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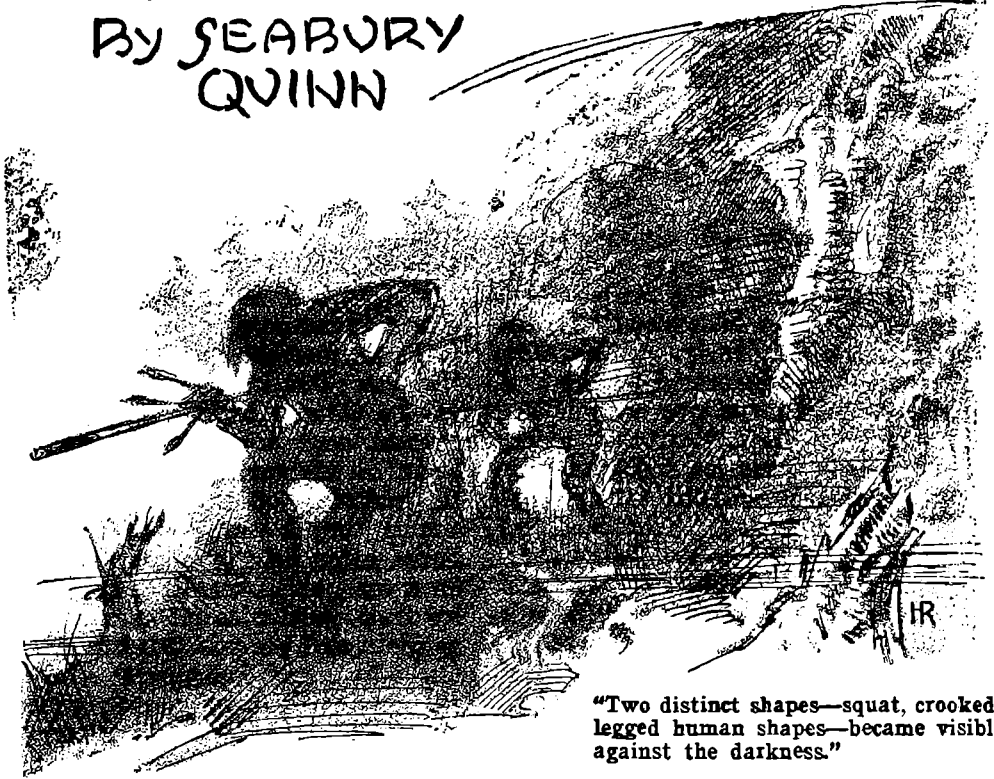
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CREEPING SHADOWS

By SEABURY
QUINN



"Two distinct shapes—squat, crooked-legged human shapes—became visible against the darkness."

"**M**ON Dieu! Is it that we are arrest'?" Jules de Grandin half rose from the dinner table in mock consternation as the vigorous ringing of the front door bell was followed by a heavy tramp in the hall, and Nora, my household factotum, ushered Detective Sergeant Costello and two uniformed policemen into the dining room.

"Not a bit of it," Costello negatived with a grin as he seated himself on the extreme forward edge of the chair I indicated and motioned the two patrolmen to seats beside him. "Not a bit of it, Dr. de Grandin, sor; but we're after askin' a favor of you, if you don't mind. This is Officer Callaghan"—he indicated the burly, red-headed policeman at his right—"an' this is Officer Schippert. Both

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good boys, sor, an' worthy to be believed, for I know 'em of old."

"I doubt it not," de Grandin acknowledged the introduction with one of his quick smiles, "those whom you vouch for are surely not to be despised, *mon vieux*. But this favor you would have of me, what of it?"

Detective Sergeant Costello clasped his black derby hat in a viselike grip between his knees and stared into its interior as though he expected to find inspiration there. "We're after wantin' some information in th' Craven case, if ye don't mind, sor," he replied.

"Eh, the Craven case?" de Grandin echoed. "*Parbleu*, old friend, I fear you have come to the wrong bureau of information. I know nothing of the matter except such tags of gossip as I have heard, and that is

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little enough. Was it not that this Monsieur Craven, who lived alone by himself, was discovered dead in his front yard after having lain there in that condition for several days, and that there was evidence of neither struggle nor robbery? Am I right?"

"M'm," Costello mumbled. "They didn't tell ye nothin' about his head bein' cut off, then?"

An expression of almost tragic astonishment swept over the little Frenchman's face. "What is it that you say—he was beheaded?" he exclaimed incredulously. "*Mordieu*, why was I not informed of this? I had been told there was no evidence of struggle! Is it then that lonely gentlemen in America suffer the loss of their heads without struggling? Tell on, my friend. I burn, I am consumed with curiosity. What more of this so remarkable case where a man dies by decapitation and there is no sign of foul play? *Nom d'un raisin*, I am very wise, *cher sergent*, but it seems I have yet much to learn!"

