

SATELLITE

science fiction

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A COMPLETE NOVEL

A GLASS OF DARKNESS

by PHILIP K. DICK

The Virginia town in which Ted Barton was born had vanished. In its place was a strange new community where golems walked and Wanderers shone by night, a strange battleground of cosmic forces that spanned time and the galaxy!

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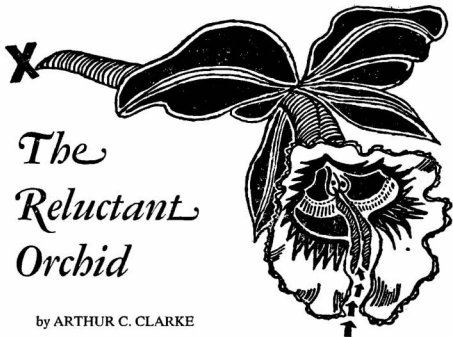
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The Reluctant Orchid

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

*Harry Purvis, pub-crawling raconteur, tells of
a cannibal bloom that was not hungry enough.*

WHILE FEW PEOPLE in the *White Hart* will concede that any of Harry Purvis' stories are actually true, the regulars agree that some are much more probable than others. On any level of the Purvis Probability Scale, the Affair of the Reluctant Orchid must rate very low indeed.

I don't remember what ingenious gambit Harry used to launch this narrative. Perhaps some orchid-fancier had brought his latest monstrosity into the bar. This was

enough to set Harry off. No matter—I do remember the story, and, after all, that's what counts.

The adventure did not, on this occasion, concern any of Harry's numerous relatives, and he dextrously avoided questions as to just how he happened to know so many of the sordid details. The hero—if you can call him that—of this hot-house epic was an inoffensive little clerk named Hercules Keating. If you think *that* is the most unlikely part of the story, just stick around.

Hercules is not the sort of name a man can carry off lightly at the best of times, and, when you are four foot nine and look as if you'd have to take a physical-culture course before you can even become a 97-pound weakling, Hercules is a positive embarrassment. Perhaps this helped to explain why Hercules had very little social life, why all his real friends grew in pots in a humid conservatory at the bottom of his garden.

His needs were simple, and he spent little money on himself. Consequently, his collection of orchids and cacti was really rather remarkable. Indeed, he had a wide reputation among the small but far-flung fraternity of cactophiles, and often received, from remote corners of the globe, oddly-shaped parcels that smelled of mould and tropical jungles.

Hercules had only one living relative, and it would have been hard to find a greater contrast than that offered by Aunt Henrietta and her plant-loving nephew. She was a massive six footer, usually wore a rather loud line in Harris tweeds, drove a Jaguar with reckless skill, and chain-smoked cigars. Her parents had set their hearts on a boy, and had never been able to decide whether or not their wish had been granted.

Henrietta earned a living, and quite a good one, breeding dogs of various shapes and sizes. She was seldom without a couple of her

latest models, and they were not the type of portable canine ladies like to carry in their handbags. The Keating Kennels specialized in Great Danes, Alsations, and Saint Bernards.

Henrietta, rightly despising men as the weaker sex, had never married. However, for some reason, she took an avuncular—yes, avuncular is definitely the proper word—interest in Hercules, and called to see him almost every weekend.

It was a curious relationship—perhaps Henrietta found that Hercules bolstered her feelings of superiority. If he was a good example of the male sex, then they were certainly a pretty sorry lot. Yet, if this was Henrietta's motivation, she was unconscious of it and seemed genuinely fond of her nephew. She was patronizing, but never unkind.

As might be expected, her attentions did not exactly help Hercules' own well-developed inferiority complex. At first, he tolerated his aunt. Then, he came to dread her visits, her booming voice, her bone-crushing handshake. At last, he grew to hate her.

Eventually, indeed, this hate was the dominant emotion in his life, exceeding even his love for his orchids. But he was careful not to show it, realizing that, if Aunt Henrietta ever discovered how he truly felt about her, she would probably break him in two and throw the halves to her wolf-pack.

There was no way, then, in which Hercules could express his pent-up feelings. He had to be polite to Aunt Henrietta, even when he felt like murder—and he often *did* feel like murder, though he knew that there was nothing he would ever do about it. Until one day . . .

According to the dealer, the orchid came from "somewhere in the Amazon region"—a rather vague postal address. When Hercules first saw it, it was not a prepossessing sight, even to a man who loved orchids as much as he did. A shapeless root, about the size of a man's fist—that was all.

