad to see you." I gave him both my hands.

I think it was at that instant I fell in love with Rex Stanton, and he swears that when he took my hands and felt them tremble in his he knew I was the girl he wanted to marry. I didn't know then, but my subconscious self must have, for it was an electric moment.

Angus O'Malley broke into it. "Will you not present me to your friend?" There was a depth and malice in his voice that made me realize I didn't know the name of my rescuer.

He saved me again. "Surely you remember me, Rex Stanton, Mr. O'Malley. I've had the pleasure of meeting you before."

O'Malley's full lips curved oddly. "My memory is, for once, at fault."

"Well, not being an unusual type, I'm afraid I'm easy to forget." Rex Stanton smiled charmingly.

That word again—*unusual*. It seemed odd that both men should emphasize the word.

O'MALLEY ignored Rex and turned to me. Taking my hand, he bent over it. Once more I felt the touch of his hot lips and experienced the same sensations. As he straightened up he whispered in my ear, "A captive bird may beat its wings against the net, but it is of no avail." Then louder, "I shall give myself the pleasure of calling upon you tomorrow." And without a word to Rex he was gone.

I began to shake with convulsive tremors that I couldn't control.

Rex Stanton put his arm around me. "He's a strange person, but he's not quite as bad as all that. You did want me to come over, didn't you?"

I leaned against him, and nodded. Almost before I knew it he had piloted me out through the crowd into a quiet corner of Muriel's library, which fortunately was entirely deserted. Then almost without my own volition I was telling him all about everything, even my imagined feelings while Splondowski played.

By the time I'd reached the end of my recital I was calm again.

Rex looked grave. "The man seems slightly goofy to me," he commented. "Of course I'd never met him before, but luckily I had inquired who he was. He rather stands out in an assemblage—with his orchid boutonnière! Oh well, I guess he's safe enough—probably just a little touched. Still I'd like to be there tomorrow when he calls."

"Will you?" I cried. Already I was sure that if Rex was on hand nothing could go wrong.

"If you want me, I'll come early and stay late. That's a bargain and my good luck."

We shook hands. Then he said, "You're not one of Muriel's types?"

"We went to school together. I came to hear Splondowski. Why did you come? You're not her type, either."

He grinned. "*Touché*. I knew her first husband. I came because, frankly, I knew she accumulated odd people, and I'm investigating the disappearance of Lucia Trent."

"I knew Lucia." I felt suddenly saddened as I remembered her bright beauty. Lucia had golden hair of the color that is formed in the water-lily's heart, brown eyes with tiny yellow flecks in them, a

tawny skin the shade of honey and a body full of slim curves that were lovely to behold. She was only seventeen when she walked out of her house to go and see her best friend. Her mother had waved good-bye to her laughingly and sent messages, but they had never been delivered, for Lucia had vanished as completely and utterly as though she had never existed. No one ever saw her again. It was a terrific mystery, and it had brought sorrow to us all.

"You're just the person for me, then." Rex brought me back into the present. "Tell me, was there anything"—he started to say "unusual", then in the light of my recent confession changed it to—"different about her?"

"Do you think it could have been white-slavers?" I advanced the most popular theory.

"I wonder. Was there any particular man?"

"At least fifteen boys. Lucia was popular. But none of them knew anything. They all adored her—everyone did—but she hadn't any secret passion, if that's what you mean." I was almost caustic. It seemed so silly to associate Lucia with intrigue.

"I only asked. One has to cover every contingency, you know."

"How did you——" I began.

He cut me short. "I was coming to that. Your friend Lucia isn't the first girl to disappear completely with no trace."

"You mean Dorothy Arnold?" Everyone had been comparing the two cases.

"That's ancient history. I mean in the last year. Outstanding disappearances. In this city, of course, there are always a number of missing girls, but there is generally some kind of a lead. Too, the girls are usually from the lower classes, especially girls without anyone to be interested in what becomes of them. These

disappearances I've been investigating haven't been like that. They've all been girls like Lucia, young, beautiful and intelligent and from good families, which doesn't interest white-slavers ordinarily. After about eight such disappearances the coincidence struck the police. Eventually I was called in from Washington."

A G-man! No wonder I had felt confidence in him.

