Fred M. White

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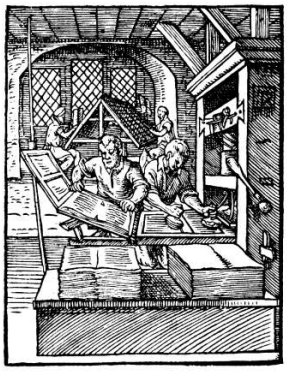

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CHAPTER I.

FLOWERS OF BLOOD.

The purple darkness seemed to be filled with a nebulous suggestion of things beautiful; long trails and ropes of blossoms hung like stars reflected in a lake of blue. As the eye grew accustomed to the gloom these blooms seemed to expand and beautify. There was a great orange globe floating on a violet mist, a patch of pink swam against an opaque window-pane like a flight of butterflies. Outside the throaty roar of Piccadilly could be distinctly heard; inside was misty silence and the coaxed and pampered atmosphere of the Orient. Then a long, slim hand—a hand with jewels on it—was extended, and the whole vast dome was bathed in brilliant light.

For once the electric globes had lost their garish pertinacity. There were scores of lamps there, but every one of them was laced with dripping flowers and foliage till their softness was like that of a misty moon behind the tree-tops. And the blossoms hung everywhere—thousands upon thousands of them, red, blue, orange, creamy white, fantastic in shape and variegated in hue, with a diabolical suggestiveness about them that orchids alone possess. Up in the roof, out of a faint cloud of steam, other blossoms of purple and azure peeped.

Complimented upon the amazing beauty of his orchid-house, Sir Clement Frobisher cynically remarked that the

folly had cost him from first to last over a hundred thousand pounds. He passed for a man with no single generous impulse or feeling of emotion; a love of flowers was the only weakness that Providence had vouchsafed to him, and he held it cheap at the money. You could rob Sir Clement Frobisher or cheat him or lie to him, and he would continue to ask you to dinner, if you were a sufficiently amusing or particularly rascally fellow, but if you casually picked one of his priceless Cypripediums——!

He sat there in his bath of brilliant blossoms, smoking a clay pipe and sipping some peculiarly thin and aggressive Rhine wine from a long, thin-stemmed Bohemian glass. He had a fancy for that atrocious grape juice and common ship's tobacco from a reeking clay. Otherwise he was immaculate, and his velvet dinner-jacket was probably the best-cut garment of its kind in London.

A small man, just over fifty, with a dome-like head absolutely devoid of hair, and shiny like a billiard-ball, a ridiculously small nose suggestive of the bill of a love-bird, a clean-shaven, humorous mouth with a certain hard cruelty about it, a figure slight, but enormously powerful. For the rest, Sir Clement was that rare bird amongst high-born species—a man, poor originally, who had become rich. He was popularly supposed to have been kicked out of the diplomatic service after a brilliant operation connected with certain Turkish Bonds. The scandal was an old one, and might have had no basis in fact, but the same *Times* that conveyed to an interested public the fact of Sir Clement Frobisher's retirement from the *corps diplomatique*, announced that the baronet in question had purchased the

lease of 947, Piccadilly, for the sum of ninety-five thousand pounds. And for seven years Society refused to admit the existence of anybody called Sir Clement Frobisher.

But the man had his title, his family, and his million or so well invested. Also he had an amazing audacity, and a moral courage beyond belief. Also he married a lady whose social claims could not be contested. Clement Frobisher went back to the fold again at a great dinner given at Yorkshire House. There it was that Earl Beauregard, a one-time chief of Frobisher's, roundly declared that, take him all in all, Count Whyzed was the most finished and abandoned scoundrel in Europe. Did not Frobisher think so? To which Frobisher replied that he considered the decision to be a personal slight to himself, who had worked so hard for that same distinction. Beauregard laughed, and the rest of the party followed suit, and Frobisher did much as he liked, ever after.

He was looking just a little bored now, and was debating whether he should go to bed, though it was not long after eleven o'clock, and that in the creamy month of the London season. Down below somewhere an electric bell was purring impatiently. The butler, an Armenian with a fez on his black, sleek head, looked in and inquired if Sir Clement would see anybody.

