

Weird Tales



JULY, 1946

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Catpaws

BY SEABURY QUINN

WE HAD been late leaving the Medical Society meeting and the cold rain of the early evening had changed to a wet, sleet-spurred snow, hag-ridden by a bitter wind, when we came out into the street. At the southern entrance of the Park my car gave a sharp lurch as a report like a bursting electric bulb was followed by an angry hiss and the sound of vicious slapping on the roadway. "Grand Dieu des porcs," asked Jules de Grandin, "what in Satan's name was that?"

I swerved the car to the curb and shut off my engine. "If you don't know I haven't the heart to tell you," I answered.

He nodded sadly. "One might have guessed as much. And we have no spare tire, *naturellement*?"

"*Naturellement*," I echoed. "Those things are pretty strictly rationed. We just came through a war, or hadn't you heard?"

"It is the fortune of the dog we have. What should we do?" Then before I could make a sarcastic rejoinder, "One comprehends. It is that we walk?"

"It is," I assured him as we dived into the Park's darkness, heads bent against the weather.

The gale clutched at our hats, whipped our sleeves, lashed at our coats; snow gathered on our soles in hard inverted pyramids that made the going doubly hard, now and then a laden tree bough shook its frigid burden down on us.

"*Feu noir du diable*," de Grandin cursed as a particularly vicious barrage of wet snow

fell on him, "*quelle nuit sauvage!* If only—*morbleu*, another luckless pilgrim of the night! Observe her, Friend Trowbridge."

I followed the direction of his pointing stick and saw a woman—a girl, really—fur-swathed from neck to knees, bareheaded and shod with high-heeled sandals, judging by her awkward gait, struggling with frantic haste over the rough hummocks of frozen slush. As she drew almost abreast of us I realized she was half moaning, half sobbing to herself as she ran.

"*Pardonnez-moi, Mademoiselle*," de Grandin touched the brim of his black felt hat, "may we be of service? You seem in trouble—"

"Oh—" she gave a little scream of surprise at his voice. "Oh, yes; yes. You can help me. *You can!*" Her voice rose to a pitch half an octave below hysteria. "Please help me, I'm—"

"*Tiens*, you have the nervousness unnecessarily, *Mademoiselle*. We shall take great pleasure in assisting you. What is it?"

"I—" she gulped sobbingly for breath—"I want to get to a trolley, a taxi, any way to get home in a hurry, please. I—"

"And so do we, *ma petite*," he broke in, "but alas, there is no street car, bus or taxi to be had. If you will come with us to the other side of the Park—"

"Oh, no!" she declined fiercely. "Not that way. I'm afraid. Please don't take me back that way. He's there!"

"Eh?" he shot back sharply. "And who is 'he,' if one may ask?"

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

How easy it is to flee in terror at night from formless spectors
who cannot be, save in our imaginations



"That—that man!" she panted hoarsely, half turning to resume her flight. "Oh, sir, please don't take me back. I'm terribly afraid!" Her teeth began to chatter with mingled chill and fright.

"Be quiet, *Mademoiselle!*" he ordered. "This will not do. No, not at all. What is your trouble, why do you fear to retrace your steps? Is there anybody there two able-bodied, healthy men cannot protect you from?"

"I—" the girl began again, then seemed to take a grip upon her nerves. "No, of course I'm not afraid while I'm with you. I'll go." She swung round, catching step between us.

"I was going home from a party at a friend's house," she began, speaking hurriedly. "My—my young man had to catch a midnight train for Philadelphia and couldn't take me, so I was waiting on the corner for a bus when a man drove by and asked me if I'd like a lift, and—like a fool!—I told him yes. I told him I was going to MacKenzie Boulevard, but he turned into the Park, and when we got down to the bottom of the hill he—oh, I was so terrified! I jumped out and began to run, and—and I'm afraid, sir; I'm terribly afraid of him!"

The light from one of the infrequent roadside lamps fell on de Grandin's face and showed a look of mingled wonder and amusement. "One understands, but only partly, *Mademoiselle*. You were a very foolish little person to accept a ride from a stranger. Had you never heard that she who rides must all too often pay her passage? That the young man—one assumes he was young—should have proved a wolf was not astonishing, but you evaded him. He did not harm you. Why, then, are you so distraught, so terrified? Is it that—"

Her frightened exclamation cut through his question as her hands clenched on our arms with fear-strengthened fingers. "See! There are the lights of his car. He's waiting for me—oh, I'm afraid!"

THE Frenchman loosed her clutching fingers gently. "Look to her, Friend Trowbridge. Me, I shall attend to this smasher." Striding to the car parked at the roadside he addressed its unseen occupant. "*Mon-*

sieur, this young woman tells us you have affronted her. Me, I do not like that kind of business. Have the goodness to descend, *Monsieur*, and I shall take great pleasure in tweaking your so odious nose."

No answer was forthcoming and he put a foot upon the running board. "I see you, miscreant. Silence will not give you protection. Descend and defend yourself—" He raised his head level with the face of the man at the car's steering wheel. There was a rustle of snow-covered sleeve against the casing of the car window, and: "*Mordieu*, Friend Trowbridge, come and see," he ordered as he fished into his pocket for his flashlight. "Look at him, if you please—and keep tight hold of the woman!"

I grasped the girl's wrist and leant forward as the beam of his light pierced the darkness and fell back a step, my fingers tightening on her arm involuntarily.