He went on. "There have been sixteen cases—no, your friend was the seventeenth. Seventeen girls snatched into thin air—gone without a trace. They've all left their homes for some normal reason and not one of them has been seen again. God help me, I haven't been able to find a single clue. I've been clutching at straws. That's why I came here tonight—a futile gamble, but it brought me something very wonderful."

"What?" I asked point-blank because I had to know.

When he answered, "You," I was content.

THE next afternoon Angus O'Malley came to find Rex and me chatting cozily over the tea-table. He remained to join in the talk. It was all very commonplace. I began to think I had dreamed the night before, until once he caught my eyes and held them and it seemed to me that a message came from his brain to mine. "Flutter your wings if you like, but remember only I can open the net." Then there came into my vision the lavender edges of the orchid he was wearing. A slight movement of the petals drew my eyes away from him.

He hadn't touched my hand in greeting, and he did not do so in farewell, but just as he took his departure he said, "I shall come again. In a few days my new orchid will bloom, and I want you to see it." There was a touch of malice as he bowed slightly toward Rex—"Perhaps

the good Mr. Stanton will be here too."

"I *would* like to see the orchid." Rex ignored the malice.

"Unfortunately I can set no date. My flowers are capricious, but when it blooms I will come."

Another bow, this time in my direction, and he was gone. From the other side of the front door we heard something that from anyone else would have been a chuckle but from Angus O'Malley seemed sinister.

Rex said, "We're all washed up about that man. Except for the orchid and his Oscar Wildish appearance he's all right."

"Except for the orchid." If Rex had only known—if I had only guessed—but we didn't. I said, "I hope you're here when he comes." And when Rex began to tell me how much he wanted to be, I dismissed Angus O'Malley from my mind.

THREE days later I was sitting out under the trees with a book Rex had sent me when suddenly a shadow fell upon it. I looked up and there was Angus O'Malley smiling down upon me. In his buttonhole was the most exquisite orchid I had ever seen. Its petals were the yellow color of honey and its heart was deep brown with little golden flecks.

"Oh!" I exclaimed, forgetting my fear of him in my admiration of the orchid. "I have never seen an orchid like that."

He knew what I meant. "You never will again—unless I am so fortunate as to find—the same colors—once more. See," he took it from his coat and held it out to me, "I have brought it for you. Will you wear it?"

I touched the flower, and one of the petals curled around my finger as though it had been a living thing.

"May I pin it on?" he asked, and before I could either assent or refuse he was fastening the great golden flower on my

dress near my shoulder, where the petals brushed against my cheek. "Speak to her, my flower," he whispered; "tell her the things I have told you to tell her. Sing to her of my love in the daytime and at night tell her of the joys to be found in my arms."

I shrank back. He caught my hands in his. "You are not beautiful, your hair has no vivid color, but you can be a companion with whom to share my secrets, someone to know and understand my work. I would see that you understand. Surely I who thought never to know love have been pierced by the arrow of the blind god. Give yourself to me."

All this time he had been pulling me closer until now I was in his arms and his full lips were near mine.

"No, no!" I tried to push him away.

"Then will you marry me?" he laughed wildly. "Yes, I, Angus O'Malley, chosen of the gods, I who can make and unmake souls, ask you to be my wife."

I shook my head. I could not command my voice.

His lips crushed mine. At first I thought I would die of sheer repugnance, and then my will seemed caught up into his—the repugnance went away and in its stead came response to his kisses.

Suddenly the orchid petals brushed against my cheek and a small stifled voice whispered in my ear. "Send him away. Send him away. Danger! Danger!" The small voice went on and on, growing stronger as it seeped into my consciousness. "Send him away. Danger! Danger!"

The voice seemed vaguely familiar, yet I could not place it, but it brought me back to my senses. With enormous effort I twisted from his arms and wiped his kisses from my lips with the back of my hand.

"Go—please go. I never want to see you again!" I cried.

His eyes narrowed. "Yet you responded to my kisses."

The still small voice was silent now. I must have imagined it. I told myself sternly that flowers couldn't speak. But I remembered how I had returned his kiss, and a wave of shame swept over me until my cheeks burned.

