

FEBRUARY

Strange Stories

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A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE

A Story of
Witchcraft's Labyrinth

By ROBERT
BLOCH

IN THIS ISSUE

THE SINGING SHADOWS

A Novel of Weird Enslavement

By VINCENT CORNIER

« « « Gripping Tales of the Uncanny » » »

Strange STORIES

VOL. I, NO. 1

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The Singing Shadows

An Evil Wraith Dances, a Damned Soul Dreams, and Supernal Voices Whisper Warnings, as Averil Egerton, Jungle-Born Orchid Hunter, Struggles in a Web Whose Warp and Woof Are Mystery and Death!

By
**VINCENT
CORNIER**

*Author of "The Stone Ear,"
"The Mantle that Laughed," etc.*

CHAPTER I

The Dance of the Wanton

AVERIL EGERTON clenched and unclenched her hands as she sat by her bedroom window in Sir Gregory Congreve's manor house of Brindleigh Chase and stared out upon the restless,



The paradise orchid gripped them in its toils

night-shrouded sea. Her soul within her was strangely full of sorrow, and in her mind the imps of apprehension danced to the muted music of her fears—fears as impalpable as mist yet as certainly present as the dark rolling waters visible from her room.

Yet Averil Egerton should have been at home with fear—she had known it many times before in her young life—the fear and mystery

A Complete Novel of Weird Enslavement

Terror and Tragedy Stalk when the Passion

bound up with her remarkable work—work that would have been extraordinary even for a man.

Born twenty-three years before of medical missionary parents in the East Indian Islands of the head-

But that had been three years ago. Now Averil Egerton was an honored guest of the Congreves, called in to nurture that fabulously priced orchid into bloom.

She had arrived that afternoon, had talked with Sir Gregory, who had listened to her with fascinated interest, and who, incidentally, had paid her the most astounding and unexpected tribute of her career.

She was not thinking about that now, however. Dinner, at which there



hunters, bred up in loveliness among the most beautiful flowers in the world, she had become the supreme authority on those flowers—she trafficked with them between eerie forests and the London markets. She was an orchid hunter.

An orchid had brought her to Brindleigh Chase—an orchid she had delivered to Messrs. Barnaby and Duncannon, who had sold it in turn to Sir Gregory Congreve for the stupendous sum of two thousand pounds!

had been guests, was long over. She had grown uneasy at dinner, and had taken that uneasiness up with her to her room. There, instead of diminishing, it had grown, feeding upon

The Hue Se Tsi L'an Wafts Death-Laden,

Flower of Paradise Bursts into Bloom!

itself and upon the mixed impressions she had gained of Sir Gregory and his wife; of their matter-of-fact son, Lacy; of their other son, William, who was not matter-of-fact. No, Bill Congreve was strange.

But, strangest of all, impinging upon her sensitivity like the gossamer wings of a butterfly brushing an orchid petal, was her impression of another man—the man with whom Bill Congreve was reputed to be inseparable — the man who had been Sir

broke in long white-capped combers on this strip of English shore—wind and water seemed to grieve together. And—

What was that!

Averil Egerton's lips parted. Mysteriously, like an outward answer to her inward yet nameless fear, a sound was coming — a sound not made by the sea, nor yet by the tormented ash trees on the manor grounds—a queer sound, with ratlike squeaks in it—the kind of sound timbers, after wind-stress, make.

But this was a humanly-devised music. Elementary and disconnected though it was, it was music made by human fingers and human lips. Averil could have sworn it.

She spun up from the window



the unearthly dance

Gregory's neighbor for the last three years—the Dutchman from America—Mynheer Van Rankyn.

It was an unquiet night. The wind made steady moan. The North Sea

Eerie Music to Brindleigh Chase Manor!

seat and waited for its repetition. It came. Again and again it came—the threnody of a pipe of reeds. Someone was calling, weirdly and persistently, from the shore, in the primitive cadences of primitive people.

Then she heard something else, something that told her she was not the only one in Brindleigh Chase to hear. Her nameless fears gave way to excitement—a door had slowly opened somewhere. A gentle clump and the slight rattle of a handle told her that the "someone" had closed it after him. Then a crunch of cautious feet on gravel.

Averil glanced swiftly around her room. The fire had died to embers, not sufficient to limn her slender form in the window frame. The place was heavily curtained, and shadows were plentiful. She risked standing alongside the windowpane and curiously peeped into the moonlit garden.

A tall and shambling shape moved across a patch of grass and merged into the darkness of a beech-hedge. The direction it was taking was toward the narrow sands.

Averil acted swiftly. She had good reason to follow that figure—the unmistakable figure of Bill Congreve.

Outside and below her chamber was one of the twin bay windows of the dining room. A crenellated coping of basalt bound it, and strong ivy tangled up to its rim. She opened her window, stepped out onto the leaded roofing of the bay. A catlike scramble down the ivy matting brought her safely to the ground.

She did all this as naturally as other girls walk. Part of her success in her strange profession had depended on her ability to climb. If, in the jungle, the tallest tree had not daunted her, it would have been strange indeed if she had hesitated over a fifteen-foot drop. Besides, there was more than an orchid involved in this—there was a human being.

Averil was determined to find out what that thin fluting meant. She was equally determined to discover where the shambling half-drugged

figure of Bill Congreve was headed. Yes, he was drugged. Averil had reason to know that too.

Over the grounds and out upon the sand-dunes, Averil made her way. By this time Bill Congreve was out of sight, but his unsteady blunderings had left tracks in the wet sand that a child could have followed. Yet she was cautious.

When Averil next glimpsed his figure, the house was far behind and the sea was very near. The wailing of the reeds was still in the air, but louder now. Where, exactly, it proceeded from, she could not tell; the piper was invisible. But she surmised that he, or she, or it, was concealed among the hummocks crowned with sedges that guarded the sandy flats. She moved forward craftily and silently.

CONGREVE had stopped. Where he stood, a bit of gleaming white sand bit into the highest rampart of the dunes. The sea receded at this point more than elsewhere. Congreve had reachd what looked like a natural amphitheatre.

He moved again. Averil saw him paw and scuffle about an altar-like block of basalt whose lower level was fringed with long ribbons of wet weed. Evidently he intended to climb up to the top of the block, but he was having difficulty. His movements were those of a drunken man—his futile grabs, his unsteady attempts to find a grip on the weeded base, his flopping unhandiness. He was intoxicated . . . but not with alcohol.

Averil's woodcraft served her easily; her sure and long-experienced hands did not falter. She drew herself so silently near that she was not more than ten feet from Bill Congreve when at last he succeeded in establishing himself on the big flat slab. She was nearer to the sea than he; the offshore night wind carried across him and the odor she caught was not that of alcohol. Once already that night her nostrils had sent that same message to her brain. Bill Congreve reeked with the dread drug, *Beu Hiang!*

He lay there in the clean night, a half-befuddled human clod. But Averil Egerton was sure of one thing—the devilish music of those little savage pipes was communicating to him some intelligence whose meaning was as yet concealed from her.

It seemed to Averil in that moment that there were only two people left alive in the world—herself and Sir Gregory's younger son—she, the orchid bringer, and he, the *Beu Hiang* eater. It seemed that her orchid-bringing and his *Beu Hiang* eating were tied together by silken cords of evil—an evil she could not yet fathom but which had begun to whisper to her at dinner and which had continued to whisper to her in the privacy of her bedroom overlooking the sea. They two, alone upon a wind-swept earth, listening to eerie music blown on primitive pipes. . . .

Alone? God in heaven, no! In the gloom of the shadowed pit Averil saw it, and simultaneous with her sharp intake of breath she could have sworn it was a bird, a great blue bird rising from the dark shoulders of the sand dunes, shrugging hugely into the upper air. But then, her held breath aching in her throat and breast, she saw that the blue wings were filmy veils—the slender body between them, gleaming in the moonlight, was a woman's!

The reedy pipes played on. The looped veils beneath the arms gently moved to their music. Now the satiny smooth blue-white body of the ghost woman was lost in them, now it reappeared. And then the veils were suddenly gone—two gray-blue quivers moved tremulously where before the veils had maddeningly concealed and even more maddeningly revealed. And the devil dancer, seeming just to touch ground with an earth-disdaining toe, entered the smoothly sanded amphitheatre and dissolved into the embrace of its shadows.

Averil was not conscious of the ache in her muscles, nor of the wild beating of her heart. Flashings of vari-colored lights told her burning

eyes that the wanton apparition was ablaze with precious stones. Now and then the moonfire in her flying hair made the tresses encircle her exquisite little face like a halo of black pearls. And all the while her slender limbs were serpentine with cunning invitation. . . .

Averil clenched at the stones and rough grass beneath her hot hands. The thing was devilish—devilish beyond all telling. She was a woman herself; men had called her beautiful—but this ivory phantom that made the harsh beach a silken floor for her tiny feet was more than beautiful; all man-maddening allurement was concentrated in her being.

Congreve's figure stirred. He lifted himself onto one elbow, pulled a leg under his body. He was readying himself to leap down from the rock.

The dancer advanced. Congreve crouched, prepared to leap. The uncanny dancer sped back.

Congreve, with a sob in his throat, jumped from the basalt tablet, went lumbering up the sands.

A musical laugh reached out from the dunes. Abruptly the piping ceased. The dancer was gone like a wraith.

