

Weird Tales

JANUARY

25c

CHILDREN OF THE BAT

an every story of unusual
thrill and gripping interest
... by SEABURY QUINN

H. P. Lovecraft

Paul Ernst

Thorp McClusky

Alfred I. Tooke

*All
Stories
Complete*

TM Brusky

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

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Volume 29

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C hildren of the Bat

By SEABURY QUINN

A grim tale of stark horror—a story of the redoubtable little French occultist and crime-fighter, Jules de Grandin, and a weird exploit in the wilds of Yucatan

JULES DE GRANDIN beat his hands together softly in perfunctory applause as the slim young bubble-dancer, birth-nude save for a liberal application of pearl powder, poised on slender, painted toes an instant with the shimmering thirty-inch rubber balloon forming a pellucid barrier between her nakedness and the audience, then ran lightly as a wind-blown thistle-fluff from the semi-lighted dance quadrangle framed by the rows of tables.

"Parbleu," he murmured with a grin, "facilities for studying anatomy have been enlarged since you and I were at *l'école de médecine, n'est-ce-pas*, my friend?"

With the deftness of much practise he maneuvered the cherry at the bottom of his old-fashioned cocktail onto the flange of his muddler and raised it to his lips as a Chinaman might raise rice upon his chopsticks. He ruminated on the candied fruit a moment, washed it down with the cocktail's final draft and turned his eyes again toward the dancing-floor, where an amber spotlight's shaft stabbed through the violet darkness as the orchestra began to play a waltz tune softly.

Memories of moonlit straw-rides, of college proms and midwinter cotillions came to me as I recognized the gliding melody of *Sobre las Olas*, but no partners at a college hop or ballroom German of my dancing-days ever matched the couple who flowed out upon the

floor. The man was tall and slim, virtually hipless in his molded evening clothes, with a tiny wisp of black mustache and gleaming hair pomaded and stretched back so tightly from his brow that it almost seemed to make his eyeballs pop. The girl was gold and cinnabar and ivory. Her hair, cut in a rippling shoulder-bob, was a mixture of pale gold and red, and the spotlight which played on her made it glimmer like a cataract of coruscating molten metal. Her gown of uncut velvet was brilliant yellow-red, throat-high in front, backless to the waist behind, and slit to the knee at either side to show the gleam of slender, sleekly depilated legs. Mandarin rouge was on her cheeks and lips, the filbert-shaped nails of her hands and feet were lacquered bright vermillion, her spool-heeled sandals were of gilded leather. The oval face, long-lashed blue eyes and provocative red mouth were perfect, yet her vibrant youthfulness was overlaid with a veneer of hardness. The girl had lived and looked at life, not always in its most alluring aspects.

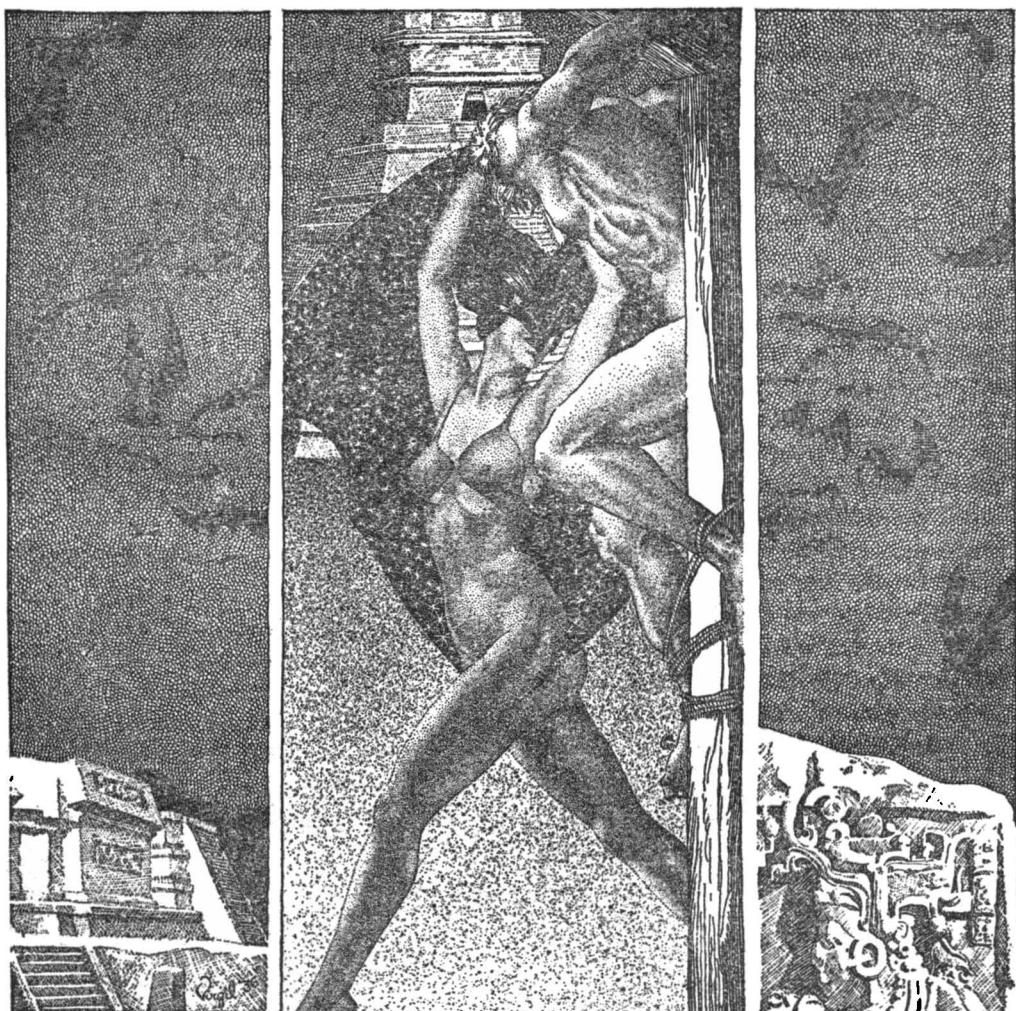
Their dance was neatly executed but purely routine. Turn followed pirouette and lift succeeded turn in an acrobatic version of the waltz, and applause was merely courteous in volume when the couple paused at length and made their salutations to the audience.

The music muted to a slow, soft, sobbing undertone, and a purl of babbling

conversation had begun to buzz as the dancers turned to leave the floor. I looked about the darkened cabaret, searching for our waiter. A final drink of dubonnet, the check, then home seemed the best immediate program, for I had an appendectomy at seven the next morning. The servitor had lost himself among the tables, according to the habit of his kind, and I half rose from my chair to get a better vision, when my glance strayed upward to the entrance stairway. Framed against the silken hangings of vermillion,

multifolded by reflections of opposing gilt-framed mirrors, stood a woman.

So startling was the silhouette she made that she seemed to be a figure out of allegory, perhaps Lachesis grown weary of her task of measuring the thread of human destiny. Tall she was, and slender, an aureole of old-world glamor hovering round her; black hair shining smoothly back from a forehead of magnolia-white, wide-set black eyes beneath black-penciled brows, lips full and red and richly curved, a little mock-



"He beat his head against the cross and arched his body forward. All the time La Murcile-laga stood there statue-still, with her bat wings spread out."

ing, more than a little scornful. Her gown was midnight velvet, its somberness lightened only by a diamond buckle at her belt, and, molding shapely hips, fell swirling down about the brocade sandals on her long and narrow feet. As she threw her velvet evening wrap back from her shoulders it seemed to spread and billow between her outstretched arms, and I had the momentarily unpleasant impression that her graceful shoulders were adorned with sable bat-wings.

"*Mon Dieu!*" de Grandin's exclamation called my wandering attention to the dance floor; "she is distract, she is unwell, she swoons, my friend!"

The little danseuse's glance had caught the woman at the stairhead as she rose from her deep curtsy, and the set, professional smile faded from her features as though wiped away. A sudden deathly pallor spread across her face, making the vermillion rouge stand out in shocking contrast, like an undertaker's pigments on the features of a corpse. She paused abruptly, seemed to shiver as though chilled, then sank down to the floor, not in a toppling faint, but with a kind of slow deliberation which reminded me of the collapse of something formed of wax when heat is applied to it. Yet it was not an ordinary fainting fit which bore her down; rather, it seemed to me, she groveled on the polished floor in utter self-abasement, like a dog which, caught in fault, pleads with its master to withhold the whip.

As her dancing-partner raised her in his arms and bore her to the dressing-rooms the orchestra burst out into a fox-trot, trumpets and saxophones bellowing the melody, piano, bass viol and drums beating the rhythm, and in a moment the sharp whisper of the dancers' sliding feet mingled with the jungloid music and the cachinnation of high, half-drunk

laughter to drown out the memory of the girl's indisposition.

