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# WHITE ORCHIDS



"Never shall I forget the despairing scream of my unlucky guide."

**M**EN call me mad. They have labeled me a maniac and shut me away in this grim asylum. The more I try to convince them of the truth, the more they laugh. Bad I am; a criminal I am; but insane I am not. Now, incarcerated within madhouse walls, I will write my story; and perhaps, after I have gone, they will believe.

It all began last September; now it is June. In a tall maple outside my iron-barred window, robins are singing. To the birds it is summer; nine months ago it was summer in my heart, too. Nine months ago! How long it seems!

Nine months ago, I visited the Western Hospital of that old French-Canadian city, Montreal. And there, on a cot near the door in the fifth

public ward, I saw Old Matthewson, the orchid-gatherer. Fever was devouring him, and part of the time he was delirious. But, during lucid moments, he told me his strange story; told me of the marvelous flowers for which I have sold my soul!

I laughed at him at first, I remember; laughed incredulously. Had not I myself for many years collected orchids; searched them out from the farthest corners of the globe? Certainly I had; and critics had pronounced my collection the most excellent of any—better even than that of Jasper Carrington, my most bitter rival.

Old Matthewson saw me laugh; saw my sneer of unbelief. Then with shaking fingers he drew from be-

neath his pillow the map, and pointed out to me the place, far in the interior of Brazil, where the flowers grew. And as his finger touched the rude sketch, his forehead contracted; a look of fear came into his pale blue eyes; and from his burning lips trembled the word, "Danger!" Suddenly he raised himself upon his elbow and stared in horror past me into nothingness. Then, uttering a sharp cry of "White Orchids!" he fell back dead.

As a nurse came hurrying from the other end of the ward, I thrust the paper into my coat pocket. After all, the man was dead, dead as a smelt. Why, then, as he could not use his map, should not I appropriate it? I calmly listened to the anger of the nurse, who accused me of exciting the patient. Then, as she turned again to the body, I walked quickly from the building.

Next morning I returned to my home in New York, taking the map with me. That evening, I spread it before me on a table in my den, and gloated over it. I studied it intently; studied it till every point upon it was firmly fixed within my mind. Finally, putting the chart aside, I sketched it from memory upon another paper; then compared the two. In delight, I found my new map was a counterpart of the original. True, I had left out a few minor details, but all important features were identical.

Placing my own sketch within a book, I folded Matthewson's, and put it in my pocketbook. Then I went down to the Collectors' Club.

Many of the members were there that night, among others, Carrington.

I behaved foolishly that evening. Excited by my discovery, I drank deeply, and became badly intoxicated. During a discussion with Carrington regarding the merits of

our collections, I boasted of my new find.

Carrington laughed contemptuously: "You're dreaming, man! Or rather—you're drunk!"

Taking out the map, I waved it dramatically.

"Drunk, am I?" I exclaimed. "There's the map to prove what I've told you! Oh no, you don't!"—as he reached for it—"the secret's mine, mine alone! I'm the only white man who knows where those orchids are!"

Carrington's eyes sparkled with desire, and for a moment he appeared almost ready to assault me. Then, with a muttered oath, he turned away.

Flushed with my triumph, I called loudly for another drink. Then for another, and another.

At an early hour next morning, I staggered to a couch in an inner room, and falling upon it, lost consciousness.

**W**HEN I opened my eyes, I remembered what a fool I had made of myself the night before. I could not recall all the idiotic things I had done, but I could remember enough. Then I thought of my map. I felt for my pocketbook. What a relief when my fingers touched it!

Reassured, I went back to my house, and entering my den, locked the door. I opened the pocketbook. The map was gone!

For several minutes I paced the room, wildly cursing. Though I had no proof, I was certain that Carrington had stolen my chart.

Then I laughed. After all, I still had a reliable map. I crossed to the table and opened the book. Yes, there lay my new map, just as I had left it.

I went to the 'phone, intending to enter a complaint at the club. Then I paused. Such a proceeding would be useless. Most of the members

were good friends of Carrington's, and many were my personal enemies. If I spread the news of my loss, I should gain nothing, and besides, I should make a laughing-stock of myself.

I wished, however, to learn what Carrington was doing. So I rang him up. A servant answered, a new servant who did not recognize my voice. I asked to speak to her master. She told me that Mr. Carrington had left that morning for his house at Jacksonville. No—she didn't know how long he'd be away.

But I had found out enough. I knew why Carrington had gone to Jacksonville. It was there that his powerful biplane was housed.

