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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Black Moon

By SEABURY QUINN

*A goose-flesh story of African voodoo transplanted in the United States—an
every tale of weird rites and mysterious murders and a brilliant exploit
of Jules de Grandin, occult detective and ghost-breaker*

THE August sun had reigned all day as mercilessly as a tsar whose ukase is a sword and whose sword is sudden death. Now in the evening cool we were dining in the garden, and dinner was unusually good, even for such a virtuoso of cuisine as Nora McGinnis. Tiny clams chilled almost crisp and served with champagne *brut* were followed by green turtle soup and pale dry sherry, then roast young guinea-hen and ginger ice with white Burgundy. Now the spicy sweetness of Chartreuse and the bitterness of Java coffee put a period to a meal which might have brought a flush of envy to Lucullus' face. "*Tiens*, my friend, I am in a pious mood, me," announced Jules de Grandin, his little round blue eyes bright in the candlelight. "But certainly, of course——"

"Are you repenting of past sins, or sins to be committed?" I replied.

He grinned at me. "Observe," he ordered. "In Tarragona, where the good Carthusian brethren work so hard to make this precious stuff, they say that drinking one small glass of it is equal to attending three low masses. *Parbleu*, I make amends for laxness in devotions——" He poised the cruet of green liqueur to decant a second drink, but the wisp-wisp of swift feet on close-cropped grass broke in upon his solemn rite.

"If yez plaze, sors, there's a gentleman to see yez," announced Nora.

Nora resents callers after office hours. More than once she has turned my patients off with sharp-tongued rebuke

when they rang the door-bell around dinnertime, but now her eyes were shining with suppressed elation, and she seemed to labor with some weighty secret as she bore the message of the interruption to our after-dinner confab.

"A visitor—*grand Dieu des porcs!*—are we to be eternally annoyed by them?" de Grandin answered tartly. "Bid him depart, *ma chère*, tell him we are indisposed, that we died this afternoon and now await the coming of the undertaker——"

"And if she did he'd not believe a word of it; he's too familiar with your shameless lies, you little blighter!" a deep voice challenged as a big form vaulted from the side porch and came striding toward us through the deepening twilight.

"*Comment? Mais non!* It cannot be, and yet it is, by blue!" de Grandin cried. "*Hiji, mon brave, mon cher camarade, mon beau copain*—is it truly thou, or has some spirit put your form upon him?" In a moment he had grasped the big intruder by the shoulders, drawn him to him in a bear-hug and stood on tiptoe to impress a kiss on both his cheeks.

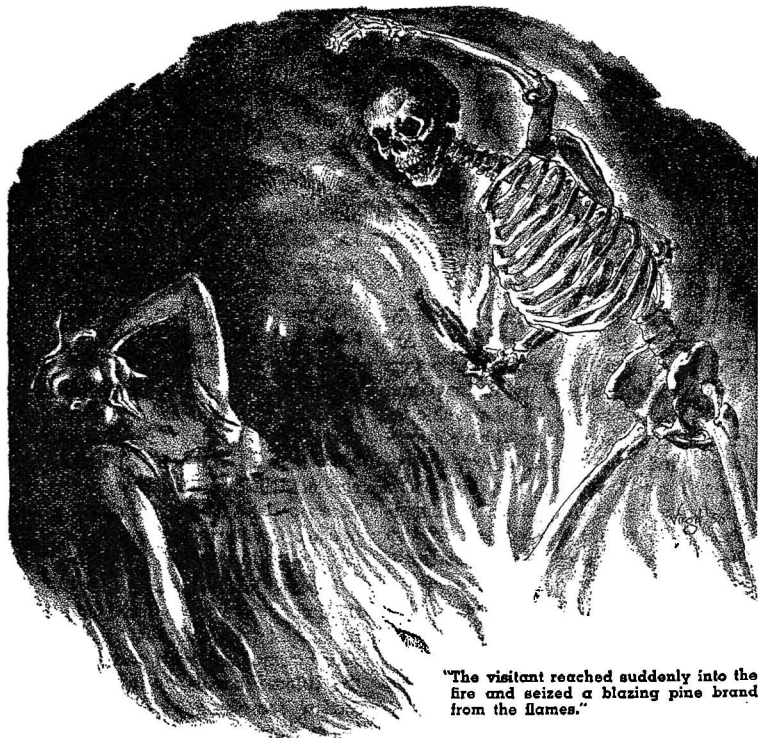
"Give over, you small devil, d'ye want the neighbors talkin'?" exclaimed the new arrival, thrusting back the little Frenchman, but retaining a tight hold upon his shoulders. "Trowbridge, old top, how are you?" With his free hand he grasped mine and almost paralyzed it in a vise-tight grip.

"Ingraham!" I gasped, amazed. "My boy, I'm glad to see you!"

"Glad enough to offer me a whisky-soda?" he asked as he drew a chair up to the table.

Nora had the bottle and siphon at his side almost before he could finish speaking, and as he poured about four ounces of the liquor in his glass and diluted it with rather less than that much soda I observed him carefully. Sir Haddingway Ingraham Jamison Ingraham, known to all his intimates as Hiji, late of the Sierra Leone Frontier Police, member of the British Army Intelligence, detective extraordinary and adventurer-at-large, was

taller by almost two feet than Jules de Grandin, and lean with the leanness of the practised athlete. Although his small mustache was black, his hair was iron-gray, and his long, thin, high-cheeked face was burned almost the hue of old mahogany. With de Grandin and Costello and Inspector Renouard of the French Cambodian *gendarmerie* he had smashed a bold conspiracy to spread devil worship throughout Asia, and more than once we'd talked of him and mourned his absence when we'd found ourselves in places where a man with a strong arm and ability to shoot straight would have come in handy. Now, dropped from the sum-



"The visitant reached suddenly into the fire and seized a blazing pine brand from the flames."

mer evening sky, apparently, he sat beside us, drinking whisky-soda as composedly as though we'd seen each other at the breakfast table.

"What is it brings you here, my friend?" de Grandin asked. "Is it that you offer us a chance to go with you on some adventure? One hopes so most devoutly. Life grows stale and tiresome in New Jersey——"

The big Englishman grinned at him. "Still on the go, eh, Frenchy? Too bad I have to let you down, but I'm a married man these days, with a wife and kids and everything that goes with it. Also, I'm no longer in the Army. I'm a member of his Majesty's Consular Service, quiet and respectable as a retired parson."

The Frenchman's eager little face went long, and Hiji grinned at him almost maliciously as he reached into his dinner coat and drew a sheaf of papers from his pocket. "Glance these over," he commanded as he spread the documents upon the tablecloth. "Just a little routine stuff about commercial matters." He raised his glass and took a long sip, gazing at de Grandin over the tall tumbler's rim.

With a grimace of distaste the Frenchman spread the papers out before him. They seemed to be newspaper clippings pasted on stiff sheets of foolscap and numbered in rotation. What possible interest Jules de Grandin could have in production and consumption, imports and exports, I could not conceive, but I saw his narrow brows draw down in concentration as he read, and when he looked up there was a lightning-glint in his small, deep-set blue eyes. "Me, I am greatly interested in this species of commercialism," he declared. "Is it that you invite us to assist in your investigations?"

"Just what I dropped in for," answered Hiji. "Can you come?"

The little Frenchman spread his hands

in a wide gesture. "Can the pussycat devour liver, or the duck perform aquatic feats?" he asked. "When do we depart?"

"What's it all about?" I cut in. "I never knew you cared two pins for commerce, de Grandin, yet——"

"Observe them, if you please," he broke in as he thrust the papers toward me. "They do not make sense, I agree, but they promise something interesting, I damn think."

AS FAR as I could see, the cuttings were without relation to each other. The first, dated a year back, bore the head:

Students' Prank Seen in Police Find
Parts of Bodies Found in Bay Believed
Dissecting-Room Relics—Murder Mys-
tery Blows Up

The item related the finding of a gunny-sack in the Chesapeake not far from Reedville, Virginia, which when opened proved to contain several human arm and leg bones from which the flesh had been almost completely cut away. Local police had at first believed them evidence of murder, but when physicians declared the grisly relics were from several bodies the theory that medical students had tossed the sack into the bay near Norfolk was accepted as the most likely explanation.

Less than an inch in length, and without relation to the first, the second cutting bore the head: "Farm and Domestic Help Scarce," and related that domestic and field helpers were at a premium in Westmoreland, Richmond and Northumberland Counties, though there had been no great migration to the North.

"Camp Meetings Lose Appeal" the third clipping was headlined, and told of the almost total failure of attendance at recent camp and bush meetings among the colored population of the Norfolk section, something without precedent in the memory of the oldest inhabitants.

Entirely unrelated to the first three items, as far as I could see, was the clipping from a New York Negro daily telling of the gory murder of the proprietor of a Harlem café. The body had been found almost denuded of clothing, scored and slashed as if a savage beast had clawed it. Robbery had not been the motive, for the dead man's well-filled wallet was intact, and a diamond scarf-pin was still in his tie. He had no enemies, as far as the authorities could learn. Indeed, he had been very popular, especially with the Southern Negroes of the district.