"You are afraid. The little white dove trembling before the eagle. But the eagle can be kind—to his mate. Do not tempt me to be otherwise—for if you do——" His voice died away without putting his thoughts into words; yet I understood that he was threatening me.

And then like the sunlight breaking through thunder clouds came Rex Stanton's voice: "Louise. Louise. Where are you?"

"Down by the willows," I called.

"The guardian angel," O'Malley sneered, then bent down close to me. "I am going away, but I will come back, and when I do, you must make up your mind which it is to be, love or hate—and I warn you I can hate even better than I can love."

The small voice whispered again, "Danger! Danger!" and the orchid petals touched my cheek, gently, pityingly.

"My flower will tell you of my love," O'Malley said, and then he strode off across the lawn past Rex, who had just come into sight.

"Wow!" Rex exclaimed; "not even a greeting did I get. I felt as though a storm cloud sailed by. I take it that all is not serene on the horizon."

Once more I unburdened my mind of everything that had happened.

REX made no comment until I had finished; then he said, "You can't marry O'Malley, because you're going to marry me."

He held out his hand. I put mine into it, and that was that. We didn't speak

of love; it wasn't necessary. He didn't kiss me then. But the look in his eyes was a caress and we were both happy with the deep contentment of perfect love. It was a wonderful moment between us.

Rex broke the spell. "Let me see the orchid. It's different in color from any I've ever seen."

With unsteady fingers I unfastened it and put it in his hands, and as I did so it seemed to me I heard a sigh.

Rex heard it too. He looked at me sharply. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," he quoted. "Perhaps we're up against magic."

I laughed, but my laugh died away as quickly as a sudden breeze on a still day, for the flower in Rex's hand bent over as though it were nodding—and there was no wind!

I shivered. "Rex, I'm afraid."

"If the flower has life, a strange life of some kind we don't understand, at least it is your friend," Rex said calmly. "It warns you of danger. It confirms my suspicion that we're up against something incomprehensible."

"He said he would make me understand — perhaps that's what he meant——"

Then suddenly something Rex had said beat itself into my brain: "Your friend." I looked down at the flower—saw the lovely golden-honey color, the deep brown heart with yellow flecks——

"Lucia! Lucia Trent!" I exclaimed. "The orchid—it's like Lucia—the same coloring!"

I stopped aghast at my own thought—but once more the flower bowed as though in assent and swayed toward me as though it wanted to touch me.

"Good heaven!" Rex stared at the flower. "You're sure?"

"She had those same golden flecks in her brown eyes."

"There might be a connection, but what? What?"

"I saw a movie in which a scientist reduced people to dolls. Then he hypnotized them into doing whatever he wanted—sent them forth to slay." Lionel Barrymore's acting was still vivid before me.

"My God! Perhaps——" Rex stared at the orchid.

The flower swayed back and forth as though it were trying to say no.

"The orchid—whatever—whoever—it is, is my friend," I said solemnly, and the flower nodded. "It's uncanny—it knows what we say."

"It's against all the laws of nature," Rex protested.

"It may only be a law we don't understand. O'Malley said the orchid would tell me of his love. He may have given it power to say what he wanted it to."

"And because Lucia was your friend the flower spoke of its own accord."

The orchid bent over again. We knew it meant yes, and we were silent before a marvel we couldn't comprehend.

Finally Rex spoke. "What do you know about O'Malley?"

"Nothing that I haven't told you."

"Muriel said he bought a magnificent old place at Riverdale-on-Hudson about two years ago and installed wonderful orchid houses. He drives a Rolls-Royce and has a yacht. He sometimes takes people on cruises, often has parties at his estate. Could you find out if Lucia knew him?"

"I could ask her mother."

"Do—and I'll try to get more of a line on him. Find out if there's any connection with any of the other girls. Of course it's utterly fantastic, and I can't for the life of me think Lucia's soul is imprisoned in that flower. Still, it's the

only lead I've had, and I told you I was clutching at straws."

Rex gave back the orchid to me and once more I fastened it to my shoulder.

"He said he could make and unmake souls." I hesitated, then went on: "Perhaps tonight——"

"I'm afraid for you. May I come and stay outside your door?"