"If it's a typical acquaintance, certainly not, Hafid," Frobisher said, sleepily. "If it happens to be one of my picturesque rascals, send all the other servants to bed. But it's sure to be some commonplace, respectable caller."

Hafid bowed and withdrew. Down below the bell was purring again. A door opened somewhere, letting in the strident roar of the streets like a dirge, then the din shut

down again as if a lid had been clapped on it. From the dim shadow of the hall a figure emerged bearing a long white paper cone, handled with the care and attention one would bestow on a sick child.

"Paul Lopez to see you," Hafid said.

"Lopez!" Frobisher cried. "See how my virtue is rewarded. It is the return for all the boredom I have endured lately. Respectability reeks in my nostrils. I have been longing for a scoundrel—not necessarily a star of the first magnitude, a rival to myself. Ho, ho, Lopez!"

The newcomer nodded and smiled. A small, dark man with restless eyes, and hands that were never still. There was something catlike, sinuous, about him, and in those restless eyes a look of profound, placid, monumental contempt for Frobisher.

"You did not expect to see me?" he said.

"No," Frobisher chuckled. "I began to fear that you had been hanged, friend Paul. Do you recollect the last time we were together? It was——"

The voice trailed off with a muttered suggestion of wickedness beyond words. Frobisher lay back in his chair with the tangled ropes of blossoms about his sleek head; a great purple orchid with a living orange eye broke from the cluster and hung as if listening. Lopez looked round the bewildering beauty of it all with an artistic respect for his surroundings.

"The devil has looked after his dear friend carefully," he said, with the same calm contempt. Frobisher indicated it all with a comprehensive hand. "Now you are jealous," he said. "Hafid, the other servants are gone to bed? Good! Then you

may sit in the library till I require you. What have you got there, Paul?"

"I have a flower, an orchid. It is at your disposal, at a price."

"At a price, of course. What are you asking for it?"

Paul Lopez made no reply. He proceeded to remove the paper from the long cone, and disclosed a lank, withered-looking stem with faded buds apparently hanging thereto by attenuated threads. It might have been nothing better than a dead clematis thrown by a gardener on the dust-heap. The root, or what passed for it, was simply attached to a slap of virgin cork by a couple of rusty nails. Frobisher watched Lopez with half-closed eyes.

"Of course, I am going to be disappointed," he said. "How often have I gone hunting the eagle and found it to be a tit? The rare sensation of a new blossom has been denied me for years. Is it possible that my pets are going to have a new and lovely sister?"

He caressed the purple bloom over his head tenderly. Lopez drew from his pocket a great tangle of Manilla rope, yards of it, which he proceeded to loop along one side of the orchid-house. Upon this he twisted his faded stem, drawing it out until, with the dusty laterals, there were some forty feet of it.

"Where is your steam-pipe?" he asked.

Frobisher indicated the steam-cock languidly. Ever and again the nozzle worked automatically, half filling the orchid-house with the grateful steam which was as life to the gorgeous flowers. Lopez turned the cock full on; there

was a hiss, a white cloud that fairly enveloped his recent work.

"Now you shall see what you shall see," he said in his calm, cool voice. "Oh, my friend, you will be with your arms about my neck presently!"

Already the masses of flowers were glistening with moisture. It filled up the strands of the loose Manilla rope, and drew it up tight as a fiddle-string. Through the dim cloud Frobisher could see the dry stalks literally bursting into life.

"Aaron's rod," murmured Frobisher. "Do you know that for Aaron's rod, properly verified, and in good working order, I would give quite a lot of money?"

"You would cut it up for firewood to possess what I shall show you presently," said Lopez. "See here."

He turned off the steam-cock and the thin, vapoury cloud rapidly dispelled. And then behold a miracle! The twisted, withered stalk was a shining, joyous green, from it burst a long glistening cluster of great white flowers, pink fringed, and with just a touch of the deep green sea in them. They ran along the stem like the foam on a summer beach. And from them, suspended on stems so slender as to be practically invisible to the eye, was a perfect fluttering cloud of smaller blossoms of the deepest cardinal red. Even in that still atmosphere they floated and trembled for all the world like a palpitating cloud of butterflies hovering over a cluster of lilies. Anything more chaste, more weird, and at the same time more bewilderingly beautiful, it would be impossible to imagine.