"Doctor," Mike Caldes, proprietor of *La Pantoufle Dorée*, tiptoed to our table, "will you step back to th' dressin'-rooms? Rita's pretty sick an' we'd like to keep th' customers from knowin' it, so—"

"Of course, immediately; at once," de Grandin whispered. "We observed her difficulty, my friend, and were about to offer our assistance when you came."

THE dancer Rita lay upon the couch in her narrow, cell-like dressing-room, and one look at her convinced us that she suffered from a case of paralyzing shock. Her face was absolutely colorless, her skin was utterly devoid of warmth, and tiny nodules of horripilation showed upon her forearms. When she sought to speak, an ululating groan was all that issued from between her writhing lips, for the muscles of her throat were contracted nearly to the choking-point by the *globus hystericus*; in a moment she was trembling in a spasm of uncontrollable successive shudders, while her eyeballs rolled back underneath the lids till the pupils disappeared, leaving but a line of oyster-white framed by her lashes.

"Has she got an epileptic fit, Doc?" Caldes asked. "Th' dirty little double-crosser told me she was strong an' healthy; now she goes an'—"

"Be silent," ordered Jules de Grandin, "it is not epilepsy, but hysteria. She has been badly frightened, this one. Hasten, if you please, *Monsieur*, and bring us brandy and a pan of boiling water and some towels. Be quick; we wait on you, but not with patience."

Quickly he wrung the steaming towels out, enveloped them in dry cloths and placed them on the trembling girl's neck, wrists and feet. This done, he wrapped her in a blanket and proceeded to ad-

minister the brandy by the spoonful till the tremors passed and her eyelids slowly lowered.

A little moan escaped her as her tauted nerves relaxed and the anesthesia of sleep came on. "What is it, *Mado-moiselle?*" he asked, bending till his ear lay nearly level with her lips.

"*La—La Murciélagá,*" she responded sleepily. "*La—Mur—*" her whisper trailed to silence and her bosom fluttered with a tired sigh as she sank into unconsciousness.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"I don't know," he responded with a shrug. "Perhaps a line of chorus from some song. They say absurd things at such times, my friend."

"She should be recovered in an hour, at most," he told Caldes as he rose and slipped his dinner jacket on. "Let someone sit with her until she has regained her strength; then see that she goes home. She must not dance again tonight."

"O.K., Doc; much obliged," responded Caldes. "I'll see she's taken care of." But the greedy gleam between his heavy lids served notice that the girl would carry out her schedule on the dance floor if her partner had to bear her in his arms.

I MIGHT have been asleep an hour when the fretful rattle of the bedside telephone awakened me. "Hullo, Doctor Trowbridge, sor," a richly brogued Hibernian voice announced, "this is Detective Sergeant Costello. Will ye an' Doctor de Grandin be afther comin' to th' Pantuflay Dory on th' run, sor? I'll take it kindly if ye will."

"Come where?" I answered sleepily.

"Th' Pantuflay Dory, sor. Mike Caldes' joint. There's all hell to pay here an' no pitch hot."

"What's happened?"

"'Tis a pore young gur-rl's been

murthered, sor; kilt dead entirely by a gang o' sacrilegious haythens, an'—can ye come at onct, sor? Ye'll be interested; leastwise, Doctor de Grandin will."

De Grandin joined me as I drove the car from the garage. He had not waited to don short and collar, but had wound a mauve silk scarf around his neck and tied it ascot fashion, then slipped his jacket over his pajamas. As he climbed into the motor he was busy teasing needle-points upon the tips of his small blond mustache.

"Who is it who is done to death?" he asked. "In what manner was the killing done?"

"You know as much as I," I answered as we slid into the street, and, headlights blazing, rushed across town to the *Pantoufle Dorée*.

COSTELLO had not made an overstatement when he told me that the murder was the work of "sacrilegious haythens."

The door communicating from the outer lobby to the club's wide entrance stairs was built of heavy mortised timbers—a relic of the Prohibition days when ax-armed raiders might swoop down upon the place unheralded—and these were overlaid with a smooth coat of bright vermillion lacquer on which were painted golden dragons in the Chinese manner. Bone-white against this brilliant background, crucified with railway spikes, hung the naked body of a girl. From nail-pierced hands and feet small rivulets of bright-red blood writhed down like ruby-colored worms. In haste, perhaps, the slayers had neglected to strip off both her sandals, so that one foot showed gilt cross-straps on each side of the cruel spike which held it to the painted door, while the other was unclothed except for the stigmata of bright blood which ran down from the pierced instep.

In the orange glow of a great Chinese lantern she hung against the red and golden panels in a hush of horror; yet she made a picture of appealing, tragic beauty. Her long, slim limbs, the slender waist, the hips which swelled in gracious curves, were beautiful as anything shaped by a master sculptor. Her breasts, drawn upward by the outstretched arms, were lovely as twin hemispheres of alabaster jeweled with coral. Her head had fallen forward in the utter flaccidness of death, and the fine, bright hair cascaded downward from her brow, veiling the horror of half-closed, glazing eyes and limp lips fallen open.

Upon the Peking-blue of the rich Chinese rug spread on the floor before her the sandal she had lost gleamed emptily upon its side, its buckle broken, its golden heel and instep straps ripped almost clear away from the gilt sole. Somehow, death seemed incongruous here. In this resort of opulent magnificence, this temple dedicated to enjoyment of the vanities of life, death was as out of place as a murder scene injected in a Johann Strauss operetta. An odd place, surely, for a woman to be crucified!

De Grandin stood before the lovely, piteous crucifix, arms akimbo, blond mustache a-twitch. "When did you find her?" he demanded of Costello.

"We didn't, sor," the Irishman replied. "Th' watchman o' th' place ran onto 'er whilst he wuz makin' his rounds a little afther three o'clock. He came a-runnin' like the devil's self wuz afther him, an' bawled his sthory to the desk sergeant down at Number Three; so they sends a harness bull around here to invistigate, an' rings th' homicide squad at headquarters. Gilligan an' I gits detailed to th' job, an' th' first thing I does when I sees how things is, is to ring fer you an' Doctor Trowbridge, sor."

"One comprehends. And where is this *gardien de nuit*—this how do you call him?—watchman?—if you please?"

"Come here, youse!" Costello bawled, and at the hail a heavy-set, bow-legged man of thirty-five or -six came from the checkroom where evidently he had been in durance. Despite the neat gray uniform he wore, the man reminded me of something simian. His shoulders were enormous, his chest so much developed that it seemed to dwarf his abdomen; his legs were strong and heavy, but bowed almost to the point of deformity; his arms hung down quite to his knees, and his forehead was so low it made his hairline seem to rest upon his brows. As he turned his head to keep his gaze averted from the pale corpse on the door, I saw the telltale cauliflower ear which proclaimed his past experience in the prize ring.

"I wuz goin' on me rounds, y'understan'," he said, "just after three o'clock this mornin'—th' three-ten box is by th' checkroom door—an' I had to come through there." He jerked a thumb across his shoulder toward the panels where the dead girl hung, but kept his eyes averted. "Th' door's always kind o' hard to open, y'understan', but tonight seems like it wuz stuck, or sumpin, an' I has to lean me shoulder to it. Th' office is out here, an' th' first thing that I thinks about is that some yegg is monkeyin' wid th' safe an' one o' his pals is holdin' th' door on me; so I pulls out me rod an' jams me shoulder agin th' door wid all me might an' busts in here. But if they's anybody here, they're awful quiet, thinks I; so I flashes me light aroun', an' then I sees her hangin' there——" He paused in his recital and a tremor shook his heavy frame.

"*Précisément*, you saw her; and then?" de Grandin prompted.

"Then I goes all haywire. I gits so

deadly sick I busts out to th' street an' pukes; then I beats it for th' station house. Th' coppers brung me back, but I don't know nothin' about it. Honest to Gawd, I don't!"

"Did you hear no sounds before you found the body?"

"No, sir. I don't come on till two o'clock when th' k'itchen gang signs off, an' dis wuz me first trip roun' tonight. I starts off down by th' kitchen an' storerooms, an' these doors is pretty thick, an' wid th' hangin's an' rugs an' things they has here, you wouldn't be apt to hear nothin' much goin' on in one end o' th' place when you wuz at th' other."

"*Très bien*," de Grandin answered. "You may wait outside, my friend." To Costello:

"Have you called the others?"

"Yis, sor. There's a squad car wid Mike Caldes on its way here, now."

The Frenchman nodded toward the pendent body on the door. "How long has she been dead, Friend Trowbridge?"

"H'm, not very long," I returned. "There's no sign of *rigor mortis*, and scarcely any perceptible clotting of blood around the wounds. No hypostasis apparent. My guess is that she could not have been dead much more than half an hour when the watchman found her."

