

Phalaenopsis Gloriosa

by John Jason Trent, 1875-1932

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TWO men sat over their liquor and cigars in the big library of Driscoll's country place. It was a chilly evening in April, and the great pine logs which blazed on the hearth before them and threw tremendous lightings over the books, paintings, and heavy ebony furnishings of the apartment scarcely served to dissipate the chill of the unused room.

To the right, three long French windows looked westward over acres of lawn sweeping down to the broad river, while to the south the view was shut off by dense masses of evergreen shrubbery, supplemented by vines and creepers which had flung their festoons of delicate leafage in every direction across the windows. A great elm standing guard at this corner of the house tossed its branches to and fro in the spring wind and tapped nervously on the nearest window.

The house, in spite of its wealth and beauty, impressed one with a sense of loneliness. A dwelling reflects the daily life of its tenants in the same intangible way that a man carries the reflection of his life writ large in face and person; and this stately room had the air of one who has looked on his dead and stands

appalled and desolate. From the more distant parts of the house came the occasional creak of a board or the slam of a shutter in the wind, and at each fresh noise the elder of the two men turned a face full of ill-concealed uneasiness in the direction of the sound. At last the other tossed the ash of his cigar in the fire and turned to his host.

"Bob, old fellow, what's the matter with you? You're as nervous as my grandmother! Is it a ghost or delirium tremens that is freezing your young soul? Speak out man, what is it?"

Driscoll, thus addressed, rose, and going almost stealthily to the two doors leading out of the room, slipped the massive bolts across into their sockets; then he came back to the fire, poured out some liquor, drank it, and pulled his chair near to Larcher.

"Larcher, you and I have been out together for big game. The tiger skin there tells one story, this leopard's skin beneath our feet another, but I have brought you here to-night to help me kill or capture the most devilish thing that ever walked the earth. You, because you are the one man whose brain and nerve and muscle I can trust."

"Good!" said Larcher. "Is it man or beast?"

"Not beast, yet scarcely human," replied the other, "but I must go back and tell you the story of this accursed thing that has come upon the place. You know what a hobby my orchid houses have long been to me, and you have heard me speak of the difficulty I have had in getting a capable foreman to minister to my favorites. The run of these fellows know merely the few common commercial varieties, and my interest has always centred in the rarer species. Six months ago I was in such despair over my collection that I had almost decided to give up their culture entirely rather than suffer the constant disappointment of having successive importations die on my hands, when, in response to my advertisement in the Herald, there walked into my office one morning a fellow who seemed exactly the one for the place. I couldn't tell his nationality exactly, but his bronzed face bore out his statement that he had spent many years in the tropics, collecting orchids for one of the big English importing houses. Details were soon adjusted between us, and it was arranged that he was to come down here and begin work at once. I inquired if he had a family, and he replied that he had a wife, who would come down here with him the next day.

"As he rose to leave the office, I said: 'One thing more, Hearston. I hope you are up in growing *Phalaenopsis Gloriosa*. They are my favorite orchid, and I have a special house of them out there.' Larcher, at mention of the orchid's name I could have sworn that the fellow turned green under his tan. He caught at the chair back as though to steady himself, and answered oddly that he thought he could do nothing with them, and then added, as though he had said more than he had meant to: 'They are the most difficult orchids in the world to bloom in captivity, sir.' I smiled at the conceit of the orchids as imprisoned wild things, bade him good morning, and forgot the incident for the time.

"Well, they went down the next day, and were soon established in the pretty little cottage on the slope of the hill near the greenhouses. I went down some weeks later, found everything running smoothly, and Hearston introduced me to his wife. You know that since Mollie died, women have rather gone out of my life, and I am not easily impressed with a pretty face, but I shall never forget the exotic beauty of that woman.