Frobisher jumped to his feet with a hoarse cry of delight. Little beads of perspiration stood on his sleek head. The man was quivering from head to foot with intense excitement. With hesitating forefinger he touched the taut Manilla rope and it hummed like a harp-string, each strand drawn rigid with the moisture. And all the moths there leapt with a new, hovering life.

"The Cardinal Moth," Frobisher said hoarsely. "Hafid, it is the Cardinal Moth!"

Hafid came, from the darkness of the study with a cry something like Frobisher's, but it was a cry of terror. His brown face had turned to a ghastly, decayed green, those lovely flowers might have been a nest of cobras from the terror of his eye.

"Chop it up, destroy it, burn it!" he yelled. "Put it in the fire and scatter the ashes to the four winds. Trample on it, master; crush the flower to pieces. He is mad, he has forgotten that dreadful night in Stamboul!"

"Would you mind taking that tankard of iced water and pouring it over Hafid's head?" said Frobisher. "You silly, superstitious fool! The Stamboul affair was a mere coincidence. And so there was another Cardinal Moth besides my unfortunate plant all the time! Oh, the beauty, the gem, the auk amongst orchids! Where, where did you get it from?"

"It came from quite a small collection near London."

"The greedy ruffian! Fancy the man having a Cardinal Moth and keeping it to himself like that! The one I lost was a mere weed compared to this. Name your price, Paul, and if it

is too high, Hafid and I will murder you between us and swear that you were a burglar shot in self-defence."

Lopez laughed noiselessly—a strange, unpleasant laugh.

"You would do it without the slightest hesitation," he said. "But the orchid is quite safe with you, seeing that the owner is dead, and that his secret was all his own. And the price is a small one."

"Ah, you are modest, friend Paul! Name it."

"You are merely to tell a lie and to stick to it. I am in trouble, in danger. And I hold that hanging is the worst use you can put a man to. If anything happens, I came here last night at ten o'clock. I stayed till nearly midnight. Hafid must remember the circumstances also."

"Hafid," Frobisher said slowly, "will forget or remember anything that I ask him to."

Hafid nodded with his eyes still fixed in fascinated horror on the palpitating, quivering, crimson floating over its bed of snow. He heard and understood, but only by instinct.

"I was at home all the evening, and her ladyship is away," said Frobisher. "I was expecting a mere commonplace rascal—not an artist like yourself, Paul—and the others had gone to bed. And you were here for the time you said. Is not that so, Hafid?"

"Oh, by the soul of my father, yes!" Hafid said in a frozen voice. "Take it and burn it, and scatter it. What my lord says is the truth. Take it and burn it, and scatter it."

"He'll be all right in the morning," Frobisher said. "Lopez, take the big steps and festoon that lovely new daughter of mine across the roof. You can fasten it to those hooks. To-morrow I will have an extra steam valve for her ladyship. Let

me see—if she gets her bath of steam every night regularly she will require no more. Aphrodite, beautiful, your bath shall be remembered."

He kissed his fingers gaily to the trembling flowers now hooked across the roof. Already the loose Manilla rope was drying and hanging in baggy folds that made a more artistic foil for the quivering red moths. It was only when the steaming process was going on that the thin, strong ropes drew it up humming and taut as harp-strings.

"Ah, that is like a new planet in a blue sky!" Frobisher cried. "Lopez, I am obliged to you. Come again when I am less excited and I will suitably reward you. To-night I am *tête montêe*—I am not responsible for my actions. And the lie shall be told for you, a veritable *chef-d'oeuvre* amongst lies. Sit down, and the best shall not be good enough for you."

"I must go," Lopez said in the same even tones. "I have private business elsewhere. I drink nothing and I smoke nothing till business is finished. Good-night, prince of rascals, and fair dreams to you."

Lopez passed leisurely into the black throat of the library, Hafid following. Frobisher nodded and chuckled, not in the least displeased. He had not been so excited for years. The sight of those blossoms filled him with unspeakable pleasure. For their sakes he would have committed murder without the slightest hesitation. He had eyes for nothing else, ears deaf to everything. He heeded not the purr of the hall bell again, he was lost to his surroundings until Hafid shook him soundly.