It was redolent of decay, and there was the faintest hint of a rank, carrion smell. Hercules was not even sure that it was viable, and told the dealer as much. Perhaps this enabled him to purchase it for a trifling sum, and he carried it home without much enthusiasm.

It showed no signs of life for the first month, but that did not worry Hercules. He knew his orchids. Then, one day, a tiny green shoot appeared and began to creep up to the light. After that, progress was rapid.

Soon there was a thick, fleshy stem as big as a man's forearm, and colored a positively virulent green. Near the top of the stem, a series of curious bulges circled the plant. Otherwise, it was completely featureless. Hercules was now quite excited—he was sure that some en-

tirely new species had swum into his ken.

The rate of growth became really fantastic. Soon the plant was taller than Hercules, not that that was saying a great deal. Moreover, the bulges seemed to be developing, until it looked as if at any moment the orchid would burst into bloom.

Hercules waited anxiously, knowing how short-lived some flowers can be, and spent as much time as he possibly could in the hot-house. Despite all his watchfulness, however, the transformation occurred one night, while he was asleep.

In the morning, the orchid was fringed by a series of eight dangling tendrils, almost reaching to the ground. They must have developed inside the plant and emerged with—for the vegetable world—explosive speed. Hercules stared at the phenomenon in amazement, and went very thoughtfully to work.

That evening, as he watered the plant and checked its soil, he noticed a still more peculiar fact. The tendrils were thickening, and they were not completely motionless. They had a slight but unmistakable tendency to vibrate, as if possessing a life of their own. Even Hercules, for all of his interest and enthusiasm, found this more than a little disturbing.

A few days later, there was no doubt about it at all. When he ap-

proached the orchid, the tendrils swayed towards him in an unpleasantly suggestive fashion. The impression of hunger was so strong that Hercules began to feel very uncomfortable indeed, and something started to nag at the back of his mind. It was quite a while before he could recall what it was.

Then he said to himself, "Of course! How stupid of me!" and went along to the local library. Here he spent a most interesting half-hour rereading a little piece by one H. G. Wells entitled, "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid."

My goodness! thought Hercules when he had finished the tale. As yet, there had been no stupefying odor which might overpower the plant's intended victim, but otherwise the characteristics were all too similar. Hercules went home in a very unsettled mood indeed.

He opened the conservatory door and stood there, looking along the avenue of greenery toward his prize specimen. He judged the length of the tendrils—already he found himself calling them "tentacles"—with great care and walked to within what appeared a safe distance. The plant certainly gave an impression of alertness and menace far more appropriate to the animal than the vegetable kingdom. Hercules remembered the unfortunate history of Doctor Frankenstein, and he was not amused.

But, really, he told himself, this was ridiculous! Such things didn't

happen in real life. Well, there was one way to put matters to the test.

Hercules went into the house and came back a few minutes later with a broomstick, to the end of which he had attached a piece of raw meat. Feeling himself to be a considerable fool, he advanced towards the orchid as a lion-tamer might approach one of his charges at meal-time.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then two of the tendrils developed an agitated twitch. They began to sway back and forth, as if the plant was making up its mind. Abruptly, they whipped out with such speed that they practically vanished from view. They wrapped themselves round the meat, and Hercules felt a powerful tug at the end of his broomstick. Then the meat was gone—the orchid was clutching it to its figurative bosom.

"Jumping Jehosaphat!" yelled Hercules. It was very seldom indeed that he used such strong language.

The orchid showed no further signs of life for twenty-four hours. It was waiting for the meat to become high, and it was also developing its digestive system. By the next day, a network of what looked like short roots had covered the still visible chunk of meat. By nightfall, the meat was gone.

The plant had tasted blood!

Hercules' emotions as he watched over his prize were curiously mixed. There were times

when it almost gave him nightmares, and he foresaw a whole range of horrid possibilities. The orchid was now extremely strong. If he ever got within its clutches, he would be done for. But, of course, there was not the slightest danger of that.

He had arranged a system of pipes, so that it could be watered from a safe distance. Its less orthodox food he simply tossed within range of the deadly tentacles. It was now eating a pound of raw meat a day, and he had an uncomfortable feeling that it could cope with much larger quantities if it had the opportunity.

Hercules' natural qualms were, on the whole, outweighed by his feeling of triumph that such a botanical marvel had fallen into his hands. Whenever he chose, he could become the most famous orchid-grower in the world. It was typical of his somewhat restricted viewpoint that it never occurred to him other people, besides orchid-fanciers, might be interested in his pet.