"Whatever doubt there might be about his nationality, hers was unmistakable. She was pure, high-caste East Indian; you know the type, tall, slim, with exquisite features and eyes of midnight witchery. I thought as I looked at her that she had the same subtle atmosphere of mingled spirituality and splendor that my orchid blooms possess. She spoke no word of English, and stood beside Hearston as we talked, eyeing him with a world of pathos in her dark, unfathomable eyes. It was plain to see that she adored her husband from his footprints upward. You remember the handsome collie dog I had here, a beautiful fellow, who lived up to his ideals in a way to shame most humans. He had always been slow to make friends with strangers, though devoted to the old servants on the place. He came bounding up to us as we stood there, and to my surprise, ignored me to fawn at Mrs. Hearston's feet, leaping upon her with the utmost affection. 'Your wife has made a friend worth having,' I remarked to Hearston. The man smiled and assented, and the subject passed.

"We spent the rest of the day going through the greenhouses together, and I found that I had made no mistake in my man. Such a knowledge of orchids, of their native conditions of growth and climate, and such a stock of East Indian lore was a revelation to me.

"The greenhouses have been altered and enlarged considerably since you saw them last; the chief addition being an immense circular house at the foot of the range. Here I have gathered thousands of fine plants of *Phalaenopsis Gloriosa*. Instead of the usual equipment of benches I had a number of trees on the place cut down and sunk in the ground at irregular intervals from each other, on all sides of the house, and the orchid plants were then wired to them from the ground up, interspersed with ferns imbedded in moss. Great palms were planted thickly round the trees, and hundreds of orchids were suspended by wire from the roof. The whole effect was that of a bit of tropical jungle. In spite of all my care they had never done well, and I was anxious to have, my new foreman's advice on the subject.

"Rather to my surprise, Hearston's wife accompanied us on our rounds, but when she came to the floor of the *Phalaenopsis* house, she drew back pale and shuddering. He spoke some rapid words in what I suppose was her native tongue to her, and she turned and sat on a stool in the shed outside. He murmured some apology to me about her being tired, and followed me into the house. Before communicative, the man grew oddly quiet and nervous. We were there some five minutes, and in that time he never took his eyes off the slim little figure in the shed beyond. I could get nothing out of him about the culture of the *Gloriosas*, and attributing his evident embarrassment to his ignorance on the subject, we returned to the other houses. That night I went back to town.

"I am going into all this wearisome detail, Larcher, in the hope that you, with your years of experience in India, and your knowledge of the Oriental character, may be able to see some glimmer of dawn in the darkness of the mystery that followed."

Larcher nodded, eagerly, and Driscoll continued:

"Six weeks passed, and Hearston's reports were uniformly satisfactory. At the end of that time I received a curious letter from him. It was a request for a couple of private police to patrol the place night and day, and the man urged haste as though oppressed with terror. We are too far off the turnpike here to be often troubled with tramps. Still I felt that my new foreman had deserved my confidence so far, and I took steps that afternoon to engage a couple of men for

watchman's duty. The next day was Sunday, and still a bit worried by the unusual tenor of Hearston's letter, I took the afternoon train and came out here. I had neglected to wire anyone of my coming, so there was no trap at the station to meet me, and I walked the mile to the place in a bleak February twilight that seemed to deepen in perceptible gradations.

"As I came down the curve of the drive and round the southern corner of the house, I paused, struck by the beauty of the view. Great crimson clouds were banked up on the horizon as though rolled up by a stupendous fire, while streaks of sullen red shooting almost to the zenith flung their sinister reflection on the river and the lawns. I had never seen the place take on such a lurid unearthly beauty, fit setting for the tragedy to come. The group of dwarf Norwegian pines at this corner of the house stood out against the angry sky like some exquisite tracery, and while I stood admiring their symmetry and grace, a branch not twenty feet away from me swung back and—a face looked out.

"A hideous face, such as one might conjure up in the nightmares of a fever, a yellow, square Mongolian face, seamed with a thousand wrinkles, and every seam a sin. Larcher, I saw that face as plain as I see you now. For the space of three seconds I stood still, looking straight at that grinning mask, hypnotised, perhaps, by those beady glittering eyes gazing into mine. Then the branch dropped back into place, and I, released from the spell cast over me, darted forward to the spot where it had been. It had vanished like a dream. I searched among the bushes for half-an-hour or more, but finally gave up in despair, and went into the house.