He studied the pale body thoughtfully. "Does it not seem to you that there should be more hemorrhage?" he demanded. "Those spikes are blunt and more than half an inch in thickness, and the tissues round the wounds are badly torn, yet I doubt that she has bled as much as fifteen cubic centimeters."

"Why—er—" I temporized, but he was paying no attention.

Like a tom-cat pouncing on a mouse, he dropped upon his knees and snatched at something lying at the margin of the rug, half hidden by the shadow of the

dead girl's feet. "*Tiens*, what have we here?" he asked, holding his find up to the light.

"A bat's wing," I replied as I looked at it, "but what in heaven's name could it be doing here?"

"God and the devil know, not I," he answered with a shrug as he wrapped the leathery pinion in a sheet of newspaper and stowed it in an inner pocket of his jacket.

STEPPING softly, almost reverently, he crossed the room and surveyed the body pendent on the door through half-closed eyes, then mounting a chair brushed back the rippling wave of bright, fair hair and put a hand beneath her chin.

"*Que diable?*" he exclaimed as the back-brushed tresses unveiled the pale, dead face. "What do you make of this, *mon vieux*?" With a well-groomed forefinger he pointed to the tip of her tongue, which, prolapsed in death, lay across her teeth and hung a quarter-inch or so beyond her lower lip. Against the pale pink of the membrane showed a ruby globule, a little gout of blood.

"Probably the poor child gnashed her tongue in torment when they nailed her to the door," I hazarded, but:

"No, I do not think so," he denied. "See, here is the trail of blood"—he pointed to a narrow track of red which marked the center of the tongue—"and besides, her lips have not been injured. She would have bitten them to ribbons in her agony if—ah? Observe him, if you please!"

Lowering the girl's head he bent it downward on her chest and brushed the hair up from her neck. About three inches from the skull-base showed a tiny cross-shaped wound, its arms a scant half-inch in length. Apparently it had been made by some sharp, square instrument, and from the faintly bluish cast about

the edges of the puncture I reasoned that the weapon had been forced deep into the tissues.

"Ritual, *pardieu!*" he murmured. "It is obvious. Of course, but——"

"What's obvious?"

"That they hanged her on the door as part of some vile ceremony. She was dead before they touched a hammer to a spike. That drop of blood upon her tongue explains the manner of her death. They drove the lethal instrument clear through her spine, so deeply that it penetrated to her throat. She died instantly and silently; probably painlessly, as well. That accounts for the watchman's having heard no outcry, and also for the small amount of blood she shed when they pierced her hands and feet with nails."

"But why?" I asked. "If they'd already killed her, why should they hang her body up like this?"

"That is a question we must answer, but I fear we shall not answer it to-night," he replied as he stepped down from the chair. "Now, if——"

A blustering bellow drowned his observation as Mike Caldes, flanked by two policemen, hustled through the vestibule.

"What's this?—what's all this?" he shouted. "Someone's broken in my place? Where's that dam' lazy watchman? I'll fire 'um! Sleepin' on th' job an' lettin'——" Striding forward wrathfully and glowering about him, he was almost face to face with the girl's body before he saw it.

The change that swept across his fat and swarthy countenance would have been comic if it had not been so terrible. Perspiration spouted on his forehead, trickling down until it formed in little pools above his bushy brows. His jowls hung heavily, like the dewlaps of a hound, and his black eyes widened suddenly and shone with an unnatural brightness, as though they were reacting

to a drug. His lips began to twist convulsively and his hands twitched in a perfect paroxysm of abysmal terror. For half a minute he stared mutely at the body; then a dreadful, choking cry retched from him.

"*Santissima Maria!*" he sobbed, bending an arm across his eyes to shut the vision out. "Not that—not here—they can't do this in my place! No—no—no!"

De Grandin bent a fixed, unwinking stare on him. "Be good enough to tell us more, *Monsieur*," he ordered. "Who is it that did this thing which could not be accomplished in your place? You were forewarned of this?"

"No!" Caldes gasped. "Not me! I didn't know—I didn't think——"

The Frenchman nodded to Costello. "Take him to the office, *sergent*," he commanded. "We can talk with more convenience there."

Turning to an officer he bade: "Have them take her down with gentleness, my friend. Do not let them tear her hands and feet unnecessarily when they withdraw the nails."

"**A**ND now, *Monsieur*, we shall be grateful for such information as you have," he said to Caldes as we joined Costello in the office. "You may speak with freedom, but you must be truthful, too, for we are most unpleasant fellows to attempt the monkey business with."

Caldes' hands shook so that he had to make a number of attempts before he managed to set fire to his cigar. Finally, when he had drawn a deep whiff of pungent smoke into his lungs: "Read this," he ordered, drawing a sheet of paper from his pocket and thrusting it into de Grandin's hand.

"*Hace abierto la ventana de su oficina mañana por la noche*—leave your office window open tomorrow night," the missive ordered. It was without signature,

but the silhouette of a flying bat was appended to the legend.

"Ha!" exclaimed de Grandin. "*La Murciélagá*—the she-bat! It was that the poor one babbled in her delirium of fear. What does the message mean?"

Caldes squirmed uncomfortably, looked about the room as though he sought an inspiration from the frankly displayed charms of the photographed young women hanging on the walls, finally:

"I was born in *Tupulo*," he answered, and we noticed that his usual boastful manner had departed. "They have societies down there, something like th' Black Hand they used to have in Italy, only worse. When they say to do a thing you do it, no matter what it is. Down in *Yucatan* th' orders of these people always have th' picture of a bat—a female bat, *la Murciélagá*—on them. Everyone, from th' *alcalde* down, knows what happens when you get a note with th' picture of a bat signed to it. I've been up here twenty years, but when I got that letter yesterday I didn't ask no questions—I left th' window open like they said. That's why I scrambled home early tonight an' had th' watchman come on duty late. They didn't ask for money, or tell me to stay an' meet 'em, so——"

"An' I don't suppose ye had th' faintest idea what they wuz up to, eh?" Costello interrupted cynically.

"*Dios mio, no!*" exclaimed the Mexican. "How should I know they wuz goin' to murder someone, least of all Rita, who's an American gal, an' never did a thing to cross 'em, far's I know?"

"A woman came into the club just as Mademoiselle Rita was finishing her dance; it was then that she was taken ill," mused Jules de Grandin. "Did you recognize her?"

"Who, me? No, sir. I wuz in th' bar when Rita pulled her faintin'-fit. I

didn't know about it till they'd took her to her dressin'-room."

"And did you later recognize anyone whom you knew to be connected with these people of the bat?"

A grimace which might have been intended for a smile, but which bore small family resemblance to it, swept over Caldes' face, making the knife-scar on his cheek do a macabre dance. "Outsiders don't know th' members of th' bat society," he responded. "You don't live long if you ever find out who's a member, either. But—say, was this dame you're speakin' of a tall, dark woman—looked like a princess, or sumpin'? If she wuz, I know her—she just blew into town, an' lives at——

"*Jesusito!*" the shrill scream broke his words as he leapt from his chair, his face a writhen mask of pain and fright. Frantically he clawed at his throat, as if he slapped at some stinging insect which had lighted there. But it was no insect which he held between his fingers as he waved a trembling hand at us. It was a bit of brownish wood, no longer and no thicker than a match-stick, pointed at the tip and slightly rounded at the base.

I looked at it in mute inquiry, but de Grandin seemed to recognize it, for with a bound he dashed around the deck and seized the stricken man by the shoulders, easing him to the floor. With his thumb and forefinger he seized a fold of the smooth-shaven skin encasing Caldes' neck and, pinching the tiny wound up, put his lips to it.

"Look out for 'em, Clancy!" Costello roared, dashing to the open window of the office and leaning out to bawl his order down the alley. "Oh, ye would, would ye?"

Snatching the revolver from his shoulder holster he leant across the window-sill and fired two shots in quick succession, and the detonation of his weapon was re-

peated by a third shot from the alley-mouth. Nimble as a cat despite his bulk, he clambered through the window and went racing down the brick-paved passage.

"Send someone for potassium perman-ganate," de Grandin ordered as he raised his head from Caldes' wounded throat and expelled a mouthful of blood. "Quickly, if you please; we must make haste!"

I HURRIED to the lobby and dispatched an officer post-haste for the perman-ganate, then rejoined him in the office.

Caldes lay upon the floor, lips quivering, emitting little whimpering noises. Even as I joined de Grandin he drew his legs up with a sharp, convulsive jerk, then straightened them with a sharp kick, and his heels began to beat the floor with a constantly increasing rhythm. He drew his arms across his breast, clenching his fists together, then threw them out to right and left, bowling de Grandin over and upsetting a bronze smoking-stand which stood beside the desk.

