

I wonder how it feels to have something happen to you, something really remarkable.

"That orchid collector was only 36—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 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 8. I am going up by the quarter to 12 train, so that there is plenty of time. I think I shall wear my alpaca jacket—it is quite warm enough—and my gray 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.

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 Dendrobis and some Palaeophobis." He surveyed his purchases lovingly as he consumed his soup. They were laid out on the spotless table cloth 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 know 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 rhinoceros—"was not identified. It may be a Palaeophobis—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," 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 what I ought 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 sucked of him by the jungle leeches. 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 civilized to take care of all his collection until his colleagues, who were an ornithologist, came back again from the interior; though they could not tell the species of the orchid, and had not left 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 on 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, fusing 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 Dendrobis 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 him, 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 roots."

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

"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 roots 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 be the 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 orchid is constructed in that way, in order that those might carry the pollen from plant to plant. Well, it seems that there are lots of orchids known the flower of which cannot be fertilised 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 said, "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 have been lying 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 roots, 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 dinner, growing longer and longer, and spreading out, and she had been so horrified by the sight that she had not been able to eat. 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 shape, and the leaves were green with splashes and dots of deep red towards the base. He knew of no other leaves quite like these. 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 glasshouse he knew that the spike had burst out, although his great Palaeophobis 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 curled 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 must have a strong draught of air. He went to the window and opened it. 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 a curve upward.

At half-past 4 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," he 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 roots no longer swayed freely in the air, but were crowded together, a tangle of gray ropes, and stretched tight with their ends closely applied to his chin and neck and hands.

With an inarticulate cry she ran towards him and tried to pull him away from the loath-ly suckers. She snapped two of these tentacles, and their sap dripped red. Then the overpowering scent began to make her head reel. How they clung to him! She left him and hastily opened the nearest door. After she had passed a moment in the fresh air, she re-entered the hothouse and opened the windows. She tugged now with renewed strength at Wedderburn's motionless body, and brought the strange orchid crashing to the floor. Then she thought of tearing through the sucker roots one by one, and in another minute she had released him and was dragging him out into the fresh air. The old job was now coming up to the garden and saw her emerge, clutching 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 natural alacrity, he returned with the water, he found her wringing 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 at once.

"Go and tell Annie to come out here to me, and then go for Doctor Haddon at once. I have said to the old 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. The torn aerial roots 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. 'I know that orchids are parasites,' said the doctor, 'and I have heard of flesh-eating plants, but a vampire plant, with decay flowers, is new to me. You must take great care of this.'"

"I mean to," said the housekeeper. "It shan't go blood-sucking any more people."

But when Haddon called next day to show the curiosity to the vicar he was pained to hear that she had burnt it.

"I did not mean you to do that," said the doctor.

"No," said the housekeeper. "I meant to do that myself." She was not a person to argue with.

"That is why these occurrences are given to the world in the guise of fiction. The habitual scepticism of the scientific people would demand the production of the plant, and just at present no plant can be produced. For up to the present no further specimens of this singular orchid have come to hand, and one at least of those who cultivate root stocks in a sportive spirit has desisted from this amusement, and buys his orchids in flower from the recognised dealers."