"I took occasion, while old Mrs. Mayhew was serving my dinner, to question her guardedly on the subject of tramps or strangers on the place. She told me there hadn't been a stranger seen on the place all the winter. That some of the servants had been commenting on the fact only the night before. This made Hearston's letter more inexplicable than ever, and after dinner I sent for him, intending to have a plain talk with him on the subject. He came in answer to my summons, and I jumped at sight of the man's face. White and haggard, with a certain hunted fierceness in his eyes and a restlessness in his manner which changed him utterly. I felt that the situation rose to its feet, and explained itself as a bad combination of man and whisky. I never strike a man when he's down, or preach temperance to a convalescent drunkard, so I ignored Hearston's apparent condition, told him of my receipt of his letter and the arrangements I had made for the patrolling of the place.

"'They must be quick, Mr. Driscoll,' Hearston broke in. 'They, must be quick. For God's sake, sir, get them over here at once!' He came up to me in his excitement and laid his hand on mine. I shivered at his touch; it was so cold. His eyes blazed into mine in passionate eagerness, and then I saw my mistake. It wasn't drink that had changed the man; it was sheer, clear, cold, blue terror!

"Hearston,' I said, 'there is something wrong here on the place; I want you to tell me frankly what you fear.'

"Before the fellow had a chance to reply the night was broken by a succession of sharp yelps like an animal in pain, followed by a shrill scream, and on the sound the man beside me dashed through the door and out over the verandah. I followed him almost instantly and ran out of doors. There, ahead of me, Hearston was running over the lawn to his cottage, as though he had been shot from a bow. I followed him as rapidly as possible, marvelling at the speed with which he crossed the ground, and a second later I came up to him bending over

his wife lying in a dead faint on the verandah of his cottage. A shadow lay at the woman's feet, and as I bent to see what it was, a pitiful little moan came up from the darkness.

"Someone brought a lantern, and by its light I saw, my collie Donald lying there, his bright fur all matted with blood from a murderous knife-wound in his side. His beautiful, faithful eyes turned up to mine as I knelt beside him, then glazed as the little life went out. Together we lifted Mrs. Hearston, and, carrying her into the house, laid her upon the bed. Hearston, wild with excitement, bent over her, begging me to do something—anything. In a few minutes she recovered her consciousness, but relapsed at sight of us into a state of helpless hysteria. They both seemed too near the verge of collapse to give me any information as to what had occurred.

"Hearston was walking to and fro like a crazy man, wringing his hands, while his wife lay laughing and sobbing uncontrolledly. The dog's death showed me that something serious was on foot on the place, and, feeling that they were probably not safe in the cottage by themselves, I proposed to Hearston that he and his wife come up here for the night. He assented with eagerness, and they came up to the house with me. Mayhew put them in a room on the ground-floor which had at one time been used as a sort of spare room when the house was crowded. It was in this wing, but on the other side and facing the greenhouses. I saw them comfortably installed, told Mayhew to see that Mrs. Hearston had everything she needed, and bade them good-night.

"I sat long over the fire that evening, trying in vain to puzzle out Hearston's behavior, and the cause of my dog's death. It all depressed me more than I can tell you, and I was filled with a miserable, presentiment of evil, try as I might to shake it off. I must have sunk into a sort of a doze before the fire, for I dreamed a curiously vivid dream. I was out on the lawn in the moonlight, pursuing a baffling shape which fled from me, eluding me ever as I gained on it, and which kept giving out yelps like the dying cry of the dog.

"Faster it fled, and I faster, with that curious rapid increase of momentum peculiar to dreams, till at last I had him by the shoulder. He turned in my grasp, and I saw again the hideous yellow face outlined against the shrubbery, and an appalling scream shot through my brain and brought me to my feet. I knew that I had dreamt the rest, but I could have sworn that the scream was real. I rushed to the door and flung it open. The hall lay dark and silent. I threw open a window thinking the sound might have come from without, but the grave could not be quieter; and cursing my nervous imagination for the fright that it had given me, I turned in and went to bed.

