

HOLIDAY

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Do orchids have the right to privacy?

Damn right, says the author of *Nero Wolfe*.
Here's why.

by Rex Stout



If I were an atom, or an orchid, I would hire a lawyer and start suits for damages for invasion of privacy.

For the atom the grounds for complaint are manifest. It took it millions, probably billions, of years to design and perfect its hermetic selfhood, impenetrable and impregnable forever. A hurricane or an erupting volcano or an earthquake was for atoms merely a frolic. For a million centuries nothing and no one could crack it. Then along came a two-legged creature with inferior anatomical equipment in all but two spots: its digits and its skull. The combination of the apposable thumb and the outsize brain did the trick in no time at all. *Homo sapiens* was still an upstart when he split the atom's inviolate seal.

For the orchid the case is not as obvious, but it is valid. Many flowering plants, scorning seclusion, are as sociable as a baby-kissing politician. From A, aster, to Z, zinnias, there are hundreds of them. Day lilies and goldenrod love company; they'll come right up to your door if you'll let them. But not orchids. Even an orchid native to a climate and terrain preferred by man is aloof—for instance, *Cypripedium calceolus*, yellow lady's-slipper to you. In the meadows and woods around my house on a Connecticut hilltop there isn't a day from April to October when a stranger couldn't pick a bouquet of wild flowers with no trouble at all, but if he is looking for lady's-slipper, which he should not pick, he will have a time of it. They are there, in certain spots in the woods, but they like privacy and are hard to find.

Most of the 30,000 known and named species of orchids, both epiphytic and terrestrial, are not hard to find, but they are hard to get to. Before the arrival of *homo sapiens* they were rarely disturbed—by occasional sprees of the elements—in the dripping-wet canyon bottoms or steep mountain slopes or dense jungles that they love. No one knows when a man first climbed a tree and tore an orchid loose from its roost, but in its complaint the orchid would of course cite Alexander Humboldt in his canoe on the Orinoco and John Lager scrambling up a crag in the Andes. Humboldt and Lager are dead, but there are plenty of live ones, including me. One day long ago I rode a burro down a tough trail in Guatemala with a specimen tied to my thigh which I thought was a real find. (It proved to be only a sunburned *Odontoglossum crispum*.) This day, any given day, there are thousands of orchid hunters, professional and amateur, on rivers and in forests, from Assam to Peru, out for bounty. The orchid would have a plenitude of evidence for a verdict.

Certainly homo sapiens is not the only creature who habitually violates privacies. If you leave a bar of chocolate loose in your tent expect a bear. A snake raids a brown thrasher's nest for the eggs. The fleas giving you that itch were not invited, nor were the birds in your berry patch, the rabbits in your vegetable garden, or the moles in your lawn. The lion sinking its teeth in the throat of an impala and the streptococci sneaking into your throat are equally unwelcome. The worm in my apple, the fly in my soup,

Drawing by Julio Fernandez.

the cuckoo laying an egg in a nest it didn't build, the elephant trampling a rice paddy—they are all gatecrashers. One of the most persistent is the epiphytic orchid. It is not a parasite; it doesn't feed on the tree, it merely perches on it. There is a published photograph of a gnarled old acacia which has for non-rent-paying tenants more than a thousand plants of

Brassavola nodosa. The caption says the acacia is their "host." Host? If a swarm of hornets builds and occupies a nest on my terrace, am I their host?

But the hornets have to build somewhere, and that's the point. A man-eating tiger creeps into a hut on a Himalayan hillside in the middle of the night, gets a man or woman in its jaws, and streaks for the bush, because

it *must*—or starve to death. Some disability of muscle or teeth has made it incapable of catching or killing its conventional prey. An orchid takes up residence on a trunk or a limb only because its roots can cling to tree bark and—with that species—to nothing else. All organisms, animal or vegetable, that take liberties with other organisms do so because it is es-

sential to their well-being, and usually to their very existence. They can't help it. All except one: man. Many of man's invasions of privacy are dictated by necessity, but many are not. He has invaded innumerable privacies not because he had to, but just for the hell of it. Usually he has covered up by pretending a need, but sometimes he has confessed, as when Edmund Hillary, asked why he had climbed Mount Everest, replied, "Because it was there."

For instance, the orchid. It is arguable that as man's huge brain reached an unprecedented complexity he acquired something new under the sun, an aesthetic sensitivity that made it essential to his well-being (though not to his existence) that he climb a tree and get an orchid plant, roots and all, and take it home. Perhaps to his woman? But he didn't stop there, or his descendants didn't. Even today, with herds of nude men and women cavorting on stages and many detailed accounts of fornication in books, it is still generally felt that the most private privacy is sex. The dictionary definition of "privates" is "the private parts; the genitals." The organs of reproduction. Man has been monkeying with the organs of reproduction of other organisms for centuries, and in recent decades he has had a picnic with orchids. A book by two men named Rolfe and Hurst is entitled *The Orchid Studbook*



Crossing the pollen of one species with the pistil of another species is easier with orchids than with most other plants, but you have to know your species. Harry J. Veitch reports on his experiments with *Cattleya mossiae*: "A few hours after pollination the floral segments become flaccid and show signs of withering. In a couple of days the pollinia are seen to be disintegrating, forming, with the viscid secretion from the stigma, a gelatinous mass that quite fills up the stigmatic cavity. At the same time the pollen tubes have commenced to grow, and in eight days they have reached the base of the column, being found in vast numbers among the conducting tissue. At the end of a month the ovary has become considerably enlarged, and the placenta and ovules are beginning to assume a definite form, while the pollen tubes are pushing downwards along the sides of the placenta and among the ovules. In two months, though the pollen. . . ."

