

- ***** "The Story of the Brown Hand." 17 (May 1899): 400-508.
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H.G. Wells

- "Mr Ledbetter's Vacation." 16 (Oct. 1898): 452-62.
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 697-705; vol.21: 30-41, 160-69, 279-90, 400-409, 497-507, 657-62; vol.22: 16-
 29, 141-49.

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- * = Printed as part of the series, "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes".
 ** = Printed as part of the series, "The Exploits of Brigadier Gerard".
 *** = Autobiographical articles.
 **** = Serialised novels.
 ***** =Printed as part of the series, "Round the Fire".

**MESSRS WELLS AND CONAN DOYLE – PURVEYORS OF
 HORTICULTURALCURIOSITIES AND PROTO-TRIFFIDS**
 by Laurence Price

Long before the publication of *The Day of the Triffids* by John Wyndham in 1951, two eminent authors had developed the theme of man-killing plants, although on a less apocalyptic scale, in short stories written towards the end of the nineteenth century. The first was Arthur Conan Doyle with "The American's Tale" published in the Christmas number of *London Society* in 1880, the second, H.G. Wells with "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid" which appeared in the *Pall Mall Budget* on 2nd August 1894.

Of the two, "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid" is the superior tale which centres on the horticultural obsessions of one of Wells's ubiquitous "little men", Winter-Wedderburn, a collector of rare orchids. He is a "shy, lonely, rather ineffectual man" (*H.G. Wells Short Stories* 69) who complains to his housekeeper and remote cousin that "nothing ever happens to me" (70). Today, however, he is to buy plants from the Andamans and the Indies at "Peters" and states to his cousin that he has "a fancy that something is going to happen to me today... I mean nothing unpleasant... though what I do mean I scarcely know" (69-70).

He is actually envious of the young orchid collector, Batten, twenty years younger than Wedderburn, who had died at the age of at thirty-six while amassing the collection which is on sale. Batten had been married twice, divorced once, had had malarial fever four times, broken his thigh, killed a Malay, been wounded by a poisonous dart and in the end been killed by jungle-licees. By contrast, Wedderburn has never had accidents, never fallen in love, never married. Neither has he ever had the need, or the desire, to seek exacting employment, having been provided with "just enough income to keep [him] off the spur of necessity" (69). His orchids are his passion in an otherwise dull and unremarkable life. Wedderburn aches for a "whirl of excitement" (70) while recognising that for those who have experienced it, like the late Batten, it "must have been very troublesome, but then it must have been very interesting..." (70).

He takes a careful and precise note of the time and makes an equally careful selection from his wardrobe before nervously setting off beneath a serene sky, nevertheless taking his cousin's advice "that admitted of no denial" (71) that he had

better take an umbrella. When he returns he is in a "state of mild excitement" (71) having made some purchases. He spreads his Vandas, a Dendrobe and some Palæonophis on the spotless tablecloth as he consumes his soup: "'That one' – he pointed to a shrivelled rhizome – 'was not identified. It may be a Palæonophis – or it may not. It may be a new species, or even a new genus. And it was the last that poor Batten ever collected'" (71). His housekeeper does not like the look of it and concludes it looks like a spider shamming dead.

"They found poor Batten lying dead, or dying, in a mangrove swamp – I forget which," he began again presently, "with one of these very orchids crushed up under his body. He had been unwell for several days with some kind of native fever, and I suppose he fainted. These mangrove swamps are very unwholesome. Every drop of blood, they say, was taken out of him by jungle-leeches. It may be that very plant that cost him his life to obtain." (71-72)

Presently, the strange new orchid begins to show signs of life. His housekeeper views it with growing unease, saying she thinks the emerging aerial rootlets look like little white fingers "'trying to get at you...I can't help thinking of that corpse'" (73). One more visit, with the aerial rootlets more than a foot long, reminds her of "tentacles reaching out after something" (73). They also get "into her dreams, growing after her with incredible rapidity" which settles "to her entire satisfaction that she would not see that plant again" (73-74). Wedderburn spends his afternoons meditating on the approaching flowering of the strange plant until, at last, the great thing happens:

Directly he entered the little glass house he knew that the spike had burst out, although his great *Palæonophis Lowii* hid the corner where his new darling stood. There was a new odour in the air, a rich, intensely sweet scent, that overpowered every other in that crowded, steaming little greenhouse.