"The next morning I woke early, and eager to clear up in the daylight the wretched business of the night before, I sent Hendricks over to Hearston's room to tell him I wished to see him as soon as possible. The fellow came back and said he had knocked repeatedly on Hearston's door, but couldn't rouse him, and in that instant all the vague horror of the night before returned to me. The room had two long French windows in it like these, opening out on the north verandah, so I sent Hendricks out on the porch to reconnoiter from the outside. He returned, almost immediately this time, to say that one of the windows was wide open, and he had looked in. The room was in confusion, Hearston and his wife were gone. It came to me that they might have risen early and gone back to the cottage, so I sent Hendricks for the third time to deliver my message. A third time he came back to say that they were not there. I went myself to the

cottage. It was just as we had left it the night before. I hailed one of the gardeners on his way to work. 'Have you seen Hearston?' 'No,' he answered; 'perhaps he is in the greenhouses.'

"Perhaps he is," I said; 'we must find him. You and Hendricks take the first house and I'll take the second, and we'll go through alternating.' I started on my tour of the houses, calling Hearston's name aloud in my eagerness to find him safe, and shake off the deepening conviction that I should find him otherwise.

I reached the Phalaenopsis house at the foot of the range, still calling, opened the door and started to go in. The masses of greenery made the interior seem dim to me after the morning sunlight; but as I closed the door I saw something coming towards me out of the forest twilight of the place. At first I thought that it was Broughton's Great Dane—the dog is over here half the time—but it rose upright, upright and gibbering, lunged at me through the shadows of the green! I leaped to the door and crashed it behind me, and the thing fell against it heavily, and rolled over on the floor. It was Hearston; Hearston with snow-white hair and eyes of flame! Hearston, and he was mad—mad!"

"And the woman?"

"No trace! If the earth had opened and swallowed her she could not have disappeared more utterly. We captured Hearston after a terrible struggle; there was nothing to be elicited from him. Every inch of this place has been searched and searched again, and still, no trace! And, Larcher, it seems a trivial thing, a weak and empty fancy, and yet—"

"Tell!"

"Since that night when that mysterious horror happened, those Gloriosas seem to have taken a new lease, of life! Great sprays have started from every plant and hang laced and interlaced like some strange web on every side. Buds developed, but they do not bloom! A month ago I said to the man in charge—'To-morrow will see this house white with blossoms.'

"He looked at me curiously. 'So I thought, sir, a week ago.'

"They were not sufficiently developed, then,' I answered.

"Yes, sir, just as they are now.'

"Why, man, they couldn't be,' I cried! 'look at them, they are just ready to burst open.'

"As you say, sir,' he answered; reservedly.

"But you don't agree with me?' I asked.

"No, sir, they were just like this ten days ago; one would say, sir, they were all ready to bloom, but—that they were waiting for something!"

"It is true! I have watched them ever since. The whole place is full of a dismal, haunting oppression that I cannot shake off or banish. An indescribable terror hangs over it, and I never want to see it again.'

Larcher rose to his feet, his face alight with excitement, and stood with his back to the fire looking down at Driscoll.

"And the motive, the clue, the explanation to it all? What do people say? What do they think?"

"Everything and nothing! A woman is made away with—by whom? By Hearston, himself, some say: Bah! The man loved her. She had no fear of him. There was a third person whom they both feared—the face in the pines."

"The other men on the place?"

"Are above suspicion! They all room together in quarters over the carriage-house, and were all there that night. They say that Hearston was a good fellow

and devoted to his wife; that she was with him in the green-houses every day, and that he never seemed content unless she was close beside him. Further, it was brought out that in the ten days preceding the occurrence Hearston had seemed strangely excited and nervous, but perfectly sober and sane, and, note this, that there had been no tramp nor suspicious character seen on the place since Hearston had come on it."

"Did you tell the police of the face you had seen?"