"Ar-wa-ar-war-war!" thickly the choked syllables came from his throat as he fought for breath. The man was dying of asphyxia before our eyes.

We turned him on his face and began administering artificial respiration, but before we had more than started the man gasped once or twice, shook with a hideous spasm, then went limp beneath our hands.

"Good heavens, what was it?" I asked as de Grandin rose and began matter-of-factly to brush the dust from his knees.

"Urare poisoning. It was a dart from a *soplete*, or blow-gun, which struck him in the throat. The thing was poisoned with a strychnos extract which acts like cobra venom, causing death within an hour by paralysis of the respiratory

muscles. Had it struck him on a limb we could have used a tourniquet to stop the flow of poison to the blood stream. But no! The dart struck into his external jugular, and the venom spread like wild-fire through his system. I think that fright increased its action, too, for he had doubtless seen men die in such a way before, and gave himself no hope when he discovered he was wounded. Usually the poison does not act so quickly——"

"I got 'im, sor," announced Costello jubilantly from the doorway. "Bad cess to 'im, he tried to shoot me wid his bean-blower, so I give 'im a dose o' lead poisonin' an' Clancy let 'im have another pill jist for—howly Mither, what's this?"

"This, my friend, is murder," answered Jules de Grandin evenly. "It seems he spoke more truly than he realized when he said that those who recognized the members of this gang are seldom troubled by infirmities of age. Come, let us see the other."

Costello's victim was an undersized dark man, thin to emaciation, swarthy-skinned, smooth-shaven save for a small black mustache, and dressed impeccably in dinner clothes. A quick search failed to show a single clue to his identity. Nothing but a pack of *Violetta* cigarettes, ten dollars in bills and change and a book of paper matches occupied his pockets. The maker's labels had been taken from his clothes, his linen had apparently been worn that evening for the first time; there were no laundry marks upon it. Ten feet or so from where the man had fallen we found a tube of smoothly polished hollow reed some eighteen inches long, and beside it, like a clip of cartridges, a folded sheet of cardboard through which were thrust three four-inch splints of wood like that with which the night-club owner had been wounded. Near the window where it had fallen harmlessly to the pavement

lay the dart he had blown at Costello.

"Be careful how you handle them," de Grandin warned as Officer Clancy picked up the paper clip of darts; "a scratch from them is death!"

"Humph," Costello murmured as he viewed the body of the murderer, "they wuzn't takin' any chances, wuz they, Doctor de Grandin, sor? This felly's as bare o' clues as Billy-be-damned. Th' woman Mike wuz tellin' us about is our best bet. A dame as strakin' as ye tell me this one wuz ought not to be so hard to locate. If she just blew into town, like Caldes said, an' if she's been around enough for him to notice her, she's likely livin' at some swank hotel. We'll put th' dragnet out for her immejately, an' when we find her I'm afther thinkin' she'll have some mighty fancy answerin' to do."

WE WERE enjoying coffee and Chartreuse in the study after dinner the next evening when Nora McGinnis announced: "Sergeant Costello an' a lady's here to see yez, sors. Shall I have 'em wait?"

"Not at all; by no means; show them in," de Grandin bade, and, as the burly Irishman loomed in the doorway, "Welcome, *mon sergeant*; is it news of the strange woman that you bring?"

"Well, sor, yis an' no, as th' felly sez," Costello answered with a rather sheepish grin as he beckoned to someone behind him. "This here young lady's got a sthory which may shed some light on last night's monkey-business."

The girl who entered at his gesture seemed absurdly small and fragile in comparison to his great bulk, though in fact she was something over middle height. It was not until she took a seat upon the sofa at de Grandin's invitation that I recognized her as the bubble-dancer at the Caldes cabaret. How a young female who dances naked dresses

when she is not working at her trade had never been a subject of my thought, but certainly I was not prepared for any costume such as that our visitor wore. She was almost nun-like in her sheer black dinner dress of marquisette trimmed with tiny ruffles of white organdy, her corsage of gardenias, her small black hat, and her white-kid gloves. She might have been a clergyman's daughter, or a member of the Junior League, judging from appearances.

"I'm Nancy Meigs," she told us as she folded white-gloved hands demurely in her lap and looked at us with wide, grave, troubled eyes. "Rita Smith, the girl they killed last night, and I were pals."

"Smith! *Mon Dieu*, her name was Smith, and she so beautiful!" de Grandin murmured sadly. "This English, what a language!"

"It was *Los Niños de la Murciélagos*—the 'Children of the Bat'—who killed her," Nancy added. "I was sure—"

"Perfectly, *Mademoiselle*, and so are we," de Grandin interrupted, "but who are these sixty-times-accursed ones, where may they be found, and why, especially, should they kill and crucify a young girl in New Jersey?"

Her gray eyes were clear and soft and steady as they looked at him, but they were frightened, too. "Was—did you find a bat wing by her body?" she responded.

"By blue, I did!" he answered. "Wait, I have it in my room."

He hurried out, returning in a moment with the sheet of paper wrapped around the wing he had retrieved the night before.

She took the folded wing between her thumbs and forefingers, extending it against the light cast by the study lamp. "Can you read it?" she demanded, moving the membranes across the field of light.

Scratched upon the leathery skin was a five-word legend:

Así siempre á los traidores.

"Howly St. Patrick!" swore Costello.

"Précisément," de Grandin nodded.

"What's it mean?" I asked.

"Thus always to traitors,' sor," Costello answered. "I picked up enough o' th' lingo whilst I wuz servin' in th' Filypines to read that much."

De Grandin poured two glasses of Chartreuse and handed them to our visitors; then, as he refilled his own:

"Just what connection did this poor young woman have with these so naughty murderers, *Mademoiselle*?"

"Rita and I were members of the order—once," replied the girl. "It was back in '29, just before the bottom fell out of the show business; we were touring South America with a troupe of entertainers. Fan and bubble dancing hadn't been invented then, but we did a rumba routine that was popular, and went over almost as big as the performing seals. We'd gotten up the coast as far as Tupulo when the crash came. Tupulo's an oil town, you know, and all orders from the wells had been canceled; so the place was like a western mining-camp when the ore ran out. We didn't draw a corporal's guard at shows, and then one night our manager, Samuelson, got into a fight in a gambling-hall and they put him in jail and seized the animals and properties of the show. Rita and I were stranded with only about ten pesos between us. That didn't last us long and presently they threatened to jail us, too, for non-payment of rent. We were desperate."

"One understands," de Grandin nodded. "And then?"

"We got an engagement dancing in one of the saloons. It was pretty dread-

ful, for the patrons of the place were the off-scum of the oil fields, and we had to do the *danza de las dos tetas*—dancing in unbuttoned blouses and shaking our shoulders till our breasts protruded through the opening, you know—but stranded actresses can't very well afford to quarrel with their bread and butter.

"One night it was especially terrible. The drunken loafers in the place called insults at us and even pelted us with bits of bread and vegetables as we danced; we were both about to collapse when the evening's work was done. Rita cried all the way to our lodgings. 'I can't stand this another night,' she wept. 'I'd sooner go lose myself in the jungle and die than do another shimmy in that deadly place!'

"One may go into the jungle, yet not die, *Señorita*," someone told us from the darkness, and a man stepped out from the shadow of a building, raising his sombrero.

"We thought at first it was one of the barroom loafers who'd followed us, and I drew my hands back to write the Ten Commandments on his cheeks with my nails, but the street lamp showed us he was a stranger and a *caballero*.

"I have watched you for some time," he told us. "You were made for better things than twinkling your little, perfect feet before such swine as those you entertain. If you will let me, I can help you."

"We sized him up. He was little, very neat and extremely ugly, but he didn't look particularly dangerous. 'All right,' said Rita, 'what's your proposition?'

"One I serve has need of women with discretion—and beauty," he answered. "She can offer you a life of luxury, everything which you deserve—fine clothes, fine food, luxurious surroundings. But it will not be a life of ease or safety. There will be much work and more danger."

Also, no one in this service ever makes a second mistake. However—he shrugged his shoulders as only a Mexican can—"it will be better than the life you're leading now."

"OUR contract was concluded then and there. We didn't even go back to our lodgings to collect and pack what clothes we had.

"He had a motor waiting at the outskirts of the town, and in this we rode till daylight, stopping at a little *hacienda* at the jungle edge to sleep all day. When darkness came he wakened us, and we rode on muleback through the bush till it was nearly dawn again.

"Our destination was an old abandoned Mayan temple, one of those ruins that dot the jungle all through Yucatan, and it seemed deserted as a graveyard when we rode up to it, but we found the jungle had been cleared away and the debris of fallen stones removed till the place was made quite habitable.