Directly he noticed this he hurried down to the strange orchid. And behold! the trailing green spikes bore now three great splashes of blossom, from which this overpowering sweetness proceeded. He stopped before them in an ecstasy of admiration.

The flowers were white, with streaks of golden orange upon the petals; the heavy labellum was coiled into an intricate projection, and a wonderful bluish purple mingled there with the gold. He could see at once that the genus was altogether a new one. And the insufferable scent! How hot the place was! The blossoms swam before his eyes.

He would see if the temperature was right. He made a step towards the thermometer. Suddenly everything appeared unsteady. The bricks on the floor were dancing up and down. Then the white blossoms, the green leaves

behind them, the whole greenhouse, seemed to sway sideways, and then in a curve upward. (74).

What a fine example from Wells of the sublime and the beautiful; a reminder that Nature cannot ultimately be reduced or tamed into the sentimentalised Earthly Paradise of a little man's suburban dreams; nor even into his glasshouse. More accurate, then, the waking nightmares of his housekeeper who will now play her part in this little drama.

Wedderburn will be saved by his precise and fussy nature; his housekeeper notes he does not come in for tea at half-past four as is "their invariable custom" (74). Deciding that "he is worshipping that horrid orchid" and that "his watch must have stopped" (74) she goes straight to the hothouse and stands motionless gazing at the scene before her:

He was lying, face upward, at the foot of the strange orchid. The tentacle-like aerial rootlets no longer swayed freely in the air, but were crowded together, a tangle of grey ropes, and stretched tight with their ends closely applied to his chin and neck and hands.

She did not understand. Then she saw from under one of the exultant tentacles upon his cheek there trickled a little thread of blood.

With an inarticulate cry she ran towards him, and tried to pull him away from the leech-like suckers. She snapped two of these tentacles, and their sap dripped red.

Then the overpowering scent of the blossom began to make her head reel. How they clung to him! She tore at the tough ropes, and he and the white inflorescence swam about her... She caught up a flowerpot and smashed it in the windows at the end of the greenhouse... She tugged now with renewed strength at Wedderburn's motionless body, and brought the strange orchid crashing to the floor...and in another minute she had released him and was dragging him away from the horror. (75)

The story concludes: "the next morning the strange orchid still lay there, black now and putrescent. The door banged intermittently in the morning breeze, and all the array of Wedderburn's orchids was shrivelled and prostrate. But Wedderburn himself was bright and garrulous upstairs in the glory of his strange adventure" (76). This is a literary "victory for the small man", and the unexpected danger Wedderburn has encountered has proven to be a life-enhancing experience; not so, of course, for the unfortunate Batten who was drained of every drop of his blood not by jungle

leeches but by “that very plant that [had] cost him his life to obtain” (72) as Wedderburn had deduced, without realising the irony of his statement.

The discovery of the strange orchid, perhaps of the species *Phalænopsis*, and Asiatic moth orchid with its characteristic aerial roots and succulent leaves, in mangrove swamps adds to the eerie verisimilitude that holds this story together. The mangrove is a type of tree, especially a species of *Rhizophora*, which itself has *aerial* roots. These “extended” limbs that suggest the possibility of perambulation through the muddy marshes in which they originate have an unsettling quality; add to this that the *Phalænopsis* is an epiphyte orchid, that appears to cling parasitically to a plant, tree or shrub. It does *not* actually “feed” off or have any detrimental effect on the host plant. Much emphasis is placed on the human and corpse-like appearance of the shrivelled rhizome, roots and buds of the strange orchid by Wells; he also succeeds in combining sweet smells and putridity into the text, common to both certain species of orchids and death itself, and so apt, of course, with regard to this particularly deadly flower. The man-orchid, *Aceras anthropophora*, has flowers suggestive of a human-like shape; it is perhaps these “human” aspects in such an exotic plant that makes its choice as a man-killing plant so appropriate, and one which Wells used to such good effect in this story.