The final story dealt with the unexplained murder of a Captain Ronald Sterling, apparently a gentleman of some importance in Westmoreland County. He had, according to the clipping, been found dead on his front lawn, his face, neck and breast so horribly mutilated that identification was possible only by his clothes. While every circumstance pointed to death being due to some ferocious beast, a careful check-up of the death scene disclosed no animal tracks, though numerous human footprints were discovered on the sandy driveway. No one had been approached, for the police had been unable to formulate a tenable theory in the case.

"H'm, perhaps there's some connection in these stories, but I can't find it if there is," I said as I passed back the papers.

Ingraham produced a small black pipe and a tin of Three Nuns and began tamping the tobacco in the briar as he looked quizzically at us. "There doesn't seem to be any common denominator, I'll admit," he answered, "but I think there is. So do my bosses. You see, there have been quite a number of Jamaican and Barbadian Negroes coming to this country lately, and some of your G-gentlemen seem to think they're mixed up in this business. His Majesty's Government thinks otherwise; I've been deputed to prove we're right."

"But what is 'this business,' as you call

it?" I demanded. "I don't see any possible connection between medical students' pranks and failing attendance at camp meetings with murders in Virginia and Harlem——"

"No"—Hiji took a few quick puffs to get his pipe alight—"I don't suppose you do, but there are data not shown in the clippings. For instance, those bones washed up by the Chesapeake were charred by fire. Exposure to the water rendered positive opinion difficult, but the little flesh remaining on them appeared to have been acted on by heat. Bluntly, they'd been cooked.

"Second, there have been a number of strange Negroes seen in that section of Virginia and southeastern Maryland. They're West Indians, not from Jamaica or Barbados, but from Martinique and Haiti, men and women speaking English with a strong French patois accent. That's where we come in. Your people don't seem able to distinguish between our Negroes and those from the non-British islands.

"Now, as to connection between these murders: Jim Collins, the proprietor of that Harlem hot spot, wasn't a West Indian. He went North from Virginia something like a year ago, and he went from Captain Sterling's place. It's known that he corresponded with Sterling after coming North, and a letter was received from him two days before Sterling's death."

"D'ye know what it said?"

He nodded. "Just five words: 'Some of them are here.' I think it was 'some of them,' whoever they were or are, who killed both him and Captain Sterling. The same technique was followed in each case. Furthermore, there have been three more deaths like those of Collins and the captain, though I haven't clippings on them. One was in Maryland, almost across the bay from Sterling's place; one

was in South Carolina, one in Louisiana. Add the fact that Negro churches in those localities have been steadily losing in attendance to these murders occurring hundreds of miles apart, and I think you have something. Sterling's death might have been laid to some freak of criminology, or to some wild beast escaped from a circus, but you can't advance that theory to account for the other killings. Collins writes a letter saying, 'Some of them are here,' and dies next day. Sterling receives it and dies exactly the same way two days later. A circus beast might have killed Collins or Sterling, but it couldn't have traveled from New York to Virginia in that short time. Or, say it was a criminal pervert. Those Johnnies aren't usually so choicy. Like our Jack the Ripper or your own sadistic murderers, they take their victims where they find 'em. Why should one of 'em kill the Negro Collins in New York, then hop a train to travel to Virginia just to kill the white man Sterling? And even if he did do that, would he be likely then to cross the bay to Maryland, kill a Johnny there, then travel down to Carolina and cross the country into Louisiana just to kill two more?"

"You think it was a gang?"

"I'm sure of it, and——"

"One moment, if you please!" de Grandin broke in. "Await me here; I must know something." Jumping up, he ran into the house, where a moment later we saw a glow of light shine through the study windows. In a minute he returned, announcing: "I have looked in last year's almanac. One week before that sack of bones was found in Chesapeake Bay there was a total lunar eclipse, visible from that portion of Maryland and Virginia."

"Well, what of it?" I demanded. "What's a lunar eclipse to do with——"

The little Frenchman looked at the big

Englishman, and each saw confirmation of a thought in the other's glance.

"The Black Moon!" Hiji said as he let his breath out softly through his teeth.

"Precisely," nodded Jules de Grandin. "Also, according to the almanac, another eclipse will occur there in three days."

"I think we'd better do a move," replied the Englishman. "Can you put me up tonight, Trowbridge?"

AT OUR backs the sun rose from the Chesapeake; underfoot the shaky little pier swayed with each rising wave; ahead of us the bay showed as clear of any sign of craft as the ocean around Juan Fernandez when Crusoe was cast on its beach. An hour earlier the steamboat which had brought us up from Norfolk had deposited us and a tall, handsome, dark young woman on the dock from which the motor ferry was supposed to operate, and since that time we had seen nothing more than sea-gulls on the water.

"Lost," Ingraham muttered as he knocked the dottle from his pipe against his heel. "We've been marooned, men, and if we can't reach Sterling's Landing by tomorrow——"

"Pardon me, sir, did I understand you all are goin' to Sterling's Landing?" the tall young woman who was our fellow castaway broke in. "May I inquire your business there? I'm Captain Sterling's daughter," she added, softening the apparent sharpness of her question. "You see, I'm his sole survivor, and——"

"Of course, one understands, *Mademoiselle*," de Grandin answered with a bow. "I am Doctor Jules de Grandin and these are Doctor Samuel Trowbridge and Sir Haddingway Ingraham of the British Consular Service. We have come to make investigation of the disaffection of your local Negro population——"

The young woman—she was no girl,

but five or six and twenty—shuddered slightly, despite the rising August heat.

"I'd like to know about that, too," she answered. "Papa wrote me of it just before he died. It seems the colored people all refused to work, and some of them were insolent. A pa'cel of strange darkies came and squatted on our land, and when he warned them off they defied him——"

"Do"—the little Frenchman spoke deliberately as he eyed her narrowly—"do you connect your father's death with this, *Mademoiselle?*"

"I really couldn't say, sir. You see, I'm on the stage, and was playin' in St. Louis when word came of my father's death. I came as quickly as I could, but"—she paused and bit her lip, then: "I had to wait until I had the money to come home."

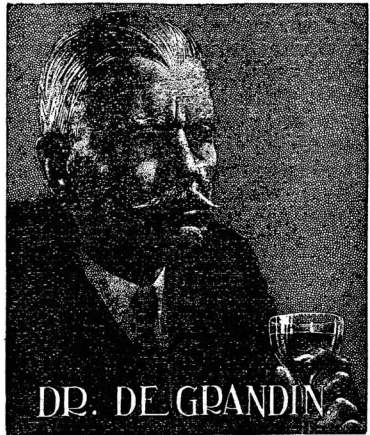
Again the little Frenchman nodded. Following his quick glance I read the sign upon her wardrobe trunk: "Coralea Sterling, Moonlight Maidens, Theatre." Some months before, the Moonlight Maidens burlesque troupe had played in Harrisonville, and from theatrical reports I'd gathered they were not very successful.

"May we count upon your help, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin asked.

"Of course. I'll be very glad to put you all up at the house, and if there's any way that I can help you find out——"

The hooting of the little ferry's air-whistle broke in, and in a moment we were headed down the bay for Sterling's Landing.

THE Sterling mansion proved a disappointment. Far from being the Southern manor house of tradition, it was a fairly comfortable old farmhouse, badly in need of repair, set back from the sand by-road in a plot of rather unkempt lawn with an avenue of honey-locust leading from its gate. A kitchen garden mostly weeds was at its back door, and behind



that was a farm of thirty-five or forty acres in a state of almost utter fallowness. Mortgages, I guessed, had been the chief crop of that land for many years. Inside, the house was fairly clean, with some pieces of good furniture of the Victorian era, some family portraits dating to the days before the Civil War, and several chambers with large, comfortable beds. No one met us at the landing, and we took turns carrying the luggage to the house, then at Miss Sterling's request went down to the village store, where we laid in a supply of canned goods, supplemented by a ham and some fresh eggs and vegetables. By noon we had fire going in the kitchen range and made a comfortable meal.

The interval that followed was a pleasant one. We all turned in to wash and put away the dishes, and as I looked at Coralea enveloped in her big apron I had a hard time visualizing her shuffling and strutting back and forth across a darkened stage while she felt for concealed fasteners in her gown and discarded piece on piece of costume till she stood revealed in pristine nudity beneath the spotlight's

purple glare. With uncanny understanding de Grandin read my thought. "One often wonders at the lure the theatre has," he whispered. "I have known mothers to desert their children and wives desert their comfortable homes to dance and sing in third-rate music halls, enduring poverty and social ostracism cheerfully. One cannot explain it, one only knows that it is so."

I nodded, but before I could reply our hostess spoke: "Can I trouble you gentlemen to make one more trip to the Land-in? There are some more things we'll be needin' from the sto'e, and while you're gone I'd like to visit 'round the neighborhood a little. I can borrow a horse next door at Hopkins'."

Half an hour later we set out for the small general store, while Coralea waved to us as she walked in the opposite direction, her slim, tall form almost boyish in khaki jodhpurs and checked riding-coat.