"Well, sor," Costello began half apologetically, "I don't know why ye never heard about Craven's head bein' missin', unless th' coroner's office hustled th' body off too soon for th' folks to git wise. But that ain't th' strangest part of th' case; not by a dam' sight—askin' your pardon for th' expression, sor. Ye see, these boys here"—he indicated the officers, who nodded solemn confirmation of his remark before he uttered it—"these boys here have th' beat which goes past th' Craven house, an' they both of 'em swear they seen him in his front yard th' mornin' of th' very day he was found dead, *an' supposed to have been dead for several days when found!*

"Now, Dr. de Grandin, I'm just a police officer, an' Callaghan an' Schippert's just a pair o' harness bulls. We ain't had no eddycation, an' th' doctors at the coroner's office ought to know what they're talkin'

about when they say th' putrefactive state of his body showed Craven had been dead several days; but just th' same——" He paused, casting a glance at his two blue-uniformed confreres.

"*Nom d'un bouc*, go on, man; go on!" de Grandin urged. "I starve for further details, and you withhold your story like a naughty little boy teasing a dog with a bit of meat! Proceed, I beseech you."

"Well, sor, as I was sayin'," the detective resumed, "I ain't settin' up to be no medical doctor, nor nothin' like that; but I'll take me Bible oath Mister Craven hadn't been dead no several days when they found him layin' in his garden. 'Twas early in th' mornin' of th' very day they found 'im I was walkin' past his house after bein' out most all night on a case, an' I seen him standin' in his front yard with me own two eyes, as plain as I see you this minute, sor. Callaghan an' Schippert, who was comin' off night juty, come past th' house not more'n a' hour afterward, an' they seen 'im standin' among th' flowers, too."

"Eh, you are sure of this?" de Grandin demanded, his little blue eyes snapping with interest.

"Positive," Costello returned. "Meself, I might a' seen a ghost, an' Callaghan might a' done th' same, for we're Irish, sor, an' th' hidden people show 'emselves to us when they don't bid th' time o' day to th' rest o' yez; but Schippert here, if he seen a banshee settin' on a murderer's grave, combin' her hair with th' shin-bone of a dead gipsy, he'd never give th' old gurrl a tumble unless her screechin' annoyed th' neighbors, an' then he'd tell her to shut up an' move on, or he'd run her in for disturbin' th' peace. So if Schippert says he seen Mr. Craven walkin' in his front garden half an hour after sun-up, why, Mr. Craven it were, sor, an' no ghost at all. I'll swear to that."

"*Morbleu*, and did you not tell the coroner as much at the inquisition?" de Grandin asked, producing a cigarette from his waistcoat pocket like a prestidigitator exhuming a rabbit from his trick hat, but forgetting to light it in his excitement. "Did you not inform *Monsieur le Coroneur* of this?"

"No, sor; we wasn't invited to th' inquest. I reported what I'd seen to headquarters when I heard they'd found Mr. Craven's body, an' Callaghan an' Schippert done th' same at their precinct, but all they said to us was 'Applesauce.' An' that was that, sor. Y'see, when we all three swore we'd seen th' man himself th' same mornin', an' th' doctors all swore he must a' been dead almost a week before he was found, they thought we was all cuckoo, an' paid us no more mind."

"*Nom d'un porc!* Did they so?" de Grandin barked. "They did tell you, my friend, that you spoke the sauce of the apple; *you*, who have assisted Jules de Grandin in more cases than one? *Mordieu*, it is the insult! I shall go to these *canaille*; I shall tell them to their foolish faces that they possess not the brain of a guinea-pig! I, Jules de Grandin, shall inform them——"

"Aisy, sor; go aisy, if ye please," Costello besought. "'Twould do us more harm than good should ye cause hard feelin's agin us at th' coroner's office; but ye can be a big help to us in another way, if ye will."

"*Morbleu*, speak on, my friend, enlighten me," de Grandin agreed. "If there be a mystery to this case, and a mystery there surely is, have no fear that Jules de Grandin will sleep or eat or drink till it shall be explained!" He poured himself another cup of coffee and imbibed it in two huge gulps. "Lead on, *mon brave*. What is it that you would have me do?"

"Well, sor," the Irishman grinned

with delight at de Grandin's enthusiastic acceptance of his suggestion, "we knew as how you'd had all sorts an' kinds o' experience with dead folks, an' we're wonderin' if mebber you would go over to th' Craven house with us an' take a look round th' premises, sorter. Mebbe you'd be able to find out sumpin' that would make th' goin' aasier for us, for they're razzin' us sumpin' awful about sayin' we seen Mr. Craven several days after th' doctor says he was kilt, so they are. All th' same, no matter what they say at th' coroner's office," he added stubbornly, "a man that's well enough to be walkin' around his own front yard at half-past 4 in th' mornin' ain't goin' to be dead several days when he's found in th' same yard a few minutes after 4 o'clock th' same afternoon. That's what I say, an' Callaghan an' Schippert here says th' same."

"Sure do," Officers Callaghan and Schippert nodded solemn agreement.

"*Parbleu, mes amis*," de Grandin agreed as he rose from the table, "I consider your logic irrefutable.

"Come, Trowbridge, my friend," he beckoned to me, "let us go to this house where men who died several days before—with their heads off, *parbleu!*—promenade their front yards." He held the door of my motor's tonneau courteously for the three officers, then vaulted nimbly to the front seat beside me. "Trowbridge, my old one," he whispered as I set the car in motion, "I damn think we shall have the beautiful adventure this night. Hasten, I would that it begins at once, right away."

THE Craven cottage stood in the center of a quarter-acre tract, a low hedge cutting it off from the old military road on which it faced, an eight-foot brick wall surrounding its other three sides. Though the front grounds were planted in a run-down garden, there were no trees near the

house, consequently we had an unobstructed view of the yard in the brilliant May moonlight.