Averil felt tears searing her eyes as she watched Sir Gregory's younger son, as she watched him blundering and falling over half-concealed stones, his arms yearningly outstretched, his soul and body uniting in a frenzied search after the vanished thing. . . .

"*Miss Egerton*"—a voice rasped into Averil's startled mind—"Miss Egerton—what in the world are you doing here?"

CHAPTER II

The Loom of the Unknown

SHE got to her feet and hastily dashed the sand from her clothing. Her hair was undone, gritty and bedraggled. Pushing it back into something like order, she turned to

face the man whose identity had already been revealed to her by his voice. Lacy Congreve, white-faced, haggard and miserable, loomed above her.

She was breathing quickly but she forced a calmness into her tones. "Watching," she said tersely. "Watching something I hope never to see again. And you?" she challenged. "What were you doing here?"

LACY CONGREVE raised his arms in a gesture of helplessness.

"What do you think I was doing?" His attitude was rough, yet there was a blunt honesty in it which Averil knew was characteristic of him. "I saw that young fool of a brother of mine sidle off on this mad jaunt and I saw you scale down from your window after him. I might have let Bill go to the dickens, since I'm not his keeper—but I couldn't resist the temptation of following when I saw how dead-set you were on tracking him. I—I never saw anyone move more like a cat than you, Miss Egerton. I suppose it's your sort of job, though, after all." He smiled wanly.

"You followed me?"

"Not exactly. I surmised Bill's destination. He's got a sort of affection for mooning about this sand-pit at all hours of the day and night. Apparently you both made off in the same direction—I took a big detour and came on you from the down-shore."

"You saw the dancer?" she asked hesitantly.

She was half prepared to hear him reply in the negative, half prepared to believe that what she had seen had been only a wild figment of her imagination—that imagination nurtured in the jungle, attuned to mystery, sharpened by the dangers of her eternal search for flowers of beauty, for orchids, for the *Paradise Orchid*.

He shifted uncomfortably and she knew, with a sharp thrill in her heart, his answer before he uttered it.

"Yes, I saw her," he said in a low voice. "Who is she, what's her game, I can't say. A rotten, immoral wanton of a woman!"

It was evident that to his matter-of-fact mind there was nothing of the supernatural about the demonishly beautiful face they both had seen. Yet he added, still low-voiced: "But where the deuce could she have disappeared to?"

"If ever 'she' was here," Averil murmured.

"None of that, Miss Egerton. She was here right enough! My brother may have been bunged up to the chin with opium, or whatever the filthy stuff is that that Dutchman gives him, but I was clear-headed and I imagine you were the same. We saw her, didn't we?"

"Then you'd expect her to leave tracks," Averil said slowly, a little sadly too—her voice held overtones of a sad wisdom, a sorrowing fear, and Lacy Congreve felt strangely moved by it.

"The sand is soft and wet," she went on. "Shall we look for the tracks?"

"Oh, the tracks will be there all right. I'm not so much interested in the woman. I'd rather concentrate on locating Bill."

"If I told you now," Averil said, and her smile did something to the man—it was winsome yet frightened at the same time—"if I told you now that even though the dancing took place, no trace of that dancing exists or ever existed, would you believe me?"

"I'd hesitate to disbelieve anyone as charming as you," he said. He grinned, and it was surprising how that grin lit up his strong sober face. "But the creature was flesh and blood or I'll eat my hat," he added emphatically.

"I'm not glad that I can't agree with you," Averil murmured sadly. "I've seen too much, in India, in the jungles of Java and Borneo—"

She broke off, sensing his tenseness, his desire for action, even before he said: "Bill's the mystic of our family, Miss Egerton—not I.

Come on—let's prove or disprove those footprints."

Averil nodded. She stepped a quick pace or two to get into his stride. The effort shook her and made her cry out. Long crouching among the sodden grasses and on the sand had seized her muscles in a chill. She stumbled and moaned.

"I say!" Lacy Congreve cried. "You—you poor little soul—you're absolutely knocked to pieces by the business. Here—grab hold of my arm and keep hold."

Averil was glad of the offer—and was unaware of the emotions aroused in Lacy Congreve by the simple touch of her hand on his arm. The truth was that the broad-shouldered older son of Sir Gregory had from their first meeting stood somewhat in awe of the personality of the famous and self-possessed Miss Egerton, expert and collector of orchids. But now he had upon his arm the warm and fluttering touch of a frail, lovely girl whose name was Averil — no longer Miss Egerton, but Averil, the sweet name of a girl depending on his strength.

CLOSE to each other, they moved toward the place where the dancing had been. They came to it, and Lacy Congreve examined the moonlit sand. Then he turned to Averil, his candid eyes wide and unbelieving, his face awed.

"You—you were right," he whispered, and he did not know he was whispering. He shook his head, drew his hand across his eyes. "This sand when it's wet takes impressions like soft plaster and keeps them for hours. A small bird couldn't have hopped across here without leaving tracks. Yet there are no tracks here—just as you knew—just as you knew. . . ."

Averil nodded wearily. Yes, she had known, she had foretold. Had she not seen things similar to this before—this ghastly dancing with beauty and evil in it—in lost savage villages, by the wilderness waters of the Chinese East? Yes, similar—but not the same. Never anything as

beautiful, nor as evil, nor as supernally fear-inspiring.

"I'm tired," she murmured.

"You must be." The falling cadence of his tones caressed her. She did not know that Lacy Congreve had never spoken so tenderly to anyone before. "You've had a deuce of a time. Let's get out of here."

They walked back along the sea-shore. The metal breath of bells came from the quiet land, marking the first hour of a new day. Rats chiselled and shrilled among drifted wrack heaps, curlews uneasily wailed, and somewhere a honking squadron of gray-lag geese netted the lines of their flight into a speeding V. The eternal sea broke mournfully upon the shore.

The blend of sorrow and fear which Averil Egerton had felt in her room was still within her. What she had seen in the sandpit had simply confirmed it, strengthened it. She felt the loom of mystery, which even Lacy Congreve's strong arm could not dispel. Its fabric was the stuff of death—its pattern was an orchid—an orchid called Paradise—and for the presence of that orchid at Brindleigh Chase, she, Averil Egerton, was responsible. The memory of the dinner came back to her—and with it something Lacy Congreve had said on the dunes. She broached the subject to him abruptly.

"You said something about opium 'or some other filthy stuff'. You intimated that the supplier of that drug is Mynheer Van Rankyn. Is that true?"

"I was all worked up when I let that cat out of the bag, Miss Egerton. I hope you won't think anything more about it."

But Averil had learned enough.

If it was true, if that extraordinary country gentleman named Van Rankyn was supplying William Congreve with *Beu Hiang*, then Van Rankyn had killed William Congreve—was killing William Congreve as surely as day followed night! She remembered her introduction to Van Rankyn before dinner. She remembered how glad she had been that

the ceremony of introduction in England required nothing from a woman but a nod of her head. For she had not wanted to touch Mynheer Van Rankyn's hand.

Aye. Van Rankyn was the enemy within the gates. She wondered if she would find, in Lacy Congreve, an ally against that enemy.

They had reached the wall of the gardens. Lacy followed Averil's gaze to the ivy-covered window-bay. "No need to go back in the way you came out," he said softly. "You've gone through enough for one night. No one will be up yet—we'll slip in quietly together, and you'll go to your room to get some much needed sleep."

Silently they entered the house.

"About this rotten business on the sands," Lacy inquired softly. "Shall we forget it?"

"Could you forget it?" Averil asked. "But I shan't mention it if that's what you mean."

"I don't want the *mater* and the governor to be hurt," he said simply. "I'll help Bill in my own way. Don't you think that's best?"

SHE nodded, knowing that her nod was a lie. Bill Congreve was past help. Yet what good would it do to tell Lacy that? It would give him pain, and she did not want to give him pain. He had come to mean something to her, more than any man had ever meant before. No, he was too clean, too good, to be drawn into the depths of the mystic and the occult in which she, jungle-born, an orchid hunter, was so much more at home. She would have to act alone, until such time as she could no longer do without his honesty and strength. She waved him a good-by over the bannister.

When she was gone he stood for a long while at the foot of the stairs—until the deliciously penetrant suspicion of heliotrope which she had left on the close air was no longer present. Then he wandered off to get himself a stiff drink and to wonder just what attitude he would have to take with his brother when next

he met that queer and suffering young man.

In her room Averil undressed, creamed her face and brushed her hair. Her promise to Lacy had put her in a dilemma. For she had promised Lacy's father, Sir Gregory, something quite different in their talk the previous afternoon.

She had promised him that she would reveal all that she knew about the mystery behind the priceless orchid she had hunted and found, and which she had been called to Brindleigh Chase three years later to nurture into bloom.

What that promise now involved was telling Sir Gregory about his younger son, about Bill Congreve's tragic use of *Dieu Hiang*, about the supplier of that dooming drug, and about the Thing toward which young Congreve had yearned with outstretched arms in the wind-swept amphitheatre on the dunes.

For of one thing Averil Egerton was sure: behind the drug and the doom and the dancer was the flower she had filched from the forest—that still unblooming orchid called Paradise—thing of still hidden beauty—the *Catasetum Egertonii*!

Yes, Sir Gregory had named that rarest of flowers after her, its discoverer! It was the thought of that altogether unexpected and overwhelming tribute she had taken up to her room with her, after her talk with Sir Gregory, after the dinner at which she had met Lacy and Mynheer Van Rankyn.