Bolt-upright at the wheel of the roadster was a heavy-set blond young man, bare-headed, and with the collar of his ulster open at the throat. His left hand wore a heavy glove, I noticed, while his right, which rested on the wheel, was bare. His light-blue eyes, probably always prominent, were widely opened in an idiotic, fixed stare and fairly popping from his face. His mouth was gaping with a hang-jawed, imbecile expression, the tongue protruding slightly, and the chin resting on the fabric of his turned-back collar.

"Oh," the girl beside me let out a shrill, squealing scream, "he's dead!"

"*Comme un maquereau*," de Grandin agreed laconically. "Nor did he die from overeating. Regard him, if you please, Friend Trowbridge." Placing his hand on the young man's sleek fair hair he moved it with a gentle rotary motion. The head beneath his hand followed its pressure as if it had been fastened to the shoulders by a loose-tensioned spring. "You agree with my diagnosis?" he asked.

"There certainly appears to be a fracture, probably at the third cervical vertebra," I agreed, "but whether he died as a result of—"

"Perfectly," he agreed. "The autopsy will disclose that." Then, to the girl: "Was this why you were so afraid to retrace your steps, *Mademoiselle?*"

"I didn't do it—truly I didn't!" she answered in a thick-tongued voice. "He was alive—alive and laughing, when I ran away. The last thing I heard as I ran was his voice calling, 'You won't get far in this storm, sister. Come back when it gets too cold for you.' Please, you must believe me!"

"H'm," he snapped his flashlight off and climbed down from the running board. "I do believe you did not do it, *Mademoiselle*. You have not strength enough. But this is a case for the coroner and the police. We must ask you to accompany us."

"The police?" her voice was little more than a whisper, but freighted with as much fear as a scream. "Oh—no! You mustn't have me arrested. I don't know anything about it—" She choked on her denial and slumped against me, then slid to the snow unconscious.

"The typically feminine escape," he murmured cynically. "Come, let us take her up, my friend. Here—so." He grasped my wrists in his hands, forming a chair for the unconscious girl. "We shall bear her easier this way. She is no great weight."

"That's why I think she told the truth when she said she didn't do it," I replied as we trudged toward the exit of the Park. "She's a frail little thing who could no more break a man's neck than I could kick a hippopotamus's ribs in."

"True," he agreed as he eased her dark head on his shoulder. "I think she tells the truth when she denies the actual killing, but someone killed him very thoroughly less than half an hour ago. It may well be that she knows more than she has told, and I propose to find out what she knows before we summon the police. If she is guilty she should suffer; if she is innocent it is our duty to protect her. *En tout cas* I propose to know the truth."

FRAIL or not, the girl's weight seemed to increase in geometrical progression as we trudged through the sticky snow. By the time we reached the Park gate I was thoroughly exhausted and the blinking lights of the taxi de Grandin hailed were like a lighthouse to a shipwrecked mariner to me.

We carried her into the house and laid

her on the office couch, and while de Grandin poured a dose of aromatic ammonia in one glass and two ounces of sherry in another I unfastened her fur coat and laid it back. "I don't believe we have a right to do this," I began. "We've no official status, and no legal right to question her—good heavens!"

"*Comment?*" queried Jules de Grandin.

"Look here," I ordered. "Her chest—" Beginning just below the inner extremity of her left clavicle and extending downward almost to the upper rondure of her left breast were three paralleling vertical incisions, superficial, little more than scratches, and deeper at beginning than at termination. They were about a half-inch from each other and their lips were roughened, the skin turned back like soil at the lips of a plough-furrow. Blood had run down them and dripped upon the bodice of her low-cut party frock, and the bodice itself had been torn and ripped so that the black lace of the bandeau that confined her rather slender bosom was exposed.

"*Morbleu,*" de Grandin bent across my shoulder to inspect the scratches, "*Chose étrange!* If you did not know otherwise what would you say caused those wounds, Friend Trowbridge?"

I shook my head bewilderedly. "It's past me. If they were smaller I'd say they'd been made by a cat—"

"*Tu parles, mon vieux*—you have said it. A cat and nothing else it was that made those scores in her so tender flesh, but what a cat! *Nom d'un pipe,* he must have been an ocelot at least, and yet—"

"Ah, *Mademoiselle,* you waken?" he broke off as the girl's lids fluttered. "That is good. Drink this." He held the ammonia to her lips, and as she gulped it down regarded her with an unwinking stare. "You have not told us all, by any means," he added as he handed her the sherry. "The young man lifts you—*non,* how do you say him picks you up? Yes. When he has driven you into the *parc* he becomes forward. Yes. You leap from the *moteur* in outraged modesty and flee into the storm. Yes; certainly. So much you tell us; that much we know. But—" his eyes hardened and his voice grew cold—"you have not told us how your *toilette* be-

came torn, nor how you suffered those wounds on your thorax. No, not at all. Our eyes and our experience say those wounds were inflicted by a cat—a very large, great cat, perhaps a panther or a wildcat. Our reason rejects the hypothesis. Yet," he raised his narrow shoulders in a shrug, "*les voilà*—there we are!"

The girl shrank back as from a blow. "You wouldn't believe me!"

"Tenez, *Mademoiselle*, you would be astonished at my credulity. Tell us just what happened, if you please, and omit nothing."