While I made the purchases, Hiji and de Grandin engaged some store-porch loafers in confab, and though our actual business occupied a scant half-hour it was midafternoon before we started on our homeward walk.

"It all fits in," said Hiji. "We see a disaffection among the local blacks who refuse work, no matter what the wages are. Negroes are naturally religious, yet there's a steady fallin' off in church attendance. Next we have four terrifyin' murders, identical in technique, but widely separated. Each victim has no known enemies, each was popular among the colored folks. Collins, the Harlem Negro, was something of a leader of his race and highly thought of by both whites and blacks. Sterling enjoyed the confidence of local colored residents, the Carolina victim was a social worker deeply loved by all the colored folks, and the fourth was a young Baptist missionary from the North who by his eloquence and kindness

had won a host of friends, both white and black, and was more than holding his own against the ebb-tide in church membership. Then crack-o! someone murders him, and his congregation falls to pieces. Why should these people, so widely separated by distance, race, vocation and background, have been killed in the same manner?

"Then, here's another puzzle: The bones they found down here appear to have been relics of a cannibal feast. There's never been a case of cannibalism heard of in this country; yet—there it is.

"If these murders had been done in Africa I'd say they were the work of Leopard Men. Furthermore, the Human Leopards make a practise of eating their victims, and their big cannibal parties are held during an eclipse—at the time of the 'Black Moon.' It looks almost as if this deviltry had been imported from West Africa."

"But only indirectly," said de Grandin. "Me, I have another theory. The islands of the Caribbean reek with voodoo, the black sorcery imported with the slaves from Africa. It began in Haiti before Dessalines threw off French government; it grew upon the ruins of the church the black imperialists tore down. It is said Célestine, daughter of President Antoine-Simone, was high priestess of the cult. Its blasphemies and obscenities run through the island's culture as tropic breezes rustle through the jungle trees. There at the time of the Black Moon the 'Goat Without Horns' has been sacrificed on voodoo altars; there the drums have bidden worshippers to the shrine of the White Queen; there a priesthood more terrible than that of Baal has ruled supreme since 1791. *Ha*, but with the coming of American marines the scene was changed. Precisely as you ran down the Leopard Men, my Hiji, the Americans hunted down the sorcerers of voodoo until their power was

broken utterly. Now, I damn think, they have decided on a bold stroke. Here"—he swung his arm in a wide arc—"right here, it seems, they have decided to set up their bloody altars and force the native blacks to join with them in a worship which blends jungle bestiality with the depravity of decadent European superstition. Unless I miss my guess, my friends, we are at grips with *obeis*, voodoo—call it what you will, it makes no difference—"

The furious drumming of a horse's hoofs broke through his words, and round the turning of the sandy road a maddened beast came rushing, bearing down upon us like a miniature cavalry charge. Clinging to the pommel of the saddle, with no effort to control the frenzied steed, was Coralea Sterling, hat gone, her long black hair whipped out behind her like a fluttering signal of distress. Her eyes were round with horror, her cheeks gray with the waxen hue that comes from but one cause. One glance at her blanched, terrified, drawn face told all. Sheer, ghastly fear had seized her by the throat, strangling back the scream her grayed lips were parted to utter.

"Runaway!" cried Hiji, and poised to launch himself at the maddened horse's bridle, but the girl waved him frantically aside. Then we noticed that the unspurred heels of her tan riding-boots were beating an hysterical tattoo against the horse's sides. She was urging it to greater speed.

Like an express train flashing past a way-station, horse and rider thundered past us, while we gaped in wonder. Then:

"*Grand Dieu des chats!*" de Grandin cried, and sprang into the dusty road, dragging at the handle of his sword-stick. Something eery whipped along the highway, weaving in and out between the tracks left by the fleeing horse, something

I could not see, but which left a little zig-zag trail of kicked-up dust like a puff of wind gone crazy. De Grandin brought the slim blade of his sword-cane down upon the dancing dust with a cutting, lash-like motion, and something brown and gray, with a flash of yellowish-white underside, squirmed up from the baked roadway and writhed about his blade like the serpent on Mercury's caducæus. A strumming like a chorus of a hundred summer locusts in unison sounded as he struck and whipped his sword-blade back, then struck again.

"Nice work, old son—good Lord!" Hiji thrust his hand into his jacket pocket and snatched his blue steel Browning out, firing point-blank into the road six feet or so behind de Grandin. A little spurt of dust kicked up where the steel-capped bullet struck, and with it rose a writhing thing as thick as a man's arm and half again as long.

"*Merci beaucoup, mon ami,*" de Grandin grinned. "I had not noticed him, and had you not been quick I fear I should not long have noticed anything. It seems our bag is full, now; let us count the game."

DIZZY with bewilderment, I stepped out into the road. At de Grandin's feet, still quivering, but stone-dead beneath the lashing of his sword-cane, lay a diamond-headed rattlesnake, its tail adorned with ten bone buttons. Beyond the little Frenchman, where Hiji's bullet had almost shot its head away, another snake lay squirming in death agony, thrashing up the road dust into tiny, inch-high sand dunes.

I looked at both the loathsome things with a shudder of repulsion, but Hiji and de Grandin had eyes only for the second snake. "By George!" the Englishman turned the thing over with his foot.

"*Mais oui, précisément,*" the Frenchman nodded. "You recognize him?"

"Quite. I've been to Martinique and Haiti."

I stared from one to the other, puzzled as a child whose elders spell out words. De Grandin pointed first to one dead reptile, then the other. "This," he told me, "is a rattlesnake, native of this section, and this," he touched the other with his sword-tip, "is a *fer-de-lance*, found in both Martinique and Haiti, but never in this country, except in zoos. You comprehend?"

"Can't say I do."

"*Non*, I am not sure that I do, either; but I should guess those naughty people we suspect have brought in snakes as well as most deplorably bad manners with them. What say you, *mon Hiji*?"

But the big Englishman was intent on a fresh find. "What d'ye make o' this, Frenchy?" he asked, poking a knot of gum-like substance lying in the road.

De Grandin bent and looked at it intently, lowered his head until his nostrils almost touched it, and sniffed daintily. "I recognize him," he replied, "but I cannot call his name."

"Me, too," the Englishman agreed. "A cove who used to live in Haiti showed me some of it once. Those black blighters down there make a mixture by some secret formula and put it where it will be stepped in by someone they don't love so awfully much. Maybe they smear it on his motor tires or on his horse's hooves. It's all one, as far as results go. No sooner does the poor bloke go out than all the bally snakes in seven counties pick his spoor up and go after him. In a little while he gets rid of the stuff or dies by snakebite, for the stuff's attractive to the little scaly devils as valerian is to a cat."

"I think that you have right, my friend."

"You think? You know dam' well I'm

right! Didn't you see how the gal was kickin' her cob to more speed when the poor brute was already giving all it had? That was no runaway; that was panic flight. And the snakes—did you ever see a snake, 'specially a lazy rotter like a rattler, pursue a human bein' for all he was worth? Watch this!" He tossed the knot of gum into the roadside grass and motioned us to stand back.

We waited silently ten, fifteen, twenty minutes; then: "Look sharp!" commanded Hiji. A rustling sounded in the short, dry grass, a little spurt of sun-baked dust showed in the center of the road. Converging on the spot where he had thrown the gum were several snakes: two full-grown rattlers, a small, slim copperhead; finally, sliding like the flickering shadow of a whiplash drawn across a horse's flank, a six-foot black snake.

"Convinced?" asked Hiji as he turned away.

"**N**O," SAID Coralea, "I can't remember when I first saw them. I'd been the rounds, callin' on the neighbors and tryin' to find out something about Papa's death. The last place I stopped at was Judge Scatterhorn's, but I don't remember anything suspicious. A colored lad was out in front when I came out, and led my horse up to the carriage block, but—oh!" She stopped abruptly, one hand raised to her mouth.

"Yes, *Mademoiselle*?" de Grandin prompted.

"I tossed a dime to him as I rode off, for he'd held my stirrup very nicely, but instead of takin' it he let it fall into the road and muttered something——"

"He held your stirrup, did you say?" de Grandin interrupted.

"Yes, he did, and——"

"*Mademoiselle*, where are your riding-boots?"

"My—my ridin'-boots?"

"*Précisément.*"

"Why, in the cupboard of my room——"

Without a word the Frenchman rose and hurried up the stairs. In a moment we heard the sharp double crack of his small pocket pistol, and a minute later he came down the stairs with two dead snakes looped across the stick he'd taken from her bedroom window. "They were in your closet, *Mademoiselle*. When you went to get a change of clothing you would have found them waiting for you. I dislike to say so, but it would be safer if you burned those boots. One can replace burned boots, but it is not often one recovers from a fatal snakebite."

DINNER was a gayer meal than I had looked for. Somewhere Coralea had found a store of wine, and with this, tinned soup, fried ham and eggs and a liberal portion of fresh melon, we did very well. But though we chatted cheerfully as we did the dinner dishes there was an air of gathering restraint which seemed to seep into the lamplit kitchen as though it were a chilling fog no door could quite shut out. Shadows flickering in the corners took on strange shapes of menace, and more than once I drew my hand back quickly, thinking I had seen the looping convolutions of a coiled snake as I reached to place a piece of china in the cupboard. By the time the last dish had been wiped and stored away our nerves were at the snapping-point. I jumped as if I had been stung when a hail came from the front door.