And she had sat by her window, a prey to her nameless fears, with an indefinable sorrow in her heart, until, with the fire in her room dying down she had heard that eerie music, and had clambered down the tangle of vines, and had followed Bill Congreve to the sand pit on the dunes.

Now she lay in her bed with unclosed eyes, and went back in her mind to the previous afternoon. Thoughts, events, swirled into a misty pattern as she turned the clock of her mind back to yesterday and reviewed things seen, people met, words spoken . . .

CHAPTER III

Catasetum Egertonii!

THE hollow hour previous to dinner had been filled by an extraordinary talk with Sir Gregory Congreve in the privacy of his study. Sir Gregory's opening words had first warmed and then amazed her.

"I have asked you here in your capacity of expert," he said, "but I should be happy if you would look upon yourself as our most welcome guest. I don't want you to spend all your waking hours mooning about the orchid house. I have sons. You are too young, and, if an old man may pay a compliment, too beautiful, to devote all your time to even as rare a flower as"—he paused and then came the totally unexpected tribute—"Catasetum Egertonii."

Averil blinked. The color flooded into her face. She felt her breath come faster and the tears came into her eyes. That mighty *Catasetum* orchid—that two-thousand-pound rarity of the *Catasetum*—that flower of the gods Sir Gregory had purchased from her employers, Messrs. Barnaby & Duncannon, of Strensall Street, East London—named after her!

"Sir—Sir Gregory," she stammered. "I hadn't any idea that you'd care to register the *Catasetum* in my name! Really, I—I cannot even begin to thank—"

"You discovered it, I only bought it," he interrupted. "And if *Catasetum Egertonii* ever produces a bloom worthy of its namesake, I shall be quite content."

"If it blooms at all, you will find it something far beyond the loveliness of anything you have ever seen," Averil said tremulously. "The natural color transparencies I took of it, when it was in its wild state, don't begin to describe its beauty."

"That's saying a great deal—" Sir Gregory picked up the two bril-

liantly-fired squares of glass—the Lumière autochromes to which Averil had referred. He lifted one of the plates up to the light and carefully examined it. Instead of a photographic negative of monotones, the autochromes were positives ablaze with microscopical stipples of color. Their glow was an almost perfect reproduction of natural hues.

What they showed were the cathedral mists and firefly high-lights of the heart of a forest. Golden-skinned natives clustered about a gnarled and half-rotten teakwood stump on which the orchid was growing. Thus had Averil first beheld it—a huge green-blue writhing of vegetation bearing gourd-like tubers of a satin and ashen texture—and nine bewildering blooms of faery glory: vast and waxy trumpets of miraculous purity and tint.

"Very, very fine," Sir Gregory murmured.

Averil nodded, thinking back.

Within four hours of her photographing the orchid, it was packed in rattans—teakwood stump and all—and off on its way to the coast. After sea and land passages, it was delivered to Barnaby & Duncannon at their warehouse in Strensall Street.

Averil had gone with it. She knew that she had found a treasure destined to be world-famous and she didn't intend that her employers should have all to say in the matter of its disposal. It was she who set the price on it—all Barnaby & Duncannon saw was a tangle of wood and decaying vegetable matter. They laughed—until the autochromes were developed and their wonderful record made permanent.

Barnaby whistled; Sandy Duncannon gasped—and within a day of Sir Gregory's purchase of the rarity for two thousand pounds, they cursed. Cables from all over America started coming in. The market they had thought dead was aroused into violent life. And they had to refuse offers twice as great as Averil had demanded.

The most amazing orchid in the

world had been discovered—by a woman.

That was three years ago. During that time the teakwood stump, in Sir Gregory's orchid house, put on verdure twice. The first year, under artificial cultivation, it produced one sickly flower no larger than a sweet-pea blossom. The second year it burgeoned into a score of pseudobulbs and four stillborn buds. Now was the third time of its prime—and Averil Egerton had been commissioned to employ every art and craft of her knowledge to nurse the orchid into bloom. If she succeeded she would receive a small fortune and a large fame. If she failed, the lonely wonder of that far-off Borneoan forest would have been spirited away in vain. *Catasetum Egertonii* could not survive a third season of futility.

SIR GREGORY CONGREVE tapped the Lumiere plate. "I have assumed, from the expressions on these savages' faces, that they were against your taking of the orchid."

Averil's eyes saddened. "Yes. My journey to the coast was something of a nightmare. I hardly ever slept and rarely had a pistol out of my hand. Yes, Sir Gregory, collection of that orchid was not a pleasant experience."

"But why, Miss Egerton? What did they have against it?"

"I rather gathered that by my act I had brought down upon my men the mystic hand of a Chinese *ki e' ange*, a secret society. It appeared that this orchid was the emblem of that society."

"Really!" Sir Gregory's voice suddenly sharpened. "Then, as a flower, it must be well known!"

Averil shook her head and her smile was mirthless. "I see what you mean, Sir Gregory, and I understand what is disturbing you: if the flower is well known, then it isn't rare, and if it isn't rare it isn't worth the two thousand pounds you paid for it."

"Exactly," said Sir Gregory.
Averil shook her head.

"*Egertonii*"—as Averil's soft lips formed the unaccustomed word, she colored again—"is unique, definitely. It is the only *Catasetum* orchid ever to have come out of the Far East. It is the only Borneoan *Catasetum* known. Let me explain.

"The great societies of the Chinese, once upon a time, had secret encampments in the Borneo forests and hinterlands. Whole villages were given over to the practice of their terrible rites and to accommodate their fraternal lodges.

"But, about half a century ago the encampments and all the awful things they concealed were blasted out of existence. The Chinese were expelled—affair of gatling guns, Maxim's and mountain artillery.

"Now what was the greatest treasure of those Chinese? Not their material possessions. No, the symbol of their order. So they took the greatest care in destroying all the orchids they possessed. For they couldn't hope to foster their growth in China, the climate being inimical. And above all they didn't want the 'foreign devils' to get hold of the blooms, so sacred to them. There was a great farewell ceremony and all their flower symbols were burned.

"*Egertonii* must have grown from some wind-borne spore. The Chinese secret-society mandarins certainly had no knowledge of its existence, else they would have gone through fire and water to destroy it. *Egertonii* is the last survivor, in all probability, of its race. Are you convinced, now, that you made a good bargain, Sir Gregory?"

Sir Gregory slowly nodded. "Yes," he murmured. "I am convinced. Convinced and troubled."

She looked at him quickly. His keen eyes took note of a certain quality in the look.

"You are troubled too, are you not, Miss Egerton?"

"Yes," she said softly. "I am troubled."

"I wonder," said Sir Gregory, "what especial virtue lay hidden in this *Catasetum*, making it such an object of worship? Have you any

idea why the secret brotherhood took the flower as their totem?"

Averil felt a slight tremor go up and down her spine. What was it? It was as though some force outside herself did not want her to speak. When she answered, the words seemed to come from her automatically—they were not the words that had been in her mind.

"The unusual old-wives' tales of the hinterlands, Sir Gregory. Not worth talking about."

But Sir Gregory was not fooled. "I'm afraid I can't accept that answer, Miss Egerton," he said. "On the basis of my own independent research into the matter, I must inquire if you ever heard, among this goblin talk of your men, any reference to the *Egertonii* being—being a flower that gave off a curious noise—not a perfume but a curious noise?"

Again something forced Averil to be evasive. "You mean that it can create soft whispers, the same as certain *bulbophyllum* orchids, to attract insects?"

"No, I don't mean that," said Sir Gregory, and he seemed to be irritated. "What I mean is: did any of your porters say anything about *Egertonii* being a sound-flower?"

"No. What they told me was that if I touched it I should be forever accursed—that I must not dare to violate its taboo."

"What was that taboo?"

"Some tommy-rot about a deity called *Koe se l'an*—"

Sir Gregory interrupted. "Why aren't you being frank with me, Miss Egerton? Surely you must know as well as I that *Koe se l'an* isn't a deity but a collective term referring to those noisy members of the Chinese devil-heaven who were kicked out and sent to dwell on earth, for penance—the ghostly 'singers.' Don't you, Miss Egerton?"

"I do," said Averil, and it seemed to her that the power of Sir Gregory's personality had temporarily weakened the queer restraining force on her tongue. "The idea was prevalent among my men that *Koe se l'an* spirits dwelt in the *Egertonii* blooms

—does that satisfy you, Sir Gregory?"

"That's better," her strangely persistent questioner admitted.

"And," Averil went on, rapidly now, "the name of the secret society in question was *Hue Se Tsi L'an*—'the company of the singing shadows.' The members believed that their symbol flowers were shrines inhabited by those outcasts of Paradise. In fact, *Egertonii* already had a name—they called it 'Paradise.' "

"So violating the taboo—in other words touching the orchid blossoms—was the same as violating a shrine! Right?"

"Yes," said Averil, and again she felt the tremor. "I never saw it quite in that light before. No wonder my men were so fearful over what I was doing and what they were indirectly helping me to do. The dread of the old Chinese tongs is still strong among the Dyaks—"

"Yes," snapped Sir Gregory.

"Haven't the Dyaks a powerful deity whose name also means 'the singer of Paradise'? I seem to collect they have."