By comparison, Conan Doyle’s “The American’s Tale” is a weaker work and suffers particularly from his attempts to capture the rhythms of American speech. In mitigation this is one of the earliest works he had published while still developing his craft, and completing his studies to become a doctor in Edinburgh. Unfortunately, he never really did overcome the disability and his use of American dialect remained unconvincing even in the hands of the great Holmes, posing, more unsuccessfully in my view, as the Irish-American agent Altamont, in “His Last Bow” (1917); and its use by the American, Bill Scanlan, in one of his last works, *The Maracot Deep* (1929), is risible. The opening paragraph of “The American’s Tale,” which introduces us to Jefferson Adams, “our American storyteller”, is typical of what will follow:

“It air strange, it air,” he was saying as I opened the door of the room where our social little semi-literary society met; “but I could tell you queerer things than that ‘ere – almighty queer things. You can’t learn everything out of books, sirs, nohow. You see it ain’t the men as can string English together and as has good eddications as finds themselves in the queer places I’ve been in. They’re mostly rough men, sirs, as

can scarce speak aright, far less tell with pen and ink the things they’ve seen; but if they could they’d make some of your European’s har riz with astonishment. They would sirs, you bet!” (*Uncollected Stories* 11)

After much of this tortuous preamble, Jefferson Adams recounts the tale of the death of Joe Hawkins or “Alabama Joe as he was called there. A reg’lar out and outer, he was, bout the darndest skunk as ever man clapt eyes on” (12). The tale takes place in Arizona where, Adams assured his audience:

“Grass as hung over a chap’s head as he rode through it, and trees so thick you couldn’t catch a glimpse of blue sky for leagues and leagues, and orchids like umbrellas! Maybe some on you has seen a plant as they calls the ‘fly-catcher’, in some parts of the States?... Well, I’ve seen those flytraps in Arizona with leaves eight and ten feet long, and thorns or teeth a foot or more; why they could – But darn it, I’m going too fast!” (11)

A row takes place in Simpson’s bar between an Englishman, Tom Scott, and Alabama Joe. Scott is a loner and “a sort o’ butt among the men of Montana, for he was so quiet an’ simple-like. There was no party either to take up his grievances; for, as I’ve been saying, the Britishers hardly counted him one of them, and many a rough joke they played on him...” (13). Joe upsets the British party in the bar and it is the quiet Scott who replies, drawn Derringer in hand: “Say your prayers, Joe Hawkins; for, by Heaven, you’re a dead man!... It ain’t that the old country has used me over – well but no man shall speak agin it afore me, and live” (13-14). Then, laughing, Scott throws his pistol on the floor and continues: “I can’t shoot a half-drunk man. Take your dirty life, Joe, an’ use it better nor you have done. You’ve been nearer the grave this night than you will be agin until your time comes. You’d best make tracks now, I guess. Nay, never look black at me, man; I’m not afeard at your shootin’ iron. A bully’s nigh always a coward.” (14).

With the Britishers’ laughter ringing in his ears, Joe skulks from the bar and Jefferson Adams who had witnessed all this, sees murder in Joe’s eyes:

...for I knew Joe’s bloodthirsty mind, and that the Englishman had small chance of ever seeing the morning. He lives in an out-of-the-way sort of place, you see, clean off the trail, and had to pass through the Flytrap Gulch to get to it. This here gulch was a marshy-gloomy place, lonely enough during the day even; for it

were always a creepy sort o' thing to see the eight and ten-foot leaves snapping up if aught touched them; but at night there were never a soul near. Some parts of the marsh, too, were soft and deep, and a body thrown in would be gone by the morning. I could see Alabama Joe crouchin' under the leaves of the great Flytrap in the darkest part of the gulch, with a scowl on his face and a revolver in his hand; I could see it, sirs, as plain as with my two eyes. (14)

Everyone seems aware of the ambush and Adams even warns Scott to be on his guard when he sets off from the bar at midnight. The next morning, an "uncommon scared" half-breed reports that he had heard "the fearfulest screams in the stillness of the night" when he'd "chanced to be near the gulch 'bout one in the morning" but "there weren't no shots...but scream after scream, kinder muffled, like a man with a serape over his head, an' in mortal pain" (14-15).