"Miss Sterling; oh, Miss Coralea, is your 'phone in workin' order? Judge Scatterhorn's been killed."

"You and Doctor Trowbridge go and take a look—medical chaps are better qualified for that sort o' work—I'll stay here and keep the jolly home fires burnin'," Hijji said as we gave over efforts

to get service from the telephone. "Sing out when you come to the door, though; I'm liable to have a nerry finger on the trigger."

A little knot of white men grouped round something on the ground before the Scatterhorn veranda, a railroad lantern shedding its uncertain light upon their dusty boots. Two or three Negroes, eyes rolling in abysmal terror till they seemed all whites, hung on the outskirts of the crowd, studiously avoiding a glance at the blanket-covered object round which the white men gathered.

"Pardon, gentlemen, we are physicians," apologized de Grandin as we pushed our way among the crowd, knelt and turned the blanket back.

Judge Scatterhorn lay as he had died, his arms outstretched, fingers clutching at the yielding sand of the driveway. His throat and chest were horribly lacerated, as though he had been clawed and bitten by some savage beast; across his cheeks and brow ran several hideous gashes; as de Grandin turned him gently over we saw six deep cuts upon his back, running parallel from shoulder-blade to waist, and so deeply incised that the bone had been laid bare in several places.

"When did this atrocity occur?" de Grandin asked as we completed our examination.

"'Bout half an hour back," a member of the crowd replied. "We just got word of it. Mis' Semmes 'phoned us."

"Ah? And who is Madame Semmes?"

"She's th' Judge's sister. Wanna see her?"

"I regret to intrude, but it would be well if I might question her." The little Frenchman put the blanket back upon the dead man's face and rose, brushing the sand from his knees.

"*Madame*, we do not waste your time in idle curiosity," he told the trembling woman when she met us in her parlor,

"but much depends upon our having first-hand information now. Will you tell us all you can?"

"We've had no servants for the last two weeks," the bereaved lady answered, "and George and I made out the best we could. He'd been out this evenin', and I heard him drive into the yard about three-quarters of an hour ago. Presently I caught his step as he walked round to the front door—we've kept the back door barred since all the servants left—then I heard a frightful scream, and the sound of someone strugglin' on the porch. George called, 'Don't come out, Sally!' then there was the sound of more thrashin' around, and—and when I finally lit a lamp and ventured out, I found him there—like that."

"Was it your brother who screamed, *Madame?*"

"No. Oh, no. It sounded more like the scream of a wildcat."

"And did you hear anything else?"

"I—I think—but I'm not quite sure—I heard somebody laughin', a terrible, high-pitched laugh; then I heard someone or something runnin' off among the laurels."

The little Frenchman looked at her intently for a moment. "You say that you have been without domestic servants for some time, *Madame*. Why is that?"

The woman shuddered. "My brother was a justice of the peace. For some time, now, there have been strange Negroes in the district. None of them has been disorderly, but they're a sullen lot, and we considered them a bad influence on the local colored people. So when one of them was picked up by the constable last month my brother sentenced him to road work as a vagrant. The fellow grinned at him before they took him off and told George, 'You'll regret this, you infernal *blanc'*—I don't know what he meant by that, but he spoke English with so strong

an accent that perhaps it was an insult in some foreign language. At any rate, our servants left us the next mornin', without explanation and without even waitin' for their wages, and we've had no help of any sort since then."

De Grandin took his chin between a thoughtful thumb and forefinger. "Mademoiselle Sterling called on you this afternoon?"

"Yes, she did."

"And was it one of your servants who held her stirrup?"

A slight flush mounted to our hostess' face. "Perhaps you didn't understand," she answered. "I told you that we'd been without help for two weeks."

"Forgive my seeming rudeness, *Madame*, but Mademoiselle Coralea told us that a strange young colored lad was waiting at the front door when she left, and helped her set her foot into the stirrup."

We left the bereaved lady with her grief, and at the doorway de Grandin gave a snort of impatience. "Me, I am the stupid-head!" he confided. "I have left my pocket lens. Will you be good enough to go and fetch it from our room, Friend Trowbridge? I fear the crowd has destroyed most of the evidence, but I may be able to find something helpful to us. I shall wait you here."

I WAS none too pleased with the assignment, but there was no way of getting out of it; so I started up the road toward Sterling's home, grasping my heavy stick and walking faster with each step. The moon rode high and round in a clear sky, and the wind that blew up from the bay moaned and sighed among the roadside cedars like the ghosts of lovers parted in the days when North and South contended bloodily for this Virginia land. Nearer and nearer I approached the Sterling homestead, faster and faster I walked. By

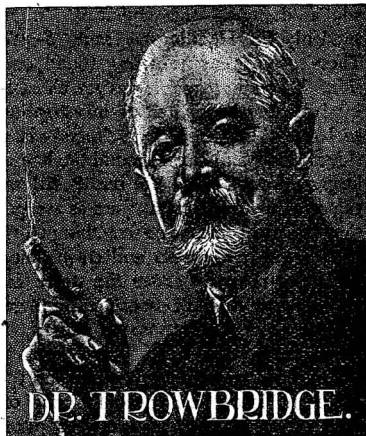
the time I reached the driveway I was almost running.

The house lights shone between the trees with beckoning cheerfulness; I had not more than fifty yards to go until I reached the door, but the memory of Judge Scatterhorn's disfigured face was with me like the image of a walking nightmare. I pursed my lips to whistle a signal to Hiji, but it was no use. Walking required all my breath, and the muscles of my face were stiff as if a winter chill had gripped them.

A heavy growth of vines screened the porch from the front lawn, and the rustling of their leaves in the light breeze was like the clapping of dry, long-dead hands applauding some obscene comedy. I launched myself at the short flight of steps that led to the veranda like a winded runner entering the home stretch, then rolled floundering to the sandy driveway beneath a sudden devastating impact from above.

Something long and black, twisting, clutching, grappling, dropped upon me from the string-piece of the porch roof, hurtling through the air like a panther pouncing on its prey, clawing, grasping, tearing at my throat, gnashing teeth in berserk rage, screaming like all the fiends of hell in chorus. I felt myself borne to the earth beneath its loathsome weight, felt the cruel, cutting claws shear through the padding of my jacket shoulders, felt the gush of warm blood as they sank into my flesh.

I tried to draw the pistol which de Grandin had insisted that I carry. My right arm was pinioned to my side between my body and the ground. I tried to strike at the thing with my fist. A talon hand, strong as a steel vise, gripped my wrist until I thought the bones would surely break. "This is how Judge Scatterhorn was killed!" I thought as I



bridged my body, rising on a shoulder as I sought desperately to free myself.

A blaze of sudden light seared my eyes, a report like a field gun's sounded in my ear. There was a light impact, like a stone flung into moist sand, and the thing above me stiffened, then went limp. Something warm and sticky-feeling, something which I felt instinctively was red, began to soak the clothes above my breast.

"Bull's-eye, by Jove!" Hiji called delightedly, rushing forward from the shadow, his Browning gleaming in the lamp-light filtering through the porch viney. "Potted the beggar neat as neat. Couldn't 'a' done it better if I'd practised on him for an hour!"

"Up you come, Trowbridge." He rolled the body off me and thrust forth a helping hand. "Cheerio. You're all right, old thing!"

I wasn't quite as certain of my all-rightness as he seemed to be as I sat up slowly and stared around. Close behind him, her face pale and set, but without a trace of fear, stood Coralea, a dark cloak masking her light dress.

"We were sittin' in the parlor after

you all'd gone," she explained, "when suddenly Sir Haddingway said, 'S-s-sh! There's something prowling round outside.' I thought maybe it was you all coming back, but he insisted on investigatin', so I came along, too. We slipped out a side window and circled round the house, keepin' down behind the bushes till we came to the front lawn. Just as we got there we saw someone or something climb one of the porch posts and crawl along the string-piece up above the steps. Sir Haddingway couldn't shoot it from there, for the beam was between it and us, so we waited.

"Directly we heard you comin' up the drive and knew that it would jump on you, so Sir Haddingway had his pistol ready to shoot it before it could do much harm."

"H'm, I'm glad he didn't wait much longer," I replied. "His idea of harm and mine don't seem to coincide."

"Trowbridge, old fellow, you're not much hurt, are you?" cried Hiji penitently. "I'd 'a' shot him sooner, but I was afraid of hittin' you——"

"Oh, I don't think there's any damage sticking-plaster and some antiseptic can't take care of," I responded as I got unsteadily upon my feet.

"Right-o," Hiji answered with enthusiasm. "Here comes the blighted little Frenchman. Wait till we show him our bag. First blood for us, eh, what?"

"**T**ROWBRIDGE, *mon vieux*, is it thou?" de Grandin called as he strode up the drive. "I decided that it was too dark to make out anything tonight, so—*mon Dieu*, what have we here?"