"Not exactly the singer of Paradise," Averil said. "The English rendering of his name is confusing you. It's *Singalong Burong*, and it means the Voice of Heaven, the Supreme One."

"But the similarity, the connection, is there just the same; in both beliefs it's *sound* that's deified!"

"Yes," Averil echoed softly. "On the one hand we have our unholy tenants of the *Egertonii*, the singing shadow—and on the other we have a Mars-like personage who is worshipped as the Voice."

SIR GREGORY nodded. "It strikes me, Miss Egerton, that you are a very fortunate young lady."

"Why?"

"To be alive."

"Yes," said Averil in a low voice. "I am very fortunate to be still alive. But how could you know, or rather feel—as I feel—that I am in danger?"

"If you were more open with me,

I'd be more open with you," Sir Gregory murmured.

"I've tried to be as candid as I could," Averil answered. How could she explain to this nobleman her mysterious sense of someone, something, putting a guard upon her tongue? "You're not being fair, Sir Gregory."

"More than fair!" A trace of suppressed passion crept into Sir Gregory's voice. "Who has lived with this eerie plant in my house for nearly three years, guarding it, studying it, nurturing it—and fearing it, yes fearing it, throughout that time?"

"Fearing it?" She could hardly recognize the echo as being of her own making. "You—you—feared it?"

"Yes, Miss Egerton. I've feared it as though it were the very devil sitting at my elbow. But you aren't surprised, are you? You must have known that it could engender fear. Even now—you wouldn't admit it but I can sense it—you're struggling with every fiber of your being to deny the hideous terror that is part and parcel of this mysterious growth you have brought into twentieth-century life!"

"I do admit it," said Averil in almost a whisper.

"But I don't suppose, for one moment, you regret your discovery of it. If I were in your place, I wouldn't either, but—"

Averil raised her hand. She was almost completely self-possessed again.

"Don't you think," she asked, "that things have come to a rather distressing pass if you, an elderly man, and I, a young and healthy woman, have got to be hoodooed by a miserable clump of flowers and greenery? Yes, you were right—I have withheld confidences. I know more than you think about that accursed orchid's evil history. And I promise to tell you more in good time. But you were also right in suggesting that I did a very unwise thing in bringing it into the ordinary materialisms of this twentieth century. There is one thing, therefore, I want to know."

"What is that?"

"Would you be prepared to let me repurchase the orchid—?"

"Never!" Sir Gregory's vehemence was astounding. "Miss Egerton—I tell you, never!"

"Then I presume you want me to go ahead and foster its flowering, as arranged?" Averil said, and with the words she felt her heart pounding with a strange joy and a strange fear, a sharp thrill that was neither pleasure nor pain, too intense to be either.

"If—if you dare do so."

"I dare, Sir Gregory. Come what may, I dare!"

CHAPTER IV

... one with glass heels . . .

AVERIL lay in her bed with un-closed eyes. The clock of her mind was still turned back to the previous day, and now it moved out of the study with Sir Gregory, moved to the drawing room and to her first meeting with Sir Gregory's older son, Lacy. . . .

Cocktails. The laughter and chattering of guests, the clink and the tinkle of ice cubes in shakers, the comfortable maternal whiteness of Lady Congreve, and—Lacy.

Her first impression was that Lacy did not like her. His manner was blunt. He was aware of the orchid's eerie reputation but he did not share his father's fears about it.

"More than a flower, that orchid," he said. "At least, so they tell me—"

"But you don't believe it," she finished for him.

"To the untutored mind of a simple farmer a flower is a flower, in spite of what the lady expert says."

Averil laughed, at the same time sensing his antagonism and wondering at the reason for it.

"I presume," she said, "that by 'lady expert' you mean me, and by 'simple farmer' you mean yourself."

"Exactly," he said.

"And I presume the 'simple farmer' is offended at the 'lady expert's' suggestion that perhaps orchids have a near-intelligence, or intelligence approaching in dim ways the directing power of little insects."

"It's my sense of reality that's offended," he snapped.

She was silent an instant, then asked slowly: "Why don't you like me, Mr. Congreve?"

It caught him off his guard. He flushed and looked uncomfortable. Yet the honesty of his nature forced him to give an honest answer.

"There's been nothing but worry and trouble in this place since the damnable plant came here. Almost instinctively I've got into the habit of—of—"

"Of tracing it all back to me?"

"To be perfectly frank—yes," he said.

"I'm sorry," said Averil.

"Maybe you'll hit it off better with our neighbor, Mynheer Van Rankyn," Lacy said irritably, and Averil couldn't be sure if the irritation was directed at himself or at her. "At any rate, you'll find him more entertaining than I. He's a frightfully keen bloke on orchids. In fact, if you had turned down our request, he was prepared to nurture the *Egertonii* himself."

"Really?" Averil said, her professional pride aroused. "He must be a very advanced culturist if he thinks himself capable of that. Is he here now? I'd like to meet him."

"I daresay," said Lacy gloomily, and he sounded as though what he was thinking was: "Anything to get away from a dull fellow like me."

"Hasn't turned up yet. Out with my brother Bill somewhere. They're almost inseparables." He took her emptied cocktail glass. "A Dutchman, you know—can't say I like him. Potty about orchids. Matter of fact, when Barnaby and Duncannon first offered *Egertonii* for sale, Mynheer Van Rankyn was their first prospect. It seems that they sent all particulars to him, in New York, but they didn't reach him. Mynheer

was camping somewhere in the Adirondacks, and it was nearly a fortnight before the mail followed him. In the meantime, the governor had scooped the market."

"I—I remember now. He was the man, I believe, who cabled Barnaby and Duncannon offering incredible sums for the plant."

"Yes, and he was so galled at having missed the orchid, he came straight to England and began to pester us with fantastic offers."

"Which your father refused."

"Absolutely! He wouldn't hear of parting with *Egertonii*. And Mynheer, if you please, sat himself down on our doorstep to beg. Really, it's funny in a way—my governor and this Dutchman. For three blessed years now they've been at it—Van Rankyn never ceasing to importune, the old man never ceasing to give downright refusals. The dogged beggar bought a house, not half-a-mile away, and settled down to be as near the orchid as he could!"

"Fanatical," murmured Averil.

"Fanatical is right!" Lacy's tones left no doubt that he detested the Dutchman. "And"—his voice changed—"you'll have the pleasure of meeting him in a minute. He's just come in. My brother isn't with him after all." Lacy's voice was no longer vigorous but weary. "I'm afraid you won't see Bill tonight."

"Not at dinner?"

"No. He'll not turn up to feed." All Lacy's vitality seemed gone. "Anyhow, the other'll prove of interest. Come, let me do the honors. Van Rankyn is very interested in you, I might say."

THAT was when Averil had been glad that the trifling ceremony did not demand anything from her but a bow. She would not have touched Van Rankyn's slender hand for all the wealth of the Celebes. She had her reasons—reasons that would have shocked and confounded the Congreves into stupor. Reasons? . . . Why, she had a hundred! No woman who had been born and bred among those bright *pakhana* lands of the

East could make a mistake about her assessment of Mynheer Van Rankyn.

Averil knew his breed, from his delicate black head to the delicate and pointed feet. She knew the traffic of the sensuous brain behind the chilly agate eyes; the cruelty that was dormant in his lithe body. Yes . . . she had met the Van Rankyn stamp too often for mistake.

To her disgust she discovered that Lady Congreve had arranged for Van Rankyn to take her into dinner. Perforce she had to answer when he spoke to her.

"It is remarkable," he said, "to find a lady, and one so young, Miss Egerton, who is an authority upon those delicious extravagances of Nature we call the orchids."

"I don't altogether agree, Mynheer. After all, botany and horticulture are feminine sciences."

"Possibly," said Mynheer Van Rankyn, after a slight pause. He eyed her, smilingly. "I had not considered science in the light of genders before."

"No?"

"No," said Mynheer. "It is a pretty distinction." His enunciation of English was perfect. "When one recalls, however, the old cult of the orchid-watchers of Far Eastern fame, one is inclined to grant your point."

NOW Averil had no rational warrant for the constriction of dread about her heart. The Dutchman had merely made passing references to a well-known fact. The "orchid-watchers" were fabled virgins of a vestal quite similar to those of olden Rome. They had guarded living blooms instead of living fire. But those Eastern orchid-watchers had served their offices for the terrible princes of companies such as that of the singing shadows—mandarins of the orchid masonry known as the *Hue Se Tsi L'an*—or perhaps for the singing shadows themselves. . . . The very matters she had discussed with Sir Gregory.

But with Van Rankyn she professed ignorance.

"I don't exactly follow. What

orchid-watchers, mynheer—and of what cult?"

Van Rankyn smoothed his glossy, black hair. Averil noticed how fine it was, and long. And she also took note of the singularly lean and hairless hand. A big ruby set in old hammered gold spanned the olive-hued little finger of that hand.

"Surely, Miss Egerton, in this particular instance of your collection of *Catasetum Egertonii* someone must have informed you." There was tensioning of Van Rankyn's lips, neither smile nor sneer, yet partaking of both. "Had you no idea of the bloom's olden name? You know, once it was called *Paradise*—and there were priestesses of the orchid called *Paradise*."

"Really?"

"Yes, Miss Egerton, really."

Averil shrugged her shoulders and gazed abstractedly around. She caught Daphne Congreve's merry glance—and remembered that the eighteen-year-old daughter of the house was all agog to capture ten minutes or so of the time of the famous Averil Egerton.

