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GARDENS OF IDEAS 4

JUNGLE RARITIES IN NORFOLK

Maurice Mason hunts plants all over the world, and has himself collected almost 300 new species. H. E. BATES describes his 30-acre garden near King's Lynn

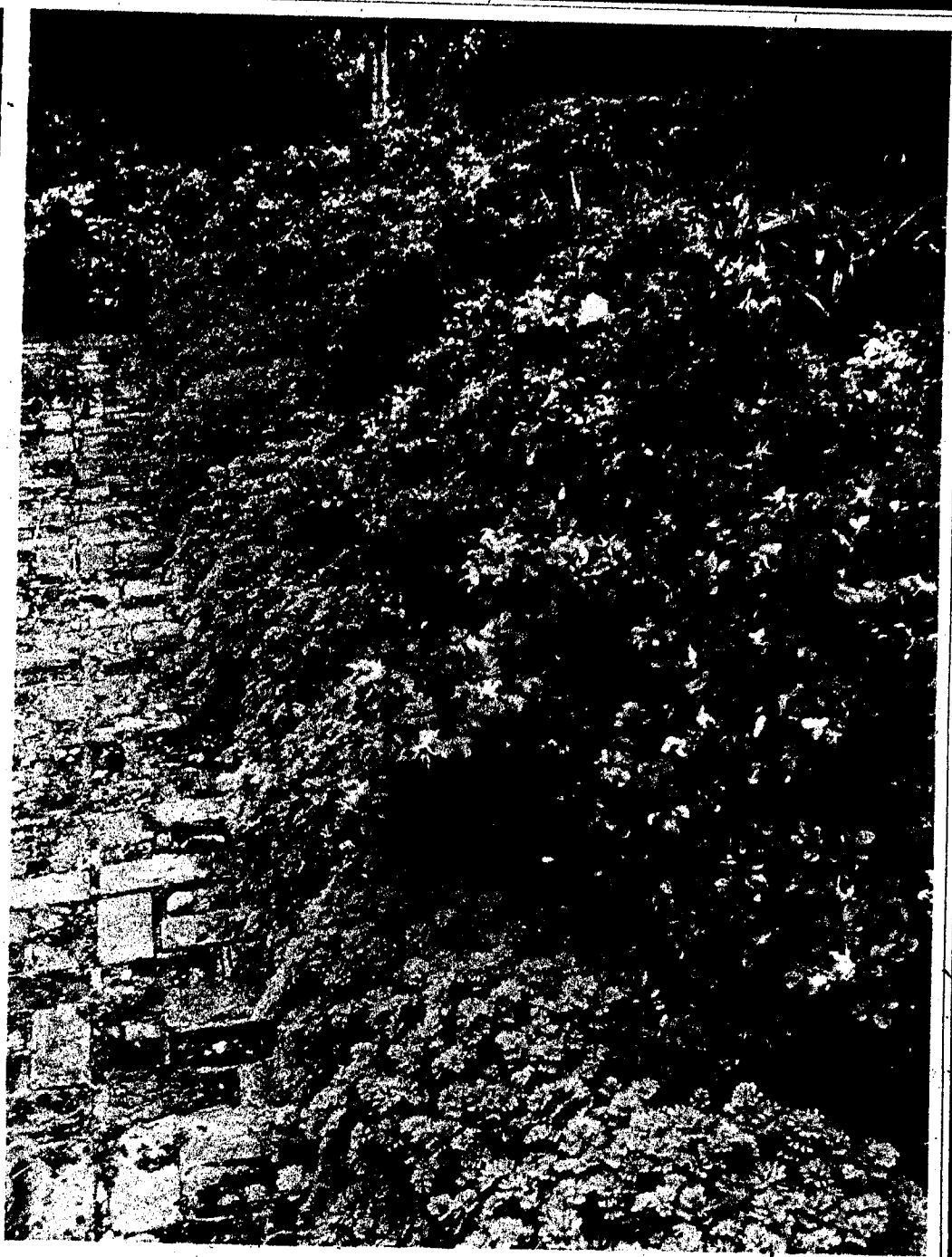
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DMITRI KASTERINE

THE history of plant-collecting, though not so long as that of printed books on horticulture, which is now nearly five centuries old (the English translation of *Liber de proprietabilis verum*, the first English printed book containing definite botanical information, having been published about 1495) is certainly of no mean length itself. It is also crammed with riches. The Tradescants, David, Farrer, Fortune, E. H. Wilson, Kingdon Ward, Furze, not to speak of various officers of the old East India Company, who began to send home specimens of many kinds, more particularly roses, from India and China at the start of the 18th century; the centuries positively teem with the names of a host of men who have roamed the globe in search of new and rare plants, to the greater enrichment of the horticultural scene. E. H. Wilson alone, working for the firm of Veitch of Exeter at the turn of the century, introduced no less than 16,000 specimens to the world's herbaria and brought home no less than 1,000 species previously unknown to civilisation, among them the now well-known and well-loved *Lilium regale*, of which there is a stupendous picture in his *Aristocrats of the Garden*.