"We rested all next day and were wakened in the evening by the sound of tom-toms. An Indian woman came and led us to a stone tank like a swimming-pool, and when we finished bathing we found she'd taken our soiled clothes and left us gowns of beautifully woven cotton and *huaraches*, or native sandals. When we'd dressed in these she took us to another room, where she gave us stewed meat and beans and cool, tart wine, after which she signaled us to follow her.

"We walked out to the square before the pyramid, which was all ablaze with lighted torches, and I nearly fainted at the sight that met our eyes. All around the square was a solid rank of men and women, all in native costume—a simple, straight gown like a nightdress for the women, a shirt and pair of cotton trousers for the men—and all masked by having huge artificial bats' heads drawn over

their faces like hoods. Everywhere we looked they were, as much alike as grains of rice from the same bag, all with their eyes flashing in the torchlight at us through the peep-holes in their masks.

"Four of the bat-men took our arms and turned us toward the steps of the great pyramid. Then we saw *La Murciélagá*!"

"*La Murciélagá?*" echoed Jules de Grandin. "Was it then a bat that these strange people worshipped?"

"No, sir. It was a woman. She was tall and slender and beautifully made, as we could see at a glance; for every inch of her was encased in a skin-tight suit of sheer black webbing, like the finest of silk stockings, and her face was hidden by a bat-mask like the rest, only hers seemed made of shimmering black feathers while theirs were made of coarse black fur. Joining her arms to her body were folds of sheer black silk so that when she raised her hands it spread and stretched like a bat spreading its wings to fly.

"Some kind of trial seemed to be in progress, for two bat-men held another one between them, and the woman in the bat costume seemed questioning the prisoner, though we couldn't hear what she said or he replied from where we stood.

"After a little while she seemed to have arrived at a decision, for she raised her hands, spreading out her bat-wings, and curved her fingers at him as though she were about to claw his face. The poor thing dropped upon his knees and held his hands extended, asking mercy, but *La Murciélagá* never changed her pose, just stood there with her claws stretched out and her eyes gleaming horribly through her mask.

"Before we realized what was happening some men had brought a blood-stained wooden cross and laid it down

upon the pavement. Then they stripped the prisoner's clothing off and nailed him to the cross while the tom-toms beat so loudly that we could not hear his shrieks, and all the masked bat-people screamed '*Ast siempre á los traidores!*' over and over again.

"That's what comes to those who disobey or fail *La Murciélagos*!" someone whispered in my ear, and I recognized the voice of the man who had brought us out from Tupulo.

"But we don't want to join any such terrible society as this!" I cried. "We won't —"

"There are other crosses waiting," he warned me. "Will you hang beside that traitor or will you take the oath of fealty to the Bat Mother and become her true and faithful servants?"

"The poor wretch on the cross kept shrieking, and though we couldn't hear him for the tom-toms' noise, we could see his mouth gape open and the blood run down his chin where he gnashed his lips and tongue. He beat his head against the cross and arched his body forward till the spikes tore greater wounds in his pierced hands and feet, and all the time *La Murciélagos* stood there statue-still with her bat-wings spread out and her fingers curved like talons.

"Finally, when the crucified man's screams had muted to a low, exhausted moan, they led us up to the 'Bat Mother,' and there in the shadow cast by the cross with its writhing, groaning burden, we knelt down on the stones and swore to do whatever we were bidden, promising to give ourselves up for crucifixion if we ever disobeyed an order or attempted to leave the bat society or divulge its secrets. They made us put our hands out straight before us on the ground, and *La Murciélagos* came and stood on them while we kissed her feet and vowed we were her slaves for ever. Then we were given bat-

masks and told to take our places in the ranks which stood about the square before the pyramid."

"And how did you escape that place of torment, *Mademoiselle*?"

"We didn't have to, sir. In the morning we were wakened and taken to the coast, where they put us on a boat and sent us up to Vera Cruz.

"May I have a cigarette?" she asked; and, as de Grandin passed the box to her, then held his lighter while she set it glowing, "Do you remember how the Spanish freighter *Gato* apparently sailed off the earth?"

De Grandin and Costello nodded.

"We did that, Rita and I. They told us to make love to the master and chief engineer, and with the memory of that horrid scene out in the jungle to spur us on, we did just as they told us. We teased the engineer to let us go and see his engines, and Rita took a little box they'd given her aboard, and hid it in the bunkers. What was in it we don't know, but when they threw the coal where it had rested in the furnace the whole side of the ship was ripped away, and everyone on board was lost."

"But this is purest idiocy, *Mademoiselle*!" protested Jules de Grandin. "Why should anyone in wanton cruelty desire to destroy a ship?"

"The *Gato* carried half a million dollars' worth of jewels," the girl replied. "She sank in less than fifteen fathoms, and the hole blown in her side made it easy for the divers to go in and loot her strongroom."

She took a final long draw at her cigarette, then crushed its fire out in the ash-tray. "You remember when MacPherson Briarly, the insurance magnate's son, was held for ransom in Chihuahua?" she asked. "Rita was the lure—posed as an American girl stranded in *El Centro*

and traded on his chivalry. He went out riding with her one afternoon and—it cost his father fifty thousand dollars to get him back alive."

"**B**UT why didn't you attempt escape?" I asked. "Surely, if you went as far north as Chihuahua you were out of reach of the jungle headquarters in Yucatan?"

A queer look passed across her face, wiping away her youth and leaving her features old and utterly exhausted-looking. "You don't escape *Los Niños de la Murciélagos*, sir," she answered simply. "They are everywhere. The loafer in the doorway, the policeman in the street, the conductor of the tram-car or the train, is as likely as not a member of the band, and if he fails to prevent your breaking your oath of obedience—there's a cross waiting for him in the jungle. You may be dining in a fashionable hotel, sitting in a box at the opera in Mexico City or walking in the plaza when someone—a beggar, a stylish woman or an elegantly dressed man—will open his hand and display a bat wing. That is the signal, the summons not to be ignored on pain of crucifixion."

"But you finally escaped," I insisted somewhat fatuously.

Again that queer, senescent-seeming look spread on her face. "We ran away," she corrected. "They sent us up to Tia Juana and when we found ourselves so near the American border we decided to make a dash for it. We were well supplied with funds—we always were—so we had no trouble getting up to San Diego, but we knew we'd not be safe in California, or anywhere within a thousand miles of Mexico, for that matter, so we hurried back East.

"The movies had killed vaudeville, and no new musical shows were outfitting that season, but we managed to get jobs

in burlesque. Finally I heard about an opening at Mike Caldes' place and sold him the idea of letting me go on as a bubble-dancer. I hadn't been there long when the girl who did the waltz routine left the show to marry, and I got Rita her place. We thought we'd be safe out here in New Jersey," she finished bitterly.

"And this so unpleasant female, this *Murciélagos*, you can tell us what she looks like?" asked de Grandin.

"*You're* asking *me*?" she answered. "You saw her when she came into the club before they took revenge on Rita."

"That lovely woman?" I exclaimed incredulously.

"That lovely woman," she repeated in a flat and toneless voice. "Did you see the way she held her cloak before she took it off? That's her sign. The others carry bat wings for identification. Only *La Murciélagos* is allowed to wear them."

"Well, I'll be damned!" declared Costello.

"Assuredly, unless you mend your ways," agreed de Grandin with a grin. Then, sobering abruptly:

"Tell me, *ma petite*," he asked, "have you any idea the unfortunate Mike Caldes knew of your connection with these people of the bat?"

"No, sir," she answered positively. "Mike had never been a member of the order, but he'd lived in Tupulo and knew its power. He'd no more have dared shelter us if he'd suspected we were wanted by *La Murciélagos* than he'd have given us jobs if he'd thought we had the smallpox. As far as any Mexican from Yucatan is concerned, any fugitive from the vengeance of the Bat is hotter than counterfeit money or stolen Government bonds."

"And what of you, my friend?" de Grandin asked Costello. "Have you been

able to locate this strange woman whose advent heralded these murders?"

"No, sor, we haven't," answered the detective. "We spread th' dragnet for 'er, like I told ye at th' joint last night, but we can't find hide nor hair o' her. P'raps she's stayin' in New York—there's lots o' furriners—axin' yer pardon, sor—always hangin' out there, an' we've asked th' police to be on th' lookout fer her, but you know how it is. Pretty much like lookin' fer a needle in a haystack, as th' felly says. So when Nancy—beg pardon, I mane Miss Meigs—come an' told me she might be able for to shed some light on all this monkey-business, I thought I'd better bring her over."

"Precisely," nodded Jules de Grandin. "And in the meantime, while we seek the so elusive Lady of the Bat, how shall we make things safe for Mademoiselle Nancy?"