"I'm afraid, Mynheer, you are talking the same nonsense as my porters did, when I came across *Egertonii*. And I was neither interested nor impressed then. You must forgive me."

Van Rankyn bowed. Averil was already moving away.

"Might I get you another cocktail?" he inquired urbanely.

Miss Egerton thanked him, but she did not want another cocktail. Elegantly enough Van Rankyn escorted her across to the rapturous Daphne's side. He made some casual remarks about the rising storm over the sea, and elegantly bowed himself away.

"Hateful man, that," said Daphne. "I always get the creeps when he comes near."

It seemed that Daphne was very much like her brother Lacy, honest and direct.

"I wouldn't care if his ways were only foreign," Daphne went on. "But they're so utterly other-worldish! Miss Egerton, if you can, just take

a tiny peep at him now as he's gliding across to Mother—there's an example."

Averil looked and Daphne whispered: "You see, I'm right in saying he glides—do you notice, his heels hardly touch the floor? Isn't that enough to give any normal person the shudders?"

Averil nodded, fascinated. Van Rankyn's movement was that of a wolf. The balls of his feet certainly met the parquet flooring, but the heels did not come down behind them. They touched—yes, they touched, but barely. . . .

Averil experienced a wave of quiet terror. Here, she knew—in a drawing room in an old English house by a healthy northern sea—was something that could turn a savage head-hunter of primitive haunts and steaming jungle tracks half-mad with loathing and terror.

Here—in the house of the Congreves, calling itself Piet Van Rankyn—was the gruesome embodiment of that diabolical near-ghost of the lands about the China Seas—"one with glass heels"—a weird physical manifestation of an unhuman entity!

The butler appeared at the drawing room door. Dinner was served—and Averil was taken in to it by this something that was not a man. . . .

It was some time after dinner that Averil met Bill Congreve. He didn't stay in the drawing room long but lounged off to the billiard room with Van Rankyn at the end of about ten minutes. Nevertheless it had been long enough for Averil to appraise him and to feel sorry for him.

He was a tall, unhealthy-looking youth. His talking was shrill and tumbling; utterly unlike Lacy's gentle, slow and whimsical speech. And his eyes stayed too long without movement, once they had fixed their gaze on anything.

Averil found herself at angry variance with the stealthy power of those eyes. They were luscious sloes, deep with the mists of hidden thought; wanton thought that sickened. All her womanhood arose against their searching and assess-

ment. She was not overpolite to Mr. William Congreve.

Nor was anyone else. Peculiar, but the mother of the man was the only person in that house who addressed him with ordinary charity. Sir Gregory was cool and curt; Lacy's voice droned wearily over him—despairingly, one might say; Daphne was flippant with him; and Van Rankyn's sighing and delicate "my dear Bill, just as you like, of course," was languid with tolerance and resignation.

THE warm-hearted Averil's sorrow grew. She took it up to her room with her, along with her confused thoughts about the orchid and her nameless dread. There was evil in Bill Congreve, yet her woman's heart yearned over him, yearned to help him. But in what? And against what?

It was really surprising to have to acknowledge that such a quality existed in one of the Congreve stock. They seemed the very last people on earth to have such evil among them. Sir Gregory, Lacy, Daphne and the good and ample Hannah, Sir Gregory's lady, were simple folk. Bill Congreve's dark eyes, subtle and complex, denied his goodly heritage. Averil had found the same evil among swarthy, fat and sun-fed people; indolents and lotus-eaters of tropical climes—she never dreamed she would come to find it in a fair-haired Englishman with some of his adolescent life still to be lived.

She had, however, no time to spend in summing up psychological problems. After all, Bill Congreve was a comparative stranger and, in a fortnight's time, he would pass out of her ken for good. Her job was to foster the orchid called *Egertonii*—or Paradise, she cared not which it was.

Averil shrugged and gently opened a window, preparatory to enjoying a midnight smoke. She did not know if the sedate Lady Congreve would altogether approve of feminine guests lighting cigarettes in her Queen Anne bedchambers, and she

was not going to risk disapproval. For all that, she was a smoker and intended to indulge—with caution.

But it was destined that Averil should not light her cigarette. The opening of the window gave her impulse a sudden stop.

A faint and balsamic air came into the room with the cold of the quiet night. It was closely akin to burning incense, and made one think of a scent as of rich oranges sending up chill and keen acridity from a bowl beneath one's nose. A scent of lush warmth and acid oiliness—a scent of a drug—of the drug *Beu Hiang*!

Someone addicted to that curse had *Beu Hiang* in Brindleigh Chase. Someone had been taking it recently. *Beu Hiang* was a crisp, gray, resinous powder that could be chewed into cloying juices, after the manner of dissolving Demerara sugar in the mouth. Someone who was a *Beu Hiang* eater had indulged in the passion not so very long ago!

Piet Van Rankyn? Hardly—else he had returned to the Chase after his leave-taking for his own home at ten o'clock. Again, Van Rankyn's eyes were too clear for those of a 'Hiang-taker.

Bill Congreve! Of course!

Averil's heart throbbed and she felt immeasurably saddened. Yes, Bill Congreve's aspect betrayed the vice. His steady and clouded gaze was that of a 'Hiang-eater. The treble tumult of the voice—the gawky stoop; the restlessness; the skinny body, the irritable and lackadaisical air—Bill Congreve, beyond a doubt!

But where did he get hold of the beastly stuff? And how had he been initiated into its doom?

There was nothing for an addict of 'Hiang but ultimate agonizing delirium and death. The Malays and certain of the Papuan tribes had some powerful antidote to the poison—but they never disclosed it to Occidental knowledge. And *Beu Hiang* was essentially a product of camphor forests—how, in the name of goodness, was young Congreve able to ensure a steady supply?

If he stopped taking the drug, he was quite as liable to run amok as any "eater" of the East. To stop meant death—either by his own hand, speedily, or in a lunatic asylum, lingeringly. Assuming that Congreve was the addict, he must have had implicit trust in someone—someone who held the balance of life for him—someone who supplied him.

Bill Congreve, so she had heard, had never been out of England. Van Rankyn had—and, according to Lacy, he and Bill were inseparables. Van Rankyn knew the regions of the Eastern orchids. Naturally, therefore, Van Rankyn would have knowledge of *Beu Hiang* eaters and the camphor tracts out of which the essence came. And, knowing all this, he could easily procure supplies of it. So far as Averil was aware, *Beu Hiang* was not a contraband or a prohibited article. Yes, Van Rankyn could stand guilty, on all counts, of the initiation and the continued oppression of young Bill Congreve, in the ways of *Beu Hiang*. . . .

And then had come that eerie piping, that weird music that had drawn Bill Congreve from the house and had drawn her after him. The sandpit on the dunes, the ghost dancer, her meeting with Lacy—all these episodes rolled up in her memory. And she had come back to the house clinging to Lacy's strong arm. His touch had been sweet. She had waved good-by to him over the bannister and had gone back to her room. She had lain in her bed with unclosed eyes, thinking back.

And now she lay with unclosed eyes, thinking—ahead. . . .

CHAPTER V

In the Thrall of Beu Hiang

VAN RANKYN—he was at the bottom of the whole devilish business. Van Rankyn, the "untouchable"—the "one with glass

heels"—no more a Dutchman than she was a Hottentot. Piet Van Rankyn, who was doubtless the genius behind that incredible dance on the sands—that dancing of the Flower Ghost — that dance of the wanton beauty—that dance of secret ritual, performed by the "projection" of a *Hue* priestess; by the old and evil soul of something gloriously beautiful in living flesh, an orchid-watcher, a vestal, the thing Van Rankyn had himself spoke of!

Van Rankyn—he did not live! Or, if he did, then the orchid which she, Averil had found, did not.

It was a buffeting and torturing mass of bewilderment. Averil wished in that moment that her fateful steps had never taken her through those dim forest ways to the Paradise Orchid, to *Egertonii*. The stuff of death. She did not want it near her. She was young, a woman without a mate, with the widening of life before her in the glow of a love that had been born in an hour.

HER thinking stopped with the awful scream that cut the silent hours in twain.

It was a man's voice that had made the dreadful cry.

Averil caught up her dressing-gown and flew across to the wardrobe, where she seized her automatic pistol. She placed the squat little weapon into the deep cuff of her left sleeve and sped to the head of the stairs. Even with her delay, she was the first out of all the panic-stricken house to be astir.

Down the stairs, across the hall and to the switches, Averil went. She flooded the place with light. Then, from room to room, she scoured—

It was Lacy Congreve who had screamed. He lay by a long, oaken side-table in the dining room. A glass was shattered in his right hand, and spirits mingled with the blood of his lacerated fingers. His hair was torn almost as though a wild beast had clawed him; his right ear was purple and swollen; his collar and tie were crumpled ruins, and

his dully-reddened face lay half-hidden beneath the table.

Averil set her teeth and gently opened the stiff fingers. Then she lifted the awry head. A bruise as big as her hand cut across Lacy's right jaw and extended into the curve of his throat. As though he had been struck upwards with a hockey-stick—a boomerang—

Averil groaned and frenziedly listened for any sound of breathing, felt for the movement of his pulse. Very rarely, she knew, did anyone survive treatment such as had been meted out to Lacy Congreve—

Again the uncanny relevance to all this orchid mystery—Lacy had been felled by a blow from an up-thrust arm that was intended to break his neck. A ju-jutsu grip; a Chinese garroter's trick; a swinging curve, sufficient to cause unconsciousness, then a tearing twist designed to separate the axis from the atlas bones of the vertebrae.