I shook my head. "If Lucia is in any way connected with the orchid, I'm not afraid. Besides, O'Malley gave me until he came back to decide. I'm not afraid of *him—now!*"

Rex took my face in his two hands and kissed me gently. My arms stole around his neck. This time there were no warning whispers.

REX came early the next morning to hear what had happened. I told him that I had slept remarkably well with the orchid in a vase on the night table beside my bed, that toward morning I had had a confused dream in which Lucia with tears streaming from her eyes stood in front of a curious iron-studded door and shook her head, warning me that I must not go inside.

Neither of us could make anything of it. Then Rex asked, "Did you check up on O'Malley and Lucia?"

"Mrs. Trent had never heard of him, but finally after I kept pressing her she did remember Lucia speaking of an unusual-looking man she had met at a party, who had raved about her looks. Lucia had been a little excited by his fulsome admiration and rather wondered why he hadn't made any effort to date her. It was the day after that she disappeared." I reeled off the information I had gathered.

"It could be O'Malley. I had all the other girls' families approached, with no results except that one father remembered his daughter telling him practically the

same thing you've just reported, only he recalled the man's name. It *was* O'Malley. It's the first definite link we've had, but where it will lead to I've no idea. I can't see my way clear." Rex drew his brows together.

"Do you suppose Lucia's still alive?" I asked.

"Can't be, if your theory's right and her spirit is imprisoned in the flower."

"The dolls were."

"I don't know. I don't know anything. This whole thing's a labyrinth through which I can't find my way," Rex groaned. "The only clue I've got is in your hands, and it's dynamite. Still I have to use it. If you're willing——"

"I'll do anything," I said, little dreaming what was in his mind.

"There's danger, a very real danger, but I'll be around. I hate even to ask you, but seventeen girls have disappeared. It may be we can save them, or if not, others——" He broke off abruptly, then went on. "There's only one way to go about it. Could you bear to be nice to O'Malley?"

"Nice to O'Malley?" That was the last thing I had expected.

"Yes, lead him on. He's in love with you. Why, if he really is connected with these disappearances, you haven't been spirited away, I can't fathom. Perhaps, like Eastern potentates, he keeps a harem for his pleasure, but looks on you as the Ranee that must be really won according to Hoyle, or something like that. There's only one way to find out, as I see it. Lead him on, humor him until he gives himself away or we find a path through the labyrinth."

"You mean let him kiss me?" I gasped. "I'm afraid. Suppose there isn't a flower to save me."

"Wear the orchid. Somehow I feel that with it you're safe, and I'll be right on the job. Tell him you don't like me but

I'm hard to shake. I'll have my men constantly covering us." Rex was more serious than I had ever seen him.

"He'll read my thoughts," I protested, remembering only too well the feelings I had experienced while Splondowski played.

"You must make your mind a blank so he can't get inside it. Will you do it, Louise—for humanity?"

"I'll do it—for you," I said fiercely. I knew how much Rex wanted to succeed with this particular assignment and what it would mean to his future if he did.

FOUR days passed with no sign from O'Malley, and on the fifth day a new sensation struck the city—another girl vanished, the eighteenth, Helen Ferguson. Again there was no trace of any kind. She had left her house to do some shopping. The whole thing was inexplicable.

Rex investigated at once, but found nothing. "It's incredible that no passer-by noticed anything," he told me, "and to make matters worse it gives O'Malley a clean bill of health, so far as I can see. He wasn't off his place. I've had it watched. Nothing unusual happened on the estate. The men I've got posted all around reported."

"No one went in?" I asked.

"Nothing passed the gates but his own Ford delivery truck, which went to market and returned full of provisions. It goes every other day. He has a retinue of servants and evidently buys largely."

"What was Helen Ferguson like?"

"Beautiful — auburn hair, greenish eyes, and a lovely complexion—noted for her skin, which was like a pale pink rose petal."

"I'm glad I'm not beautiful," I said, and shuddered.

"You are to me. I love your sweet little face." Rex leaned over and kissed

me to emphasize his point, and we forgot the problems for the time being.

Two more days went by, and it was practically a week since I had seen O'Malley, and the orchid was still as fresh as when he had given it to me. I wore it constantly, and kept it in water at night near my bed. But it gave no more signs of being anything but a flower; there were no whisperings, no assents or denials when I addressed questions to it, and I began to think there never had been.