"I did. But no one else had seen it; I had no tangible proof that I had, and the consensus of opinion seemed to be that it was the result of overstrained nerves."

"What has become of Hearston?"

"He is, or rather was, till two days ago, in the lunatic asylum, the tower of which you can see just over the trees, to the west of the place. It's about three miles distant. They said from the first that his condition was quite hopeless. When they took him there he was almost uncontrollable; then he sank into a sullen silence difficult to break. Two days ago I received word from the superintendent that Hearston had burst the heavy iron bars at his window and escaped. They begged me, if I had any knowledge of his whereabouts, to inform them at once, and added that they were watching my place, as it was likely that he would seek his home.

"I came down here immediately, but so far, have had no sight of him. Yesterday afternoon I grew lonely and nervous. I had been in the house all day, and, thinking a little exercise would do me good, I strolled up the drive to the gate. It was almost dark when I turned to come back, and I couldn't help glancing sharply through the shrubbery as I passed along. I had on an old pair of tennis shoes I found in my room here, and the soft soles were almost noiseless on the gravel roadway. And as I walked it seemed to me I heard a sort of swish, swish, as of someone moving through the bushes to my right. I drew my revolver, and gradually slackened my speed, that whatever it was might pass me.

"The movement in the bushes slackened, too, and I knew that I was being watched. I walked on till we came to a place where the shrubbery lining the road was thinner than usual, and, wheeling suddenly, I plunged through the bushes in the direction of the sound. As I wheeled, so did the intruder, and put such distance between us that I could but faintly make out a tall supple figure in the robe of some dark stuff, wound round the waist with a scarf. I had hoped to find it Hearston. But it wasn't he, for the man glanced around just before he disappeared, and I saw again the villainous yellow face, and the beady eyes! I ran after him, discharging my revolver as I ran, but the shots went wild in the gathering night, and for a second time he eluded me. This morning I sent you a wire. You are here. That is all."

"Driscoll, you say the face you saw in the shrubbery was grinning? Did you notice anything, peculiar, about the teeth?"

Driscoll sprang to his feet with a smothered oath. "Larcher, you have seen it! Where?"

"I haven't seen it, Bob, upon my word!"

"Then how did you know that it hadn't any teeth? At least, just the two incisors, at the angle of the jaw, long and yellow like a wolf's fangs! How did you know the one thing I omitted to tell you?"

"Sit down, and I'll tell you. It's a bit of a story I haven't thought of for years," answered Larcher, lighting a fresh cigar. "By the way, since you confess so frankly to carrying a gun, I may as well unload myself of my armoury. I never stay in civilisation long enough at a time to accustom myself to going without a weapon. I'll lay it here on the table, if you don't mind. Well, you remember that I went out with the British East India Geographical Commission some seven years ago, and you will remember, further, perhaps, that our chief mission at that time was the exploration of some of the tributaries of the Mekhong River. The British Government has ploughed India with its army, and harrowed it with its civil service, till it is surprising that there should be a wild spot left; but there are still great stretches of territory unknown and almost impenetrable, where the weeds of native custom flourish in rank luxuriance. There is probably no place on the habitable globe, under the nominal control of the civilised nation, concerning which so little is known as the valley of the Mekhong River. Immense forests, centuries old, stretch unbroken for hundreds of miles, hiding in dank, impenetrable morass and jungle, the wild, fierce people who inhabit them.

"We struck the Lam-nam-si River at its junction with the Mekhong, and started off to follow it to its source. We had not been out more than three days' march when we began to hear of tigers, and I determined to leave the party at Menatkong and browse round the neighborhood a bit to see if I could get a tiger skin or two. I expected to join the others about a week later at a point agreed upon. They protested that my life wouldn't be worth a farthing, alone in that country; so I compromised by taking Haranya Vatani, a native, who accompanied the party as guide and godmother. The first day we were disappointed in our game, and found ourselves at dusk, with a tropical storm on our track, near an isolated native village.