Enough. I have my fair share of gall, but there's a limit. Mr. Veitch may be a good citizen, a faithful husband, a loving father, and a member of the SPCA, but his experimenting with *Cattleya mossiae's* privates was brazen effrontery, totally without necessity on behalf of his existence or well-being. There are now more than 16,000 named manmade orchid hybrids, and countless others, not thought good enough to name, have been tossed in garbage cans.

The gaudiest, the most spectacular, invasions of privacy by homo sapiens are treasured chapters in our glorious (sic) history. The landing on this continent by Columbus was even without the excuse "because it was there." He didn't know it was there; nobody did; it got in his way when he tried for a short cut to the luxuries of India. And then here they came, the conquistadors and Pilgrims and Captain John Smith, and the creatures who had been here since the Lower Paleolithic era were done for. Our crowning impudence is the name we call them by: American Indians. Amerinds. Neither "American" nor "Indian" has any relevance to them, their past, their ethos, or their culture. The one is in honor of a congenital invader named Amerigo Vespucci, and the other immortalizes Columbus's delusion about where he was. That is surely the supreme instance of adding insult to injury. For more than a century we have been graciously granting Amerinds a new privacy by herding them into corrals which we call reservations. They don't appreciate it properly.

But our historically notorious invasions of privacy, from Alexander the Great's sightseeing Asian tour to the Russians' summer excursion to Czechoslovakia two years ago, are merely the frosting on the cake. If there is somewhere an accessible organism whose privacy no man or woman has

ever violated I don't know what it is, and if I could name it I wouldn't; it would start a stampede. From the largest animal still around, the sperm whale, to the tiniest particle we know of, the neutron, nothing and no one is safe. The largest collective particle in our reach is the planet we inhabit, and we keep getting deeper and deeper inside it, extracting anything we fancy. The cover of a national magazine announces in large type, **THE OCEANS—MAN'S LAST GREAT RESOURCE.** Superb cheek. Since our ancient ancestors elected to come on out of the water and stay out, it would seem that a decent respect for the opinion of polyps and dolphins and fish must concede that the oceans are the resource of those who chose to stay in. But men have no respect whatever for the opinion of anyone or anything except other men, and that goes more by whim than by precept.

Since there is no privacy that man does not violate at will it might be supposed that he rejects even the conception of a right to privacy. Oh no. A man's home is his castle. Private property. **KEEP OUT. NO TRESPASSING.** Private enterprise. Shiny on your own side. **NO ADMITTANCE.** By appointment only. No comment. Do not list my telephone number. There is the basic ambivalence that makes homo sapiens nature's wildest prank. After keeping himself alive and going,

getting the necessities for existence, half of his energy is spent on violating the privacy of others and the other half on trying to maintain his own. If you challenge that estimate as extravagant, consider our latest flamboyant invasion of privacy, the landing on the moon. A million men and women had a hand in it, directly or remotely, and we spent twenty billion dollars on it. I am not condemning it; I would have liked to go along. If an orchid or an atom should ask me, "Was it essential to your existence or even your well-being?" I would reply, "Mind your own business. Don't invade the privacy of homo sapiens." If a social worker should ask me why I approve the expenditure of so much time and energy on that highflying jaunt when a billion of our fellow beings haven't enough to eat I would reply, "The moon was there."

We have evolved into the role of world-champion meddlers and trespassers and we will defend our title against all comers. There is no limit to our ingenuity and versatility at butting in. You who are reading this may be a subscriber to a magazine that specializes in abetting and promoting intrusion. Not wanting to be sued for libel, I won't name it; call it H. . . . Y. It is true that most of the spots suggested by H. . . . Y as destinations for a holiday trip are asking for it, and you will probably be welcome.

But anyone familiar with H. . . . Y's contents and attitudes knows that what it enjoys most is discovery and disclosure of a spot, no matter where, that has something, no matter what, that would appeal to strangers but has shown no inclination to invite them in. The chances are that you will *not* be welcome, but that's your problem, not H. . . . Y's. Darwin never claimed that open arms awaited him at Galapagos.

We have certainly had a lot of fun; and, having danced, we shouldn't complain if we must pay the piper. It is possible, it even seems likely, that we are now setting the stage for the grandest irony since matter came to life—or life came to matter. We have justified our invasions of privacy by contending that they were requisite to the improvement of our lot, and it may be that the result of one of our recent breaches, the cracking of the atom, will be not the improvement of our lot but its finish. We may be done for, and if so we did it. Yes, the atom was there, and Mount Everest, and the orchid, and I can't decide whether to be glad or sorry that if we go they will still be there. I would like to do another page or two about this exquisite irony, but I have to go and fix a broken step on my ten-foot stepladder. I'll need it in the spring for pruning trees, to improve my lot.

THE END