"It was right here they found him," Officer Schippert volunteered, directing our attention to a bed of phlox which still bore the impression of some heavy weight. "He was standin' almost alongside this here flower bed when I seen him that mornin', an' he must a' fallen where he stood. I can't understand what—ouch! What th' devil's that?" He drew his hand suddenly back from the mass of flowering plants, grasping his forefinger in pain.

"Stick yerself, Schip?" Callaghan asked casually. "I didn't know them things had thorns on 'em."

"I'll say I stuck myself," Officer Schippert replied, displaying a long, pointed sliver of wood adhering to the skin of his finger. "This thing was layin' right amongst them flowers, an'—oh, my God! Callaghan, Costello, I'm goin' blind; I'm dyin'!" With an exclamation which was half grunt, half choke, he slid forward to the earth, his stalwart body crushing the flowers which had bent beneath the weight of Craven's headless corpse some forty-eight hours earlier.

"Howly Mither!" Sergeant Costello exclaimed as he bent over the prostrate figure of the policeman. "Dr. de Grandin, he is dead! See here, sor; his heart's stopped beatin'!"

De Grandin and I leaned forward, making a hasty inspection. Costello's diagnosis was all too true. The sturdy patrolman, vibrant with life two minutes before, was lifeless as the man whose body lay in the city morgue, "apparently dead for several days when found," according to medical testimony.

Costello and I picked our fallen comrade up and bore him into the empty house of death, and while I struck a match and applied it to a gas jet, de Grandin opened the dead

policeman's blouse and made a closer examination.

"Look here, Dr. de Grandin," the sergeant announced, looking up from the dead man's face with the dry-eyed sorrow of a man whose daily duty it is to take desperate risks, "there's something devilish about this business. Look at his face! He's turnin' spotty a'ready! Why, you'd think he was dead a couple o' days, an' we only just carried him in here a minute ago."

De Grandin bent closer, examining the dead man's face, chest and arms attentively. "*Pardieu*, it may easily be so!" he murmured to himself, then aloud to Costello: "You are right, my friend. Do you and the good Callaghan go to the police bureau for an ambulance. Dr. Trowbridge and I will wait until they come for the—for your comrade. Meantime——" He broke off, gazing abstractedly about the combination living-dining room in which we stood, noting the odd ornaments on the mantel-shelf, the neatly arranged blue plates in the china closet, the general air of stiff, masculine house-keeping which permeated the apartment.

"*Parbleu*, Trowbridge, my friend," he commented as the policemen tip-toed out, "I think this matter will require much thinking over. Me, I do not like the way this poor one die'd, and I have less liking for the intelligence that Monsieur Craven's head was missing."

"But Craven must have been cut down by some fiend," I interposed, "while poor Schippert—well, how *did* he die, de Grandin?"

"Who can say?" he queried in his turn, tapping his teeth thoughtfully with the polished nail of his forefinger.

"Now, Jules de Grandin, great *tête de chou* that you are, what have you to say to this?" he apostrophized himself as he inspected the splinted

of wood which had scratched the dead policeman's hand. "That is what it is, undoubtedly," he continued his monologue, "yes, *pardieu*, we do all know that, but why? Such things do not happen without reason, foolish one." He turned to the chest of drawers beneath the kitchen dresser and began ransacking it as methodically as though he were a burglar intent on looting the place.

"Ah? What have we here?" he demanded as a heavy package, securely wrapped in muslin, came to light. "Perhaps it is a plate——" He bore the parcel to the unpainted kitchen table and began undoing the nautical knots with which its wrappings were fastened. "*Morbleu*," he laid back the last layer of cloth, "it is a plate, Friend Trowbridge. And such a plate! Men have died for less—*cordieu*, I think men have died for *this*, unless I am more mistaken than I think."

Under the flickering gaslight there lay a disk of yellow metal some thirteen or fourteen inches in diameter, its outer edge decorated with a row of small, oblong ornaments, like a border of dominoes, an inner circle, three inches or so smaller than the plate's perimeter, serving as a frame for the bas-relief figure of a dancing man crowned with a feather head-dress and brandishing a two-headed spear in one hand and a hook-ended war-club in the other.

"It is gold, my friend," he breathed almost reverently. "Solid, virgin gold, hammered by hand a thousand years ago, if a day. Pure Mayan it is, from Chichen-Itzá or Uxmal, and worth its weight in diamonds."

"U'm, perhaps," I agreed doubtfully, "but nothing you've said means anything to me."

"No matter," he retorted shortly. "Let us see—ah, what have we here?" In a corner of the small open fireplace, innocent of any trace of ash or cinder, lay a tiny wisp of charred

paper. Darting forward he retrieved the bit of refuse and spread it before him on the table.

"Um'm?" he muttered non-committally, staring at the relic as though he expected it to speak.

The paper had been burned to a crisp and had curled up on itself with the action of the flame, but the metallic content of the ink in which its message had been scribbled had bleached to a dark, leaden gray, several shades lighter than the carbonized surface of the note itself.

"*Regardez vous*, my friend," he commanded, taking a pair of laboratory tweezers from his dinner-coat pocket and straightening the paper slightly with a careful pressure. "Can not you desery words on this so black background?"