On the morning of the eighth day I received a note. It was written on green paper with green ink. In one corner was engraved an orchid, and below it:

ORCHID HOUSE
RIVERDALE
NEW YORK

It was the type of paper a luxury-loving woman would have, but it was Angus O'Malley who had written the note:

Come to see my orchids Wednesday at four. I am asking Muriel and some others. Bring the good Mr. Stanton if you wish. I shall expect you—and my answer.

ANGUS O'MALLEY.

That was all. There was no beginning.

I phoned Rex. He was delighted.

"So much easier than I thought!" he crowed. "In a crowd you'll be perfectly safe."

If he had only known! But he didn't.

All the way up to Riverdale we laughed and joked and planned our future. It was only when we drew up before the great iron grille gates of Orchid House that I began to be afraid and the flower on my shoulder trembled as though it too echoed the wild beating of my heart.

"It's like a prison," I said, as the gates clanged shut behind us.

Rex was silent as we drove up the long, wooded road.

"He must own acres," he remarked at last.

Just then the house came within our range of vision. It was like a feudal castle—one of the German ones out of a fairy-tale. From any of the four towers Rapunzel might have let down her golden hair—or the fairy Melusine woven her spells.

"Don't worry," Rex's steady and cheerful voice broke into my thoughts. "I'll be right beside you; I'm armed, and I've men all around the outside."

I touched his hand, where it rested on the wheel. Then I assumed the bored air we had agreed upon. It was a good thing I did so, for when we drove under the porte-cochère and stopped it was Angus O'Malley who opened the car door for us. He greeted Rex with exaggerated courtesy. He kissed my hand lingeringly before he guided us into the house.

WHEN we passed through the doors we went back centuries into mediæval England, to a great room that was vaguely familiar.

"The Hall of Elthau," our host said. "I had it copied; only I have heat and electricity."

There were about forty people in the hall, most of whom I knew. O'Malley was a charming host. He gave us tea—an utterly commonplace tea—and then took us all over the house and the conservatories, which were full of the most beautiful orchids I have ever seen. None of them, however, was like the yellow one I wore.

"Where is the plant this came from?" I asked him.

For a second he hesitated, then pointed to a moss-like ball with no bloom upon it. Somehow I felt he lied, but I could not dispute him.

When we returned to the house after our tour of the conservatories I looked

for Rex. Muriel had him in one corner. Someone came up to O'Malley and engaged him in a long discussion. I decided to slip off by myself and explore a little, for I had noticed that O'Malley had not taken us into one of the towers, although he had meticulously shown us everything else—even his own sleeping-quarters, which were in one of the towers but completely modern and fantastic with mirrored walls.

I made my way to where I thought the entrance of the tower would be, judging by the others I had seen. A tapestry covered the wall where the door should have been. I pulled it back and stepped inside to the circular room all the other towers had had, looked up at the same stone stairway, but in the tower half-way up the stairs barring the ascent was a door—a curious iron-studded door—the same door I had seen in my dreams!

"Are you Pandora or Bluebeard's wife?" O'Malley's voice was in my ear. He was standing right behind me. I swung around, deciding quickly that this was an emergency that called for the truth.

"I noticed you didn't show us one tower, and I confess to curiosity." I actually managed to be coy.

"These are my private rooms. Some day I will show them to you. But now, little white bird, you must tell me, is it love or hate?" His eyes searched mine.

I followed Rex's instructions. I made my mind a blank before I answered. Then I said shyly, "I wouldn't want you to hate me."

Joy leapt into his face for the moment, transfiguring it from a Brenda mask into something closer to humanity.

"Then it is love!" He caught my hand.

I held him off a little. "Perhaps, but you must be patient with me for a little. This has all been so quick. I am attracted to you, but I need time. You"—I hesi-

tated, then rushed on—"you frighten me sometimes. You are not like other men."

I had struck the right note. His colossal ego was touched.

"You have spoken more of a truth than you know. See, I will be gentle. I will be kind." He took me in his arms tenderly and caressed me as though I had been a child. "In your arms I will forget that I am a lonely god."

He kissed me then, and I did not resist, though the small, still voice of the flower was again whispering, "Send him away," over and over in my ear.