"H'm, I might lock 'er up as a material witness," Costello offered with a grin, "but—"

"Oh, would you—*please?*" broke in the girl. "I never wanted to be anywhere in all my life as much as I want to be behind jail bars right now!"

"Sold," Costello agreed. "We'll go over to your place an' get your clothes; then you can trot along to jail wid me."

"One moment, *Mademoiselle*, before you go to the bastille," de Grandin interrupted. "It is entirely unlikely that the search for this Bat Woman will produce results. They are clever, these ones. I do not doubt that they have covered up their trail so well that long before the gendarmes realize the search is useless she will have fled the country. Tell me, would you know your way—could you retrace your steps to that so odious temple where the Children of the Bat have made their lair?"

A little frown of concentration

wrinkled her smooth forehead. "I think I could," she answered finally.

"And will you lead us there? Remember, it is in the cause of justice, to avenge the ruthless murder of your friend and to save *le bon Dieu* knows how many others from a similar fate."

She looked at him with widened eyes, eyes in which the pupils seemed to swell and spread till they almost hid the irides. Her eyes were blank, but not expressionless. Rather, they seemed to me like openings to hell, as though they mirrored all the nightmares she had seen within their depths.

"I suppose I might as well," she answered with a little shudder. "If I go there they will nail me to a cross. If I stay here they'll do it sooner or later, anyway."

She was like a lovely, lifeless robot as she rose to go with Costello. The certain knowledge of foreshadowed death, cold and ominous as some great snake, had seized her in its paralyzing grip.

CAPTAIN Hilario César Ramirez de Quesada y Revilla, Commandant of Tupulo, courteously replenished our glasses from the straw-sheathed flask of *babañero*, then poured himself a drink out of all proportion to his own diminutive stature. "*Señores, Señorita*," he bowed to us and Nancy Meigs in turn, "your visit is more welcome than I can express. *Valgame Dios!* For a year I have stormed and sweated here in impotence; now you come with explanations and an offer of assistance. Crime is rampant in this neighborhood, and the police are powerless. A man is murdered, a business house is robbed at night, no one knows who did it; there are no clues, there are no complainants. The very persons who are injured place their fingers on their lips and shrug their shoulders. '*La Murciélagos*,' they say, as

though they said it was inexorable fate. They tell us nothing; we are helpless. Nor is that all. People, women as well as men, disappear; they vanish as though swallowed by an earthquake. 'Where is so and so?' we ask, and 'S-s-sh—*La Murciélagu*!' is the only answer. I came here with a full company a year ago. Today I have but two platoons; the others are all dead, deserted or vanished—*La Murciélagu*!

"*Por Dios*, until you came here with this explanation I had thought she was a legend, like Tezcatlipoca or the Thunder-Bird!"

"Then we may count upon your help, *Monsieur le Capitaine?*" de Grandin asked.

"With all my heart. *Carajo*, I would give this head of mine to lay my eyes upon *La Murciélagu*—"

An orderly tapped at the door, and he looked up with a frown. "What?" he demanded.

"A young *caballero* waits to see the captain," the man explained apologetically. "His *hacienda* was burglarized last night. Much livestock was driven off; the family plate was stolen. He is sure it was *La Murciélagu*, and has come to make complaint."

"*Un milagro*—a miracle!" the Commandant cried exultantly. "Two in one day, *amigos*. First come you with information of this cursed bat society, then comes a man with courage to denounce them for their thievery.

"Bring him in, *muy pronto!*" he commanded.

The man the orderly showed in was scarcely more than a lad, dark, slender, almost womanish in build, his sole claim to masculinity seeming to be based upon a tiny black mustache and a little tuft of beard immediately below his mouth, so small and black that it reminded me of a beetle perched between his chin and

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lip. He wore the old-time Mexican costume, short jacket and loose-bottomed trousers of black velveteen, a scarlet cummerbund about his waist, exceedingly high-heeled boots, a bright silk handkerchief about his head. In one hand he bore a felt *sombrero*, the brim of which seemed only the necessary groundwork to support row on row of glittering silver braid.

At sight of us he paused abashed, but when the Commandant presented us, his teeth shone in a glittering smile. "We are well met, *Señores y Señorita*," he declared; "you are come to seek these Children of the Bat, I am come to ask the *commandante's* aid. Last night they picked my house as clean as ever vultures plucked a carcass, and my craven peons refused to lift a hand to stop them. They said that it was death to offer opposition to *La Murciélagu*, but me, I am brave. I will not be intimidated. No, I have come to the police for aid."

"What makes you think it was *La Murciélagu*, sir?" the Commandant inquired. "These people of the bat are criminals, yes; but there are other robbers, too. Might not it be that—"

"*Señor Commandante*," broke in the other in a low, half-frightened voice, "would other robbers dare to leave *this* at my house?" Opening his small gloved hand he dropped a folded bat-wing on the desk.

"Bring a file of soldiers quickly," he besought. "We can reach my house by sundown, and begin pursuit tomorrow morning. *Señorita Meigs* can lead us to the secret stronghold in the jungle, and we can take them by surprize."

PREPAREDATIONS were completed quickly. Two squads of cavalry with two machine-guns were quickly mustered at the barracks, and with young *Señor Epilar* to guide us, we set out for the scene of

La Murciélagos latest depredation. The sun dropped down behind the jungle wall as we arrived at the old *hacienda*.

The soldiers were bivouacked in the *patio*, and escorted by our host, we made our way to a wide, long drawing-room lighted by wax candles in tall wrought-iron standards and sparsely furnished with chairs and tables of massive oak.

"I bid you welcome to my humble home, my friends," said Señor Epilar with charming Spanish courtesy. "If you will indulge me a few moments I will have refreshment——"

"What's that?" the Commandant broke in as a sharp, shrill cry, followed by the detonation of a carbine shot, came from the *patio*.

"Perhaps one of my people plucked up courage to fire at a coyote," answered Epilar. "They showed little enough desire to shoot last night——"

"No, that was an army rifle," the Commandant insisted. "If you will excuse me——"

"And if I do not choose to do so?" calmly asked our host.

"*Tres mil diablos*—if you do not choose——"

"*Precisamente, Señor Commandante*," answered Epilar. "I should like to claim my forfeit."

De Grandin's small blue eyes were sparkling in the candlelight. "*Dieu de Dieu de Dieu de Dieu!*" he murmured. "I was certain; I was sure; I could not be mistaken!"

The Commandant regarded Señor Epilar in round-eyed wonder. "Your forfeit?" he demanded. "In the devil's name——"

"Not quite the devil, though something like it," cut in Epilar with a soft laugh. "*La Murciélagos, Commandante mío.* As I came into your office you declared that you would give your head if you could but lay your eyes upon the

Bat-Woman. Look, my friend, your wish is granted."

With one hand he tore off the tiny black mustache and goatee which adorned his face; with the other he unwound the gaudy handkerchief which bound his head, and a wealth of raven hair came tumbling down about his face and rippled round his shoulders. Stripped of its masculine adornments I recognized that lovely, cold, impassive face as belonging to the woman who had stood upon the stairs the night that Caldes and the dancer met their deaths.

"*Dios!*" the Commandant exclaimed, reaching for the pistol at his belt; but:

"I would not try to do it," warned the woman. "Look about you."

At every window of the room masked men were stationed, each with a deadly blow-gun poised and ready at his lips.

"Your soldiers are far happier, I know," the woman announced softly. "All of them, I'm sure, had been to mass this morning. Now they are conversing with the holy saints. "As for you"—she threw us the dry flick of a Mona Lisa smile—"if you will be kind enough to come, I shall take pleasure in entertaining you at my jungle headquarters." For a moment her sardonic gaze fixed on Nancy Meigs; then: "Your fair companion will be glad to furnish some amusement, I am sure," she added softly.

We rode all night. Strapped tightly to the saddles of our mules, hands bound behind us and with *tapojos*, or mule-blinds, drawn across our faces, we plodded through the jungle, claws of acacia and mesquite slapping and scratching against us, the chafing of our rawhide bonds becoming more intolerable each mile.

It was full daylight when they took our hoodwinks off. We had reached an open space several hundred feet in

breadth, tiled with squared stones and facing on the ruins of a topless Mayan pyramid which towered ninety or a hundred feet against the thick-set wall of jungle. On each side of us ranked a file of bat-masked men, each with a blow-gun in his hand. Of *La Murciélag* we could see nothing.

"*Holá, mes enfants, we have come through nobly thus far, n'est-ce-pas?*" de Grandin called as he twisted in his saddle to throw a cheerful grin in our direction. "If—*par Dieu et le Diable!*" he broke off as his small blue eyes went wide with horror and commiseration. Turning, I followed the direction of his glance and felt a sickening sensation at my stomach.