"No—yes!" I replied, looking over his shoulder and straining my eyes to the utmost.

"*Bien*, we shall read it together," he responded. "Now to begin:"

"*ar al*," we spelled out laboriously, as he turned the charred note gingerly to and fro beneath the lambent light. "*red ils av ot Murphy. Lay low an——*" the rest of the message was lost in the multitude of heat-wrinkles on the paper's blackened surface.

"*Mordieu*, but this is too bad!" he exclaimed when our united efforts to decipher further words proved fruitless. "There is no date, no signature, no anything. *Hélas*, we stand no nearer an answer to our puzzle than at first!"

He lighted one of his evil-smelling French cigarettes and took several lung-filling, thoughtful puffs, then threw the half-smoked tube into the fireplace and began rewrapping the golden plate. "My friend," he informed me, his little blue eyes twinkling with sardonic laughter, "I lie. A moment since I did declare we were still at sea, but now I think we are, like Columbus, in sight of land.

Moreover, again like Columbus, I think it is the coast of Central America which we do sight. Behold, we have established the motive for Monsieur Craven's murder, and we know how it was accomplished. There now remains only to ascertain who this Monsieur Murphy was and who inscribed this note of warning to the late Monsieur Craven."

"Well," I exclaimed impatiently, "I'm glad you've found out why and how Craven was killed. All I've seen here tonight is a policeman's tragic death and a silly-looking plate from Uxbridge, or some other absurd place."

He produced another cigarette and felt thoughtfully through his pockets for a match. "Those who know not what they see oftentimes see nothing, my friend," he returned with a sarcastic smile. "Come, let us go out into the air. This place—pah!—it has the reek of death on it."

We waited at the front gate until Costello and Callaghan arrived with the police ambulance. As the litter-bearers passed us on their grisly errand, de Grandin leaned from my car and whispered to Costello. "Tomorrow night, *cher sergent*. . . Perhaps we shall come to the end of the riddle then, and apprehend those who slew your friend, as well."

"Can ye, now, doctor?" the Irishman returned eagerly. "By gorry, I'll be present with bells—an' a couple o' guns—on if ye can trace th' murderin' devil for me."

"*Très bien*," de Grandin assented. "Meet us at Dr. Trowbridge's house about 8 o'clock, if you please."

"Now, what's it all mean?" I demanded as I turned the car toward home. "You're as mysterious as a magician at the county fair. Come, out with it!"

"Listen, my friend," he bade. "The wise man who thinks he knows whereof he speaks retains silence until his thought becomes a certainty.

Me, I have wisdom. Much experience has given it to me. Let us say no more of this matter until we have ascertained light on certain things which are yet most dark. Yes."

"But——"

"*Je suis le roi de ces montagnes . . .*"

he sang in high good humor, nor could all my threats or entreaties make him say one word more concerning the mystery of Craven's death, or Schippert's, or the queer, golden plate we found in the deserted house.

"**B**ON soir, *sergent*," de Grandin greeted as Costello entered the study shortly after 9 o'clock the following evening. "We have awaited you with impatience."

"Have ye, now?" the Irishman replied. "Sure, it's too bad entirely that I've delayed th' party, but I've had th' devil's own time gettin' here this night. All sorts o' things have been poppin' up, sor."

"*Eh bien*, perhaps we shall pop up something more before the night is ended," the Frenchman returned. "Come, let us hasten; we have much to do before we seek our beds."

"All right," Costello agreed as he prepared to follow, "where are we goin', if I may ask?"

"Ah, too many questions spoil the party of surprize, my friend," de Grandin answered with a laugh as he led the way to the car.

"Do you know the Rugby Road, Friend Trowbridge?" he asked as he climbed into the front seat beside me.

"Uh, yes," I replied without enthusiasm. The neighborhood he mentioned was in a suburb at the extreme east end of town, not at all noted for its odor of sanctity. Frankly, I had not much stomach for driving out there after dark, even with Sergeant Costello for company, but de Grandin gave me no time for temporizing.

"*Bien*," he replied enthusiastically. "You will drive us there with all celerity, if you please, and pause when I give the signal. Come, my friend; haste, I pray you. Not only may we save another life—we may apprehend those assassins who did Craven and the poor Schippert to death."

"All right," I agreed grudgingly, "but I'm not very keen on it."

Half an hour's run brought us to the winding, tree-shaded trail known as Rugby Road, a thoroughfare of broken pavements, tumbledown houses and wide spaces of open, uncultivated fields. At a signal from my companion I brought up before the straggling picket fence of a deserted-looking cottage, and the three of us swarmed out and advanced along the grass-choked path leading to the ruinous front stoop.

"I'm thinkin' we've had our ride for our pains, sor," Costello asserted as de Grandin's third imperative knock brought no response from beyond the weather-scarred door.

"Not we," the Frenchman denied, increasing both tempo and volume of his raps. "There is someone here, of a certainty, and here we shall stand until we receive an answer."

His persistence was rewarded, for a shuffling step finally sounded beyond the panels, and a cautious voice demanded haltingly, "Who's there?"

"*Parbleu*, friend, you are over long in honoring the presence of those who come to aid you!" de Grandin complained with testy irrelevancy. "Have the kindness to open the door."