Eventually he let me go. "We will announce our engagement immediately. I want to watch the good Mr. Stanton's face." Nero at the circus turning his great emerald for all to see.

Rex—the mention of his name brought him before my eyes and for one second made me forget the guard I was keeping on my mind. Only one second, but it was enough.

"So!" O'Malley's lips drew back from his teeth in a bestial snarl. "So it's the good Mr. Stanton you love and you are tricking me for his sake!" With unerring precision he hit the nail directly on the head. "So—you wanted to find out my secrets. Well, you shall."

He caught me by the wrist and dragged me toward the stairs. I screamed, but the sound died in my throat as he struck me on the side of the head with terrific force. He caught me as I fell, and then I knew nothing more.

When I came to, my head ached terribly and for a second I didn't know what had happened. Then I remembered and looked about for O'Malley. To my great relief I found that I was alone.

My dress was gone. I was wrapped in a lovely blue satin kimono, and I was lying on a long couch which took up one side of a barren, cell-like room. There was no other furniture. The walls were

of stone and there was no window. High up in the ceiling, which must have been at least twenty feet away, were a few round holes which evidently afforded ventilation. There was a carved wooden door, which I tried although I knew it would be locked. I was a prisoner. I could scream and yell, but no one would hear. But of course Rex would rescue me. I pinned all my hopes to that, and didn't even let myself think how impossible it would be.

Two more things I noticed. The yellow orchid I had worn was lying crushed to a pulp on the floor, as though it had been stamped upon, and there were little crimson spots all over that looked like blood. To take my eyes from it I looked at my wrist-watch. Seven fifteen. It must have been nearly six when I had started exploring, so I had been here in this prison for over an hour. Surely I must be missed. Surely Rex—— My thoughts died away in agonized fear.

I WAITED for what seemed an eternity but was actually only twenty minutes. Then I heard the sound of a bolt being shot back. A second later the heavy door swung upward and Angus O'Malley stood on the threshold.

He was dressed in a long Chinese robe which made him look more exotic than ever.

"Mr. O'Malley——" I began.

He held up his hand. "You little fool. Did you think you could fight me? That I who know the secrets of Cagliostro, of Nicodemus—yes, even of Merlin himself—could be deceived by a girl? Your friends have gone. The good Mr. Stanton has gone. I told them you were taken ill and asked me to send you home. I actually sent a car with a girl in it through the gates. Later that car will be discovered a complete wreck; the girl dressed in your clothes will be found

dead, her face mutilated beyond recognition. No one will look for you after that."

With a sickening sensation I listened to him. All hope died away, for even Rex would accept such overwhelming evidence.

"What are you going to do with me?" I faltered. My lips were dry.

He looked at me and smiled, and there was more menace in that smile than in any words he had ever uttered.

"First I am going to show you my orchids—the rare ones," he said slowly.

An unholy light shone in his eyes as his fingers locked around my wrist like iron bands. He half led me, half pulled me through the door out into a hall, then up the stone stairway to another iron-studded door. I contemplated screaming, but quickly realized how futile that would be.

"You are wise," he said, reading my thoughts easily. "No one could hear. This tower is sound-proof, and only I know the secret of the door below."

He pressed part of the iron decoration and the door swung open. He pulled me into a room that was very hot. It was full of laboratory apparatus. There were several long tables or benches, covered with sheets. He led me to the far end, where there was a particularly long table with a complicated series of tubes and retorts suspended above it. Most of the table was covered with heavy linen of a peculiar blue shade that was tent-like in appearance, but at one end free from the cover I could distinguish a girl's head; beautiful auburn hair, a pale rose-leaf skin, and tortured brown eyes that looked into mine pleadingly.

"Helen Ferguson!" I gasped.

"Helen Ferguson," O'Malley repeated and held up the blue linen on the side so that I could see under the tent-like arrangement.

It was that moment I think that my hair turned white; for growing from her lovely body was the dark mass of an orchid plant!

I would have fainted, but O'Malley held me and forced me to listen by the sheer power of his will. "You alone are privileged to look at the miracle of the age. Only I can work such a miracle—a flower that lives, that absorbs the color, the beauty of whatever subject I select—a flower that I can talk to, that answers all my need for beauty, for love. Imagine wearing the beauty all men desire in my buttonhole. Truly in such moments I am a god."