Hiji struck an attitude. "This w'y, gents an' lydies, yer ludships an' yer 'ighnesses!" he called in whining singsong. "Come see the gryte he-normous wild man, shot in 'is nytive 'abitat by Hiji, the

'gryte 'unter. Come one, come hall, and see the gryte, he-normous marvel——"

"*Que diable?*" de Grandin cut in testily, glancing from my torn and blood-stained clothing to the dark bulk of the thing Hiji had shot. "Be silent, you great zany, and tell me what goes on here!"

Coralea supplied the information, repeating substantially what she had told me, but making it appear Hiji's shot was almost supererogation, since, according to her version, I had already worsted my antagonist and Hiji shot him merely to relieve him of his suffering.

The little Frenchman viewed my tattered clothing skeptically. "Hiji, my friend, I am indebted to you," he declared. "Me, I have often thought Friend Trowbridge might be better for a slight amount of murdering, but always I have wished to do it with my own two hands. You have preserved him for my vengeance." But there was no affectation in the tears that glistened on his lashes as he threw both arms around me and kissed me on each cheek, murmuring, "*Mon vieux, mon cher, mon brave camarade!*"

He drew a hand across his eyes and turned away, playing his flashlight upon the sprawling body. It was a man, very tall, very thin, with cord-like muscles standing out on arms and legs. Save for a breech-clout of gunny-sacking he was naked, but his black skin was smeared with patches of dun-colored pigment in each of which was a rosette of five small dark-brown dots, the design bearing a striking resemblance to a leopard's spots.

Fastened to his hands by thongs were metal appliances like brass knuckles, only instead of bearing knobs, their rings were supplied with long, sharp blades which curved above the fingers, making each hand a clawed talon. About his head was bound a band of skin which proved to be the scaly hide of a full-grown fer-de-lance

—such a snake as we had seen pursuing Coralea that afternoon.

"By George," said Hiji as de Grandin shut his light off, "he's got the full regalia on. I've seen his kind in the Reserved Forest Area more than once—hanged a few dozen of 'em, too."

The Frenchman smiled, a thought unpleasantly. "Unless I'm more mistaken than I think, some necks will test the strength of ropes before we finish with this present business of the monkey," he declared.

THE big clock in the hall ticked slowly. All of us were tired, but sleep was farthest from our thoughts. My shoulder hurt abominably, and every whisper of a breeze-blown leaf against the window-panes seemed charged with menace. Once or twice I started up, sure that I saw a grinning, painted face beyond the window, but each time search showed that imagination had been playing tricks on me. "If we could only find the blighters' lair we'd clean 'em out in jig-time," muttered Hiji. "In most ways they've run true to form, murderin' people with their 'leopard claws' and terrifyin' all the local blacks so they don't dare squeak on 'em, but there's one thing puzzles me. In Africa these human leopards gather for their pow-wows several days before the Black Moon, and send their signals to the party out by means of drums. They should be usin' something of the kind round here——"

"That's hardly likely," I objected. "So far they've managed to conduct their raids in secrecy. If they beat drums at their meetings they'd give away their gathering-place, and——"

Across the sultry summer night there came a low, slow-swelling sound. Something like the rumble of a giant kettle-drum, but also like the low, sustained note of a bass viol it was, beginning on a

low, deep note and slowly rising in intensity, if not in pitch: "*Ro-o-om, ro-o-om, rum-rum-rum; ro-o-om, ro-o-om, rum-rum-rum,*" its rhythm swelled and sank with a monotonous, menacing insistence.

Hiji leaped across the room, dashed the window up and thrust his head out, listening intently. "That's it!" he told us as he wheeled around. "The jungle telegraph, the night-drum of the Leopard People! What're we waitin' for? Let's go! Yoicks away, lads; the chase is on!" We started for the door, but: "Wait a moment, wait for me!" cried Coralea. "You all aren't goin' out to hunt those savages and leave me here alone; I'm goin' with you. Give me a half a minute to put on some other clothes!"

She was somewhat longer than the stipulated thirty seconds, but it was little later when she reappeared in boyish riding-togs, twisting her long hair in a knot and stuffing it into a cap as she ran down the stairs. Bound to her slender waist by a wide leather belt was a powder-and-ball revolver of Civil War model, its eight-inch barrel knocking trim, straight knees each step she took.

"Let's go!" she cried as she rejoined us, and before we realized her intent she was through the door, across the veranda and speeding down the driveway beneath the honey-locust trees, heading for the open road.

We followed, catching up with her just as she reached the gate, and paused a moment, seeking bearings.

"*Ro-o-om, ro-o-om, rum-rum-rum; ro-o-om, ro-o-om, rum-rum-rum!*" the drums' deep monotone rolled across the darkened landscape, surging forward and receding like the sound of distant surf.

"It's over there," said Hiji, nodding toward a low, tree-crested line of hills that raised their bulk beyond the intervening fallow fields.

"It can't be there," objected Coralea. "There's an abandoned Negro cemetery in the hollow of those hills; a pair of murderers are buried there, and you couldn't get a darky within half a mile of it in daylight, much less at midnight."

Hiji's teeth flashed white beneath the black of his mustache. "You may know the superstition of your local blacks, but you don't know voodoo. Graveyards and haunted places are their favorite gathering-spots. Earth from graves of executed felons is a favorite ingredient of their charms. I vote we try the jolly old burying-ground."

"I, too," de Grandin concurred. "But let us step with caution. We may be seen by members of the cult who come in answer to those devils' church bells."

Cautiously we made our way across the fields, dropping to all-fours occasionally where the visibility was high, crawling, running half bent over, gradually approaching the thick-wooded knoll behind which growled the drums' low monody. By the time we reached the hill crest we were crawling on our stomachs like a scout patrol of soldiers reconnoitering an enemy's position.

Light gleamed in the little valley shut in by the hills. A bonfire of fat pine sent its orange-yellow flames mounting ten feet, painting the whitewashed headboards and occasional stone markers of the graves with startling highlights, casting purple shadows on surrounding trees and bramble bushes.

Where light and shadow met, a circle of dark forms was huddled in a wide, loose ring, the gleam of a once-white shirt or a soiled Mother Hubbard giving clue to the spectator's sex. A low, slow-moaning chant, like that heard when the mourners are about to 'get religion' at a Negro gospel meeting, sounded from the group. Now and then there was a movement, a flash of firelit clothing or the

gleam of bared teeth or of rolling eyeballs, which told that a fresh member of the congregation had arrived in response to the summons of the drums.

MORE and more they came, creeping stealthily up to the firelight's margin. From fifty to a hundred the group grew; now there were two hundred votaries about the fire, at last at least five hundred. And still the drums tolled their insistent "*ro-o-om, ro-o-om; rum-rum-rum*" through the night.

I heard Coralea's small smothered "Oh!" and Hiji's sigh of excitement coupled with de Grandin's almost frenzied flow of bubbling French profanity as a figure glided from behind a tombstone. It was a woman, so old and thin and wrinkled there was something almost obscene in the picture she presented, as if a mummy had come from the tomb or the corpse of one dead of senility had risen from its grave to mock and gibber at the living. Her skinny arms and legs, bare in the mounting firelight, seemed smeared with mingled filth and ashes. Her lich-like form was nude save for a length of dirty calico which hung across her back, loose ends split and tied about her waist and hips to form a sort of apron. The upper end of the cloth had been bound about her gray-wooled head to make a turban, and round and round this weird head-dress had been wound strings of gleaming beads. "Teeth!" muttered Hiji. "Human teeth! They knock 'em out and string 'em to make amulets."

"*Ouranga!*" came a greeting from the crone as she danced round the firelit circle. "*Ouranga!*" In one emaciated hand she held a blacksnake whip; in the other was a dried gourd-shell which she waved to and fro, making its seeds rattle furiously against the sun-dried rind. Back and forth before the fire she tripped and stumbled, leaping, sometimes, sometimes

shuffling in a sort of buck-and-wing; then pirouetting on her toes like a ghastly caricature of Columbine. "*Ouranga!*"

From the trembling congregation sounded echoes of her hail, not deep-voiced, but high and thread-thin, frightened, more than half hysterical: "*Oura-ranga, ouranga; ouranga!*" Then, in a high-swelling chorus, "*Voodoo!*"

With a mincing, shuffling step the old hag circled round the fire, clattering her rattle, flourishing her whip, pausing now and then, and each time she halted the men and women groveling before her shrank back in the shadows as though she menaced them with a live snake.

"*Ouranga!*" shrieked the crone again, and half a dozen men came struggling from the shadows, pushing three cowering wretches, two men and a woman. The luckless trio were flung face-downward on the ground, where they lay quaking, too terrified to utter pleas for mercy.

"*Ouranga!*" the witch cried furiously, leaping forward to bring down her whip on the prostrate victims' backs. Repeatedly she cried the mystic word, accompanying each repetition with a cut of her cruel lash until dull scarlet stains showed through the groveling wretches' scanty clothing.

"Back-sliders from the cult," said Hiji in a whisper. "Not much inducement for 'em to leave the fold, eh what?"