Abner Brandon and Adams ride out to Scott's house, passing through the gulch on the way but "there warn't nothing partic'lar to be seen there - no blood nor marks of a fight, not nothing..." (15). Scott confirms that he saw or heard nothing on his way home the night before - "all was quiet enough. An owl kinder moaning in the Flytrap Gulch - that was all..." (15). Scott rides back to the settlement with the two men, but Adams continues:

An all-fired commotion was on Main-street as we rode into it. The 'Merican party seemed to have gone clear crazed. Alabama Joe was gone, not a darned particle of him left. Since he went into the gulch nary an eye had seen him.... 'Stand aside, Jeff Adams,' says Zebb Humphrey, as great a scoundrel as ever lived, 'you hain't got no hand in this game. Say, boys, are we, free Americans, to be murdered by a darn Britisher?' It was the quickest thing as I ever seed. There was a rush and a crack; Zebb was down, with Scott's ball in his thigh, and Scott hisself was on the ground with a dozen men holding him.... 'he has played poor Joe some o' his sneakin' tricks, an' thrown him into the swamp'.... 'Lynch him!' shouted a hundred angry voices... 'let's lynch him by the great flytrap in the gulch. Let Joe see as he's revenged, if so be as he's buried 'bout theer.'" (15-16)

When the lynch mob gets to the flytrap to hang Scott they find thirty men waiting for the, all Britishers, armed to the teeth. Tensions rise and the two parties are about to

draw on each other when Scott suddenly calls out: "'Joe!' he cried, 'Joe! Look at him! In the flytrap!'"

One of the great leaves of the flytrap, that had been shut and touchin' the ground as it lay, was slowly rolling back upon its hinges. There, lying like a child in its cradle, was Alabama Joe, in the hollow of a leaf. The great thorns had been slowly driven through his heart as it shut upon him. We could see as he'd tried to cut his way out, for there was a slit in the thick, fleshy leaf, an' his bowie was in his hand; but it had smothered him first...an' there he were as we found him, torn and crushed into pulp by the great jagged teeth of the man-eatin' plant.... (16-17)

After Jefferson Adams has departed the following conversation takes place between the members of the "semi-literary society".

"A most extraordinary narrative!" said Dawson. "Who would have though a Dianoea had such power!"

"Deuced run yarn!" said young Sinclair.

"Evidently a matter-of-fact truthful man," said the doctor.

"Or the most original liar that ever lived," said I.

I wonder which he was." (17).

As a fledgling writer, Conan Doyle was strongly influenced by such American writers as Bret Harte, Mark Twain and Oliver Wendell Holmes. "The American Tale" certainly seems to be in the humorous tall story tradition of Mark Twain, but unlike Twain or his peers his use of "American Dialogue" is strained and unconvincing. Years later, in *The Maracot Deep*, he was still trying to convince the reader, in the case of the American, Bill Scanlan, that "you see, he talks as Englishmen expect every real American to talk" (*The Maracot Deep* 3). It is truly "a most extraordinary narrative" (17) and one senses a good science fiction story trying to emerge; the great flytrap is, in itself, a terrifying aberration of Nature and compares favourably with Wells's sinister strange orchid. Conan Doyle makes mention of "orchids like umbrellas" (12) in the text - which certainly gives Arizona an other-worldly quality - not to mention the giant flytraps. Perhaps the orchids were fly orchis - *Ophrys muscifera* or *insectifera* - with fly-like flowers; a strange landscape indeed whether in a science fiction western or tall story context!

These stories remain worthy precursors of the great deadly plant themes that have fed many of our twentieth century fears and phobias. John Wyndham's *The Day*

of the *Triffids* remains the most obvious example, both in book form and in its 1963 film and 1981 television versions. Wyndham read Wells from an early age and read his books devotedly, so it is almost certain that he was familiar with "The Flowering of the Strange Orchid" which seems to be the genesis for the apocalyptic visions of *The Day of the Triffids*. In *Billion Year Spree*, his seminal study of the history of science fiction, Brian Aldiss describes Wyndham's text as a "cosy catastrophe" (293), wherein "the hero should have a pretty good time (a girl, free suites at the Savoy, automobiles for the taking) while everyone else is dying off" (294). There is, however, hope of a gradual return to a civilised society in the future, as opposed to a doomsday scenario such as the extinction of the entire human race in Nevil Shute's *On the Beach*, published in 1957. Wyndham's use of strategic satellites is, nevertheless, amazingly anticipatory of the later Reagan administration "Star Wars" laser weapon technology of the eighties; suggesting it is something man-made, rather than a celestial display of green comets that has rained blindness and doom on the human race (See *Day of the Triffids* 246-48).