She sipped the sherry gratefully, seeming to be marshalling her thoughts. "All I told you was the truth, the absolutely honest truth," she answered slowly, "only, I didn't tell you everything. I was afraid you'd say that I was lying, drunk or crazy; maybe all three. As I said, I was standing on the corner waiting for a bus when the young man drove past and asked if I'd like a lift. He seemed so nice and pleasant, and I was so cold and wretched, that I accepted his offer. Even when he turned into the Park I wasn't too much worried. I've been around and know how to take care of myself. But when he stopped the car and leaned toward me I became frightened. Terrified. Have you ever seen a human face become a beast's—"

"*Mordieu*, you say it—"

"No, I don't mean that his features actually changed form; it was their expression. His eyes seemed positively gleaming in the dark and his lips snarled back from his teeth like those of a dog or cat, and he made the most horrifying noises in his throat. Not quite a growl, and yet—oh, I can't describe it, but it terrified me so—"

"And then?" de Grandin prompted softly as she paused and swallowed nervously.

"I hadn't noticed, but he'd drawn the glove from his right hand, and when he stretched it toward me *it had become a panther's paw!*"

"*Cordieu*, how do you say, *Mademoiselle*—*la patte d'une panthère?*"

"I mean just what I say, sir. Literally. It was black and furry, with great curving claws, and he swung it at me with a sort of dreadful playfulness—like a cat that torments a mouse with mock gentleness, you

know. Each time he moved it it came nearer, and suddenly I felt the claws rip through my dress, and in another moment I felt a quick pain in my chest. Then I seemed to come awake all of a sudden—I'd been positively paralyzed with fear—and jumped out of the car. Just like I told you in the Park, he didn't try to chase me, just sat there laughing and told me I'd not get far in the storm. Then I met you, and when we went back he was—"

Again she paused, and de Grandin supplied the ending. "Entirely dead, *parbleu*, with his neck most neatly broken."

"Yes, sir. You do believe me, don't you?" Her voice was piteous, but the big dark eyes she raised to his were even more so.

He tweaked the ends of his small wheat-blond mustache. "Perhaps I am a fool, *Mademoiselle*, but I believe you. However, it are more than barely possible the police would not share my *naïveté*. Accordingly, we shall say nothing to them of your part in this unfortunate affair. But since they must be apprised of the killing, I shall tend your hurts while Dr. Trowbridge calls them to impart the information." He handed me a slip of paper with a number scribbled on it. "That is the number of the dead man's car, Friend Trowbridge. Be kind enough to ask the good Costello to compare it with the license lists and tell us who the owner was and where he resided."

"**C**OSTELLO speakin'," came the well-known heavy voice when I had put my call through to headquarters. "That you, Dr. Trowbridge, sor? I wuz jist about to ring your house. What's cookin'?"

"I'm not quite certain," I replied. "Dr. de Grandin and I just ran across what seems to be a murder in Soldiers' Park—"

"Howly jumpin' Jehoshaphat, another? It's nuts I'm goin', sor; completely nuts, as th' felley says. That's the fourth one tonight, an' I'm gittin' so I dassen't pick th' tellyphone up for fear they'll tell me there's another. How'd your man git bumped off?"

"I'm not quite sure, but it looks like a broken neck—"

"It *looks* like it?" he roared. "Bedad, ye know right well 'tis nothin' else, sor!"

All their necks wuz broke. Everybody's neck is broke. I wish to Howly Patrick that me own wuz broke so's I didn't need to hear about these blokes wid broken necks, so I do! What'd ye say his number wuz? Thank ye. I'll be afther checkin' it wid th' files, an' be wid ye in ten minutes, more or less. Meantime I'll send a prowler car to pick up the auto an' th' body in th' Park."

I HEARD the surgery door close softly as I put the telephone down, and in a moment Jules de Grandin came into the office. "I painted her injuries with mercurochrome," he informed me. "They were superficial and showed no sign of sepsis, but I am puzzled. Yes, of course."

"Why 'of course?'" I demanded.

"Because they bore every evidence of a large cat's claw-marks. Their edges were irregular, owing to the fact the skin had been forced back as the claws ripped through it, but a microscopic examination failed to disclose any foreign particles. This should not be. As you know, claws of animals, especially those of the cat family, are markedly concave on their under sides, and since the beast does not retract them completely when he walks a certain amount of foreign matter collects in the grooves. That is why a scratch-wound from a lion or leopard, or even a domestic pussy-cat, is always more or less septic. Hers were not. My friend, it was a most peculiar cat that gave her those scratches."

"Peculiar? I should say it was," I agreed. "I heard her tell you that his hand had changed into a panther's paw. You don't believe that gammon, do you? He probably made several passes at her with his bare hand, tore her dress and scratched her accidentally—"

"Non, that he did not, my friend. I did not begin to practice medicine last week, or even week before. I am too familiar with the marks of human nails to be mistaken. I do not say his hand turned to a paw; it is too early yet to affirm anything, but this I know: Those scratches on her thorax were not made by human nails. Moreover—"

"Where is she now?" I interrupted.

"Upon her homeward way, one hopes. I

let her from the surgery door and went with her to the curb, where I stopped a taxi and put her into it—"

"But Costello will want to question her—"

"You did not tell him she was here?"