The same principle as that applied in judicial hanging had been exercised here—Lacy would be fortunate, indeed, if one spark of life remained.

Sir Gregory and Daphne and a crowd of scared servants were on the scene before she satisfied herself of his survival.

"Sir Gregory"—her hands hurt on his arms—"for Heaven's sake, pack them all off — every one, even Daphne! This is a man's job," she panted. "Someone phone for the doctor, and, Sir Gregory, help me—artificial respiration."

Sir Gregory Congreve had an excellent daughter in Daphne. Before he could reply that little lady was hustling, without regard for grace, all the household staff. Her face was ashen and her eyes like coals—yet she did as Averil asked.

Sir Gregory was slower in wit for once. Not until he saw that Averil did not intend to answer his alarmed questions did he grasp the urgency of the position. Then he settled down to working with her on reviving the stricken Lacy. He regularly pumped with the limp arms while

Averil supported the head and held the mouth open.

It seemed an age before great, shuddering breaths began to sound. Then Lacy twitched and groaned and chokingly coughed—his eyelids began to tremble and open, and the blackness went from under his skin.

"Thank God," Averil said, "he's—he's going to pull through!"

"What happened?" Sir Gregory's whisper was harsh. "How were you so quickly on the scene? What occurred?"

AVERIL darted him a searching look.

"What happened to him I don't know," she coldly replied. "All I can tell you is that I have seen men dead as a result of precisely the same death-dealing trick as this. They were flimsy natives; your son owes his life to his solid physique."

"You—you misunderstand me—"

"Sir Gregory, I don't understand nor misunderstand. I was in my room, not asleep, heard the cry and rushed downstairs. Here I found your son, and good fortune had it that I knew how to deal with the situation."

"... Bill... Bill, don't... be a rotter. . . ."

Averil and the judge exchanged wild glances. Lacy's hoarse voice, gasping out the words, were frightening.

"William?" The old man's face paled and he trembled. "My God, can this be another of his idiotic—"

"Bill!" Lacy shuddered and his blank eyes grew wide with terror and loathing. "Don't—don't! Leave her alone—she's a fiend—no woman—not alive—"

Sir Gregory's haggard gaze flashed to Averil's face. At the last words Averil had cowered away from the semi-conscious man and had drawn her hands up to her mouth. Sir Gregory could not miss the awful expression with which she looked on Lacy.

"You know," Sir Gregory muttered, "Miss Egerton, you know what he means! What?"

Averil seemed not to hear. Her attitude was frozen. But then she suddenly shot out a hand and grasped at Sir Gregory's shoulders.

"The—the orchid," she gasped. "We must let the others attend to Lacy. He'll be all right until the doctor comes. Daphne seems very sensible—we must entrust her with his care."

"My dear Miss Egerton, I'm afraid you're rather unstrung. Where my son's welfare is concerned, the *Eger-tonii* simply doesn't matter."

"I know—I know—I know!" Averil looked at him wildly. "It'll not be the orchid that'll suffer so much as the man who has gone to tamper with it!"

"Miss Egerton, are you quite yourself? Who on earth wants to tamper with *Eger-tonii*?"

"Bill, don't have any truck with her, I say! She's not human . . . Egerton woman proved that on sands . . . Averil—Averil. Here, Bill, I'll—I'll damn' well see you don't—Ah, would you?—Would you? Bill!"

Lacy Congreve's mumblings ended in a noise like the echo of his first scream.

"Do you hear, Sir Gregory!" Averil cried.

"I hear," Sir Gregory snapped grimly. "Will you also inform me what my son's delirium refers to in the matter of your proving something wasn't human, on the sands, tonight?"

The time had come to break her pledge to Lacy. Swiftly she outlined to the horrified old man all that had transpired since first she had caught the orange-and-incense whiff of *Beu Hiang*. She told of her leaving the house via the ivy—of the phantom dancing—of her meeting with Lacy—everything.

"Every bit of the jig-saw pattern fits," she concluded breathlessly. "Van Rankyn, the drugging, the mad dancing—all belong! That ghastly flower is at the bottom of everything. It's a curse, a danger—Instead of asking me to nurture it into bloom, you—you ought to take yourself out of here, now, and destroy

it, root and all. It's beyond all—"

"This creature"—the judge sternly cut across Averil's outpour of excited words—"this woman—this figment—am I to infer that it is a dominating influence over my son, William? Are you actually trying to convince me that he is obsessed, possessed, controlled, by some vampire that hasn't physical existence?"

"That I can't tell you. All I'm certain of is the fact that the evil face emanates from the orchid, through its servant, Van Rankyn—"

"Please, Miss Egerton—"

"Please, Sir Gregory, don't interrupt me like this! I know my job as you know yours. I have lived far too long among the taboo-controlled races of mankind not to have a deep respect for matters you would carelessly dismiss with a shrug of your shoulders as being crass, supernatural bunkum."

She was coolly defiant.

"I tell you once more, Van Rankyn is *not* a Dutchman—Van Rankyn—Van Rankyn is *not* a man—and Van Rankyn is the absolute serf, in flesh, of the orchid which was called Paradise!"

"The Hué priestess, the devil-dancer, is beyond me—how that was conceived may never be explained. But it's apparent, from what your son said, that he caught sight of William and this phantom while he was standing by this table pouring himself a drink. Probably directed by this—this demon—his own brother made this attack on Lacy."

The judge had gone to a pallid wreck. All his vitality evaporated, as pale sunlight from a slowly-curtained room. Haggardly he gazed at Averil.

In a dead voice he said: "I don't know whether to condemn you as a neurotic fool or myself for paying attention to you. I got you here to attend to that orchid. It appears you are also able to look after affairs outside my province. You can go ahead, do as you please, have whatever freedom you like—only don't trespass on my mind any longer with your devil lore!"

"I shan't," said Averil. "I'll leave it to do its own trespassing."

Sir Gregory Congreve's reply was blocked by the arrival of the doctor. The nobleman felt that he was beginning to detest this Averil Egerton—

Lacy Congreve was borne up to his room and put to bed.

"Can we go into the orchid-house, Sir Gregory?" Averil asked.

"Now?"

"If you please."

"I should have thought—"

"Sir Gregory, you have another son."

The statement whiplashed the old man's face with sullen color.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Egerton," he murmured sadly.

Impulsively Averil stretched out her hands and grasped the cold fingers. "Let us go together," she said.

CHAPTER VI

Death Out of Paradise

THE orchid called Paradise was so beautiful that it stilled both heart and brain in wonder. It had bloomed in the storm of the night and now it stood, fierce with miracles of waxen jewels, slowly pulsing in its new-born glories of life.

It moved; no air shifted in that hot and humid atmosphere of the orchid's house, yet the blossoms moved—they moved with a proud and languid rhythm, as the lazy nodding of plumes on the heads of war-horses to far-away brass music coming through a summer's day.

All about it was the withered ruin of ordinary species; it was the only plant in flower—a flowering that frightened as well as fascinated. Its soft trumpet-throats of palest primrose velvet were flashed and raddled with metallic pollen radiance which varied from the phosphorescent sheen of coldest blue to that rich gamut of dim purples and vitric greens to be found on a turkey's tail

feather—a rainbow quenched with an olive glass.

Two golden tongues licked out over a thick *labellum*, like pea-green melon flesh speckled with starry cloves. It was an orchid without scent, yet cold columns of queerly intoxicating essence seemed to have risen about it to guard its shrine.

"I am not wanted," said Averil Egerton in an awed voice. "It—it has bloomed of itself."

In the warm silence Sir Gregory's voice came mournfully in response:

"It is a *Catasetum*. Have you ever known one of that genus to come to perfection without human attention—when in artificial cultivation?"

"I have not," said Averil, involuntarily sinking her voice to a whisper. "Not even the tiniest and commonest of the tribe."

The judge's fingers trembled as he pointed to a certain impression that was clear upon the soft soil which surrounded the teakwood stump on which the orchid grew.

"It has had aid, I think," he said harshly. "Look there!"

AVERIL emitted a queer little cry. The footprint in the soil was startlingly plain.

It was small and lightly driven—it was the print of a little bare foot—a woman's foot.

"Its watcher came to its aid," Averil whispered.

"I—I don't follow, Miss Egerton."

"I told you about Van Rankyn's references to the orchid virgins of the great Chinese *hués*."

Sir Gregory nodded. "So you think this orchid has not been neglected—"

Averil laughed a bitter spangle of sound.

"My theory is that my firm, in advertising the discovery of this plant to the connoisseurs they knew could afford to buy it, unfortunately also advertised it to some relic of 'the company of the singing shadows'—to some surviving lodge of the Chinese *Hué Se Tsi L'An*, as much as telling them their emblem-orchid still existed."

"I've been thinking very much the

same thing myself! Is that how you set this fellow, Van Rankyn, into the sorry scheme?"

"Precisely! He comes from America and pesters you with fantastic offers—"

"How do you know that?"

"Lacy told me," Averil said. "He not only offers to buy the bloom, but also offers to bring it over its crucial period of blossoming under artificial conditions. Further than that, he sits down on your very doorstep; becomes a family friend, a fellow-orchid-enthusiast, all with one set intent."