On the triffids themselves, Wyndham's hero, Bill Masen, a biologist, is convinced "they were the outcome of a series of ingenious biological meddlings" (27) although "their true origin still remains obscure" (26). He is satisfied, however, that their seeds did not "float to us through space as specimens of the horrid forms life might assume upon other, less favoured worlds..." (26). They are, nevertheless, decidedly orchid-like with their "woody bole" (37) which are "shaggy with little rootlet hairs" (40); "three bluntly tapered projections" (40) form the legs of these incredible walking plants. From the top of the stem extends "the curious funnel-like" conical cup containing a "tightly wrapped whorl within" that is its deadly stinging whip (38). A carrion eater of decomposing flesh, it also traps flies and insects in a sticky substance within its cup - "...it was shown that they fed upon flesh as well as upon insects. The stinging tendril did not have the muscular power to tear firm flesh, but it had strength enough to pull shreds from the decomposing body and lift them to the cup of its stem" (44). A highly unpleasant organism, therefore, that mingles aspects of the deadly strange orchid and the giant flytrap of Wells's and Conan Doyle's imaginations, and shares the real orchids' associations with sickly scents and putrescent smells - and beauty and death. The triffid, though carrying out its man-eating business on a global scale is, however, of decidedly earthy origin.

It required only one more giant leap of imagination to have the plant become an alien invader from space. Don Siegel's classic *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* of 1956 and the two surprisingly good remakes of 1978 and 1993 all feature those always terrifying alien plant pods that take over the bodies of their human victims while they sleep and then simulate them to unearthly perfection. The original drew on the paranoia surrounding the McCarthy anti-Communist witch hunts of early fifties America, even providing alternative happy and downbeat endings. The latest, the 1993 *The Body Snatchers*, perhaps reflects post-Cold War and emerging pre-millennial fears, feeding on current malign alien abduction anxieties. Nor should Nigel Neale's 1953 BBC TV serial, *The Quatermass Experiment* or the later 1955 Hammer film version, *The Quatermass Xperiment*, be overlooked; an astronaut is infected in space by spores that, when he returns to earth, gradually take over his body until he becomes a huge "blob" that is finally cornered and destroyed in Westminster Abbey by Quatermass. Also worthy of note is Roger Corman's 1960 *Little Shop of Horrors* and the later Frank Oz-directed musical version of 1968, both featuring a blood-sucking and man-eating plant with its demand "Feed me!" The series of four *Alien* films from 1979 to the present also merit consideration as the crab-like Alien "face-hugger" creatures initially erupt from their organic plant pod-like eggs, to implant themselves on the faces of their unwilling human victims to continue to the next stage of their hideous gestation process.

Returning to the world of television, killer plants were used to more humorous effect in the tongue-in-cheek fantasy series, *The Avengers*, in the 1965 episode "The Man-Eater of Surrey Green", first broadcast on 11 December 1965. Baleful man-killing or man-changing plants also appeared in *The Time Machine*-inspired BBC TV *Doctor Who* science fiction series, in the 1965 stories, "Mission to the Unknown" broadcast from 13 November 1965 until 29 January 1966. The Vargas were deadly, cactus-like plants imported onto the planet Kembel by the Daleks from their home planet, Skaro. Their spines carried a deadly viral poison which, on piercing and entering the skin of one of their victims, attacked the cellular structure and turned him or her into a Varga. They stalked their prey, Triffid-like, on thick, gnarled roots. In the 1976 *Doctor Who* story, "The Seeds of Doom", broadcast from 31 January to 6 March 1976, the Krynoids germinate from pods and feed on their human victims who then mutate into the plant-like creatures.

With these two seemingly insignificant short stories – insignificant, that is, when weighed against the most well-known works and creations of the two authors – both Wells and Conan Doyle can be proven to have been astonishingly prescient in their depiction of the deadly plant themes that would be developed to such disturbing effect in mid-to-late 20th century fiction.

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