I made a rapid calculation. Carrington's airplane had been used in a long non-stop flight a few weeks before, and would need a thorough overhauling before it would be fit for service. He could scarcely have it ready before a fortnight.

Then, too, an accident might delay him, nor could he depend upon finding a good landing-place in those South American jungles.

I consulted shipping lists. The fast steamer *Bolivia* was to clear for Para, Brazil, that very afternoon.

I acted immediately. When the *Bolivia* sailed, I was aboard.

LEAVING the steamer at Para, I procured an Indian guide and a swift motor-boat, and started up the Amazon.

From the outset, disaster attended me. When near the place where I intended leaving the boat, we ran against a submerged rock. Being very near land, we managed to save both our lives and part of our supplies, including my rifle and several boxes of cartridges; but the boat sank before we could get out everything. Nearly all of my collecting paraphernalia went to the bottom; all I had left were a few large

manila envelopes, such as I used for pressing flowers.

This was bad enough, but worse was to come. On the third day after we had left the river and struck inland, came tragedy. We were pushing our way through dense jungle, when suddenly my young native, who was some distance ahead of me, uttered a despairing shriek. Running forward with rifle in hand, I was horrified to see the poor lad in the embrace of a huge anaconda, anchored by its tail to a small tree. At close range, I discharged the contents of my heavy rifle into the boa's head. It sank to the ground, its coils spasmodically tightened; then it unrolled and, releasing its victim, thrashed about in its death agony.

Knowing I had nothing more to fear from the big snake, I turned my attention to the native. The poor fellow was already nearly dead. That awful hug had crushed his ribs, and driving them against his lungs, had forced the breath from his body. Even as I bent over him, the last spark of life flickered out.

Never shall I forget the despairing scream of my unlucky guide when the sinuous coils caught him, nor the sight of his broken, squeezed body. No! Nor the look of anguish pictured upon his dead face.

I buried my guide where he lay. Then, after consulting my map, I continued my journey.

Ten days later, I knew that if map and compass had not misled me, I must surely be near the place of the orchids. My heart tingling with excitement, I hastened on.

Above me on the tree branches, small green monkeys chattered indignation at my intrusion, while gaudily-feathered parrots shrilled insults.

I scarcely noticed these, so intent were my thoughts upon the flowers.

"Where is Carrington?" I wondered. Perhaps already he had

reached his objective. Perhaps already he had won the rich prize!

Spurred by the unwelcome thought, I quickened my pace.

As I advanced, I saw the forest becoming more open, and felt certain that I was nearing the end of my quest.

Then, suddenly emerging from the shade of the forest into clear sunlight, I gasped in amazement.

No! The map had not lied. There, not more than a hundred yards in front of me, were the orchids—hundreds of them—in full bloom!

And such orchids! In my most fantastic dreams I had never imagined anything so beautiful. They were white, of a spotless tint of whiteness that shamed all other colorings. Petals were white, even the leaves and bodies of the plants were of the same shade. White orchids!

At first, feasting my eyes upon the orchids, I saw nothing more. Then, as my gaze dropped upon something lying on the ground a few yards from the flowers, I sprang involuntarily back. The white, sun-bleached *something* had once been a living man!

Glancing about, my terrified eyes saw other things of a similar nature. In all, scattered about near the orchids, I counted a full score of skeletons—every one a human's.

I now recalled the dark warning that Old Mathewson had uttered just as life was leaving him.

What meant these flesh-bared bones in this lovely flower garden? Look where I might, I could see nothing which appeared dangerous. Yet the skeletons showed that danger threatened.

Then again I looked at the white orchids, and desire gripped me. Momentarily forgetting the grim spectacle of the dead men, I ran with outstretched hands toward the flowers.

As I drew nearer them, I became aware of a sweet, powerful scent. The aroma of it filled my nostrils; the whole atmosphere seemed clouded with the subtle perfume. I was running no longer. Instead, I was drunkenly staggering from side to side. The force of the perfume was overcoming me; my senses were reeling.

Now I realized the meaning of the danger, yet despite this, my desire for the orchids drove me on. Thunder rolled within my brain; my eyes were darkening; breath was leaving me; yet still I stumbled onward.

I had been about three hundred feet from the orchids when I had started; now I was a scant hundred. But my powers of endurance were rapidly diminishing; my very life seemed ebbing from me. And finally I fell headlong.

For some minutes I lay dazed; then with dogged effort again went forward, creeping upon hands and knees.

After covering a few feet in this manner, my limbs refused to function, and I fell again, stretched at full length on the ground, my fast-blinding eyes fixed covetously upon the orchids.