"A god! You are a beast! That poor girl—is she alive?"

"Of course. The plant thrives on her life. It absorbs her color, her brain, her very soul into itself, and then when it has exhausted all she has to give, it blooms, and lives as long as I can keep what is left of the body intact."

"Dear God, how she must suffer!" I turned my face away from those anguished brown eyes and the terrible growth in her breast.

"Only so far as she knows her condition before the orchid absorbs her brain entirely. Of bodily suffering there is none. I sever the nerves when I implant the roots. I will explain——"

"No! No! I can't bear any more."

He laughed—an eery macabre laugh that pierced my soul.

"But you must. You wanted to see the plant from which the yellow orchid came; so look."

He dropped the blue linen back into place and swung me around until I faced another table, which he uncovered. There lay the body of my friend Lucia Trent, and it was horrible to see, for all the color had been drained from it. The shape, the features were still hers, but it was all shadowy—the hair that had been golden

had the same pallor as her cheeks. She was like a vegetable from which the juice and pulp has been extracted.

"It's horrible!" I moaned. "Oh, Lucia, Lucia!"

"So she was your friend! That explains why she did not do my bidding. Her love for you was stronger than my commands."

His face was concentrated fury. If there had been any life in that pale shadowy form he would have stamped it out—just as he had destroyed the orchid.

"Take me away," I pleaded, "before I go mad."

He shook his head. "No, you are to stay. You have cheated me of a flower—you must replace it—look."

HE THREW open a door. Behind it on shelves in glass vases were sixteen strange orchids of colorings and forms never seen before. O'Malley leaned toward them and they suddenly became animated with life. They swayed to meet him, touching his cheeks, his lips, his eyes—caressingly. It was obscene and terrible to behold, and all the while there was a strange whispering that was even more terrible.

"They are my darlings—all I have asked from life until I met you—you who I thought would sit at my feet and learn wisdom, who would be my companion, sharer of my secrets, my mate"—he looked at me as though he were seeing me for the first time—"why, I cannot understand. Of course I knew you hadn't the color for a flower, and something in you touched me so that for a little while I became a man, but now I have reverted to my godhead."

The man was a raving maniac!

"I no longer desire you as a woman—and fortunately you will make a lovely orchid—a white orchid! See, in all my sixteen blossoms there is not a white one,

I have never tried a young woman before with white hair."

I did not know my hair was white. I thought him crazier than ever, but I did comprehend the fate that awaited me. I had given up hope of rescue. Rex would believe me dead. I could not escape, but I must put off the terrible moment. I could at least keep him talking—perhaps dissuade him from the awful thing he contemplated, from which my whole being revolted.

"How—how," I stammered, "could you get these girls here without leaving any trace?"

He smiled conceitedly. "The obvious is never noticed. I merely drove up beside them in an inconspicuous car when no one was near and offered a lift—I had of course met each girl before. Once inside the car, a quick hypodermic with a little serum of my own and they were under my control. Then I put a hat with a mourning veil on them and drove out into the country, where I changed cars."

"But no one ever saw them go through your gates!" I remembered Helen Ferguson and thanked God I could still keep him talking.

"My Ford delivery truck came through with supplies—an inanimate woman can easily be made into a bag of potatoes. Sometimes I drove it disguised as my chauffeur." He answered my question, then turned to the orchids.

"Good-bye for the present, my little darlings. Soon you shall have new companions." He shut the door and turned to me. "I shall wear you in my button-hole—flaunt you in the eyes of the good Mr. Stanton, and you will caress me as the others do—my white orchid."

"No, no!" I screamed. "Kill me outright—anything but that."

As long as I live I will hate myself for being such a coward, but the horrors with

which I was surrounded were too much for me. I begged, I pleaded, but he only laughed at me. Finally he flung me into a chair and tied my wrists to its arms.

"I must prepare for the operation," he said.

He went away and presently returned with a dark ball of fungus root. Soon those hideous things would be feeding upon me. The thought was so horrible that I must have fainted, for the next thing I was conscious of was O'Malley dressed in a white surgeon's gown standing before a perfectly equipped operating-table that he had wheeled into the room. Near it was a long table fixed like the one on which Helen Ferguson lay. Soon I would be like her, unable to move, or to speak, or to suffer anything except the most terrible mental anguish.