"Count Lefroy to see you, and Mr. Manfred," he said. "I told them you were engaged, but they said that perhaps

——"

Frobisher dropped into his chair with the air of a man satiated with a plethora of good things.

"Now what have I done to deserve all this beatitude!" he cried. "An unique find and a brother collector to triumph over, to watch, to prick with the needle of jealousy. But stop, I must worship alone to-night. Say that I shall particularly desire to see them at luncheon to-morrow."

CHAPTER II.

ANGELA.

Frobisher sat the following morning in the orchid-house chuckling to himself and waiting the advent of his two guests to luncheon. Heaven alone could follow the twists and turns of that cunning brain. Frobisher was working out one of his most brilliant schemes now. He took infinite pains to obtain by underground passages the things he might have obtained openly and easily. But there was the delight of puzzling other people.

He looked up presently, conscious of a presence beyond his own. In the dark Frobisher could always tell if anybody came into the room. He crooked his wicked head sideways with the air of a connoisseur, and in sooth there was good cause for his admiration. Here was something equal at least to his most beautiful and cherished orchids, a tall, graceful

girl with shining brown hair, and eyes of the deepest, purest blue. Her complexion was like old ivory, and as pure, the nose a little short, perhaps, but the sweet mouth was full of strength and character.

"I came for the flowers that you promised me, Sir Clement," she said.

"Call me uncle and you shall have the conservatory," Frobisher grinned. "I am your uncle by marriage, you know, and your guardian by law. Angela, you are looking lovely. With the exception of a peasant woman I once met in Marenna, you are the most beautiful creature I ever saw."

Angela Lyne listened with absolute indifference. She was accustomed to be studied like this by Sir Clement Frobisher, whom she loathed and detested from the bottom of her heart. But Lady Frobisher was her aunt, and Frobisher her guardian for the next year, until she came of age, in fact.

"Give me the flowers," she said. "I am late as it is. I have sent my things on, for I shall dine with Lady Marchgrave after the concert, and come home alone. Hafid will let me in."

"Better take a latchkey," Frobisher suggested. "There! Let me pin them in for you. I'll show you an orchid when you have time to examine it that will move even you to admiration. But not now; she is too superb a creature for passing admiration. Now I think you will do."

There was no question of Frobisher's taste or his feeling for arranging flowers. The blossoms looked superb and yet so natural as they lay on Angela's breast—white orchids shot with sulphur. They were the theme of admiration an hour later at Lady Marchgrave's charity concert; they

gleamed again on Angela's corsage as she sat in the Grosvenor Square drawing-room at dinner. Five-and-twenty people sat round the long table with its shaded lights and feathery flowers. There were distinguished guests present, for Lady Marchgrave was by way of being intellectual, but Angela had eyes for one man only. He had come a little late, and had slipped quietly into a chair at the bottom of the table—a tall man with a strong face, not exactly handsome, but full of power. The clean-shaven lips were very firm, but when the newcomer smiled his face looked singularly young and sweet. Angela's dinner partner followed her glance with his eyes.

"If it isn't that beast Denvers," he muttered. "I thought he had been murdered in the wilds of Armenia or some such desirable spot. You ought to be glad, Angela."

"I am glad, Mr. Arnott," Angela said coldly. "Permit me to remind you again that I particularly dislike being called by my Christian name; at least, at present."

The little man with the hooked nose and the shifting, moist eye, put down his champagne glass savagely. For some deep, mysterious reason, Sir Clement favoured George Arnott's designs upon Angela, and if nothing interfered he was pretty sure to get his own way in the end. At present Angela was coldly disdainful; she little dreamt of the power and cunning of the man she was thwarting. She turned her head away, absently waiting for Lady Marchgrave's signal. There was a flutter and rustle of silken and lace draperies presently, and the chatter of high-bred voices floating from the hall. A good many people had already assembled in the suite of rooms beyond, for Lady

Marchgrave's receptions were popular as well as fashionable. Angela wandered on until she came to the balcony overlooking the square. She leant over thoughtfully—her mind had gone back to such a night a year or so before.

