

"The Beasts of Barsac" by ROBERT BLOCH

JULY

Weird Tales

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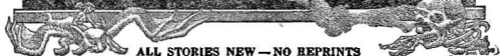
DERLETH
WELLMAN
BRADBURY

"DEATH'S BOOKKEEPER"

A Jules de Grandin story
by Seabury Quinn



Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

July, 1944

Cover by A. R. Tilburne

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental

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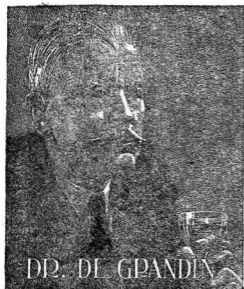
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Death's Bookkeeper



JULES DE GRANDIN, looking even more diminutive and dapper in his uniform of major in the *Service des Renseignements* than in civilian attire, regarded the highly polished tip of his tan boot with every sign of approval as he exhaled two columns of smoke through narrow nostrils. Dinner had been something of a function that evening, for at a little place in East Fifty-third Street he had found that afternoon a half-case of Nuits St. Georges which he had borne home triumphantly just in time to grace the capon which Nora McGinnis had been simmering in claret for our evening meal. Now, fed to repletion, with coffee on the stand at his elbow and something like a thimbleful of green Chartreuse left in the *pousse café* beside his cup, he seemed utterly at peace with all the world. "The day has been a trying one at the *Bureau des Renseignements*, my friend," he con-

fided as he took a half-swallow of Chartreuse and followed it with a sip of black coffee. "I am tired like twenty dogs and half as many so small puppies. I would not budge from this chair if—"

The shrilling of the telephone sawed through his statement and with a nod of apology I picked up the instrument. "Yes?" I inquired.

"This is Michaelson, Doctor," the woman's voice came to me from the other end of the wire.

"Yes?" I repeated. Miss Michaelson was night supervisor of the maternity floor at Mercy Hospital, and when she called I knew what impended.

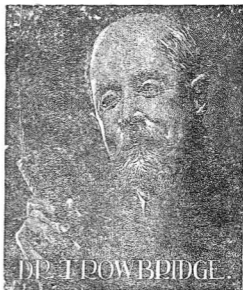
"Mrs. Morrissey in Fifty-eight—"

"How long?" I interrupted.

"Not more than half an hour, sir. Maybe less. If I were in your place—"

"If you were in my place, I should be in

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE



yours, and not have to drive thirty blocks through zero weather," I broke in somewhat rudely. "Have them make the delivery room ready, if you please, and give her half a grain of morphine if the pain becomes too great. I'm starting right away."

To de Grandin I explained: "Just one of those things that keep life from becoming too dull for the doctor. "The population of New Jersey is due for an addition in the next half hour, and I have to be there as part of the welcoming committee—"

"Will you permit that I go with you to assist?" he asked. "Me, I have so long been busily engaged in reducing the sum total of humanity that it will be a novelty to take part in its increase. Besides, my hand grows awkward for the lack of practice."

"I'll be delighted," I assured him as I

hunted up my case of instruments and got into my greatcoat. "But I thought you were too tired—"

"*Ah bab!*" The little laughter-wrinkles deepened at the outer corners of his eyes.

"That Jules de Grandin, he is what you call?—the crammer-in-the-stomach? He is always complaining, that one. You must not put too much credence in his lamentations."

IT WAS an ordinary case. Miranda Morrissey was young and strong, and de Grandin's obstetrical skill was amazing. "So—now—my small sinner," he spanked the small, red infant's small, red posterior with a wet towel, "weep and wail, and breathe the breath of life in the process. What?" as the baby refused to respond to his command. "You will not? By blue, I say you

For everyone who cheats death, death must have another victim!

shall! You are too young to defy your elders. Take that, *petit diabolotin!*" He struck a second, sharper blow, and a piping, outraged wail answered the assault. "Ah, that is better—much better!" He wrapped the now-wriggling small, wrinkled bundle of humanity in a warmed turkish towel and bore it toward the bed where Miranda rested with all the pride of a cook carrying a *chef-d'oeuvre*. "Behold your man-child, mother," he announced as he laid the baby on her bosom. "He is not happy now, but in your arms he will find happiness. *Le bon Dieu* grant the world in which he has been both may be a better one than that into which we came!"