I knew now that I could not reach them. I had crossed little more than two-thirds of the distance, and already was almost lifeless. What then would be the result if I attempted to advance farther?

I hated to go back, but to remain meant death. Yet the perfume so dangerously sweet was luring me on. Every impulse in my body, mind and soul, clamored to me to go onward. But common sense told me to retreat while there was time.

So I commenced my backward journey. Too exhausted to rise, I crawled weakly toward security.

For minutes at a time strength deserted me, and I lay motionless, unable to move a single muscle.

Then my powers would return for a brief period, and again I would resume the fight. My granite-formed will urged me on. Had it not been for that, I must have lain down and let the poisonous breath of the orchids destroy me.

But that strong will saved me, and at length I again reached the edge of the forest. Rolling beneath the cooling shade of a tree, I lay still.

**H**ow long I lay there I do not know, but it was doubtless several hours.

Suddenly I heard a sound that I recognized, a sound apart from the jungle noises—the drone of a motor.

I turned my gaze upward. Was I dreaming, I wondered, or was that big, humming thing high above me in the sky really an airplane? Then I remembered Carrington.

Eagerly I watched. The machine was dropping lower; evidently its pilot had seen the flowers. He volplaned down to a perfect landing on the other side of the orchid garden.

The pilot stepped out, and at sight of him my heart thrilled. There could be no mistaking that stalwart figure.

While I looked, Carrington started toward the flowers.

Watching my rival, I could see how I, myself, must have behaved. I smiled grimly as Carrington's stride slackened and his steps became uncertain. And laughed aloud when he began to sway from side to side.

At last, Carrington fell, even as I had done. And again as I had done, he crept forward on all fours.

I now expected to see Carrington overpowered by the heady perfume, and believed he would soon abandon his attempt.

But, after some moments, I saw in mortification that he was evidently stronger than I, and that

where I had failed, he might succeed.

Still he held to his course, gradually, inch by inch, cutting down the distance between him and the orchids.

Now, only ten feet separated him from the flowers.

With one last, desperate effort, Carrington flung himself forward. Seizing the nearest orchid-plant, he tore it from the ground. Then he sank unconscious beside the flowers.

I watched, expecting each instant to see him begin his return trip. But he remained motionless, and finally I realized that the scent had completely overpowered him, and if he should lie there many minutes longer, he would surely die. And then I made a decision.

Frantically I looked about, but could see nothing to aid me in my purpose. Then I thought of the airplane, and hurried over to it. In the machine I found what I had hoped for—a coil of rope.

Unrolling it, I saw I had about one hundred and twenty feet of cord.

I set quickly at work, and a few moments later held a serviceable-looking lasso.

Then, drawing a long breath, I stepped into the poison-charged area.

Several times the dreadful perfume almost overcame me, but finally I arrived within about a hundred feet of Carrington.

Whirling the lariat above my head, I cast. Straight and true sped the noose, encircling my rival just below his shoulders. Carefully I drew the rope tighter. With a sigh of relief I felt the slack grow less. I began to walk backward, pulling Carrington after me. Soon both of us were beyond reach of the deadly perfume.

Still Carrington held the white orchid clutched fiercely in his hand. I

took hold of the plant and tried to pull it from him. His clenched fingers were like a vise. Then I used both hands, and putting forth all my strength, bent back the rigid fingers. A moment more, and the wonderful orchid was in my possession. I cried aloud with joy; I gazed upon it in rapture.

At last, carefully laying the flower aside, I again turned to Carrington. My noose was still drawn tight about his body. His eyes were closed; I began to fear that he was already dead. I caught him by the shoulders and shook him roughly. He wriggled weakly in my grasp; his eyes slowly opened. I saw that he recognized me. He opened his mouth; tried to speak; but could not.

I smiled cruelly. I picked up the white orchid and held it above him. At sight of it, passionate desire filled his eyes; he reached for it painfully. I laughed and drew it away; his almost powerless arm dropped back; he groaned.

I laughed again. Bending over him, I said mockingly:

"You want white orchids, Carrington; then you shall have them. I will give them to you—I will give you to them!"

Catching hold of the rope, I savagely dragged him toward the flowers. I drew him far within the poison belt; drew him till I felt myself weakening; till my tortured lungs, crying for air, hammered at my ribs. Then I left him.

All this time, Carrington had said nothing, though he fully realized what was happening. That is: his lips had not spoken; but what a curse his cold gray eyes had uttered! They had bored me through and through.