The creature was now about six feet tall and apparently still growing—though much more slowly than it had been. All the other plants had been moved from its end of the conservatory, not so much because Hercules feared that it might be cannibalistic, as to enable him to tend them without danger. He had stretched a rope across the central aisle so that there was

no risk of his accidentally walking within range of those eight dangling arms.

It was obvious that the orchid had a highly developed nervous system and something very nearly approaching intelligence. It knew when it was going to be fed, and exhibited unmistakable signs of pleasure. Most fantastic of all—though Hercules was still not sure about this—it seemed capable of producing sounds.

There were times, just before a meal, when he fancied he could hear an incredibly high-pitched whistle, skirting the edge of audibility. A new-born bat might have had such a voice. He wondered what purpose it served. Did the orchid somehow lure its prey into its clutches by sound? If so, he did not think the technique would work on him.

While Hercules was making these interesting discoveries, he continued to be fussed over by Aunt Henrietta and assaulted by her hounds, which were never as housebroken as she claimed them to be. She would roar up the street on a Sunday afternoon, with one dog in the seat beside her and another occupying most of the baggage compartment.

Then she would bound up the steps, two at a time, nearly deafen Hercules with her greeting, half paralyze him with her handshake and blow cigar smoke in his face. There had been a time when he

was terrified lest she kiss him, but he had long since realized that such effeminate vulgarity was foreign to her nature.

Aunt Henrietta looked upon Hercules' orchids with some scorn. Spending one's spare time in a hot-house was, she considered, a very effete recreation. When she wanted to let off steam, she went big-game hunting in Kenya. This did nothing to endear her to Hercules, who hated blood sports.

But despite his mounting dislike for his overpowering aunt, every Sunday afternoon he dutifully prepared tea for her and they had a *tête-à-tête* together which, on the surface at least, seemed perfectly friendly. Henrietta never guessed that, as he poured the tea, Hercules often wished it were poisoned. She was, far beneath her extensive fortifications, a fundamentally good-hearted person, and knowledge of his true feelings toward her would have hurt her deeply.

Hercules did not mention his vegetable octopus to Aunt Henrietta. He had, on occasion, shown her his most interesting specimens, but this was something he was keeping to himself. Perhaps, even before he had fully formulated his diabolical plan, his subconscious was already preparing the ground . . .

It was late on Sunday evening, when the roar of the Jaguar had died away into the night and Hercules was restoring his shattered

nerves in the conservatory, that the idea first came full-fledged into his mind. He was staring at the orchid, noting how the tendrils were now as thick around as a man's thumb, when a most pleasing fantasy suddenly flashed before his eyes. He pictured Aunt Henrietta struggling helplessly in the grip of the monster, unable to escape from its carnivorous clutches.

It would be the perfect crime. The distraught nephew would arrive on the scene too late to be of assistance, and, when the police answered his frantic call, they would see at a glance that the whole affair was a deplorable accident. True, there would be an inquest, but the coroner's censure would be toned down in view of Hercules' obvious grief.

The more he thought of the idea, the more he liked it. He could discover no flaws in the plan, as long as the orchid cooperated. This, clearly, would be his greatest problem. He would have to plan a course of training for the creature. It already looked sufficiently diabolical—he must give it a disposition to match its appearance.

Considering that he had no prior experience in such matters, and that there were no authorities he could consult, Hercules proceeded along sound and businesslike lines. He would use a fishing rod to dangle pieces of meat just outside the orchid's range, until the creature lashed its tentacles in a frenzy.

At such times its high-pitched vegetable squeak was clearly audible, and Hercules wondered how it managed to produce the sound. He also wondered what its organs of perception were, but this was yet another mystery that could not be solved without close examination.

Perhaps Aunt Henrietta, if all went well, would have a brief opportunity of discovering these interesting facts—though she would probably be too busy to report them for the benefit of posterity.

There was no doubt that the beast was quite powerful enough to deal with its intended victim. It had once wrenched a broomstick out of Hercules' grip, and, although that in itself proved very little, the sickening *crack* of the wood a moment later brought a smile of satisfaction to its trainer's thin lips. He began to be much more pleasant and attentive to his aunt. In every respect, indeed, he was the model nephew.

When Hercules considered that his picador tactics had brought the orchid into the right frame of mind, he wondered if he should test it with live bait. This was a problem that worried him for some weeks, during which time he began to look speculatively at every dog or cat he passed in the street. He finally abandoned this idea, but for a rather peculiar reason—he was simply too kind-hearted to put it into practice. Aunt Henrietta

would have to be the first victim.