"No, but—"

"*Très bon.* That is good; that is entirely excellent. We shall not have her involved in the scandal. If it should transpire that we need her I know where to find her. Yes. I made her give me her address and verified it in the 'phone book before I released her. Meanwhile, what the good Costello does not know will do no harm to either him or Mademoiselle Upchurch. And so—"

The furious ringing of the front door-bell cut him short and in a minute Detective Lieutenant Costello stamped in, snow glinting on his overcoat and hat, and a most unhappy expression on his broad and usually good-natured face. "Good evenin', sors," he greeted as he hung his outside garments on the hall tree. "So it's another one o' those here broken neck murders ye'd be afther tellin' me about?"

"It is, indeed, my old one," answered Jules de Grandin with a grin. "You have the name and address of the one we found all killed to death in the Park?"

"Here 'tis, sor. John Percy Singletary, 1652 Atwater Drive, an'—"

"One moment, if you please," de Grandin hurried to the library and came back with a copy of *Who's Who*. "Ah, here is his *dossier*: 'Singletary, John Percy. Born Fairfield County, Massachusetts, July 16, 1917. Son George Angus and Martha Perry. Educated private schools and Harvard College; moved to Harrisonville, N. J., 1937; served in U. S. Army, CIB Theatre, 1943-44. Honorably discharged, CDD, 1945. Clubs, Lotus, Plumb Blossom, Explorers. Address, 1652 Atwater Drive, Harrisonville, N. J.' One sees, but dimly."

"What is it one sees, sor, dim or clear? From what ye've read I'd say this felley wuz one o' them rich willie-bhoys wid a lot more money than brains an' nothin' much to do but raise hell. His record shows he wuz run in a dozen times for speedin'. Why they didn't take his license up is more'n I can understand. I'm not weepin'

any salty tears about his goin'. It's a dam' good riddance, if ye asks me, but—who kilt him? Who the' hell kilt him, an' why?"

De Grandin motioned toward the siphon and decanter. "Pour yourself a drink, my old and rare. The world will look much brighter when you have absorbed it. Meanwhile, give me the names of those other three young men who were so unfortunate as to have their necks broken. Thank you," as Costello handed him the memorandum, "now, let us see—" He ruffled through the *Who's Who*, and, "*Dieu des porcs de Dieu des porcs de Dieu des cochons!*" he swore as he closed the book. "*Pas possible?*"

"What's that, sor?"

"The *dossiers* of these so unfortunate young men, they are almost identical. The young Monsieur Singletary, whom we found defunct in the Park, Messieurs George William Cherry, Francis Agnew Marlow and Jonathan Smith Goforth were all about the same age and went to the same schools. Most likely they were classmates. Three of them served in the United States Army, one with the British, but all in the same theatre of operations, China-Burma-India, and at the same time. The manner of their several deaths was identical, the time almost the same. *Très bon*. What does it mean?"

"O.K., sor. I'll bite—hard. What does it mean?"

The little Frenchman shrugged. "*Hélas*, I do not know. But there is more—much more—than meets the casual glance in this identity. Me, I shall think upon the matter, I shall make appropriate investigations. Already there begins to be a seeming pattern in the case. Consider, if you please. What do we know of them?" He leveled a forefinger like a pistol at Costello: "Were they killed because they were wealthy? Possibly, but not probably. Because they went to Harvard College? I have seen alumni of that institution I could gladly slay, but in this instance I doubt their *alma mater* has much bearing on the time and manner of their deaths. It might be possible they were killed because of military service, but that, I think, is merely incidental. *Très bon*. It would appear that there is still another factor. What is it?"

"I know th' answer to that one, sor. It's who kilt 'em, an' why?"

"It is, indeed, my friend. Tell me of their deaths, if you will be so kind."

Costello checked the mortuary items off on thick fingers. "Young Cherry wuz found dead in th' front yard o' his house. He'd been out to a party an' come home 'bout ten o'clock. Logan, th' policeman on th' beat, seen 'im layin' in th' yard an' thought he wuz out cold until he took a closer look. Marlow lives at th' Lotus Club, to which, as ye wuz afther sayin', all of 'em belongs. He wuz found dead in bed when one o' his friends called for him shortly afther eight o'clock tonight. Goforth wuz kilt—leastwise he wuz found dead—in th' gents' washroom o' th' Acme Theatre. All of 'em has broken necks, an' there's no marks on any of 'em. No finger bruises nor traces of a garrote. They hadn't got no business to be dead accordin' to th' book, but they're all dead as mutton, just th' same."

The Frenchman nodded. "Who was the friend who found young Monsieur Marlow murdered in his bed?"

"Felley be th' name o' Ambergrast. Lives on th' same floor o' th' clubhouse. Went to call 'im to go out to some brawl in New York, an' found him dead as yesterday's newspaper."

"One sees. Let us go all quickly and consult this Monsieur Ambergrast. It may be he can tell us something. It may be he, too, is among the list of those elected to have broken necks. Yes. Certainly."

WILFRED BAILEY AMBERGRAST, JR., seemed typical of his class. A rather pallid young person, not necessarily a vicious sort, but obviously the much-pampered son of a rich father. He was, as Jules de Grandin later said, "one of those persons of whom a false impression may be produced if you attempt to describe him at all."

He was plainly unnerved by his friend's death and not inclined to talk. "I can't imagine who killed Tubby, or why," he told us, staring moodily into his highball glass. "All I know I've told the police already. When I went to call him about eight o'clock this evening I found him lying half in, half out of bed." He paused, took

a long swallow from his glass and finished, "He was dead. His mouth was open and his eyes staring—God, it was awful!"

"*Monsieur*," de Grandin looked at him with his unwinking cat-stare, "there would not be a possible connection between your friends' deaths and your military service—in India or Burma, by example?"