When the classless society really becomes classless, one of the few real honours left to a man will be that of having his name given to some new and exciting flower discovered in the sweat and thirst of adventure on some remote peak of Himalayas or Andes. This possibility, as far as I am concerned, is

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pretty remote one however—I fear there can never be a *Primula floribunda batesii* or anything of that sort—since I am no plant-collector. Maurice Mason, however, is.

Mason, a farmer, lives some miles south of King's Lynn, that most interesting of East Anglian ports, at a point where the Isle of Ely suddenly meets the county of Norfolk. As you drive north-eastwards from Ely, the utterly flat countryside offers about as much enchantment as an abandoned battlefield. Then suddenly, as in a desert, this vast flatness, roofed by an even vaster sky, gives way to a green and leafy oasis. This oasis is Maurice Mason's: entirely of his own creation.

As if 6,000 acres of Norfolk farmland were not enough meat on his plate, Mason has created in/continued



ORCHIDS are Maurice Mason's speciality, and he enjoys discussing them, above left, with knowledgeable visitors like 88-year-old horticulturist Clive Cookson. Over 4,000 different species grow in Mason's orchid house, many of them in wall baskets, left, which leave the roots the same room to expand as they would have in their natural state, growing on the side of trees. Out in the open one bed, above, is bordered by an unusual low hedge of Jackman's Blue—a variety of rue

JUNGLE RARITIES IN NORFOLK

its centre a garden of 30 acres, every tree in it, apart from two old walnuts, having been planted by himself. These facts might argue that Maurice Mason is a man of fanatical horticultural dedication, something of a visionary, possessed of an insatiable thirst for plants and more plants, trees and more trees, much of it in defiance, perhaps, of the searing winter winds that pierce down from Spitzbergen and across the Wash: and all this is right. But Mason is also a very cheerful, very amusing, very forthright, very likable, loquacious, tirelessly energetic man, both physically and mentally, possessed among other things of an astounding encyclopaedic memory.

This, above all, he most certainly needs. The garden alone contains a probable 7,000 species; in the greenhouses, of which there are half a dozen or so, all pretty large and all heated, there dwell, under impeccable conditions, another 4,000; these do not include some 4,500 orchids, all of them species, Mason's greatest speciality, or a further 2-2,500 bromeliads etc; and an unspecified number of tropical and sub-tropical climbers. The collection of orchid species alone—as opposed to the many collections of hybrid cymbidiums, miltonias, dendrobiums and cattleyas (the latter the adored status

symbol of the more affluent American bosom) in private hands throughout the country, is almost certainly unequalled in these islands. Indeed Maurice Mason is, in my experience, the only private plantsman to have had his own stand exhibiting species at the annual Orchid Society's Show, just as he is one of the very few to have staged his own private stand at Chelsea.

All this is remarkable enough; but what is infinitely more remarkable is that Mason, with his prodigious memory, knows the name of every single species of the near 20,000 he owns, never being at a second's loss for a syllable.

"I am really purely and simply a species man," he said. With typical generosity he was serving champagne at half past eleven in the morning. "My Mecca is really Edinburgh."

"But you have also had a few adventures?"

"What is an adventure?" he said, and presently went on to recount a few.

IN FACT Maurice Mason, on his wide travels, as a regular and indefatigable plant-hunter, collected a probable 2-300 species himself. (If I constantly emphasise this business of species it is precisely because this is the main key to the man: he is, horticulturally speaking, the purist of purists.) His hunting has in fact taken him all over the world: Madagascar, Africa, Malaya, Borneo, New Guinea, Mexico, Brazil, Peru, British Guiana, Siam,

Fiji, Guatemala, Australia, Solomon Islands, New Britain.

Of all these his richest hunting-grounds are Madagascar and New Guinea, the former having a cuisine that is, as in Tahiti, a combination of native and French, the latter revealing that the business of eating one's fellow man is still common with some tribes, the method observed being to capture the required victims alive, hang them up, also alive, and carve off succulent morsels of flesh as desired, the meat as a result being kept fresh, at least until such time as the victim is no longer drawing breath, the most delicate of these morsels being, as I understand it, the palm of the hand. Mason is, however, content merely to collect orchids.

Back in the garden in Norfolk the abiding impression, in spite of its 30 acres, is not one, curiously enough, of great size but rather of great intimacy. There are no great vistas, no immense and rolling sweeps of lawns, no Capability Brown patterns of grandeur. Rather it is a series of small gardens opening one into another.

This most satisfying of plans at once provides restfulness coupled with a feast of interest and surprise. The many beds of mixed trees, shrubs and plants are almost all in the round, on the principle already advocated for some years by that other celebrated plantsman Alan Bloom.

In case this adherence to a particular system of planting should appear to give an impression of monotony let

me say at once that the exact opposite is in fact the case. A group of rare conifers gives way to a small lake, the lake to a bowling green as trim as a billiard table, the green to a heather garden, the heathers to a rock-garden largely dominated by cool clouds of grey.