Behind us, bound upon a mule, sat Nancy Meigs. They had stripped her shirt and bandeau off, leaving her stark naked to the belt, and obviously they had failed to tie a *taopojo* across her face, for from brow to waist she was a mass of crisscrossed slashes where the cruelly-clawed thorn branches of the jungle had gashed and sheared her tender skin as she rode bound and helpless through the bush. Little streaks of blood-stain, some fresh, some dry and clotted, marked a pattern on her body and her khaki jodhpurs were bespattered with the dark discolorations. She slumped forward in her saddle, half unconscious, but sufficiently awake to feel the pain of her raw wounds, and we saw her bite her lips as she strove to keep from screaming with the torment which the buzzing jungle flies, her lacerations and the cruelly knotted rawhide bonds inflicted.

"Be all th' saints, 'tis meself as would like nothin' better than to git me hands on that she-devil!" swore Costello as he saw the claw-marks on the girl's white torso. "Bedad, I'd——"

"*Andela—forward!*" came a sharp command beside us, and masked men

seized the bridles of our mules and led them toward the pyramid.

Our prison was a large square room lighted by small slits pierced in the solid masonry and furnished with a wooden grating at its doorway. Here we stretched our limbs and strove to rub the circulation back into our hands and feet.

"*Soy un bobo—what a fool I am!*" the Commandant groaned as he rubbed his swollen wrists. "I should have known that no one in the neighborhood would have the courage to come to me with complaints against these Bat-Men. I should have taken warning——"

"Softly, *mon ami*," de Grandin comforted. "You acted in the only way you could. It was your duty to embrace the chance to wipe this gang of bandits out. Me, I should probably have done the same, if——"

A rattling at the wooden grating interrupted him. "*La Murciélag* deigns to see you. Come!" a masked man told us.

For a moment I had hopes that we might overpower our guard, but the hope was short-lived; for a file of blow-gun bearers waited in the corridor outside our cell, and with this watchful company we made our way along the passage till we came to a low doorway leading to a large apartment lighted by a score of silver lamps swinging from the painted ceiling.

The ancient walls were lined with frescoes, figures of strange dancing women posed in every posture of abandon, some wearing red, some clad in green, a few in somber black, but most entirely nude, flaunting their nakedness in a riot of contorted limbs and swaying bodies. There was a vigor to the art of the old Mayan painters who had limned these frescoes on the walls. Despite their crudity of execution there was an air of reality in the murals which made it seem that they might suddenly be

waked to life and circle round the room in the frenzy of an orgiastic dance.

At the far end of the room a table of dark wood was laid with cotton napery and a wonderful old silver service which must at one time have graced the banquet hall of some old grande in the days of Spanish dominance. Four chairs were drawn up to the board facing the end where a couch of carven wood heaped high with silken cushions stood beneath the fitful luminance cast by a hanging silver lamp.

"This must have been the priestess' hall," the Commandant informed us in a whisper. "This temple is supposed to have contained a college of priests and priestesses, something like a convent and monastery."

"*Parbleu*, if that is so, I think those old ones did not mortify the flesh to any great extent," the Frenchman answered with a grin. "But while we wait in this old mausoleum of the ancient ones, where is our charming hostess?"

As though his words had been a cue, a staff of bells chimed musically outside the door, and the guard of bat-men ranged about the walls sank to their knees.

The chime grew higher, shriller, sweeter, and a double file of women dressed in filmy cotton robes, each with a bat-mask on her face, came through the low-arched entrance, paused a moment, then, as though obeying an inaudible command, dropped prostrate to the floor, head to head, hand clasping hand, so that they made a living carpet on the pavement.

Framed in the arching entrance, *La Murciélagá* stood like some lovely life-sized portrait. A robe of finely woven cotton, dyed brilliant red with cochineal and almost sheer as veiling, flowed from a jeweled belt clasped below her bosoms to the insteps of her narrow, high-arched

feet. On throat and arms, on her thumbs and little-fingers, flashed great emeralds, any one of which was worth a princely ransom. Long golden pendants throbbing with the flash of blood-bright rubies reached from the tiny lobes of little ears almost to naked, cream-white shoulders. Each move she made was musical, for bands of pure gold were clasped in tiers about her wrists and on her slender ankles, and clashed tunefully together with each step she took. Upon the great and little-toe of each slim foot there gleamed a giant emerald so that as her feet advanced beneath the swirling hem of her red robe it seemed that green-eyed serpents darted forth their heads.

"*Madre de Dios!*" I heard the Commandant exclaim, and his voice seemed choked with sobs. "*Que hermosa*—how beautiful!"

"So is the tiger or the cobra," murmured Jules de Grandin as *La Murciélagá* trod upon the prostrate women as unconcernedly as though they had been figures woven in a carpet.

She greeted us with a bright smile. "Good morning, gentlemen. I hope you did not suffer too much inconvenience from your ride last night?"

None of us made reply, but she seemed in nowise feazed. "Breakfast is prepared," she announced, sinking down upon the heaped-up cushions of the couch and motioning us to the chairs which stood about the table. "I regret I cannot offer you such food as you are used to, but I do my poor best."

Oranges and cherimoya, grapes, sweet limes, guavas and plates of flat, crisp native bread composed the meal, with coffee, chocolate and lemonade for beverages. Finally came long, thick cigars of rich lowland-grown tobacco and a sweet, strong wine which tasted like angelica.

THE woman leant back on her cushioned divan and regarded us through half-closed eyes as she let a little streamlet of gray smoke flow from her lips. "The question, gentlemen, is, 'What are we to do with you?'" she stated in a voice which held that throaty, velvety quality of the southern races. "I cannot very well afford to let you go; I have no wish to keep you here against your will. Would you care to join our ranks? I can find work for you."

"And if we should refuse, *Madame*?" de Grandin asked.

Her shrug lifted the creamy shoulders till they touched the jeweled ear-pendants and set their gems to flashing in the lamplight. "There is always *el crucifijo*," she replied, turning black-fringed, curious eyes upon him. "It would be interesting to see four bodies hanging up at once. You, my friend, would doubtless scream in charming tenor, *el Comandante* would shriek baritone, I think, while I do not doubt that the old bearded one and the big Irishman would be the bassos of the concert. It should make an interesting quartet. I have more than half a mind to hear it."

A frigid grimace, the mere parody of a smile, congealed upon the Commandant's pale lips. "You make a gruesome jest, *Señora*," he asserted feebly.

"*Cabrón!*" she shot the deadly insult at him as a snake might spew its poison. "*La Murciélagos* never jests!" Her face had gone skull-white, with narrowed, venomous eyes, the chin and mouth thrust forward and the lips pressed taut against the teeth.

"Down," she ordered, "down on your faces, all of you! Lick my feet like the dogs you are, and pray for mercy! Down, I say, for as surely as I reign supreme here I'll crucify the one who hesitates!"

De Grandin looked at Costello, and his Gallic blue eyes met prompt answer

in the black-fringed eyes of Irish blue of the detective. With one accord they turned to me, and instinctively I nodded.

The little Frenchman rose, heels clicked together, and faced the termagant she-fiend with a glance as cold and polished as a leveled bayonet. "*Madame*," he announced in a metallic voice, "we are men, we four. To men there are things worse than death."

"*Bueno*, my little one," she answered; "then I shall hear your quartet after all. I had hoped that you would choose to play the hero." Turning to her guards she ordered sharply: "Take them away."

"No, no; not me, *Señora*!" the Commandant implored, falling on his knees before her. "Do not crucify me, I beseech you!"

Across his shoulder he cried frenziedly: "Save yourselves, *amigos*. Beg mercy. What good is honor to a corpse? I saw a man whom they had crucified—they flung his body in the city square at night. It was terrible. His wounds gaped horribly and the middle fingers had been torn away where his hands had ripped loose from the spikes!"

"You would have mercy, little puppy?" asked the woman softly, regarding him with a slow, mocking smile.

"Yes, yes, *Señora*! Of your pity spare me——"

"Then, since you are a cringing dog, deport yourself becomingly." With the condescension of a queen who graciously extends her hand for salutation, she stretched out a slim, ring-jeweled foot.

It was shocking to behold him stultify his manhood. "*Misericordia muy Señora graciosa*—have mercy, gracious lady!" he whimpered, and I turned away my head with a shudder of repulsion as he put his hand beneath her instep, raised the gemmed foot to his mouth, and, thrusting forth his tongue, began to lick it as a famished dog might lap at food.

"*Cordieu,*" de Grandin murmured as the guards closed round us and began to crowd us from the room, "she may murder us to death, but I damn think she can do no worse to us than she has done to him!"

"Thru fer ye, Doctor de Grandin, sor," Costello rumbled. "You an' me wuz soldiers an' Doctor Trowbridge is a gintleman. Thank God we ain't more scared o' dyin' than o' dishonorin' ourselves!"