"Eh?"

"*Précisément*. One understands you were attached to the Air Corps, not as flyers, but as meteorologists. In such employment you had leisure to visit certain little-known and unfrequented places, to mingle with those better left alone—"

Young Ambergrast looked up quickly. "How'd you guess it?" he demanded.

"I do not guess, *Monsieur*. I am Jules de Grandin. My business is to know things, especially things which I am not supposed to know. *Bien*. Now, where was it you made the acquaintance of—" he paused with lifted brows, inviting the young man to complete the sentence.

The boy nodded sulkily. "Since you know so much already you might as well get filled in on the rest. Tubby Goforth, Bill Cherry and Jack Singletary were stationed with me near Gontur. Frank Marlow was with the British—his father was a Canadian—but stationed near enough to us so we could get together when we had a few days' leave. One day Jack told us there was something stirring at Stuartpuram. Sort o' camp meetin' of the Criminal Tribes who make their headquarters there. We took a *garry* over and got there after dark. The natives were marchin' round and round a big mud-hut they called a temple, wavin' torches and singin' *mantras* to Bogiri, which is one of the avatars of Kali. While we were watchin' the procession an old goof came siddlin' up to us, and offered to sneak us into the temple for a rupee apiece. We took him up and he led us through a back way to a little room just back of a big mud image of the goddess.

"I don't know just what we'd expected to see, but what we saw was disappointing. We'd been certain there'd be women there—*nautchnis* and that sort o' thing; maybe some such goin's-on as are carved on the walls of the Black Pagoda at Kanarak. In-

stead they were all men, and a lousy lot of crow-bait, too. One of 'em who seemed to be some sort of priest got up and harangued the meetin' in Hindustani, which we couldn't understand, of course, and presently he passed out what looked like a lot o' black fur mittens to the congregation. After that the meetin' broke up and we were just about to leave when old Whiskers who had passed us into the temple showed up again. His English wasn't any too good, but finally we understood he was offerin' to sell us mittens like those we'd seen distributed. 'What good are they?' Jack wanted to know, and the old sinner laughed until we thought he'd have a spell of asthma. 'You like make yum-yum love to brown gal?' he asked, and when Jack nodded he laughed even more wheezily. 'You wear these glove an' show heem to brown gal, you not have trouble makin' yum-yum,' he promised. 'You geeve gal little scratch with heem and all is like you want.' So each of us bought a mitten for three rupees.

"WHEN we examined 'em in the light we saw they were made of some sort of black fur and fitted with three claws made of bent horseshoe nails. How they'd operate as talismans in love-makin' we could not imagine, but next evenin' Tubby tried it, and it worked. He'd had a case on a Parsee girl for some time, but she'd stood him off. They're the aristocrats of India, those Parsees. Stand-offish as the devil. Most of 'em are rich and you can't buy or bribe 'em, and those who haven't money have enough pride to make up for it. So Tubby'd got just nowhere with the lady till the evenin' after we'd bought the mittens. He slipped the glove on his right hand and growled at her and scratched her lightly on the arm with it. It worked like magic, he told us. She was meek as Moses all evenin', and didn't seem to have a single 'No' in her vocabulary."

The little Frenchman nodded. "You have an explanation for this so strange phenomenon, *Monsieur*?"

"Well, sort of. In a few days we heard rumors of people—all sorts, men, women and children—bein' found in out of the way places and sometimes on the highway,

all clawed up as if they'd been attacked by leopards. It had the police buffaloed, for nothing like it had been known before. The way we figured it was that the Crims had taken to these steel-clawed cat's-paws in place of their usual stranglin' towel, and had the population terrified, so when the girls saw our gloves and felt the scrape of the claws they figured we were members of the Criminal Tribes—you never know who is and who isn't mixed up with them, you know. They've got more disguises than Lon Chaney ever had; so the girls played safe by not antagonizin' us."

"One sees. And the estimable old scoundrel who sold you these cat's-paws?"

"Two days later he turned up strangled to death at the outskirts of his village. We assumed someone heard that he'd shown signs of sudden wealth—you know, he'd taken sixteen rupees from us, and that's a fortune to the average Indian peasant—and he'd been killed for it. I never heard of those birds turnin' on each other, though. Funny, ain't it?"

"Very funny. Very funny, indeed, *Monsieur*. But I doubt that the old gentleman or your four friends found much humor in the situation."

"My four friends? D'ye mean that Jack and Frank—"

"Precisely, *Monsieur*. Of those who visited the temple that night and bought the cat's-paws from the old man, only you survive."

"But, good Lord, man; that means that maybe they're on my trail, too!"

"Unless I am much more mistaken than I think, you have stated the equation most exactly, *Monsieur*. Now, will you be good enough to show us *Monsieur Marlow's* room?"

"**H**UMPH," Costello growled as we entered the small neat bedroom. "It's jist like I wuz afther tellin' ye, sor. Th' felley as did this must ha' been a bird or sumpin'." He flung the window up and pointed. "We're up two flights o' stairs, a good eighteen foot from th' ground. Anybody who went out that winder would ha' had to have a parryshoot or wings or sumpin', an' as for gittin' in—how'd he make it? There's no drain pipe near th'

winder for him to climb, an' he couldn't ha' stood a ladder up again th' wall. Ye don't take ladders through th' streets widout attractin' attention, ye know. O' course, he might ha' lowered hisself from th' roof wid a rope, but how'd he git up there to do it? Th' lobby downstairs is full o' flunkies, an' guests an' members are passin' back an' forth all th' time. Since there's no adjoinin' buildin' he couldn't ha' come across th' roofs—"

"It is, as you have said, a mystery, my friend," de Grandin agreed, "but we are presently more concerned with who did these so strange murders than how he managed ingress to or egress from this room. It might be that—*mordieu*, I have the thought, I have the inspiration, me!"