"It was the only place for miles around that offered human habitation and a shelter from the storm, but in spite of that Haranya tried to steer me past it. This only made me curious to see it, so I took the rudder in my own hands, and we stayed over night there. We were civilly received, for Vatani's fat face is a sort of general ticket of admission to that part of the universe; but the next day, the worst of the storm being over, one of the inhabitants tipped Vatani the wink that it would be more tactful if we would move on, and we, accordingly, did so. After we left the place, Vatani told me the cause of our scant entertainment. The name of the village is Kong-Satru. You know, doubtless, that practically all the Gloriosas come from there."

"No, I thought they came from Panom-Pehn; that is the place mentioned in the invoices."

"That is the river-port where they are packed for shipment. They are stolen from the forests around Kong-Satru by sturdy adventurers, who evidently have little love of life, and shipped by stealth and night down the Mekhong to the sea. The forests on the hills around Kong-Satru are the most magnificent imaginable, and teeming with this variety of orchid. A native, Haranya said, would much sooner think of selling his children than a plant of the Gloriosas, which are indescribably sacred to them. These people mix their religion with the culture of the plants in a manner at once horrible and grotesque. The flowers are cared for by a band of native priests, who to the thousand other Oriental ideas, add one more, the most gruesome of them all.

"They say," and Larcher leaned across the table towards Driscoll and gazed meditatively out into the night as he continued: "They say that the orchids must have blood, human blood, and so it happens just before the plants' blooming season, the priests select a victim from among the inhabitants of the village for this sacrifice."

"And then?" asked Driscoll, as Larcher paused, still gazing past him out of the window, sunk in reminiscence.

"I was thinking of the night Haranya told me this tale, sitting in a little tent in the midst of the jungle, not 30 miles from Kong-Satru, with the tail of the storm lashing round us, and Vatani shivering with fright lest he be overheard in the telling; in India it is neither polite nor healthy to discuss your neighbor's religion."

"And then?"

"And then, on the day of the feast of the flowers, which was the festival our presence interrupted, on that full moon of April, when I unwittingly grazed Death, there is high carnival in Kong-Satru, and the priests take the victim to the forests above the town—and feed the flowers!"

"And then?"

"And then they bloom!" said Haranya, 'and not until then!' The priests are a vile-looking lot, with yellow skin like parchment, their teeth not gone as you describe, it, but the four front teeth blackened so that at a distance they are invisible. There is a large Chinese element in these priests, if they are not indeed full-blooded Mongolians, which marks them off from the rest of the Aryan population."

"And you think that Hearston's wife—"

"Was doomed to the sacrifice! That Hearston was in the neighborhood gathering Phalaenopsis, and either had seen her before, or met her while she was trying to escape; that by his knowledge of the country he succeeded in getting her to some sea-coast town where they shipped for England. Then they came here and lived content, till the fanatic face rose up at her elbow, inexorable as fate. I think myself that those priests must have some hypnotic influence over the people; you heard the girl's cry when he came to her that night? How else did he awe them to the submission and silence that followed?"

"I see it now. It must have been the priest, too, who killed my poor collie."

"Do not lament the dog, Bob; he died trying to defend the gentle soul who had been kind to him, and no death could be nobler. I think that the priest has the girl in hiding, hypnotised; he is waiting for, the hour. It has struck! This is the full moon of April, the day of the feast of the flowers. If the girl is to be saved, it must be now. We shall have an able ally."

Driscoll sprang to, his feet. "Who?"

"Hearston! He is tracking the priest; I have been watching him at it the last half-hour."

"Where?"

"There! See! The gaunt figure crouching in the shadow of the pillar on the porch! At first I thought he was the priest; and laid my gun handy; then he moved a bit, and the moonlight fell on the white hair and asylum garb. Depend upon it, Driscoll, Hearston, too, has seen that face from his prison windows and the iron bent like tin beneath the maniac strength that gathered itself and passed out to slay. See! He is watching something that is moving across the

lawn from south to north. I can tell that, from his movements. It can be nothing else but the priest. Look, he is rising! Are you armed? Then come."