"Who's there?" the voice repeated, this time with something like a tremor in it.

"*Nom d'un homard!*" the Frenchman ejaculated. "What does it matter what names we bear? We are come to help you escape 'the red devils'—those same demons who did away with Murphy and Craven. Quick, open, for the time is short!"

The man inside appeared to be considering de Grandin's statement, for there was a brief period of silence, then the sound of bolts withdrawing and a chain-lock being undone. "Quick—step fast!" the voice admonished as the door swung inward a scant ten inches without disclosing the person behind it. Next moment we stood in a dimly lighted hallway, surveying a perspiring little man in tattered pajamas and badly worn carpet slippers. He was an odd-looking bit of humanity, undersized, thin almost to the point of emaciation, with small, deep-sunken eyes set close together, a head almost denuded of hair and a mouth at once weak and vicious. I conceived an instant dislike for him, nor was my regard heightened by his greeting.

"What do you know about 'the red devils'?" he demanded truculently, regarding us with something more than suspicion. "If you're in cahoots with 'em——" he placed his hand against the soiled front of his jacket, displaying the outline of a revolver strapped to his waist.

"*Ah bah*, Deacons," de Grandin advised, "be not an utter fool. Were we part of their company, you know how much safety the possession of that toy would afford. Murphy was an excellent shot, so was Craven, but"—he waved an expressive hand—"what good were all their weapons?"

"None, by God!" the other answered with a shudder. "But what's a little pip squeak like you goin' to be able to do to help me?"

"*Morbleu*—a pip squeak—I?" The diminutive Frenchman bristled like a bantam game-cock, then interrupted himself to ask, "Why do you barricade yourself like this? Think you to escape in that way?"

"What d'ye want me to do?" the other replied sullenly. "Go out an' let 'em fill me full o'——"

"*Tiens*, the chances are nine to one

that they will get you in any case," de Grandin cut in cheerfully. "We have come to offer you the tenth chance, my friend. Now attend me carefully: Have you a cellar beneath this detestable ruin of a house, and has it a floor of earth?"

"Huh? Yes," the other replied, looking at the Frenchman as though he expected him to proclaim himself Emperor of China with his next breath. "What of it?"

"*Parbleu*, much of it, stupid one! Quick, make haste, repair instantly to the cellar and bring me a panful of earth. Be swift, the night is too hot for us to remain long baking in this hell-hole of yours."

"Lookee here——" the other began, but de Grandin shut him off.

"Do as I bid!" he thundered, his little eyes blazing fiercely. "At once, right away, immediately, or we leave you to your fate. *Cordieu*, am I not Jules de Grandin? I will be obeyed!"

With surprising meekness our host descended to the cellar and struggled up the rickety stairs in a few minutes, a dishpan full of clayey soil from the un paved floor in his hands.

"*Bien!*" De Grandin carried the earth to the kitchen sink and proceeded to moisten it with water from the tap, then began kneading it gently with his long, tapering fingers.

"Do you seat yourself between me and the light, my friend," he commanded, looking up from his work to address Deacons. "I would have a clear-cut view of your profile."

"Sa-a-ay——" the other began protestingly.

"Here, now, you, do what Dr. de Grandin tells ye, or I'll mash ye to a pulp," Costello cut in, evidently feeling he had already taken too little part in the proceedings. "Turn your ugly mug, now, like he tells ye, or I'll be turnin' it for ye, an' turnin' it so far ye'll have to walk backwards to see where ye're goin', too."

Under Costello's chaperonage Dea-

cons sat sullenly while de Grandin deftly punched and pounded the mass of soggy clay into a rough simulacrum of his nondescript profile. "*Parbleu*, Trowbridge, my friend," he remarked with a grin, "when I was a lad studying at the Beaux Arts and learning I should never make an artist, little did I think I should one day apply such little skill as I absorbed in modeling such a *cochon* as that"—he indicated Deacons with a disdainful nod—"in earth scooped from his own cellar floor! *Eh bien*, he who tracks a mystery does many strange things before he reaches his trail's end, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"Now, then," he gave the clay a final scrape with his thumb, "let us consider the two of you. Be so good as to stand beside my masterpiece, *Monsieur*," he waved an inviting hand to his model and strode across the room to get a longer perspective on his work.

Deacons complied, still muttering complainingly about "fellers that comes to a man's house an' orders 'im about like he was a bloomin' servant."

The Frenchman regarded his handiwork through narrowed eyelids, turning his head first one side, then the other. Finally he gave a short grunt of satisfaction. "*Ma foi*," he looked from Costello to me, then back to Deacons and the bust. "I think I have bettered the work of *le bon Dieu*. Surely my creation from earth does flatter His. Is it not so, my friends?"

"Sure, it is," Costello commended, "but if it ain't askin' too much, I'd like to know what's th' idea o' all th' monkey business?"

De Grandin wiped the clay from his hands on the none-too-clean towel which hung from a nail in the kitchen door. "We are about to demonstrate the superiority of Aryan culture to the heathen in his blindness," he replied.

"Are we, now?" Costello answered. "Sure, that's fine. When do we start?"