"Sure, have ye, now, sor?" asked Costello mildly. "Maybe, jist for old times' sake, ye'd be afther lettin' us in on it?"

"Assuredly, *mon ami, pourquoi pas?* Let us consult our friend Ram Chitra Das. He can tell us more in half an hour than we can guess in twenty-four. Await me here. I rush, I fly to telephone him."

Five minutes later he returned and beckoned to us. "We are in luck, *mes amis*. *Monsieur* and *Madame Das* have just returned from the opera and not yet gone to bed. They will wait up for us. Come, let us hasten to them. Meanwhile," he took Costello by the arm, led him a little way apart and whispered to him earnestly.

"O.K., sor," I heard the detective agree. "I'll do it, but it's most irreg'lar. They'll spring him before daylight."

"That will be time enough," de Grandin answered. "Go telephone headquarters and make haste; we have little time to lose."

"What was all the whispering about?" I asked as we set out for New York. "What would be so irregular, and whom will they 'spring'?"

"The young *Monsieur Ambergrast*," de Grandin answered. "They get into locked rooms whose windows are entirely inaccessible, those ones. *Ha*, but I do not think that they can penetrate a jail. No, even they would find that difficult. So, since we cannot take the young man with us and dare not leave him in his room, we shall have him arrested as a material witness and lodge him safely in the *bastille* for a few

hours. Of course he will obtain bail, but in the meantime we shall not have him on our conscience. No. Certainly. Quite not."

"HULLO, there, glad to see you!" Ram Chitra Das greeted as we trooped up the stairs to his second story walkup apartment in East Eighty-sixth Street. "How are you, Dr. Trowbridge? Glad to meet you, Lieutenant Costello." He shook hands cordially and ushered us into a room which might have served as setting for a more than usually elaborate presentation of the Arabian Nights. The walls were eggshell white and hung with rugs as gorgeous as the colors of a hashish eater's dreams, across the floor of polished yellow pine were strewn the pelts of leopards, mountain wolves with platinum-hued fur, and, by the couch against the farther wall a tiger skin of vivid ebony and gold was laid. The place was redolent with a mixture of exotic scents, the fragrance of flowers, applewood burning in the fireplace and cigarette smoke.

In his dinner clothes and spotless linen our host looked anything but Oriental. He might have been a Spaniard or Italian with his sleek black hair, alert dark eyes and small, regular features, and his accent was decidedly reminiscent of Oxford.

The woman who rose from the couch and came forward to greet us was positively breath-taking in her loveliness. Tall, slender, rather flat-chested, she moved with a grace that seemed more a flowing than a walk, as if she had been wafted by an unfelt, silent breeze. Her skin was an incredibly beautiful shade of pale gold, smooth and iridescent, her hair, demurely parted in the middle and gathered in a great loose knot at the nape of her neck, was a dull black cloud. But it was the strange, exotic molding of her features that held our gaze. Her high forehead continued downward to her nose without the faintest indication of a curve—the blood of Alexander's Grecian conquerors of India must have flowed in her veins—and beneath thin, highly arched brows her eyes were pools of deep moss-agate green. Her mouth was wide, her lips thin lines of scarlet. She wore an evening dress of dull white silk cut with classic Greek simplicity and girdled at the waist with a cord of silver. About

her right arm just above the elbow was a wide bracelet of platinum set with emeralds and rubies, and in her ears were emerald studs that picked up and accentuated the green of her eyes. Her whole appearance was one of superb, lithe grace.

"My dear," our host bowed formally as he presented us in turn, "Dr. de Grandin, Dr. Trowbridge, Lieutenant Costello. Gentlemen, my wife, Naraini, who but for a shockingly poor choice of husbands might now be Maharanee of Khandawah."

"*Tiens, Mdame,*" de Grandin murmured as he raised her slim jeweled fingers to his lips, "in India or Iceland, Nepal or New York, you would be nothing less than a queen!"

Her great eyes dwelt on him in green abstraction for a moment, then a smile came into them, and teeth like pearls showed between scarlet lips. I never saw a woman who did not smile at Jules de Grandin. "*Merci, Monsieur,*" she murmured in a voice so deeply musical that it reminded me of the cooing of doves, "*vous me faites honneur!*"

"And now," Ram Chitra Das demanded as we seated ourselves, "what seems to be the matter? From your rather hurried message I gathered that you suspect Indian skullduggery of some sort?"

"Indeed, my friend, you have entirely right," de Grandin nodded solemnly. "Consider what we know and what we suspect, then see if you can add the key-word to our enigma."

THE Indian made no comment as de Grandin outlined our problem, then, as the small Frenchman halted: "I think that your suspicions are well founded. These little stinkers stumbled onto something they had no business gettin' mixed up with, and the penalty they've been called upon to pay might have been foreseen by anybody who knows India and the Indians.