The hag had ceased her flogging, more from weariness than mercy, and the chastened apostates crawled like beaten dogs to the ranks that hovered in the shadows. We saw the others draw away from them as from contagion as they found seats on the ground.

A long black shadow cut between the fire and us, and a tall, thin man came dancing out between the tombstones, pausing for a moment with uplifted hands, then falling prostrate on the sand before the voodoo priestess. In every de-

tail he was like the man who had attacked me; painted like a leopard, hands armed with sharp, cruel iron claws, he might have been the same man raised from the dead by some unholy miracle.

The *obi* witch addressed him in a flood of cackling gibberish, and he responded in the same jargon. Finally, rising to his knees, he circled round the fire, half crawling, half dancing, waving clawed hands in the air as if he tore the life from an unseen victim. Graphically, in pantomime, we saw him re-enact the murder of Judge Scatterhorn. We saw him creep up to the quiet house, secrete himself among the shrubbery, lie in waiting for his victim. His eyes glared horribly, his teeth gleamed like the fangs of some wild thing as he arched his back and sprang. A leap, a scream like that of a demented fiend, and he swept in an arc through the air, striking with his iron-taloned hands straight at his quarry's throat, then rolling thrashing on the ground, as if locked in a death-grip with some phantom adversary. At last he lay stretched out upon the dried grass, breathing hard from his exertions, then rolled upon his face before the hag, reaching out his gaffed hands till they almost touched her feet.

"*Bon—bon!*" The *obi* witch commended, and the leopard man leaped up and joined the circle. His work had won approval from the voodoo cult's high priestess.

The bonfire had begun to burn itself to embers, and a moaning, low, almost a whimpering singsong, passed from lip to lip about the ring of squatting men and women. "*Dhan ghi—dhan ghi!*" we heard them cry. Two men staggered forward with a large pine packing-case between them. The box was reminiscent of the outside cases used to enclose caskets at cheap funerals, but was fitted with a hinged lid secured by heavy hasps and padlocks. With a sudden shock I realized

that what I'd thought were painted spots were really holes bored through the planks. "De Grandin," I whispered, "there's something *live* inside there!"

"*Mais oui, mais certainement,*" he answered imperturbably. "These naughty followers of *vaudois* are worshippers of a great snake they call the 'White Queen.' Observe them, if you please."

One of the bearers set his end of the case down and ran back to the shadows, returning in an instant with a squawking cockerel. The voodoo priestess snatched the fowl from him, drew a knife from her turban and slit its throat with a quick slash.

Now her dance was like the antics of a maniac. Laughing insanely, fiendishly, muttering unintelligible charms, shrieking and crying, she whirled and turned in the fast-waning firelight, waving the stiffening body of the slaughtered cock about her head till the spurting blood from its cut neck sprayed on the worshippers, who crouched together in an ecstasy of shuddering fear. Twice she leaped upon the box with the hinged top, and each time the congregation shrieked in wild, ecstatic glee. Once she clawed at its locked lid until I thought that she would open it, but apparently she reconsidered, and the lid remained closed on the dread god of the *obi* people.

"I think the convocation will be ending soon," de Grandin whispered. "Let us depart before they break their meeting up. We cannot hope to fight them single-handed, and if they should discover us——" It was not necessary for him to proceed; imagination more than supplied details missing from his statement.

CREEPING flat to earth, we wriggled down the hill, reached an unplowed field and rose to run across it. "Hiji!" exclaimed de Grandin. "Where is he?"

Apparently he had dematerialized. A

moment earlier he had lain beside us in our ambuscade; none of us had seen him leave, but—he was gone.

"We must go back," the Frenchman announced firmly. "We cannot leave him in their hands, they would—*mon Dieu!* Down, down for your lives, my friends!"

Coming toward us through the gloom there bulked a monstrous form. It was like some giant spider walking on its two hind legs, but larger than a cow. We dropped down to the turf, not daring to draw breath lest our respirations betray us; then: "I say, de Grandin, is that you?" Low, but distinctly cheerful, Hiji's voice came to us.

"*Bien oui,* it is I, and not another, but who in heaven's name are you?" the Frenchman answered.

"Why, Frenchy, don't you recognize your little playmate?" Hiji answered plaintively. "And I've brought our other little friend along, too. The cove who mauled Trowbridge this evenin', don't you know? While we were lyin' there and watchin' all the voodoo doin's, I thought I could find work for him, so I hustled back and got him."

I breathed more easily. What we had mistaken for a monster was the Englishman, walking upright with the dead leopard man across his shoulders.

"Just wait for me a mo'," Hiji bade. "I'll be comin' back this way, and when I come you'd best be on your toes and ready to make distance."

He trudged off in the darkness with his grisly burden. Ten minutes passed, fifteen, half an hour; then as if in response to a signal there rose such a pandemonium of shouts and screams and yells from the abandoned cemetery as might have waked the dead who slept there.

A moment later Hiji came abreast of us, running like an antelope. "Run, you blighters; cut and run for it, or you'll not

see tomorrow's sunrise!" he cried pantingly. "Don't let 'em sight you!"

We ran. My heart was pounding like a battering-ram against my ribs long before we reached the Sterling house, but, amazingly, there was no pursuit.

We faced each other in the lamplit parlor. "Tell me, *mon beau sauvage*, what was it that you did to them?" de Grandin ordered.

"Oh, just gave a demonstration of my kind of magic. The beggars were waitin' a report from the feller who jumped Trowbridge, so I took care they jolly well got it. When I got back to their council fire I was put to it for a means of deliverin' him, and a young tree gave me the idea. They were raisin' such a bally row I could a sung *God Save the King* at top voice and never have been heard; so I had no trouble loppin' off the sapling's limbs, then climbin' it and draggin' my deceased friend after me. I lodged him in the tree-fork, then swung down, bringin' the tree down with me, and let go. It straightened up, of course, when I released my weight, and shot him like a stone out of a catapult, right plump into the middle of their pow-wow, neat as wax. You should have heard 'em bellow when he landed at their hospitable fire-side."

"*Parbleu*, my friend, we did," de Grandin answered. "We did, indeed, and—*mordieu*, why can we not?"

"Eh?" answered Hiji.

"You have given me the idea, the hunch, the inspiration. But certainly. These devil-doings we beheld tonight were but the dress rehearsal to the ceremonies they will hold tomorrow when the moon is in eclipse. Why should we not prepare more magic for tomorrow night? Why should we not frighten them until they call upon the hills to fall upon them and hide them from the vengeance of our medicine?"

W. T.—3

"All right, why should we not?" demanded Hiji. "If you've any ideas for a charade, spill 'em. Depend on me to rally round, old son."

"By blue, my friend, I think that you can be of service. Tell me, can you recall the chants these Leopard People sang in Africa?"

"Er—yes, I think I can. They went something like this." From half-closed lips he hummed a syncopated, wordless tune, an eery, eldritch thing resembling our swing music as the bitter scent of hydrocyanic acid gas resembles the perfume of crushed peach leaves, a wicked tune that made the listener think of pitch-black midnights and rifled graves and evil deeds done in the darkness of the moon. As he hummed he beat time with his finger on the table top, a sharp, staccato beat of broken rhythm.

De Grandin bent his gaze on Coralea as Hiji hummed. "What does the music make you think of, *Mademoiselle*?" he asked.

"Oh"—she shook her shoulders in disgust—"it stirs me all up. It makes me want to rend and tear and scratch, as if I were a savage cat. It rouses all the elemental brute in me."

"Fine, excellent, superb!" he applauded. "I had hoped you would say something of the sort. Tomorrow night we do it. Yes, by blue, and you shall help us, for you are a psychic, *Mademoiselle*!"

"TROWBRIDGE, *mon vieux*, I have a task for you," he told me as we rose next morning. "Be good enough to take a launch and go to Monsieur Townsend at Elizabeth City. Among other things he keeps a stock of fireworks, and I should greatly like to have one hundred rockets of the largest size available. You will kindly bring them back to me as soon as possible——"

"Rockets?" I echoed stupidly. "You mean skyrocketers?"

"Nothing less, my wise one. Large, fine rockets, filled with balls of colored fire and powder which goes *swis-s-s-sh!* You comprehend?"

"No, can't say that I do, but I'll get 'em for you," I replied as I finished shaving. "Anything else you'd like?"

"No, unless you wish to get some Roman candles, also."

The afternoon was far spent when I returned with the fireworks, and my companions seemed on edge with excitement. We made a hurried, almost silent meal, and just before dusk Hiji and Coralea set out for some mysterious rendezvous. Looking grim as the governor of a prison on a hanging-day, the Englishman was back within an hour, and I decided that he must have taken her to some safe place while we faced the voodoo worshippers. A little later he came into the parlor with a pair of odd contraptions. One was an ordinary rubber comb with an envelope of tissue paper pasted over it, the other a small copper kettle the flat lid of which had been clamped down and fastened with a rim of sealing-wax.

"You have tested them?" de Grandin asked.

"Absolutely. Everything's as right as rain."

"*Très bon*. Be ready when the signal comes."