"Now, immediately, right away. Deacons"—he turned curtly to our host—"do you smoke a pipe? Habitually? *Bien*. You will put your pipe in that image's mouth, if you please. Careful, I do not wish my work spoiled by your clumsiness. Good." He regarded the image a thoughtful moment, then drawled to himself. "And—now—ah, *pardieu*, the very thing!" Seizing a roll of clothesline from the corner of the room he made it fast to a leg of the table on which the statuette rested, then began dragging it slowly toward him.

"Once more I would have your so generous criticism, *Sergent*," he requested of Costello. "Will you stand in the doorway, there, and observe the statue as it passes the light? Does its outline resemble the profile of our handsome friend yonder?"

"It does," the policeman asserted after a careful inspection through half-closed eyes. "If I seen it at fifty foot or so in a bad light I'd think it were th' man himself, *mebbe*."

"Good, fine, excellent," de Grandin replied. "Those are the precise conditions under which I propose exhibiting my work to the audience I doubt not waits to examine it. *Parbleu*, we must hope their sense of artistic appreciation is not too highly developed. Trowbridge, *mon vieux*, will you assist me with the table? I would have it in the next room, please."

When we had placed the table some five feet from the living room window which overlooked the cottage's shabby side yard, de Grandin turned to Costello and me, his face tense with excitement. "Let us steal to the back door, my friends," he directed, "and you, *Sergent*, do you have your pistol ready, for it may be that we shall

have quick and straight shooting to do before we age many minutes.

"Deacons," he turned at the doorway, speaking with a sharp, rasping note of command in his voice, "do you seat yourself on the floor, out of sight from the window, and draw the table toward you slowly with that rope when you hear my command. Slowly, my friend, mind you; about the pace a man might walk if he were in no hurry. Much depends upon your exact compliance with my orders. Now——"

Tiptoeing to the window, he seized the sliding blind, ran it up to its full height, then unbarred the shutters, flinging them wide, and dodged nimbly back from the window's opening.

"*Sergent*—Trowbridge!" he whispered tensely. "Attention; let us go; *allons!* Be ready," he flung the command to Deacons over his shoulder as he slipped from the room, "begin drawing in the rope when you hear the back door open!"

Silently as a trio of ghosts we stole out into the moonless, humid night, skirted the line of the house wall, and crouched in the shadow of a dilapidated rain-barrel.

"D'ye think annyone will——" Costello began in a hoarse whisper, but:

"*S-s-sh!*" de Grandin shut him off. "Observe, my friends; look yonder!"

A clump of scrub maple and poplar grew some forty feet from the house, and as we obeyed the Frenchman's imperative nod, a portion of the dense shadow thrown by the trees appeared to detach itself from the surrounding gloom and drift slowly toward the lighted window across which the crudely modeled bust of Deacons was being pulled.

"Careful, my friends; no noise!" de Grandin warned, so low the syllables were barely audible above the murmuring night noises. The drifting shadow was joined by another, the two merging into one

almost imperceptible blot of blackness.

Nearer, still nearer the creeping patch of gloom approached, then, with the suddenness of a wind-driven cloud altering shape, the ebon blotch changed from horizontal to vertical, two distinct shapes—squat, crooked-legged human shapes—became visible against the darkness of the night's background, and a wild, eery, blood-curdling yell rent the heavy, grass-scented air.

Two undersized, screaming shapes ran wildly toward the dimly lit window, but Detective Sergeant Costello was quicker than they. "I've got ye, ye murderin' devils!" he roared, leaping from his ambush and flourishing his revolver. "Stick up your paws, or I'll make a fly-net out o' th' pair of yez!"

"Down—down, fool!" de Grandin shrieked despairingly, as he strove futilely to drag the big Irishman back into the shadow.

He gave up the attempt and leaped forward with lithe, catlike grace, interposing himself between the detective and the shadowy forms. Something shone dimly in the night's starless air, two flashes of intense, orange flame spurted through the darkness, and the twin roar of a French army pistol crashed and reverberated against the house wall.

The racing shadows halted abruptly in their course, seemed to lean together an instant, to merge like a mass of vapor jostled by the wind, then slumped suddenly downward and lay still.

"Blessed St. Patrick!" Costello murmured, turning the prostrate forms over, inspecting the gaping wounds torn by de Grandin's soft-nosed bullets with a sort of pathetic awe. "That's what I call some shoot-in', Dr. de Grandin, sor. I knew ye was a clever little devil—askin' your pardon—but—"

"*Parbleu*, my friend, when shooting is necessary, I shoot," de Grandin replied complacently. "But we

have other things of more importance to observe, if you please. Turn your flashlight here, if you will."

Sharply silhouetted against the circle of brilliance cast by the electric torch were two slender, thornlike splinters of wood, their hard, pointed tips buried to a depth of a quarter-inch in the clapboard's crumbling surface.

"It was such as these which killed Craven and Comrade Schippert," the Frenchman explained shortly. "Had I not fired when I did, these"—he pointed gingerly to the thorns—"would have been in you, my friend, and you, I doubt not, would have been in heaven. *Morbleu*, as it was, I did despair of drawing you back before they had pierced you with their darts, and *le bon Dieu* knows I shot not a moment too soon!"

"But—howly Mither!—what th' devil is it, annyway, sor?" the big detective demanded in a fever of mystification.