"And that?"

"Either the capture of the orchid for the *ki c'ang*, the tong that sent him here—or its destruction."

"There's a flaw in your argument," Sir Gregory muttered. "Miss Egerton, don't you see that he's had opportunity after opportunity to steal the plant—we've trusted him so—and again he's had similar opportunities to destroy it. Instead he has apparently engineered its coming to perfection."

"So it would seem," murmured Averil.

"But—but, Miss Egerton, in one breath you would have me believe a fantastic vestal of this 'sacred' plant has consummated its flowering, and in the other you don't disagree with my theory that Van Rankyn himself has accomplished the task! Really, what am I to think?"

"That he failed in his attempts to destroy the plant and he failed in his attempts to steal it."

"Have you any proof that he attempted either?"

"Only your son, William," was Averil's cryptic answer.

"My—my son? What, what on earth has he to do with—"

A soft and shuffling noise grew in the gloom of the big orchid-house. The judge whipped around to determine its cause. As for Averil, she very deftly removed the little automatic pistol from her cuff and pouched it in the security of her icily-cold right hand.

"What—what was that?"

"Sounds like a drunken man, walking carefully," Averil said steadily.

It was true. The noise of the hidden progress was like that of someone who had not the fullest control of his limbs, yet was trying hard, exaggeratedly hard, to move with caution.

"Who is there?"

Sir Gregory's voice echoed through the span of the glass roof. The shuffling stopped.

"Come along there—who's that?"

A tiny hiss ran across the air and something "picked" at the quilted mass of Sir Gregory's dressing-gown. He staggered back, astounded and badly scared.

Then a voice came across the place—Van Rankyn's cool and delicately-precise speech:

"I would not touch the little thorn that has stuck in your gown if I were you, Sir Gregory. It might prick your finger. Let the ubiquitous Miss Egerton look at it and she'll doubtless be able to tell you just what would happen after you pricked that finger."

Averil reeled. She had seen the thorn a second after its impact. She did not need the mocking cruelty of Van Rankyn's voice to confirm her knowledge of it.

"Poisoned! Sir Gregory, for God's sake, take care. You'd—you'd die in an hour!"

"Thank you, Miss Clever Eger-

ton!" Again Van Rankyn sneered from his hidden place. "You doubtless recognize it as a *Pakhatani* *summit* point." Since Averil did not reply: "A little dart, my dear Sir Gregory, blown at you through a tube by my violent and dishonorable self, as a warning. I could as easily have implanted it in your face, you know."

"You—you devil—"

"Please! I'm in no mood, Sir Gregory, for futilities. Think what you like, but don't talk too much. Otherwise—"

"What do you want?"

"That's much better! I want you, and our so-clever Miss Egerton, to stand to one side, away from that orchid. It is to be collected—a second time."

Mechanically, Averil and the old man stepped away, leaving a space.

"Now then—" Van Rankyn's tones were honeyed and yet deadly with some quality of exultation. "Now then—we'll achieve what we have been commanded to achieve."

The heavy shuffling came again.

Into the body of the house, from behind a reredos of exotic plants like palms, William Congreve stepped.

His hands hung limply by his sides, his eyes were dead. His face was absolutely devoid of sensible expression and his jaw lolled to show

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his teeth and tongue. Like a sleep-walker, he advanced toward the orchid called Paradise.

"It will be quite useless, Sir Gregory, attempting to direct your son from the errand I have set him," Van Rankyn carefully called out. "He is going to take your plant away from you—and any attempt to prevent him might only result in his dealing out to your venerable self the same treatment he dealt out to his brother, Lacy, a little while ago.

"That stands as a warning for you, too, Miss Oh-so-very-clever Egerton!" A gurgling laugh edged the thin words. "You have, in this amiable young man, a perfect Frankenstein monster. Don't tempt his dull majesty, else your undeniable good looks will suffer sadly. William Congreve is my creature for the time being—Me—I think, Miss Egerton, you know what that means!"

Sharp as a lance, Averil rasped:

"I do! Cei pak wie Tur'li!"

An ominous silence and then a gasping breath.

"I—I don't know what holds me back, Miss Egerton." Van Rankyn's talk was now hideous with hatred. "The deadliest insult you could level—and yet, I let you live!"

Very lightly, Averil laughed.

"Your purpose, *Knife-hair*, isn't achieved. *That holds you!*"

Again a guttural sound of hatred. Then a swift succession of whispers.

Steadily onward tramped the figure of William Congreve.

His father, trembling, watched him near the glowing beauty of the orchid called Paradise.

Woodenly, William Congreve approached the orchid. His hands jerkily stretched out toward it until he fumblingly encountered a glossy pseudo-bulb. He moved from this through a rustling and an evil riot of greenery to seize on the moving throat of one of the huge blooms.

A movement had been made behind the reredos. Van Rankyn, all eagerness, had betrayed his hiding-place. Averil gradually twisted her armed right hand in such a way as to point dead at the movement—

A corner of Van Rankyn's shoulder showed, black against the spears of the leaves. There was a dull glint as the heavy ruby ring on his little finger caught at light as it lifted—gripped about the blow pipe.

A VERIL EGERTON fired—twice from the height of her waist and twice from eye-level.

Somewhere high above Van Rankyn's place a pane of glass went into shivering ruin as a bullet was deflected upwards, and, while the sound of this still lived, a sickeningly shrill cry came.

Van Rankyn crashed through the palms, stopped, clawed at a blood-stained hand, and spun around in agony.

"My God!" Sir Gregory's voice thundered. "What have you done, woman—what have you done?"

All his spirit was in violent revolt. All his loyal austerity was run into a flux of hottest fury. Before his eyes—the eyes of Mr. Justice Congreve, one of His Majesty's learned judges in the law—a man had been shot by a woman!

"Mad! You're mad! What—"

"Save your breath." This was the hard talking of Averil Egerton, who had been born in jungle territory and who held its simple code in greater awe than any formula of man. "Look to your son. This—this other affair—is mine. It was kill or be killed. One of us would have gone out of here feet foremost, if I hadn't shot."

A hiss came from Van Rankyn: "You!"

"I guessed as much, *Knife-hair*!" Again she employed that curious term. "Come—you're not so badly hurt as all that. Lucky for your hand my gun is only a point-three-five—You'll get over it."

Van Rankyn did not move, save to rock and tremble.

"Come on!" Averil raised the automatic. "I'm in no mood for defiance—Come!"

The "Dutchman" moved forward.

The judge gasped; Averil crinkled her eyes up to narrow slits.

Incongruous below impeccable trouser legs, "Van Rankyn's" feet showed. They were bare. Their toenails were lacquered with brilliant orange color. The dusky skin was marvelously ornamented by tattooed traceries . . .

And the feet were tiny—as tiny as the feet of a child. The little heels did not touch the ground, and a broad band of gold and diamonds coruscated about one ankle.

They were the beautiful feet of a woman—a savage woman.

"I'm glad you can show surprise, Sir Gregory," Averil calmly said. "It proves a lot—doesn't it?"

"A—a woman! Van Rankyn a—"

"A woman of the *Kina-Iedlin* people, Sir Gregory. A woman-with-knives-in-the-hair—about as deadly a subject for discussion as—as a cobra."

"A woman!" Sir Gregory was dumbfounded.

They had forgotten William Congreve.

When the shots were fired, his touch had been laid on one of the orchid blooms. Naturally, he started away—for all his hypnotized or drugged state, he still could feel the shock of that swift drama. But, in his turning away, he changed from an automaton into a man of individual existence.

Until that moment he had been nothing but a marionette for "Van Rankyn's" string-pulling. No, it appeared, not only was he released from the thraldom, but also deadly bent on avenging it!

While Averil had talked, he had blinked his eyes and listened. Into his dim brain the knowledge seeped that his father and this Miss Egerton were allied against his erstwhile master. Granted this, as well as his revolt, it dawned on him that he, as the strongest of the trio, should take the initiative in whatever struggle was going forward.

He menaced with his arms and gradually drew in on "Van Rankyn." His power of thought did not understand the import of his father's horrified "a woman"—he thought his father referred to Averil Egerton.

So, not knowing the truth, he dealt with "Van Rankyn" on terms not permitted to manhood, and launched himself at that stricken figure.

"Van, you hound!" he roared. "I'll settle with you for good! Try your rotten tricks on me, would you? You knew that thing'd kill me if I touched it—you said so, you murderous dog."

He clawed at "Van Rankyn's" neck.

THE woman stiffened and moved like a lithe beast. Bill Congreve yelled and turned a semi-somersault.

"That," said Averil, "is where our unfortunate William learned the jujutsu trick which nearly killed his brother." Strangely she had not interfered. "I think," she raised her voice, "that you'd better not try any more battery and assault, Mr. Congreve! Our esteemed 'Piet Van Rankyn' is a woman! But a woman only too well able to take care of herself! If you don't want a broken back—keep off her!"

"Van Rankyn" dabbed at the tiny hole that bled in "his" right hand. As Averil had remarked, her automatic fired only very tiny bullets. The shock was more than the wounding, and the sufferer was rapidly recovering from that.

"Well," came the snarling voice, "what remains, Miss-oh-so-clever Egerton? The police?"