There is also much ground cover; like me, Maurice Mason is a great anti-bare-earth man, a devoted lover of foliage and its many fascinating and delectable contrasts that reward throughout the year. Perhaps the only drawback to this vast cornucopia of plants is that it is virtually impossible to take everything in. The eye swoons. It is rather as if you were given the run of some celestial wine cellar (a comparison, I should guess, much to Maurice Mason's taste) with the invitation to taste infinite numbers of rare and seductive vintages until the mind swoons too, partially intoxicated with the things that "makyth glad the heart of man".

We repaired to the main orchid house, there to be shown rare orchid after rare orchid, brought to us with knowledgeable reverence by an alert and venerable character, the oldest of Mason's gardeners, Robert. It was rather like sitting in a steamy and rarefied vault, looking at a collection of infinitely delicate jewels.

From a warm oven of a greenhouse in England it is a fair step to the discomforting excitements of actually hunting them up the higher reaches of say, the rivers of British Guiana,



where water-falls make sheer drops of 1,500 feet or more and rivers are alive with piranhas, not the most amiable of companions when the waters have to be navigated on foot.

Sustained by nothing but three prunes, deserted by his native canoe men, Mason here on one occasion walked through no less than 17 rivers in a single day before finally fetching up at a mission post and the inestimable joy of quenching his thirst in one go with practically half a bottle of whisky, a pleasure clearly well earned, his shoes not having been dry for 18 consecutive days.

ON ANOTHER orchid-hunting trip, in Sarawak, at the mouth of the Kuching river, he stayed at "a most delightful camp for convicted murderers", none of whom had done anything more sinister than "cutting off their wives' heads for infidelity". He records that they were, unlike the green mambas that confront you on the forest paths of Southern Rhodesia and "come straight at you", charming companions.

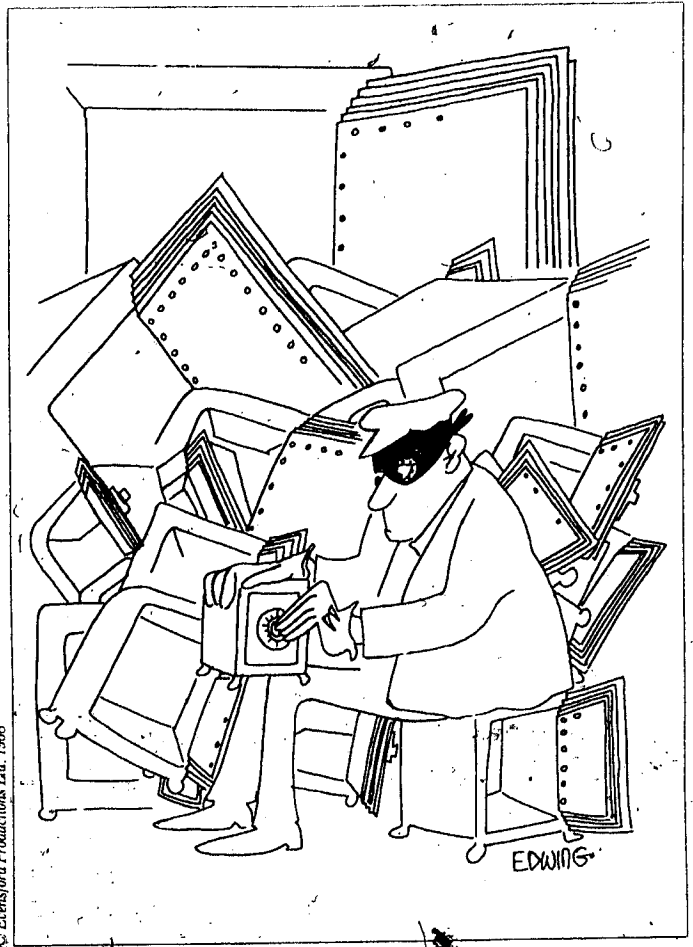
Rather less so were some native gentlemen in New Guinea, where he had been warned never to attempt to negotiate a path on which two crossed branches had been erected. Finding himself virtually trapped by one such barrier in front of him and another behind him he eventually found himself passing the night in a hut with 20

or 30 natives, all sleeping on the ground. They didn't, apparently, care for his smell and he, equally, didn't care for theirs. The source and strength of the odour became vividly apparent the following morning, when the dead body of the grandfather of the tribe revealed itself a few yards away, "having been there for a very long time".

After he had admitted to having been, on innumerable occasions, "very, very frightened", it seemed to me judicious to change the subject to one of a rather more academic nature, though no less fascinating on that account, and put to him a question I had long wanted to ask him.

"What," I asked him, "of *Begonia rex Iran Cross*?" The name had always seemed to me a particularly hideous and unfortunate one, apt though it might be to describe the plant's crimped and crinkled green leaf centrally imprinted with its marked black cross. This begonia, probably the most popular house plant in Europe, had always been considered a hybrid ever since its introduction in 1953. Maurice Mason, being as I say a dedicated species man only, set out to prove otherwise and proceeded to demonstrate that the plant is in fact indigenous to Vietnam, a species pure and simple.

The result is that *Begonia rex Iran Cross* has now officially shed its hideous name and henceforth will be *Begonia masonia*. Just reward.



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