"You know, I suppose, that the Criminal Tribes of India number almost ten million members. They aren't just ordinary thieves and murderers and pickpockets; they're literally born criminals, just as you Americans are born Protestants or Catholics or Democrats or Republicans. Every child among them is hereditarily a criminal and is

entered as such in the records of the Indian police. Stealin', murderin' and other criminal activity is as much a religious duty with them as giving alms to the poor is to the Jew, Christian or Moslem, and to fail in a career of crime is to lose caste.

"Loss of caste is serious to a Hindu. Something like excommunication to a medieval Christian—only more so. Spiritually it dooms him to countless reincarnations through unnumbered ages; physically it has drawbacks, too. If I were to return to my uncle's palace in Nepal I'd find myself a real nonentity. No servant would wait on me, no tradesman would sell me merchandise, no one but scavengers and street sweepers would dare speak to me. As for Naraini, who ran away from her princely father to marry a casteless vagabond, if she went back they'd probably sew her up in a sack and dump her in the most convenient river.

"So much for that. You know, of course, that Hindu workmen have gone nearly everywhere—China, the Dutch Indies, and, of course, the British colonies in Africa. It appears some of these 'Crims,' as they are familiarly but not affectionately known to the Indian police, gravitated to Sierra Leone some time ago, and picked up a few tricks from the Leopard men of the Protectorate and adjacent Liberia. Some of them went back to Mother India and introduced the innovation of the 'cat's-paw'—a fur glove studded with steel claws—to their contemporaries. I heard that there had been an outbreak of killin's in which the victims had apparently been mauled by leopards in the Madras Presidency a couple of years ago. That seems to be where these young men fit in. Unquestionably they visited a gatherin' of the Criminal Tribesmen when 'cat's-paws' were bein' distributed, and the old scoundrel who conducted them decided to turn a dishonest rupee by sellin' them the devilish paraphernalia.

"You remember what happened to him. Young Ambergrast thought it odd that Criminal Tribesmen should have turned on one of their fellows. It was only to have been expected. The fellow had, to all intents, sold a lodge secret, and secret societies resent that sort of thing, some more vigorously than others. It seems that this par-

ticular renegade didn't live long to enjoy his perfidious gains.

"The *roomal*—the Thugs' stranglin' towel, you know—did for him, but there remained the matter of the young outlanders to be settled. By buyin' these 'cat's-paws' and employin' them not for legitimate crimes, but to terrorize unwillin' native girls into compliance, these young white men had put an affront on the whole criminal clan. They'd made the Crims 'lose face.' Loss of face is almost as bad as loss of caste in the East, and something drastic had to be done about it. Accordingly—" He raised his hands as if he looped a cord, then drew them together with a snapping motion. "*Exeunt omnes*, as Shakespearian stage directions say."

"Then ye think, sor," Costello began, but Das forestalled him.

"I'm almost sure of it, Lieutenant. The man or men entrusted with the job of giving these youngsters the happy dispatch is probably some member of the Criminal Tribes who has lost caste, and must regain it by their murder. He or they will stop at nothing, and if there are several of them killing, some will not deter the others, for they believe implicitly that the surest, quickest route to Paradise is to be killed while in the commission of a crime, just as they lose caste by being caught."

"An' have ye anny idee how th' thafe o' th' wor-rl'd gained entrance to th' pore young felley's room, sir? It looked to me as if 'twould take a bir-rd to break into it, or git out; but as ye say, they are a clever lot and may know some tricks we ain't hep to."

"I have a very definite idea, Lieutenant," Ram Chitra Das replied. "Where's Ambergrast at present?"

"In jail, an' safe, we hope."

"**H**E'S SAFER there than anywhere, but if we want to catch our birds we'll have to bait our trap. D'ye think he's managed to raise bail by this time?"

"I dunno, sor, but I'll tellyphone if ye'd like."

"That might be a good idea. Tell them to detain him on any sort of pretext till they hear from you, then send him back to his rooms in a squad car."

RAM CHITRA DAS, de Grandin and I crouched in an angle of the wall that ran along the alley back of the Lotus Club. The numbing cold gnawed at our bones like a starved dog, and as the sky began to lighten faintly in the east a sharp wind lent an extra sting to the air. "*Mille douleurs*," the little Frenchman murmured miserably, "one little hour more of this and Jules de Grandin is a stiffening corpse, *pardieu!*"

"Quiet, old thing," Ram Chitra Das whispered. "We've invested so much time and discomfort already, it would be a shame to let him slip past us now. He's almost sure to come. Those johnnies waste no time and nearly always work in darkness. D'ye think Costello's on the job inside?"

"I left him and a plainclothes man in the room next to Ambergrast's," I answered. "They've left their door on a crack, and nothing bigger than a mouse can creep past them. If there's a squeak from Ambergrast's room they'll—"

"If the fellow we're expectin' gets into that room they'll hear no squeak," Ram Chitra Das broke in grimly. "Those Bagrees can clip an earring from a sleeping woman's head and never make her miss a snore, and when it comes to usin' the *roomal*—they can kill a man as quickly as a bullet, almost, and with no more noise than a fly walking on the ceiling. I've seen some of their work, and—by George, I think we're havin' company!"

Stepping noiselessly and sure-footedly as a cat on the frozen slush, a man was coming toward us. He was an undersized, emaciated fellow bundled in an overcoat much too large for him, and with a derby hat at least three sizes too big thrust incongruously down on his head. As nearly as I could determine he was dark-skinned, but I was certain that he was no Negro. For a moment he paused like a hound at fault, scanning the windows in the second story of the clubhouse, then walked unerringly to a spot beneath the partly opened window of the room where Ambergrast slept.