"Mine is a crescent star to-night," a quiet voice behind her said. "I seemed to divine by instinct where you were. Angela, dear Angela, it is good to be with you again."

The girl's face flushed, her blue eyes were full of tenderness. Most people called her cold, but nobody could bring that accusation against her now. Her two hands went out to Harold Denvers, and he held them both. For a long while the brown eyes looked into the heavenly blue ones.

"Still the same?" Denvers asked. "Nobody has taken what should be my place, Angela?"

"Nobody has taken it, and nobody is ever likely to," Angela smiled. "There is supposed to be nothing between us; you refused to bind me, and you did not write or give me your address, but my heart is yours and you know it. And if you changed I should never believe in anything again."

"If I should change! Dear heart, is it likely? If you only knew what I felt when I caught sight of you to-night. My queen, my beautiful, white queen! If I could only claim you before all the world!"

Angela bent her head back behind the screen of a fluttering, silken curtain and kissed the speaker. He held her in his arms just for one blissful moment.

"It seems just the same," he said, "as if the clock had been put back a year, to that night when Sir Clement found us out. The son of the man whom he had ruined and his rich

and lovely ward! There was a dramatic scene for you! But he only grinned in that diabolical way of his, and shortly after that mission to Armenia was offered to me. I never guessed then who procured it for me, but I know now as well as I know that Sir Clement never intended me to come back."

"Harold! Do you really mean to say that—that——"

"You hesitate, of course. It is not a pretty thing to say. Life is cheap out there, and if I was killed, what matter? Let us talk of other and more pleasant things."

"Of your travels and adventures, for instance. Did you find any wonderful flowers, like you did, for instance, in Borneo, Harold? Where did you get that lovely orchid from?"

A single blossom flamed on the silk lapel of Denvers' coat —a whitish bloom with a cloud of little flowers hovering over it like moths. It was the Cardinal Moth again.

"Unique, is it not?" Harold said. "Thereby hangs a strange, romantic tale which would take too long to tell at present. What would Sir Clement give for it?"

"Let me have it before I go," asked Angela, eagerly. "I should like to show it to Sir Clement. He has some wonderful flower that he wants me to see, but I feel pretty sure that he has nothing like that. I shall decline to say where I got the bloom from."

Denvers removed the exquisite bloom with its nodding scarlet moths and dexterously attached it to Angela's own orchids. The thing might have been growing there.

"It seems strange to see that bloom on your innocent breast," Harold said. "It makes me feel quite creepy when I look at it. If you only knew the sin and misery and shame

and crime that surrounds the Cardinal Moth you would hesitate to wear it."

Angela smiled; she did not possess the imaginative vein.

"You shall tell me that another time," she said. "Meanwhile you seem to have dropped from the clouds.... Are your plans more promising for the future?"

"A little nebulous for the present," Denvers admitted, "though the next expedition, which is not connected with Sir Clement Frobisher, promises well for the future. There is a lot to be done, however, and I am likely to be in London for the next three weeks or so. And you?"

"We are here for the season, of course. My aunt is staying at Chaffers Court till Friday, hence the fact that I am here alone. If you are very good you shall take me as far as Piccadilly in a taxi. I must see a good deal of you, Hal, for I have been very lonely."

There was a pathetic little droop in Angela's voice. Harold drew her a little closer.

"I wish I could take you out of it, darling," he said. "For your sake, we must try and make the next venture a success. If we can only start the company fairly, I shall be able to reckon on a thousand a year. Do you think you could manage on that, Angela?"

"Yes, or on a great deal less," Angela smiled. "I could be happy with you anywhere. And you must not forget that I shall have a large fortune of my own some day."

Other people were drifting towards the cool air of the balcony now, George Arnott amongst the number. It was getting late, and Angela was tired. She whispered Harold to procure her a cab, and that she would say good-night to

Lady Marchgrave and join him presently. The cab came, and so did the lights of Piccadilly all too soon. Denvers lingered on the steps just for a moment. He was going down to a big country house on Saturday for the week-end. Would Angela come if he could procure her an invitation? Angela's eyes replied for her. She was in the house at length by the aid of her latchkey. The dining-room door opened for a moment; there was a rattle of conversation and the smell of Egyptian cigarettes. Evidently Sir Clement was giving one of his famous impromptu dinner-parties. Angela took the spray of orchids from her breast and passed hurriedly in the direction of the orchid-house. The bloom would keep best there, she thought.