Leading the way, Larcher noiselessly unlatched the window and passed out on the verandah, Driscoll following. The man in front of them crept cautiously forward from the shadow of one tree to the next till he reached a clump of shrubs commanding a view of the great stone staircase which terraced the hill beside the greenhouses. He paused here, watching the stairs intently. Larcher and Driscoll at a little distance did the same.

"He's lost him," whispered Driscoll; but Larcher shook his head. A moment later the priest glided out of the bushes fringing the stairway, almost at the bottom of the hill. For an instant the supple figure stood out in the full moonlight, black against the whiteness of the stonework, listening; then, apparently satisfied, he beckoned, and a slender white figure crept out and after him as he opened a door and disappeared. In an instant Hearston was making his way down the steps, the others following as before. There was no hesitation or undue haste in his movements; as silently and relentlessly as the tide laps up the shore, so did he cover the space between himself and the priest. He reached the door of the Phalaenopsis house and melted into the blackness of the wall. As the door opened a low monotonous sing-song chant struck the ears of the two outside.

"Chinese, by all that's holy? Bob, he is worshipping the flowers!"

A second later they had reached the door and looked in.

It was a weird scene! Lofty trees towered sheer to the height of forty feet or more, covered with the delicate green of ferns among the darker shades of the orchid plants, while thousands of sprays of half-open flowers filled the house with a subtle and exquisite odor.

The priest stood in the centre of the house, his back to the door. He had cast off his robe, and, naked save for a loin cloth, was swaying to and fro in a sort of religious ecstasy, his arms extended towards the flowers above him, and chanting as he swayed. At his feet knelt the woman, white, unseeing, tranced!

Behind him, mute and terrible, crouched Hearston, waiting for the instant of his spring.

"Hearston's unarmed!" breathed Driscoll.

"Yes, like a gorilla! Let be! The quarry's his."

At last the priest paused in his chant and the moment came. Hearston reached out with his left hand, caught the bolt of the door, and shot it home with a crash that shook the house. It was challenge and ultimatum in one, and at the noise the priest swung round and faced his death!

He flung one arm aloft, in what almost seemed like a gesture of command; but, as he did so, Hearston's embrace went round him like a hoop of steel, crushing him in with slow, resistless force. The Mongol would have been a match for a heavier man in a poorer cause, and he writhed in Hearston's grasp, making frantic efforts to release himself, till the mighty muscles rolled under the yellow skin like the coiling and uncoiling of a cobra. A frantic tug at the loin cloth and his free arm flung upward, a curved knife in his grasp, and twice it fell in abortive strokes which glanced off Hearston harmlessly.

The men outside flung themselves against the barred door with a force that splintered the glass in the upper half, but the bolt held. Larcher reached, in through the splinters that remained, pushed back the bolt, and the two rushed in.

Suddenly, in one last supreme effort, the priest raised himself to his full height, almost lifting Hearston off his feet. Again the light quivered along the knife as it rose and fell, and as the priest sank backward, dead, he carried Hearston with him, the knife lodged in his back.

Driscoll bent over the prostrate forms, trying in vain to unlock Hearston's fingers still knotted round the priest. A cry broke from the lips of the girl beside them, and the men both turned and looked at her. She was standing gazing at Hearston in pathos unutterable; the cry that had escaped her was the long, low Indian wail for the dead. Larcher stooped, and with practised hand drew out the knife, then turned.

"Do not mourn," he said to the girl in her own tongue. "He will live, since you have come back to him."

And as he spoke Hearston released his hold on the priest, and turned and held out his arms to the girl. The flame had died out of his eyes—the man was sane!

"Driscoll," cried Larcher, in a curious toneless voice, "look up, look up at your orchids, they think they are going to be fed!"

Driscoll straightened himself from surveying the priest and looked about him. He went white as he gazed and threw a steadying hand against the nearest tree.

Multitudes of great white flowers swayed on every stalk, crisp, new blown! Wide open, each petal distended and with eager stems, as happier flowers turn to the sun, they craned their faces towards the dead priest on the floor.