De Grandin blew methodically down the barrel of his pistol to clear the smoke fumes away before restoring the weapon to his shoulder holster. "They are darts, my friend. Arrows from blowguns—arrows of sure and certain death, for with them every hit is a fatal one. In South and Central America the Indians use them in blowguns for certain classes of hunting, and sometimes in war, and when they blow one of them into a jaguar, fierce and tenacious of life as the great cat is, he dies before he can fall from his tree to the earth. Beside the venom in which these darts are steeped the poison of the cobra or the rattlesnake is harmless as water.

"But come"—he turned again toward the house—"let us go in. Me, I think I have all this sad and sordid story by heart, but there is certain information I would get from the excellent Deacons, before we write the last chapter.

“Now, *Monsieur*,” de Grandin leveled his unwinking, steel-hard stare at the little man cowering in the cottage’s shabby living room, “you have spent much time in Central America, I take it. You and your compatriots, Murphy and Craven, were grave-robbers, *n’est-ce-pas?*”

“Huh? What’s that?” Costello interrupted incredulously. “Grave-robbers, did ye say, sor? Stiff-stealers?”

“*Non, non*,” the Frenchman returned with a quick smile, then turned a stern face toward Deacons. “Not stealers of corpses, my friend, but stealers of treasure. *Morbleu*, do I not know their ilk? But of course. My friends, I was with de Lesseps when he strove to consummate the wedding of the Atlantic with the Pacific at Panama. I was for a time with the French engineers when Diaz drove the railway across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and in that time I learned much of gentry such as these. In all Central America there is great store of gold and silver and turquoise buried in the graveyards and ruined cities of the native peoples whom the pig-ignorant Spaniards destroyed in their greed for gold and power. Today brave men of science do risk their lives that these priceless relics of a forgotten people may be brought to light, and fellows such as Deacons and his two dead partners hang about the headquarters of exploring parties waiting for them to map the course to the ancient ruins, then rush in and steal each scrap of gold on which they can lay their so unclean hands. They are vandals more vile than the Spaniards who went before them, for they steal not only from the dead, but from the treasure-house of science as well.”

“We didn’t do nothin’ worse than th’ highbrows did,” Deacons defended sullenly. “You never heard of us tryin’ to alibi ourselves by claimin’

to be workin’ for some university, ’stead o’ bein’ just plain thieves. Them scientists are just as bad as we was, on’y they was *gentlemen*, an’ could git away with their second-story work.”

“About ten years ago,” de Grandin went on as if Deacons had not spoken, “this fellow, together with Craven, Murphy and three others, stumbled on the ruins of an old Mayan city in Yucatan. Only the good God knows how they found it, but find it they did, and with it they found a perfect El Dorado of golden relics.

“The local Indians—poor, ignorant, oppressed wretches—had lost all knowledge of their once so splendid ancestors, and retained nothing of the ancient Mayan culture but a few perverted legends and a deep, idolatrous veneration for the ruins of their vanished forebears’ sacred cities. When they beheld Deacons and his companions pawing over the bodies in the tombs, kicking the skeletons about as though they were but rubbish, and snatching frantically at anything and everything with the glint of gold upon it—*cordieu*, how many priceless pieces of copal and obsidian these so ignorant ignoramuses must have thrown away!—they swooped down on the camp and the robbers had to shoot their way to freedom. Three of them were slain, but three of them escaped and won through to the coast. They made their way back to this country with their booty and—”

“Say”—Deacons looked at the Frenchman as a bird might regard a serpent—“how’d you find all this out?”

“*Parbleu*, my friend,” the other smiled tolerantly, “Jules de Grandin is not to be fooled by such as you!

“*Sergent*”—he turned again to Costello—“while you and Callaghan did seek the ambulance to bear away the body of poor Schippert last night,

Friend Trowbridge and I investigated the house where Monsieur Craven died. It was not hard for us to see the place was one occupied by a man much used to living alone and being his own servant in all ways—a sailor, perhaps, or a man much accustomed to the out-of-the-way places of the world. That was the first domino with which we had to begin building.

“Now, when we came to examine his *table de cuisine* we did find an ancient Mayan plate engraved with an effigy of a priest in full sacrificial regalia. This plate was the only thing of its kind among the dead man’s effects and was carefully wrapped in a cotton rag. Evidently he had retained it as a souvenir. Those who knew not the goldsmithing trade in ancient Central America might easily have mistaken the plate for a piece of Oriental brass; but I, who know many things, realized it was of solid, unalloyed gold, intrinsically worth from five to seven thousand dollars, perhaps, but priceless from the anthropologist’s standpoint.

“‘Now,’ I ask me, ‘what would a man like this Monsieur Craven, comfortably off, but not rich, be doing with such a relic among his things unless he himself had brought it from Yucatan?’

“‘Nothing,’ I say to me.

“‘Quite right,’ I reply. ‘Jules de Grandin, you do not make mistakes.’

“Also there was the coroner’s report that this Monsieur Deadman had been dead for several days when he was found, and your piece of intelligence that his head have disappeared. Also, again, we know from you and the other officers that he had *not* been dead several days, but only several hours when discovered. What is the answer to that?

“*Hélas*, we found it out only through your poor friend’s death! Officer Schippert had pricked himself on what he thought was a thorn—so

much like thorns do these accursed darts look that the police and coroner’s attachés might have seen that one a thousand times, yet never recognized it for what it was. But our poor friend was wounded by it, and almost at once he died.