As she passed along the corridor the figure of a man preceded her. The stranger crept along, looking furtively to the right and the left. From his every gesture he was doing wrong here. Then he darted for the orchid-house and Angela followed directly she had recovered herself. She would corner the man in the conservatory and demand his business. In the conservatory Angela looked about her. The man had vanished.

He had utterly gone—he was nowhere to be seen. Angela rubbed her eyes in amazement. There was no other way out of the conservatory. She stood therewith the Cardinal Moth in her hand, aware now that she was looking into the scared face of Hafid.

"Take it and burn it, and destroy it," he said in a dazed kind of way. "Take it and burn it at once. Dear lady, will you go to bed? Take it and burn it—my head is all hot and

confused. Dear lady, do not stay here, the place is accursed. By the Prophet, I wish I had never been born."

CHAPTER III.

CROSSED SWORDS.

Hafid came into the library and pulled to the big bronze gates of the orchid-house like the portals of a floral paradise. There were flowers here: stephanotis climbing round the carved mantel, ropes of orchids dangling from the electroliers, in one corner a mass of maiden-hair fern draped the wall. Even the pictures in their Florentine frames were roped with blossoms.

Frobisher glanced beyond the carved and twisted gates with a peculiar smile after Angela had departed. His luncheon guests were late. He looked more like a mischievous bird than usual. There was an air of pleased anticipation about him as of a man who is going to witness a brilliant comedy.

There came to him a tall man with a heavy moustache and an unmistakable military swagger. If Frobisher resembled a parrot, Lefroy was most unmistakably a hawk. He passed in society generally as a cavalry officer high in favour of his Majesty the Shan of Ganistan; more than one brilliant expedition against the hill-tribes had been led by him. But some of the hill-men could have told another tale.

"Well, Lefroy," Frobisher exclaimed, genially. "This is a pleasure, a greater pleasure than you are aware of. Mr. Manfred, take a seat."

Lefroy's secretary bowed and sank into a deep chair. His face was absolutely devoid of emotion, a blank wall of whiteness with two eyes as expressionless as shuttered windows. Most people were disposed to regard Manfred as an absolute fool. The hill-men at the back of Ganistan muttered in their beards that he was, if possible, worse than his master.

Lefroy reached for a cigar, lighted it, and looked around him. The white-faced Manfred seemed to have lapsed into a kind of waking sleep. A more utter indifference to his surroundings it would be hard to imagine. Yet he was a kind of intellectual camera. He had never been in Frobisher's library before. But a year hence he could have entered it in the dark and found his way to any part of the room with absolute certainty.

"I came to see you over that central Koordstan Railway business," Lefroy said.

"Precisely," Frobisher smiled. "I might have guessed it. As an Englishman—though you have so picturesque a name—you are anxious that England should receive the concessions. In fact, you have already promised it to our Government."

Lefroy made a motion as who should move a piece on a chess-board.

"That is one to you," he said. "Yes, you are quite right. Whereas you?"

"Whereas I am interested on behalf of the Russian Government. I tried our people here two years ago, but they refused to have anything to do with me."

"Refused to trust you, in point of fact."

Frobisher laughed noiselessly. The wrinkled cunning of his face and the noble expanse of his forehead looked strange together.

"Quite right," he said. "They refused to trust me. Any man who knows my record would be a fool to do so. But in that instance I was perfectly loyal, because it was my interest to be so. Still I bowed with chastened resignation and—immediately offered my services to Russia. Then you slipped in and spoilt my little game."

"There is half a million hanging to the thing, my dear fellow."

"Well, well! But you have not won yet. You can do nothing till you have won the Shan of Koordstan to your side. Whichever way he throws his influence the concession goes. And He of Koordstan and myself are very friendly. He dines here to-night."

Lefroy started slightly. He glanced at Frobisher keenly under his shaggy brows. The latter lay back smoking his filthy clay with dreamy ecstasy.

"Yes," he went on, "He dines here to-night to see my orchids. My dear fellow, if you and Manfred will join us, I shall be delighted."