THE square before the pyramid blazed bright with torchlight. On three sides, ranked elbow to elbow, stood the "Children of the Bat" looking through the peep-holes of their masks with frenzied, hot-eyed gloating. Before the temple steps there crouched a line of drummers who beat out a steady, mind-destroying rhythm. We stood, legs hobbled, between our guards, looking toward the temple stairs, and I noticed with a shudder that at intervals of some eight feet four paving-blocks had been removed, and beside each gaping opening was a little pile of earth. The cross-pits had been dug.

"Courage, *mes enfants,*" de Grandin whispered. "If all goes well——"

Costello's lips were moving almost soundlessly. His eyes were fixed in fascinated awe upon the cross-holes in the pavement; the expression on his face showed more of wonder than of fear. "To hang upon a cross," I heard him whisper, "I am not worthy, Lord!"

"*Morbleu,* she comes, my friends!" the little Frenchman warned.

Tiny tom-toms, scarcely larger than a tea-cup, beat out a low, continuous roar beneath the thumbs and knuckles of the double line of bat-masked women filing from a doorway in the temple. Behind them came an awe-inspiring figure. Skin-tight, a sheath of finely-woven jet-black

silk, sheer and gleaming as the finest stocking, cased her supple form from throat to ankles, its close-looped meshes serving rather to accentuate than hide the gracious curves of her long, slim limbs. Moccasins of cloth of gold were on her feet, her head was covered with a hood which bore the pointed snout and tufted ears of a great vampire bat. In the eyeholes we could see the red reflection of the torchlight. Joined to her body from arm-pits to hips were folds of black-silk tissue, and these, in turn, were fastened to her tightly fitting sleeves, so that when she spread her arms it seemed that great black wings stretched from her. Her hands were bare, and we could see the blood-red lacquer gleaming on her nails as she curved her fingers forward like predatory talons.

"*La Murciélagá! La Murciélagá!*" rose a mighty shout of homage from the crowd of bat-masked men and women. It was not so much a cry of greeting as of stark insanity—of strange disease and maniacal excitement. It spouted up, cleaving the heavy, torchlit air like a terrible geyser of sound.

The drums redoubled their wild rata-plan, and the shouting grew more frenzied as *La Murciélagá* mounted a low block of stone and stood outlined in torchlight, great sable wings a-flutter, as though she were in very truth the dread Death Angel come to grace the sacrifice of poor lives with her presence.

"Look, sors, for th' love o' hivin!" bade Costello.

Across the torchlit square there walked, or rather danced, a man. In his hand he held a tether, and I felt a wave of sick revulsion as I recognized the thing he led. It was the Commandant of Tupulo. He was chained and muzzled like a dog, and he went upon all fours, like a brute beast. As his keeper led

him to the altar-stone on which the Bat-Woman was poised, he sank back on his heels, threw back his head and held his hands, drooped at the wrists, before him in simulation of a begging dog. At a kick from his keeper he sank down at the altar's base, drew up his knees and folded arms around them. His depth of degradation reached, he crouched in canine imitation at his mistress' feet.

"*Corbleu, I think that we three chose the better part, n'est-ce-pas, my friends?*" de Grandin asked.

The hot breath rising in my throat choked off my answer. Four men were staggering from the shadows with a cross, a monstrous thing of mortised timbers, and despite myself I felt my knees grow weak as I saw the red stains which disfigured it. "Mine will be there soon," a voice seemed dinging in my ears. "They'll stretch my limbs and drive the great spikes through my hands and feet; they'll hang me there——"

"*La Traidora—la Traidora—the Traitoress!*" came a great shout from the crowd, as three masked women struggled forward with a fourth. All were garbed identically, but we knew before they stripped her mask and gown and sandals off that the captive was poor Nancy Meigs.

There was no pretense of a trial. "*A la muerte—á la muerte!*" screamed the congregation, and the executioners leapt forward to their task.

Birth-nude, they stretched her on the blood-stained cross and I saw a hulking ruffian poised a great nail over her left palm while in his free hand he drew back a heavy hammer.

Costello started it. Hands joined, he dropped upon his knees and in a firm, strong voice began:

"*Hail, Mary, full of grace, blessed art Thou among women. . . .*"

De Grandin and I followed suit, and

in chorus we repeated that petition of the motherless to Heaven's Queen. ". . . *Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and in the hour of death.*"

"Amen," concluded Jules de Grandin, and, in the next breath: "*Sang de Dieu, my friends, they come! Observe them!*"

Their motor roars drowned by the screaming of the crowd, three planes zoomed down above the square, and a sudden squall of bullets spewed its deadly rain upon the close-packed ranks which lined the quadrangle.

I saw the executioner fall forward on his victim's body, a spate of life-blood gushing from his mouth; saw the Commandant leap up, then clutch his breast and topple drunkenly against the altar-stone; saw *La Murciélagó*'s outspread wings in tatters as the steel-sheathed slugs ripped through them and cut a bloody kerf across her bosom; then de Grandin and Costello pulled me down, and we lay upon the stones while gusts of bullets spattered round us or ricocheted with high, thin, irritable whines.

The carnage was complete. Close-packed, illuminated by their own torch-flares, and taken wholly by surprise, the bat-men fell before the planes' machine-gun fire like grain before the reaper.

That the three of us escaped annihilation was at least a minor miracle, but when the squadron leader gave the signal for the fire to cease, and, sub-machine guns held alertly, the aviators clambered from their planes, we rose unharmed, though far from steady on our feet.

"*Muchas gracias, Señor Capitán,*" de Grandin greeted as he halted fifteen paces from the flight commander and executed a meticulous salute. "I assure you that you did not come one little minute in advance of urgent need.

"Come, let us see to Mademoiselle Nancy," he urged Costello and me. "Perchance she still survives."

She did. Shielded by the bodies of her executioners and the upright of the cross beside which she had rolled when the gunfire struck the bat-man down, she lay unconscious in a welter of warm blood, and it was not till we had sponged her off that we found her only hurts were those inflicted by the jungle vines the night before.

Carefully they placed the Commandant's shot-riddled body in a plane for transportation back to Tupulo, and a military funeral.

"He died a hero's death, *no?*" the flight commander asked.

"Was he not an officer and gentleman?" de Grandin answered disingenuously.

BUT no, my friends," he told us as we lay sprawled out in deck chairs on the steamship *Golondrina* as she plowed her way toward New York, "it was no magic, I assure you. That commandant at Tupulo, I mistrusted his good sense. There was a weakness in his face, and lack of judgment, too. 'This one loves himself too much, he is a strutting jackdaw, he has what Friend Costello would call the silly pan,' I say to me while we were talking with him. Besides——

"We knew the countryside was terrified of *La Murciélagá*; the bare mention of her name drove men indoors and women into swoons. That anyone would have the courage to complain of her—to come to the police and ask that they send out an expeditionary force—*pardieu*, it had the smell of fish upon it!

"Furthermore, I am no fool. Not at all, by no means, and it is seldom that I do forget a face. When I saw this Señor Epilar, there was a reminiscence in his features. He reminded me too much of one whom I had seen the night poor Mademoiselle Rita met her tragic death,

Also, there was a savage gleam within his eye when it rested on our Nancy—the sort of gleam a cat may show when he finds that he has run the little helpless mouse to earth.

"'Jules de Grandin, my friend, are you going into the jungle with this so idiotic Commandant and this young man who looks uncomfortably like the *Lady of the Bat*?' I ask me.

"'Jules de Grandin, my esteemed self, I am going,' I reply to me, 'but I shall take precautions, too!'

"Accordingly, while *Monsieur le Capitaine* was fitting out his force and you were packing for the trip, I hied me to a telephone and put a call through to the military airport at Merida. '*Monsieur le Commandant*,' I tell the officer in charge, 'we are going in the jungle. We go to seek that almost legendary lady, *La Murciélagá*. I fear it is a foolish thing we do, for it is more than possible that we shall be ambushed. Therefore I would that you make use of us for bait. Have flyers fly above the jungle, and if we do not return by tomorrow noon, have them investigate anything suspicious which they may see. And, *Monsieur le Commandant*,' I tell him in conclusion, 'it might be well to order them to make investigation with machine-gun fire.'

"*Eh bien*, I think they carried out their orders very well, those ones."

Nancy laid slim fingers on his arm. "We owe our lives to you—all of us—you little darling!" Impulsively, she leant forward and kissed him on the mouth.

Tiny wrinkles crinkled round de Grandin's eyes and in their blue depths flashed an impish gleam.

"Behold, *ma chère*," he told her solemnly, "I save our lives again."

"*Mozo*," he hailed a passing deck steward, "bring us four gin slings, *may pronto!*"