“Now, what was such a dart as this doing in the Craven yard? Why did the poor Schippert have to scratch himself on a thing which should not have been in existence in that latitude and longitude? It is to seek the answer.

“We carried Schippert into the house, and what do we see? Almost at once he had begun to become *livide*—discolored. Yes. I have seen men shot with such arrows while I worked under the tropic sun, I had handled those splinters of death, and had seen the corpses assume the appearance of the long dead almost as I watched them. When I saw the appearance of the poor Schippert, and beheld the dart by which he died, I say to me, ‘This is the answer. This is why the physicians at the coroner’s office declare that my friend, the good Costello, speaks words of foolishness when he insists Craven was not long dead when found.’ Yes.

“Also, you have told me of the missing head. I know from experience and hearsay that those Indians do take the heads of their enemies as your Apaches once took the scalps of theirs, and preserve them as trophies. Everything points one way.

“You see, we have these parts of our puzzle”—he checked the facts off on his fingers—“a man who brought a golden plate from Yucatan is found dead in his front yard. He is undoubtedly the victim of an Indian blowgun dart, for his appearance and the dart which we have found too late to save the poor Schippert, all say so. Very good. No one knew anything about him, but he was apparently of those fortunate ones who can live in some comfort without working. From

this I reason he might once have possessed other Indian gold which he has sold.

"Now, while I think of these things, I notice a piece of burned paper in his fireplace, and on it I read these fragments of words:

*ar al red ils av ot Mur-
phy. Lay low an . . .*

"What does it mean?

"I think some more, and decide what was written originally was:

Dear Pal: The red devils have got Mur-
phy. Lay low and . . .

"Who are these 'red devils'? Because an Indian dart have killed both Craven and Schippert, must we not assume they are Indians? I think so. Most likely they were natives of Yucatan who had shipped as sailors on some tramp steamer and come to this land to wreak vengeance on those who despoiled their sacred cities and burying places. I have observed instances of such before. In Paris we have known of it, for there is no sort of crime with which the face of man is blackened which has not been at least once investigated by the *Service de Sûreté*.

"Now, from all this, it was most apparent the writer of this burned note had been warning Craven that one Murphy had been translated to another—though probably not a better—world, and that Craven must lie low, or he would doubtless share the same fate. So much is plain; *but who was Murphy, and who had written the warning?*

"I decided to shoot at the only target in sight. Next day I interviewed Dr. Symington, of the New York Museum of Natural History, asking him if he remembered Mayan relics being bought from a man named Craven or Murphy, or from anyone who mentioned any of those names in his conversation.

"A desperate chance, you say? But certainly. Yet it was by taking

desperate chances that we turned back the *sale boche*; it was by taking desperate chances that the peerless Wright brothers learned to fly; it was by taking a desperate chance that I, Jules de Grandin, triumphed!

"Friend Symington had heard such names. Eight years ago one Michael Murphy had sold the Museum a small piece of Mayan jewelry, a little statuette of hammered rose-gold. He had boasted of exploits in Central America when he obtained this statue, told how he, together with Arthur Craven and Charles Deacons, had a fortune in bullion within their grasp, only to lose it when the outraged Indians attacked their camp and killed three of their companions. And that he spoke truth there was small doubt, for so greatly did he fear the Indian vengeance that he refused an offer of five thousand dollars and expenses to guide a party from the Museum to the place where he found the Indian gold.

"Very good. We have got the answer to our questions: 'Whom have the "red devils" gotten?' and 'Who wrote the warning letter to Craven?'

"But where is this Charles Deacons? In the directory of this city there are three of him listed, but only one of him is labeled as retired, and it was to him I looked for further light. I assume the Deacons I seek lives, as Craven did, on the proceeds of his thefts. I further assume he goes in deadly fear of the Indians' flying vengeance by day and by night. I find his address here, and"—he waved his hand in a gesture of finality—"here we come. *Voilà!*"

I started to put a question, but Costello was before me.

"How did ye know th' murderin' heathens would be here tonight, Dr. de Grandin?" he demanded.

"*Eh bien*, by elimination, of course," the Frenchman replied in high good humor. "Three men were

sought by the Indians. Two of them had already been disposed of, therefore, unless Deacons had already fallen to their flying death, they still remained in the vicinity, awaiting a chance to execute him. We found him alive, hence we knew they had still one-third of their task to perform. So I did bait our trap with Deacons' dummy, for well I knew they would shoot their poisoned darts at him the moment they saw his shadow pass the lighted open window. *Morbleu*, my friend, how near your own foolish courage came to making you, instead, their victim!"

"Thanks to you, sor, I'm still alive an kickin'," Costello acknowledged. "Shall I be ringin' th' morgue wagon for th' fellies ye shot, sor?"

"I care not," de Grandin responded indifferently, "dispose of them as you will."

"Well, say"—Deacons suddenly seemed to emerge from his trance, and advanced toward de Grandin, his lean hand extended—"I cert'ny got to thank you for pullin' me out of a mighty tight hole, sir."

De Grandin took no notice of the proffered hand. "*Pardieu, Monsieur*," he responded coldly, "it was from no concern for you that I undertook this night's work. Those Indians had slain a friend of my friend, Sergeant Costello. I came not to save you, but to execute the murderers. You were but the stinking goat with which our tiger-trap was baited."