Lefroy muttered something that sounded like acceptance. Manfred came out of his waking dream, nodded, and slipped back into conscious unconsciousness again.

"That picturesque and slightly drunken young rascal has a passion for orchids," said Frobisher. "It is the one redeeming point in his character. But you know that, of course. You haven't forgotten the great coup so nearly made with the Cardinal Moth."

"The plant that was burnt at Ochiri," Lefroy said uneasily.

"The same. What a wax the old man was in, to be sure! Ah, my dear Lefroy, we shall never, never see a Cardinal Moth again!"

"If I could," Lefroy said hoarsely. "Your chances with the Shan of Koordstan wouldn't be worth a rap. With that orchid I could buy the man body and soul. And the plant that was stolen from us at Turin is dead long ago. It must be, such a find as that couldn't possibly have been kept quiet."

"I'll bet you a thousand pounds that orchid is alive," Frobisher said dryly.

Lefroy sat up straight as a ramrod. The waxed ends of his big moustache quivered. He turned to Manfred, anxiety, anger, passion, blazing like a brief torch in his eyes. Manfred seemed to divine rather than know that he was under that black battery, and shook his head.

"I fail to see the point of the joke," Lefroy said.

Frobisher signed to Hafid to throw back the gates. Lefroy was on his feet by this time. He breathed like one who has run fast and far. Manfred followed him with the air of a man who is utterly without hope or expectation.

"There!" Frobisher cried with a flourish of his hand. "What is that you see beyond the third tier of ropes? Ah, my beauty, here comes another lover for you!"

Lefroy's black eyes were turned up towards the high dome of the orchid-house. Other tangled ropes and loops of blossoms met his gaze and held it as he glanced in the direction indicated by Frobisher. And there, high up above them all he could see the long, foamy, pink mass of blooms with the red moths dancing and hovering about them like things of life.

"The Cardinal Moth," he screamed. "Manfred, Manfred, curse you!"

He wheeled suddenly round in a whirl of delirious passion, and struck Manfred a violent blow in the mouth. The secretary staggered back, a thin stream of blood spurted from his split lip. But he said nothing, manifested no feeling or emotion of any kind. With a handkerchief he staunched the flow with the automatic action of a marionette.

"The Cardinal Moth," Frobisher said as genially as if nothing had happened. "The gem has but recently come into my possession. It will be a pleasant surprise for our friend the Shan to-night."

Just for an instant it looked as if Lefroy were about to transfer his spleen from Manfred to his host. But Frobisher had been told enough already. The cowardly blow said as plainly as words could speak that Frobisher had obtained the very treasure that Lefroy was after. He imagined that his secretary had played him false. And, moreover, he knew that Frobisher knew this.

"You've got it," he said. He seemed to have a difficulty in swallowing something. "But you could not bring yourself to part with it. You couldn't do it."

"My good Lefroy, every man has his price, even you and I. My beloved Moth may not be a very good trap, but I shall find it a wonderfully efficient bait."

"I dare say," Lefroy returned moodily. "Can I examine the flower closer?"

"Certainly. Hafid, bring the extending steps this way. Be careful of those ropes and tangles. An active man like you could climb up the stays and bracket to the roof."

Lefroy was a long time examining the flower. He was torn by envy and admiration. When he came down again his face was pale and his hands trembled.

"The real thing," he said, "the real, palpitating, beautiful thing. But there is blood upon it."

"Born in blood and watered with the stream of life. No, I am not going to tell you where I got it from. And now, my dear Lefroy, what will you take for your Koordstan concessions?"

Lefroy said nothing, but there was a gleam in his downcast eyes. Then presently he broke into a laugh that jarred on the decorous silence of the place.

"The game is yours," he said. "White to play and mate in three moves. Still there may be a way out. And, on the other hand, you must be very sure of your game to show me that. Lord, I'd give twopence to have you alone in a dark corner!"

He rose abruptly, turned on his heel, and made for the door, followed by the white automaton with the bleeding lip. He could hear Frobisher's diabolical chuckle as the big bronze gates closed behind him. It was perhaps the most silent meal ever partaken of at Frobisher's. He was glad at length to see the last of his luncheon guests.