But when I returned to the orchid, any faint qualms of conscience left me. I would have killed another man if need were—aye, a score; a hundred—to obtain the flower. From

infancy I had loved flowers; almost worshiped them. But this white orchid—words can not describe it!

I held the flower a long time, in spellbound admiration. I would have liked to take the plant intact to North America, but I knew this would be impossible. Could I have used the airplane, I might have preserved the orchid alive, but unfortunately I had never learned to operate such a machine.

But the flower, even if pressed, would excite the envy of other collectors. In my pocket were the manila envelopes. Taking one out, I carefully broke off a big blossom and placed it inside. I sealed the envelope, then returned it to my pocket. And then, going toward the orchids, I tossed the blossom-raped plant in the direction of my victim.

Going back to the edge of the woods, I picked up my rifle, which I had laid down when attempting to secure the orchids, and after casting one last look at flowers, skeletons, and Carrington, I entered the jungle.

I was now faint with hunger, but the forest teemed with game. An hour later, I killed a peccary, built a fire, and roasted it. Then I heaped on wood and made a big blaze to keep off wild beasts. Completely worn out by the day's excitement, I lay down by the fire and fell asleep.

**E**ARLY in the morning I awoke, and continued my way back toward the river.

The fourth afternoon of my journey back, I felt sharp pains shooting through my head. I staggered on, but rapidly my strength forsook me. Fever had gripped me.

At last, my senses left me. I became delirious; what I did, I know not.

When I came to myself, I found myself in a boat on the Amazon, in the company of a party of American hunters. These told me that they



had found me burning with fever, helpless in the jungle. That they had done everything within their power to aid my recovery, and were now taking me back to civilization.

My first thought was of my orchid. I searched my pocket for the envelope; found it gone. I demanded it; they told me they had seen nothing of it; that when they had found me I had not so much as a rifle or compass with me.

I refused to believe my rescuers; I became violent; I cursed them for a lot of robbers. My excitement raised my temperature; brought on a relapse; again I lost my mind.

Of course, I do not remember what happened then, but have been told that the hunters brought me to Para, where they placed me in the care of an American doctor. He recognized me, and did everything possible for me. Gradually I recovered from the fever, but for a long time my mind was a blank. The doctor took me back to New York, and some weeks later, I regained my memory.

With remembrance there came a strange feeling. I was sorry I had killed Carrington. More than sorry; I hated myself for having done so. Had I still possessed the orchid, perhaps I might not have felt remorseful, but its loss had in a measure softened me, and I realized what an awful thing I had done.

At last the strain became too great to bear. I felt that even death would be preferable to my soul-anguish. So I went to the chief of police and told my story. He only laughed at me; declared that before leaving America, Carrington had told the press he was attempting a non-stop flight across the Atlantic; that his flight had been unsuccessful, and the accepted belief was that he had fallen into the sea.

As for my own tale, the chief considered it utterly absurd. He hinted that I was suffering from hallucina-

tions. I grew angry; a red film danced before my eyes; I struck him in the face.

It was then that they called me mad; then that they gave me a maniac's number, and dragged me to this horrible asylum. Death I would not have minded, but this——!

Since coming here, I have been tormented with awful visions. In my dreams, and often when awake, I have again seen those flowers of hell—and Carrington. I have seen his cursing gray eyes malignantly fixed upon me.

I know that if I remain longer in this lonely, dismal madhouse, I shall indeed become insane. But I will not remain!

This morning, I discovered something. One of the iron bars on my window is loose. Not very loose, but enough so I can pull it out. The maple tree where the birds are singing is quite near the window, and one of the branches is within easy reach. Tonight, when all is still, and the guards are asleep, I will escape. I have friends in the outer world who will hide me. They will give me money and help me to get away to some other country. And perhaps, when I am out in the busy world again, I shall not mind those cursing eyes; shall not behold such visions so often. Tonight, I will escape!

\* \* \* \* \*

*Extract from the report of Charles Warren, superintendent of the asylum:*

"Yesterday afternoon, Inmate No. 17 asked for pencil and paper. All the afternoon he wrote, and till nearly dark. This morning, when I entered his room, I found it empty. The pile of paper and pencil lay on the table, but Inmate No. 17 had gone. A brief examination showed that he had wrenched a bar from his window, and crawled through the opening. Going to the window, I looked out. Inmate No. 17 was lying on the ground twenty feet below. A broken branch lying beside him explained what had happened. Going downstairs, I went out and examined the body. Inmate No. 17 was dead. His neck was broken."