

MY ORCHID HOUSE IN SIAM

Kersey and I built the orchid house.

When I say we built it, I suppose I really should say he did, whilst I stood by giving occasional assistance and much unnecessary advice. But then Kersey is a handyman, and I most certainly am not.

He had been my batman in China some twelve years previously, then had served with me in India, but to my great regret had left the army after eight years' service. When he did so, I asked him to write and let me know how he got on.

After a considerable lapse he did so. An extract went as follows: "I have got a good job, but sometimes miss the army and the boys. Now I am a gardener at an inebriates' home, and when one of the attendants is away I often do his work for him, and keep an eye on the patients. Of course many of them are ex-army officers, so you see I have not quite lost touch with the army. Hoping this reaches you as it leaves me in the pink. Your obedient servant. Ernest Kersey."

At the beginning of the last war, he had been recalled to the colours, and after a spell in France, when unknown to either of us we had for a time been quite close together, though in different battalions, he had been posted to the Middle East. So had I. We met on board a troopship, bound as we thought for Suez, but fate willed otherwise and so we found ourselves first in Malaya and then prisoners-of-war together in Siam.

The orchid house was by no means a grand affair, but just a little bamboo hut, with a roof of slate so spaced as to allow the light to filter through, and with one side open to catch the early morning sun. Clumps of bamboo surrounded it, with here and there mango or tamarind trees to keep it always in partial shade.

The hut completed, the next thing was to procure some orchids to put inside. As it happened this was easy. Nearby, many large trees had been felled in order to provide supports for the bridges, or sleepers for the line on the railway we were constructing from Bampong, in Siam, to Mulmein in Burma. On many of these trees were hundreds and hundreds of epiphytes, (or plants which cling to the trees but do not live on them as parasites do), and most of these epiphytes were orchids. At this time of the year few of them were in flower, but I collected as many kinds as possible and hoped for the best. Eventually the total number of species exceeded one hundred and twenty.

In ordinary times, when the trees would have been standing, it would have been extremely difficult to have even seen many of the plants, growing as they did so high, much less gathered them, without the aid of a trained monkey such as one owned by the Singapore Botanical Society.

When the plants were gathered I fastened most of them to logs of wood or pieces of bark, or put in coconut husks, and hung them from the roof or tied them to walls. The larger ones we kept on the ground still adhering to the logs cut from the boles of trees, whilst the very smallest were kept in tiny trays on the floor.

I became very fond of these little trays and usually managed to have one or two full of bloom ready to take into the adjoining living hut. These little orchids were mostly *Bulbophylums*, many of the flowers minute, some hardly bigger than a butterfly's eye; their colouring delicate, some white, some mauve, some maroon and some parti-coloured; a few sweetly scented. It seems strange that such exquisite little gems should often bloom at the crowns of the highest trees, unseen except by birds.

Other prisoners helped with the collecting, and I can remember one day when two planter friends staggered into camp, bearing between them a section of a trunk of a tree, to which was clinging an enormous plant of some Dendrobium. These men had left camp quite openly carrying a large cross-cut saw, as if they were going to collect wood for the cook-house, and had made their way to a large fallen tree which they had noticed previously, and from it had cut a section on which grew the plant.

On another occasion the camp padre and I brought in a large fallen rotten bough, absolutely covered with "Vanda Teres" in bloom. This pretty mauve-pink orchid was common, and presented great splashes of colour at the tops of many trees. It is one of the parents of a well-known cultivated hybrid "Vanda Joekim", grown extensively in Malaya and Java, and sometimes flown in bloom to Europe often on ice.

At another camp, some seven miles distant, there lived a friend who collected for me, and to him I journeyed as often as I could find an excuse, or even without one. If going officially I would be accompanied by a Korean guard and would have to take the shortest route, but if going on my own would wander further afield. Then I would see wild animals, countless birds and butterflies, and other flowers than orchids. I can recall a very handsome brick-red Clematis, a crimson Plumbago of most unusual hue, an attractive Congea with silvery leaves and lilac bracts, and at the right season Cassia trees with cascades of golden flowers, or purple crowned Lagerstroemia. Bamboos of course abounded, and so from time to time one might come across some in flower, at the only and last time of their thirty years' life.

It was indeed fortunate that I was interested in such things, for it made it easier to put up with the hardships of our life. At the back of my mind, too, there was always the thought that I might be able to effect a break-away and with this in view I endeavoured not only to learn all I could about the country, but also to walk and climb as much as possible in order to keep fit.