We waited nervously. Neither Hiji nor de Grandin seemed inclined to talk, and both seemed listening for some signal. The daylight faded slowly, and night came on with faltering, indecisive steps. Jays and sparrows put themselves to bed with noisy good-night chirpings. Every now and then de Grandin or the Englishman went out upon the porch and looked up at the sky as though they sought some portent there. At last: "It comes, my

friends, it comes!" de Grandin cried excitedly. "Behold him, if you please!"

Following his pointing finger we looked up to the zenith. The moon, as full and round and yellow as a disk of gold alloyed with silver, swam in a cloudless sky, but nicking the smooth margin of its circle there appeared a tiny sliver of black shadow. Slowly, slower than the minute hand of a run-down old clock, the shadow moved, spreading gradually across the glowing lunar disk.

"The time has come, *mes amis*," de Grandin announced. "You know the part you are to play, my Hiji. May good fortune wait upon your work. *A bienôt!*"

"Carry on, old feller," the Englishman tucked his paper-covered comb and kettle underneath his arm and gave us each a handclasp. "Keep your heads down, and if things go wrong and I get there first, I'll tell the Devil that you're on the way and have him burn a sulfur-candle in the window for you. Cheerio." He turned and stalked off in the darkness.

"We also have our work, my friend," de Grandin told me as he bent and took a bundle of skyrockets in his arms, motioning me to take the sheaf which he had made of the remainder.

Quietly we walked across the fields while the shadow of the eclipse grew larger with each step we took. We bent double as we reached the hill range and step by cautious step began the ascent toward the wooded knoll that overlooked the voodoo meeting-place. Half-way up I paused for breath, and as I looked around I caught a flash of fluttering drapery in the gathering shadows of the road.

"Wha—what's that?" I asked. Upon a night like this the age-old fears came crowding back, and the thing I saw was like a brooding, sheeted ghost that watched us as we mounted to our doom.

"Look farther, if you please, my

friend," he answered with a laugh, "and tell me what it is you see."

I looked. Far down the road, as motionless as something carved of stone, there stood another sheeted figure, gigantic, menacing, immobile. And a little farther down the road another, and another—and another. Silent, sheeted sentinels of the night, grim specters from the olden times when dead men walked on moonless nights . . . my scalp began to prickle and my breath came faster. "What in heaven's name are they?" I gasped.

"Night riders," he replied. "A hundred of them, all in ghost-clothes, all with rifles, all ready for the signal we shall give, my friend."

"Whatever do you mean——"

He eased his burden to the turf and bent toward me. "Today we have been busy while you were away, my friend. The local colored folk are good and honest men and women, but they are firmly bound by racial fears. When these *sacré* villains from the Caribbean came here they seduced them from their simple, peaceful ways, telling them that they would bring a government like that of Haiti in the days of Henri Christophe here. Every man should be a marquis or a duke or count, every woman have a title, too, and the white oppressor should be driven from the land. Moreover, those who doubted or refused to help them were intimidated, some were even killed. Such was the fate of James Collins, whom they tracked to Harlem and murdered. You saw the sway these voodooists have on the local blacks last night. It is a kind of superstitious awe they hold them in, and only by a greater magic can that hold be broken. The authorities could harry them and hunt them, perhaps they could convict them of the murders which they have committed, but I doubt it. For where could they find a colored man or woman who would dare to testify against

them? *Ha*, but if we can put on a show which seems to overmatch the voodoo magic, if we can swoop down on them with all the dreaded panoply of the sheeted riders of the night, and take their voodoo priests and priestesses before their very eyes and hang them to convenient limbs—what then?"

"But that's sheer terrorism——"

"And what is it these villains practise here? Philanthropy? I tell you, good Friend Trowbridge, only by a show of extra-legal might can we put this horror down. When we have done our part the sheeted riders will close in. They know the local blacks, and those they know will be allowed to escape. As for the voodoo men—such men as those who killed Judge Scatterhorn and Captain Sterling, and almost did the same to you—I damn think that the ropes are now all ready for their necks. Yes, certainly. Of course."

I was about to protest, but the midnight calm was shattered by the sudden rumble of a drum: "*Ro-o-om, ro-o-om; rum-rum-rum!*" As on the night before, the devilish sound seemed welling from the very center of the earth, swelling and expanding till it filled the highest heavens with its maddening discord.

"Up, up, my friend, our work is waiting for us!"

With our rockets bundled in our arms we scrambled up the grassy slope and halted in the woods which fringed the hilltop. Quickly de Grandin set his rocket-sticks into the earth, sighting each one carefully, as though he were a battery commander about to launch a charge of grapeshot at advancing cavalry.

THE voodoo fire was burning in the hollow of the hills, the dusky worshippers were crouched in fascinated terror at the shadows' edge, the voodoo priestess danced and postured in the space between the tombstones. "*Ouranga, ou-*

ranga; voodoo!" came the litany of the black rite as the priestess and her congregation worked themselves into a frenzy.

"*Dhan ghi, dhan ghi!*" the cry rose from the swaying audience. "The White Queen, show the White Queen to us. Let her testify!"

"*Ouranga, ouranga!*" shrieked the withered hag in red as she danced and leaped among the graves, twisting and writhing in an ecstasy of self-induced hypnosis. "*Dhan ghi, dhan ghi!*" She shook her claw-like hands up at the moon, which now was almost hidden in eclipse.

Now four men came shuffling forward, and between them they were bundling two more creatures, half-grown Negresses, poor, terrified, impotent things so utterly unnerved by fear that they could scarcely struggle in their captor's hands. "*Grand Dieu, les boucs; les boucs sans bois*—the human sacrifices, goats without horns!" de Grandin whispered. "Have we made a mistake, will they reverse the ceremony, and have the feast before the White Queen testifies?"

The sacrifices were flung down before the fire and the voodoo witch bent over them, touching each with her gourd rattle, then dancing off again.

"*Dhan ghi, dhan ghi!*" the chant rose louder, more insistently, and another group of men came staggering out into the firelight; between them bumped the long, hole-decorated box we'd seen the night before.

"*Ab?*" murmured Jules de Grandin. "It seems that I was not mistaken, after all."

The bearers dropped the box unceremoniously and scuttled off, racing back to join their fellows in the circle, for plainly their fear of the goddess in the box was greater than their faith in the high priestesses' magic to protect them when the great snake issued forth.

"*Dhan ghi, dhan ghi!*" The hag was

stepping in a constantly accelerated pace about the box, her knees raised level with her waist, her scrawny, splay-boned feet extended straight in a continuation of her spindling shanks. "*Dhan ghi, dhan ghi, dhan ghi!*"

Now from between her tightly compressed lips there came a whining sing-song chant, a rising, quavering cry like that snake-charmers make before the serpents issue from their baskets. For a moment she paused by the box, then snatched the lid up in her claws, springing back two yards or so to avoid the great snake's head in case it started out of the case suddenly.

De Grandin's teeth were fairly chattering, and a flow of weirdly garbled French profanity came sprawling from his lips like sparks that sputter from a dampened fuse.

We waited breathless. A pall of silence fell upon the worshippers. We could hear a sudden hissing sizzle in the fire as a fresh stick fell into the flames.

"*A-a-ah!*" de Grandin let his breath out slowly. "She comes. Behold her, good Friend Trowbridge!"

No wicked, wedge-shaped, scale-mailed head arose from the voodoo tabernacle. No forked tongue darted menace at the posturing priestess and cowering congregation. Nothing at all came from the box.

Instead, high overhead, seemingly dropping from the zenith where the moon's pale countenance was masked, there came the whirring notes of a slow, syncopated, wordless chant, an eery thing that made the listener think of pitch-black midnights and graves from which the dead were torn, and evil deeds done in the darkness of the moon. And with the rasping, scobbing music came the sound of a tom-tom which beat in sharp staccato, its broken measures reaching to the very marrow of our spines.

The *obi* woman looked up to the sky from which the eldritch music seemed to drip like venom from a manchineel tree. Nothing met her gaze. Only the insistent, buzzing, susurrating notes swooped downward as from some discarnate unclean spirit perched among the swaying pine-trees' boughs.

The witch's hideous old face took on a look of wonder, then of worry, finally of blind, unreasoning panic. But her terror was no more than the prelude to that which followed, for something slowly rose from the long box beyond the dying fire.

A tall, lean thing it was, brown-skinned, ash-smear'd, a mop of matted white hair stringing round its skull-like face. Wisps of age-rotted cloth were loosely bound around it, like grave-clothes falling from a putrefying corpse, and where the rags left chocolate-colored body bare great patches of a leprous gray showed in a ghastly contrast.

Faster and faster dripped the ghost-tune from the treetops; louder and more menacing the phantom drum-beats came. The hideous thing leaped from its box, vaulted the fire and stood face to face with the old voodoo witch. The hag drew back her arm as if to strike the specter with her lash; the visitant reached suddenly into the fire, seized a blazing pine branch from the flames and felled the priestess with a single blow.

Before the *obi* woman could retain her feet the thing turned to the fire, striking it repeatedly with a green branch, flailing out the sinking blaze until it flickered lower, lower—finally died to a dull-glowing heap of coals.