"That, *Knife-hair*, is Sir Gregory's concern." She still leveled the automatic. "For my part, I think you must save me any further trouble about this orchid. It seems you were able to break its bud-sheaths in just that expert way which its successful blossoming demanded—"

Her talking grew deadly—"Now, *Knife-hair*, you'll come and do what you intended your 'creature,' William Congreve, to do."

The *Kina-Iedlin* woman went gray.

"Come," Averil said softly, "fertilize its blooms, so that Sir Gregory will be assured of its perennial flowering."

"Van Rankyn" cowered back.

"Come along," Averil said earnestly, "I'm not playing. I'm in deadly earnest—come and do what I say."

"It—it means," the *Kina-Iedlin* woman groaned rather than spoke her reply, "my death."

"Really?" Averil laughed. "And I suppose it wouldn't have meant *my* death if I had to do it—and I suppose you wouldn't have *murdered* William Congreve, by ordering *him* to do it?"

"It means death—for anyone."

CHAPTER VII

Death and Transfiguration

A VERIL lowered her pistol.

"You hear, Sir Gregory?"

The judge nodded. "I hear," he said.

"Your son would have died to secure the life of this devilish plant. That, in the first count, is attempted murder—in the last analysis, murder. Can you find the slightest sympathy for such a ghoulish creature?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because," Averil Egerton icily replied, "I want you, a judge, to judge me—now."

"Van Rankyn" was standing facing the largest of the blooms. Averil stood at its side. As he had been speaking, she had glanced from the trumpet to "Van Rankyn's" face.

Then, at her ejaculation—"now"—she shot out her right hand and smacked the fleshy *labellum* of the orchid with the automatic pistol.

A rain of gold came across the judge's vision. The badly-shaken William Congreve, from a distance, saw more clearly.

He saw two of the many mushroom-like darts fly from the throat of the great flower and strike "Van Rankyn" on the face. One hit the left cheek, the other struck "his" brow—the remainder spent themselves in flight and fell harmlessly to the floor.

Save for a horrid little cry, "Van Rankyn" took the shock of the darts without any emotion. The delicate face went grayer, the eyes closed,

and the slim body trembled. The heels touched the floor.

"You—you have killed me, Egerton," was what the voice said.

"As you would have killed the son of the man, Sir Gregory Congreve, who, innocently enough, bought your devil orchid. As you have killed him, anyway—with *Beu Hiang*."

Sir Gregory tried to speak: he was a shuddering mass of nervous flesh. He could not speak.

"When those darts turn down—" Averil spoke, and Sir Gregory's old eyes looked at the things, he saw that long golden pointers stuck out from the discs which had adhered to "Van Rankyn's" flesh, saw that they were bending downwards to that flesh—"you will die, *Knife-hair*. You daren't touch them—because you still hope—still hope that I will repent and get them away from you—you dare not, for to touch them with your hands means death as surely."

"You will repent," the voice moaned. "You dare not let me die, like this."

"Do you deserve more?"

There was no answer.

"But, whether you die, or whether you live is no longer my affair. I asked for judgment—I demand it now."

She turned on the old man. "Sir Gregory, it's in your hands—this creature, one cannot call her 'woman'—has supplied *Beu Hiang* to your son. He must surely die. In the space of two minutes, those poisoned darts from the orchid called Paradise will excoriate her skin—and she will die."

All the while, the temper of "Van Rankyn" was degenerating to sheerest terror. And all the while the judge was reading something in Averil's attitude that gave him a curious glow of hope.

"The Papuans and the people of the Islands know the secret of the antidote to *Beu Hiang*—" the judge saw now what Averil was driving at—

"On you lies the decision."

"To let the darts perform their task?"

"Yes! Yes—if this woman does

not pledge herself to reveal the antidote!"

"The—the root of *Bulbophyllum Clanseta* is the antidote to *Beu Hiang*," came the monotonous confession from "Van Rankyn." "Sir Gregory has—has specimens—growing here—I—must live."

Averil Egerton pulled her fingers back into the cuff of her sleeve. Making a protection of the material, she gently caught hold of the sticky darts. Equally as gently she pulled the deadly things away.

Sir Gregory took a little step or two forward. He lifted his foot and kicked—a strange fluting noise lived for a while, then faded and was forever lost—in the ruin of the orchid called Paradise. Flowers and bulbs and leaves and stems—all were crushed into a squelchy mess.

As for "Van Rankyn," he had stolen away. One moment "he" was there and the next moment "he" was gone, in the instant their backs had been turned. Gone—gone away to die, victim of venom dwelling in beauty, dwelling in a flower—for Averil knew that the darts had got in their deadly work before she had plucked them out.

Or had "Van Rankyn," like the ghostly dancer on the dunes, flown away into the upper air, a wraith, an evanescence, tragically seeking another orchid to watch over and dwell in? That question Averil could not answer. She saw tears in Sir Gregory's eyes, but all she knew in her heart was joy.

* * * * *

One could not have seen in the fair-haired and gentle-voiced girl in the library, the next day, any resemblance to the grim and competent woman of the tragedy of the Paradise Orchid.

William Congreve, already a better man after his first experiments with the antidote to *Beu Hiang*, sat quietly watching her. Lacy, his head all bandages, smoked and admired—without any reticence; admiration, and more, lived in his pleasant eyes. As for old Sir Gregory, he asked questions.

"You think 'Van Rankyn' would

have suffered, had he lived and had the orchid also lived, in my keeping?"

"That depends on what she was," Averil said softly, conscious of Lacy's gaze and of the color it brought to her cheeks. "As a vestal of the flower, her mandarin masters had given her a task. She had to bring *Egertonii* to bloom, secure its living and fertilized spore, then, and then only, destroy it. They wanted that spore—to beget another family of emblems in America. Her failure meant her death, even if the darts themselves had not been lethal.

"But, as a creature of wanton flame, a dancer to a self-made and eerie music, an orchid's sweet yet terrible voice, a singing shadow rising from a flower of beauty now crushed and dead, she is now where no man can ever find her. She has gone back into that twilight world which our everyday lives cannot comprehend and which even our rare nocturnal dreams of ecstatic divination can only guess at. . . ."

WILLIAM CONGREVE spoke up shyly. "If the second assumption is true, why was it necessary for her to trick me into taking *Beu Hiang* to get me to work her will?"

"I don't know—I can only guess—even a supernatural agency must use the natural means at hand, and even a supernatural agency may not be immune to the poisons of this world, poisons themselves mysterious and defiant of all chemical analysis.

"The *Egertonii* was dangerous and mysterious, even to her. She knew that it secured fertilization by curious means—death-dealing means. *Egertonii* had three faculties: one of trembling movement, the second of alluring song, and the third of 'air' of intoxication.

"A small animal, or bird, for that matter, lured by the intoxication and curious to determine what other squeaking little animal or bird was immured in the great flower throat, would try to push into that throat. Immediately, a rain of viscid and poisonous discs, with golden pollen plumes on them, would rap out of

the throat and stick to the head of the marauder. They killed, quickly—and, after a few moments, the pollinated spore plumes bent and touched the ground—in that place, fed by the decaying instrument of fertilization, another orchid bloomed.

"My porters, in their nightly talks, after I found the bloom, gave me to understand all that I know. The bird-like notes gave rise to the belief that an outcast 'singer from the shadows,' out of Paradise—one of the *Koe se l'an*—had taken up abode in the plant. All the rest followed. The orchid was deadly, it was exquisitely beautiful—the *Hue Se Tsi L'an* adopted it as their emblem and embellished its natural wonders with necromancies of their own.

"They appointed *Kina-Jedlin* women as its virgin 'watchers'—*Kina-Jedlins*, whom some authorities swear are offsprings of Spanish women taken from some galleon in olden days, and sold to mandarins, a race of beautiful half-castes. If so, our 'Van Rankyn' was one of those.

"And if she was, she wasn't going to risk her life with those poisonous pollinated-spores. William was supposed to do that. But all's well that ends well. I'm only sorry about your two thousand pounds, Sir Gregory."

Sir Gregory smiled wryly. "I'd gladly bear the loss of the two thousand pounds," he said quietly, "if you could clear up certain other matters for me, for all of us."

"I know," Averil said softly. "The ghostly dancer on the dunes."

She shook her head and there was a momentary sadness in her eyes.

"Who was she?" she asked. "'Van Rankyn'?" Again she shook her head. "And 'Van Rankyn'? Was he—she—flesh and blood? Who danced in the sand-pit? Who blew on those pipes while the dance went on? Was it the orchid making music—the choir of the singing shadows. . . ."

Her voice trailed off—Sir Gregory's rose in its place:

"Perhaps there are some questions that are best left unanswered. Let us be thankful that it is the orchid that is dead and we who are alive. Let us be thankful that you persuaded that creature to yield up the secret of the antidote for *Beu Hiang*. Eh, William? As for Lacy, there, I observe that he has other things to be thankful for. I'm very, very glad. . . ."

Averil blushed. And Lacy, by the fireside, knew that Averil Egerton, the world famous expert on orchids—the "intrepid" Miss Egerton of newspaper fame—had spoken from a heart that would soon forget its stern training—for a gentler and yet more passionate power—aye, for love.

He knew the orchid called Paradise had killed her career—but through her clear eyes he saw another Paradise. They could both enter there.

Next Issue: LOGODA'S HEAD, by AUGUST W. DERLETH