"Watch this," Ram Chitra Das commanded in an almost soundless whisper. "If it's what I think it'll be, it's goin' to be good."

The man came to a halt, drew a small

flask from his pocket and unorked it, letting some of its contents spill on the ground. "That's the libation," Das murmured. "They always pour a little out to Bhowance as an offerin' before they drink the sacred mhowa as a part of ceremonial murder."

The fellow drained the contents of the flask and put the empty bottle in his pocket, then, unconcernedly as a lad about to go swimming, stripped off his overcoat, his sweater, trousers and shoes, and stood in the raw winter wind unclothed save for a loin-cloth and his absurd derby. This was last of all to come off, and we saw he wore a close-wrapped turban of soiled white cloth under it.

"*Mordieu*, he mortifies the flesh, that one," de Grandin whispered, but checked on a sharp breath as the dark-skinned man unwound a length of rope from his waist, coiled it on the frozen snow at his feet and bent above it, making swift, cryptic passes with his hands.

I knew I did not see it—yet there it was. Slowly, like a snake that wakes from torpor, the rope seemed to come alive. Its end stirred, twitched, rose a few inches, fell back to the ground, then reared once more, this time remaining up. Then inch by stealthy inch it rose, seeming to feel its way cautiously, until it stood as straight and stiff as a pole, one end upon the frozen ground, the other less than a foot from Ambergrast's window.

"*Grand Dieu des porcs*, it cannot be!" de Grandin whispered incredulously. "Me, I have heard of that rope trick a thousand times, but—"

"Seein' is believin', old chap," Ram Chitra Das cut in with a low chuckle. "You've heard old, seasoned travelers say the rope trick is a fake and can't really be done—but there it is, for you to make a note of in your diary."

The little dark man had begun to climb the upright rope. Agilely as a monkey he went up hand over hand, and it seemed to me his toes were as prehensile as a monkey's too, for instead of trying to twist his ankles in the cord to brace himself he grasped it with his feet.

He was opposite the partly opened window and was loosening the towel bound about his waist above the loin-cloth when

Das stepped quickly forward, both hands raised and shouting, "*Darwaza bundo!*" in a strident voice.

The effect was electrical. The rope collapsed like a punctured balloon, and the man grasping it was hurled to the ice-covered bricks with crushing force. Half-way between the window and the ground he twisted in the air, both arms outspread, hands clutching futilely at nothingness, mouth squared in helpless, hopeless terror, turned end over end and struck the icy pavement shoulders first.

"Grab him!" Ram Chitra Das shouted as he leaped upon the fallen body, snatched the towel from the man's hand and began to knot it into a fetter. "Don't bother," he added disgustedly, as he rose and dusted snow from his knees. "He's out cold as yesterday's kipper."

"AND that is most indubitably that," Ram Chitra Das informed us as we faced each other over coffee and sandwiches in the study. "I feared there might be several of 'em, but Sookdee Singh—our little Bagree playmate—tells me he did all those killin's by his naughty little self. Quite an enterprisin' young chap, I'd say."

"Can you put credence in his word?" de Grandin asked.

"Ordinarily, no. This time, yes. A Bagree thinks no more of lyin' than he does of breathin', but when he dips his hand in blood and says, 'May Bhwanee's wrath consume me utterly if I tell not the truth,' you can believe him. I borrowed a sponge from the hospital operatin' room and made the beggar smear his finger in the blood and swear to tell the truth before I'd make him any promises."

"But what could ye promise him, sor?" Costello demanded. "We've got dead wood on 'im. He'll take th' rap for murther, sure as shootin'—"

"I'm afraid not, Lieutenant. He was pretty badly smashed up in his fall, a frac-

tured rib went through his lung, and the doctor at the hospital tells me he can't last the day. That gave me my hold on him."

"I don't see how—" Costello began, but the Indian continued with a smile.

"Those Criminal Tribesmen are devout Hindus, although the ethics of their devotion may be open to question. However, they share one thing with their more honest co-religionists. They feel it a disgrace to be buried, cremation bein' the only honorable method of disposin' of their bodies. If their ashes are committed to the Ganges they are just that much nearer heaven—somethin' like a Christian's bein' buried in consecrated ground, you know.

"That's where I got my leverage. I promised him that if he told the truth and the whole truth—if he 'came clean', I believe is the way you Americans would put it—I'd see his body was cremated and his ashes shipped to India to be thrown in the Ganges. I couldn't have offered him any greater inducement."

"If it's not a trade secret, would you mind telling me what it was you shouted to make that rope collapse?" I asked.

"Not at all. I said '*Darwaza bundo!*' which means merely 'Shut the door!' in Hindustani. It didn't really matter what I said, you know. In order to perform his tricks an adept has to concentrate his whole mind on them, and the slightest deviation—even for a second—breaks the charm. The shock of hearing himself suddenly addressed in his native tongue was so great that it diverted his attention. Only for a split-second, of course, but that was enough. Once the rope went soft, there was nothin' he could do about it till he had it coiled upon the ground once more and started his charm from the beginnin'."

"*Mon brave!*" de Grandin exclaimed delightedly. "My old and peerless one, *mon homme sensé*. *Parbleu*, I damn think next to Jules de Grandin you are the cleverest man alive! Come, let us drink to that!"