And now a thing too terrible to credit happened. The spirit of the beaten fire seemed transferred to the body of the hideous creature from the box, for its limbs and face began to glow with horrifying, smoky luminance, a glow such as

dead things give off in marshes in the darkness of the night.

Higher, shriller, rising to a keening wail that sent horripilations rippling through my skin, the ghostly music lifted, while the tom-tom's tempo quickened till each plangent beat seemed driving deep into our vertebræ, and like a sulfurous silhouette against the background of the night the fiery thing danced and shuffled back and forth between the sunken-mounded graves, its glowing feet in measure with the skirl of spectral music, its smoldering body seeming hung midway between the earth and sky as it whirled and turned and leaped and bounded where the voodoo witch-fire had been burning. Now, rag by filthy, rotting rag it tore its moldering grave-clothes off, and as each fetid fragment fell upon the earth fresh horrors met our fascinated gaze. Ribs, pelvic bones and sternum seemed made of living fire which shone through the integument of chocolate-colored skin as marsh-fire might shine through the drifting brume of foul miasmal vapors.

A MOANING, low but pregnant with unutterable dread, broke from the congregation as they saw their witch-priestess felled by this awful apparition which glowed with smoldering inward fire and summoned ghost-tunes from the moonless midnight sky.

"Men and women of the race," a voice sang from the specter's burning throat, "I bring you testimony. Daughter am I to *Iblis*, Chief of Devils; even of the *bori* of the jungle am I daughter.

"Voodoo is unclean; voodoo is forbidden those who would not feel the vengeance of the *bori*. Get ye to your homes, ye foolish ones; to your work go ye, for to labor is to praise the jungle people of your fathers.

"Where is your witch-woman now?

Where is her magic? Could she stand before the power of the spirits of the jungle? Could her fire burn one who carries fumes of hell within her body, or can her magic save ye from my wrath?

"Back to your homes, before I call on you the curse of *Mai-Aska*, who brings scars and rashes. To your cabins, followers of false gods, or on you will I bring the wrath of *Kuri-Yandu*, who swells the joints with misery. See, ye fools who trust in voodoo, even now I call the stars down from the sky to crush you with their weight. On you I call the curse of *Mai-Ja-Chikki*, who will blind you for your sins. Behold!"

She reached her fire-gloved hands up toward the moonless sky and a swishing like the roar of flooding water when the rivers overflow their banks came from the pine trees, while curve on lambent curve of fire swept through the darkness as though a storm of meteors had been blown from hell by Satan's all-destroying breath.

"*Morbleu*, but it is perfect, it is excellent, it is *magnifique!*" de Grandin whispered in delight as he raced along the line of rockets, setting fire to them and, as they soared roaring through the air, setting fresh ones in their places.

The rockets reached their apogees and hissed down to the earth, bursting into fiery constellations. It seemed as if the heavens were alive with falling, bursting stars; the wrath of fire and brimstone that burned Sodom and Gomorrah, the promised day of awful fate when earth should be consumed by fire seemed on us as the blazing, shattering missiles crashed down from the zenith.

Screams of terror, frenzied, hopeless pleas for mercy, sounded on all sides. "Oh, Lawd, Ah's got it! Ah's gone blind, mah eyes is out!" cried one man, clawing at his dazzled eyes. Another and another took the wail up, and in a moment rust-

lings in the bushes told where congregation members crawled away for sanctuary, deserting the outlanders who had held them captive in a thrall of superstition.

But now the clatter of shod hoofs came from the highway, and fresh shouts of dismay rose from the frightened fugitives as the sheeted riders of the night closed in upon the voodoo rendezvous. They were a fearsome sight—steeds and riders masked in fluttering white with fiery eyes aglare through peepholes in their draperies, torches blazing in their hands, guns or whips upraised in menace.

The ghostly riders opened ranks to let the fleeing voodoo worshippers scuttle off to safety, but with the voodoo leaders it was different. Within a moment six outlandishly dressed men and the old *obi* priestess had been corralled and bound with ropes. "I think our bag is full," de Grandin murmured; "they have them all."

"Wha—what will you do with them?" I faltered, wild stories of the condign justice meted out by night riders recurring to me.

"Do? *Parbleu*, what should they do with such ones? Have we not seen them taken as they gloated over the commission of a foul crime? Can we not testify against them from our own knowledge? *Mais certainement*, my friend. 'Within the hour they will lie all safe in *la bastille*. Tomorrow, at the latest, the *juge d'instruction* hears our evidence. After that—*morbleu*, one wishes one could be as sure of reaching heaven as one is that they will be convicted by the county court and suffer condemnation for their crimes! Come, let us go. This evening's work is finished, I damn think."

AN HOUR later we gathered in the Sterling parlor. Lamplight shone upon the tall, mint-garlanded tumblers,

ice clinked pleasantly. The juleps were delicious.

"No," Hiji laughed, "I didn't have a bit of trouble. They were all so bally intent on the doin's in the cemetery that I shinned up the tree without a single blighter spottin' me. After that"—he took another long drink—"how do you Yankees say? It was in the bag."

"Whatever——" I began, but de Grandin hastened to explain before I had a chance to frame my question.

"*Mais, c'est tout simplement, mon vieux.* One only needs to think things through, and *voilà.*" He turned as footsteps echoed in the hall and Coralea came in, her face and hands and arms aglow from recent vigorous scrubbing. "*Messieurs*, permit me to present *la grande prêtresse de voodoois*, the superwitch." Coralea blushed rosily beneath her soap-and-water glow.

"The superwitch?" I echoed. "You mean——"

"*Précisément.* I had been wondering how we might turn the tables on those naughty people from the Caribbean, and when Hiji flung the body of their executed comrade into camp the idea came to me like that—*pouf!* These so evil fellows have laid hold upon the superstition of the local colored folk by force of fear; they have worked on their imagination, they have convinced them that they are all-powerful," I say to me.

"Exactly so; you have it right, my perspicacious self," I answer me. 'Jules de Grandin, you and I must convince them that we have the greater power. We must induce them to go back to their homes and resume their simple, peaceful mode of life.'

"You have summed the situation up exactly, Jules de Grandin," I tell me. 'But how are we to do these things?'

"Then I engage myself in deep conference. We have *matériel* at hand, it only

waits our use. Hiji knows the demon music of the Africans, those bad, fierce Leopard Men of the West Coast beside whom these voodooists are but inept amateurs; he can reproduce it, but we must find a way to carry it to them and make them think it comes from superhuman agencies. Also, it is for us to make the magic of these voodoo people seem a weak and ineffective thing. We must put shame on them, as Moses shamed the magic-makers of the Pharaoh. How to do it? Then I recall Mademoiselle Coralea is a *danseuse*. She is clever, she is talented, she knows these people, and she has said the music of the Leopard Men arouses all her evil instincts. 'Mademoiselle Coralea,' I apostrophize her, 'you shall be our superwitch. You shall dance before the voodoo council of fire. You shall put shame on their *mamalois!*'

"So I approach her with my proposition. At first she is afraid, but she is the *artiste*, the rôle appeals to her dramatic nature, and so at last she gives consent. Thereupon we get our properties together. Hiji makes a tom-tom of an old kettle, and a pipe out of a piece of paper wrapped around a comb. Together in the barn we make the music, very softly, and Mademoiselle Coralea perfects her dance. We make a costume for her out of cheesecloth which we drag around the barnyard till it looks as old as sin's own self. We smear her with a chocolate paste. We buy up all the matches at the village store and boil them; then with the sulfurous paste we paint a skeleton upon her so that her bones will seem to shine clear through her skin when it is dark.

"Then Hiji and I set forth to find the 'White Queen.' We find her lying in her box out in the cemetery, and—it took but two shots to dispatch her. Afterward we clean her box with disinfectant, and into it goes Mademoiselle Coralea. *Parbleu*, I think it took more courage to lie curled

up in that snake's ex-den than it took to face the voodoo people in the open!

"In a tree above the graveyard we hung a telephone transmitter with an amplifier attached to it. These we connected to a wire and a telephone receiver which were hidden in a near-by tree, and into this our Hiji sang his tune and beat upon his kettle-drum. *Tiens*, the effect was most realistic, *n' est-ce-pas?* When the music seemed to come from nowhere, when the voodoo priestess was struck down by the fiery visitant which leaped out of the snake box, when the stars began to fall from heaven as our rockets took their flight—*parbleu*, it was so good a piece of stagecraft that even I who knew the plot was half afraid, myself!"

Coralea's pink cheeks were dimpled with a smile. "Doctor de Grandin, I

think I owe you something for tonight," she told him.

"How is that, *Mademoiselle?*"

"That dance I did tonight; if it was good enough to make those people think I was a demon from the jungle it ought to be successful in the theatre. I'll get Sir Haddingway to play the Leopard People's music on a record for me; then as soon as Papa's estate has been settled I'll go to New York. That dance should be good for a month's engagement at the Irving Place Opera House. After that—well, other burlesque actresses have gone to Hollywood. Why shouldn't I?"

"Why not, indeed, *ma plus belle héroïne?*" replied de Grandin. "*À votre triomphe!*"

We clinked our glasses on the toast.