He starved the orchid for two weeks before he put his plan into action. This was as long as he dared risk—he did not wish to weaken the beast, merely to increase its appetite and to make the outcome of the encounter more certain. So, one Sunday, when he had carried the teacups back into the kitchen and was sitting upwind of Aunt Henrietta's cigar, he said casually, "I've got something I'd like to show you, Auntie. I've been keeping it as a surprise. It'll tickle you to death."

That, he thought, was not a completely accurate description, but it gave the general idea.

Auntie took the cigar out of her mouth and looked at Hercules with frank surprise.

"*Well!*" she boomed. "Wonders will never cease! What *have* you been up to, you rascal?" She slapped him playfully on the back, thereby blasting all the air out of his lungs.

"You'll never believe it," gasped Hercules, when he had recovered his breath. "It's in the conservatory."

"Eh?" said Auntie, obviously puzzled.

"Yes—come along and have a look. It's going to create a real sensation."

Auntie gave a snort that might have indicated disbelief, but followed Hercules without further question. The two Alsatians, at the

moment busily chewing up the carpet, looked at her anxiously and half-rose to their feet, but she waved them away.

"All right, boys," she ordered gruffly. "I'll be back in a minute." Hercules thought this unlikely.

It was a dark evening, and the lights in the conservatory were off. As they entered, Auntie snorted, "Gad, Hercules—the place smells like a slaughterhouse. Haven't met such a stink since I shot that elephant in Bulawayo, and we couldn't find it for a week."

"Sorry, Auntie," apologized Hercules, propelling her forward through the gloom. "It's a new fertilizer I'm using. It produces the most stunning results. Go on—another couple of yards. I want this to be a *real* surprise."

"I hope this isn't a joke," said Auntie suspiciously, as she stomped forward.

"I can promise you it's no joke," replied Hercules, standing with his hand on the light switch. He could just see the looming bulk of the orchid—Auntie was now within ten feet of it. He waited until she was well inside the danger zone, then threw the switch.

There was a frozen moment while the scene was transfixed with light. Then Aunt Henrietta ground to a halt and stood, arms akimbo, in front of the giant orchid. For a moment, Hercules was afraid she would retreat before the plant could get into action. Then he saw

that she was calmly scrutinizing it, unable to make up her mind what the devil it was.

It was a full five seconds before the orchid moved. Then the dangling tentacles flashed into action—but not in the way that Hercules had expected. The plant clutched them tightly, protectively, *around itself*—and, at the same time, it gave a high-pitched scream of pure terror. In a moment of sickening disillusionment, Hercules realized the awful truth.

His orchid was an utter coward. It might be able to cope with the wildlife of the Amazon jungle, but coming suddenly upon Aunt Henrietta had completely broken its nerve.

As for its proposed victim, she stood watching the creature with an astonishment which swiftly changed to another emotion. She spun around on her heels and pointed an accusing finger at her nephew.

"Hercules!" she roared. "The poor thing's scared to death. *Have you been bullying it?*"

Hercules could only stand with his head hanging low in shame and frustration.

"N-no, Auntie," he quavered. "I guess it's naturally nervous."

"Well, I'm used to animals. You should have called me before. You must treat them firmly—but gently. Kindness always works, as long as you show you're the master. There, there, diddums—don't be fright-

ened of Auntie. She won't hurt you . . ."

It was, thought Hercules in his blank despair, a revolting sight. With surprising gentleness, Aunt Henrietta fussed over the plant-beast, patting and stroking it until the tentacles relaxed, and the shrill, whistling scream died away. After a few minutes of this pampering, it appeared to get over its fright. Hercules finally fled with a muffled sob when one of the tentacles shyly crept forward and began to stroke Henrietta's gnarled fingers . . .

From that day on, he was a broken man. What was worse, he could never escape from the consequences of his intended crime. Henrietta had acquired a new pet. From then on, he found her liable to call, not only at weekends but two or three times in between as well. It was obvious that she did not trust Hercules to treat the orchid properly. She still suspected him of bullying it.

She would bring tasty tidbits that

even her dogs had rejected, but which the orchid accepted with delight. The smell, which had so far been confined to the conservatory, began to creep into the house . . .

"There," concluded Harry Purvis, as he brought this improbable narrative to a close, "the matter rests—to the satisfaction of two, at any rate, of the parties concerned. The orchid is happy, and Aunt Henrietta has something else to dominate. From time to time, the creature has a nervous breakdown when a mouse gets loose in the conservatory, and she rushes to console it."

As for Hercules, there is no chance that he will ever give any more trouble to either of them. He seems to have sunk into a kind of vegetable sloth. "Indeed," said Harry thoughtfully, "every day he becomes more and more like an orchid himself."

"A harmless variety, of course . . ."