O'Malley was adjusting a tray of instruments now. It seemed to me that I couldn't see him quite so clearly. Was terror making me blind? Through the heat of the room I noticed a sweet, sickly smell. Was it some kind of anesthetic O'Malley was using? Was this the end? Vaguely I saw him pick up a hypodermic syringe and start toward me. As he came it seemed to me that he swayed. The sickly sweet smell was overpowering me. This was the end. The blackness engulfed me and even the horror was gone.

From far off I seemed to hear Rex's voice calling. "Darling, darling," it was saying over and over.

I wanted to open my eyes, but I couldn't. There seemed to be weights on them. At last I managed to flutter my lids, and looked up into Rex's face. It seemed to have aged. There were strained lines I had never seen before.

"Thank God she's coming around!" he said.

I was immediately conscious of other men bending over me and the murmur-

ing rustle that the wind makes through the leaves of trees. Perhaps I had actually died and was in heaven, only then Rex——

"Rex," I whispered weakly. "Is it really you—am I alive?"

"My darling!" He gathered me in his arms convincingly. "You are all right. Thank God! It was a close thing."

"O'Malley didn't——" I didn't dare look down at myself.

"No, no—we were in time. Oh my dear!" He buried his face in my neck as though overcome with emotion.

One of the men spoke. "I think we should get Miss Howard to the hospital. She needs treatment and rest."

Rex pulled himself together. "I'll carry her to the car," he said and picked me up.

"Where are we?" I was tremendously weak and helpless but my head was clear.

"She should be quiet," the same man spoke.

"I must know what happened," I whispered to Rex.

"We're leaving the grounds of Orchid House," Rex answered.

"O'Malley?" I shivered convulsively.

"He will never trouble you again. O'Malley is dead," Rex assured me with a tone of finality in his voice.

WHEN we were in the car and I was resting in Rex's arms with the cool night air reviving me more and more, I asked him to tell me what had happened, and he, knowing I could not rest until I knew, satisfied my curiosity.

"When O'Malley said you had been taken ill and he had sent you home, I knew he lied. You would never have gone off like that without a word to me! I knew something was wrong. I left almost at once and contacted one of my men who had been watching the gate. He had seen the car leave and a girl in it,

He recognized your clothes but was sure the girl wasn't you; he'd seen you on the way in. I'd known that if O'Malley was actually connected with the disappearance we would have to raid Orchid House, so I was prepared with a new kind of gas that paralyzes. If an antitoxin is given within a certain length of time it is harmless; otherwise the person who inhales it dies. I knew O'Malley would do nothing while the guests were there; so I waited and got ready. As soon as everyone had left, my men and I, fully protected with masks, entered Orchid House, spraying the gas as we went. It is very powerful and travels so fast that a little is sufficient. By the time we'd reached the house the servants and guards were overcome.

"I had noticed that O'Malley hadn't shown us the fourth tower. I made for it and we sprayed the gas under the door. Then we tried to open it. You'll never know the agony I went through when we couldn't. It was so awful, I lived a thousand years in a few minutes. You might already be dead, but if we were in time to save you from O'Malley, unless we got through that door before long it would be too late for the antidote, and the gas would kill you. Finally, as a last resort, we blew off the door, and got to you just in time to administer the serum and carry you out into the open air.

Rex paused and brushed my hand against his cheek. The miracle had happened—I had been snatched back from the brink of unutterable horror just in time.

"I had the strange orchids destroyed—O'Malley and the girl were paralyzed. They died long before you came around. We didn't try to save them."

"I'm so glad—oh Rex, Rex, I'll never forget her eyes!" I clung closer to him for comfort.

"My dear, my dear, I know. I've seen

your hair. Some day you will tell me everything, but not now—now you must forget what's happened and rest and recover from all this. I will do my best to help and to make you happy." He leaned down and kissed me tenderly.

THE years have passed. Rex has kept his promise. We have known happiness too great for words to describe. But even that happiness has never been able to wipe away the memory of the affair of the Strange Orchids.