Soon I had plenty of epiphytes, in fact so many that the hut became over-full, when I had to hang many plants on the surrounding trees. I decided therefore to try to procure some terrestrials to plant in the ground around.

With this in mind, one afternoon I slipped away to climb a neighbouring hill, some 800 feet in height, to see what I could find. For a long time I found little of interest and was beginning to get weary, hot and tired, since the rocks were sharp edged and the undergrowth thick, when suddenly I chanced upon a most lovely and unexpected sight.

In a little shady hollow, springing from the bare lime-stone rocks was a large clump of tall rose-pink orchids, standing almost as high as foxgloves but of a much more beautiful hue. I forgot I was tired, forgot I was hot and weary, and even forgot for a while I was an unhappy prisoner-of-war. A feeling of delight and elation overcame me.

Several times in my life before I had experienced this feeling of elation ~~on coming~~ upon an unexpected view of beautiful wild flowers - in the copses or woods of England, in the hills of India, and in particular during the spring in Malta and in Southern Spain - but never to such an extent as on this day.

Soon I found more and more of these lovely flowers, and gathered great bunches to take back to camp, in the hope they would survive till Christmas, when I intended to use them for decorating the rough altar of our out-door church. Alas, however, they did not last quite long enough. I also took back a number of their pseudo-bulbs and planted them as I had planned; later I moved them to another camp, but I never saw them bloom.

As soon as the hot weather arrived and the jungle had become parched and brown, the bulk of the orchids began to bloom. First came several of the smaller hanging Dendrobiums, when the orchid-house became a haven of beauty. Some were white, some mauve, and some golden, with pendant racemes of various lengths, and most of them sweetly scented, especially in the heat of the day. The most abundant in this district was one with rich golden blooms which quite covered up the trunks of many trees.

Then appeared a whole host of flowers from tiny white Dendrobiums of the "pigeon orchid" type, to large colourful ones some several inches across; Vandas of various species but mostly small and sombrely hued; brown and yellow Cymbidiums, dainty Coelogynes, tiny Bulbophilums and many which I have so far been unable to identify.

My favourite of all was one of the larger Dendrobiums which had great sprays of a dozen or more gorgeously coloured blooms. The sepals and petals were ivory, veined with pink, whilst the white ermine-like lip had large deep maroon patches at its base. It often occurred to me that an evening frock so coloured might be a great success! Not long after, another of similar growth, formation and size, but of quite different colouring, came into bloom. This one had bright yellow flowers with dark red patches at the base of the lip. It was possible to tell beforehand which of these two a plant would prove to be, as the leaves and stems of the former were green, tinted and spotted with purple-mauve, whilst the latter were green only. Generally speaking, however, I found it extremely difficult to guess ahead the colour or even the size of orchids, since the size of the bud, or the size of the previous year's seed pods often gave quite a wrong impression. One thing, however, I did discover was that the length of time a plant was in bud usually gave some indication of the length of time it was likely to remain in flower. But this, too, was by no means certain. Altogether I found orchids unorthodox, unusual and often beautiful, but always fascinating to grow.

By the end of April and before all the plants had blossomed we received orders to move downstream to the base. For most this was excellent news, as the food and medical attention would almost certainly be better - they could hardly be worse - but for me personally it was rather a blow. I did not like to leave my orchid house, not yet in full bloom, nor did I like to leave the area where I was able to see so many beautiful butterflies. Of course, for the very many sick I was delighted.

I might mention here that during our nine months' stay in this particular camp, I had been very lucky in many respects - not least in keeping fit and well - and had discovered several excellent British and Dutch artists.

With the scantiest and most primitive of materials, and under appalling conditions, these kind-hearted men had painted for me about forty of my best orchids. These sketches I still have, although many times I wondered whether keeping them was worth the severe beating I should have received had the Nips discovered them, since they later issued a stringent order that no one was to have in their possession any paper, pencils or pens. However, as I have said I did retain them, by various means, and now of course I value them most highly.

In the end the orchid house was not entirely wasted as I was able to take along a few of the choicest plants with me, whilst the bulk I bestowed upon an unlucky but philosophic Australian doctor who had been detailed to remain in medical charge of some hundreds of Malays and Chinese, mostly dying of cholera or malaria, who had been ordered like many thousands of others to work on the ill-famed railway. The doctor I know survived, and I hope he has as pleasant memories of his orchid house as I have of mine.

A.A. Johnson.



Editor's Note

Colonel Johnson endured imprisonment by the Japanese in Thailand from 1942 to 1945.

This drawing of "The Colonel's Orchid House" was made at the time.