As we walked down the corridor he drew his hand across his eyes wearily. "There is something more solemn in a birth than a death," he confided. "For the dead one all is over, his troubles are behind him, he is quits with life and fate. But for the one who is beginning life—*hilar*, who can say what he has stepped into? A quarter-century ago when little boys came into the world we thought they were inheritors of peace and safety and security; that we had won the war to end all war. Today?" He spread his hands and raised his shoulders in the sort of shrug no one but a Frenchman can attain, "Who can prophesy, who can predict what—*barbe d'un bouc vert*, who in Satan's name is that?" he broke off sharply.

I looked at him in amazement. His small, pointed chin was thrust forward and in his little round blue eyes there was the flash of sudden anger, while his delicate, slim nostrils twitched like those of a hound scenting danger or quarry. "Who? Where?" I asked.

"Yonder by the elevator, my friend. Do not you see him? *Parbleu*, if the Iscariot had descendants, I make no doubt that he is one of them!"

I looked where his glance indicated and gave a shrug of disgust. "That's Coiquitt," I answered. "Dr. Henri Coiquitt."

"Hein?"

"I don't know much about him, and the little that I do know is not good. He came here since you went away. You never heard of him."

"Thank God for that," he answered piously. "But something tells me I shall hear

more of him in the future, and that he shall hear of Jules de Grandin."

The object of our colloquy turned toward us as the elevator stopped in answer to his ring, and in the light that flowed from the car we saw him outlined clearly as an actor in a spotlight on a darkened stage. He was a big man, six feet tall, at least, and his height seemed greater because of his extreme slenderness. He was in black throughout, a long, loose cape like a naval officer's boat-cloak hung from his shoulders, his broad-brimmed hat was black velour; his clothes, too, seemed to be of a peculiar shade of black that caught and pocketed the light. The only highlight in his costume was the band of white that marked his collar above his wide, flowing black cravat, and in complement to the somberness of his attire his skin was pale olive and his lips intensely red. As we stepped into the car beside him we caught the scent of perfumed soap and bath powder, but underneath the more agreeable odor, it seemed to me, there was a faint, repulsive smell of decay and corruption.

Coiquitt bowed gracefully as we joined him, and de Grandin, not to be outdone in courtesy, returned the bow punctiliously, but for a moment, as their glances crossed, both men seemed poised and alert, like duelists who seek an opening in each others' guards. I felt a shiver of something like awe run through me. It seemed to me as I sat in a box seat and watched a drama staged by Fate unfold. These men had never heard of each other, never before set eyes on each other, yet in the glance of each there shone a sudden hatred, cold and deadly as a bared knife. They were like two chemicals that waited only for a catalyst to explode them.

TRAVELING so smoothly we were scarcely aware of its motion, the elevator drew to a stop at the ground floor, and Coiquitt stepped soundlessly across the corridor to the reception room. At the door Camilla Castevens rushed to meet him. "How is he, Doctor?" we heard her ask in a trembling whisper. "Is he—is there any improvement?"

He bowed to her with a superb gentility, yet the gesture had a hint of mockery in it, I thought. "Of course, Miss Castevens. Did

"I not promise you—" He turned and cast a glance half quizzical, half mocking, at de Grandin and me, and with a guilty start I realized we had halted almost at his elbow, drinking in each word he and Camilla said to each other.

"Good evening, Dr. Trowbridge," Camilla nodded coldly as she recognized me, and with an answering bow I took de Grandin's elbow and guided him toward the door, feeling like a naughty little boy who had been caught eavesdropping on his elders' conversation.

"Now, what in Satan's name is it all about?" the little Frenchman demanded as we stepped into the stinging cold of the February night.

I laughed without humor. "I wish I knew. Dr. Coiquitt is a newcomer to Harrisonville, as I told you. Where he came from goodness only knows. We know only that he had credentials from half a dozen European universities, and had no difficulty in obtaining a license to practice. Since he set up shop in Dahle-nega Road he's raised the very devil with the medical profession."

"Ah? How is that, is he a quack?"

"I really wish I knew. He's certainly not orthodox. The first case I have real knowledge of is one he took from Perry. I think you know Perry. First-rate heart man. He'd been treating Mrs. Delarue for angina pectoris, and having no more luck with her than was to be expected in the circumstances. Then somehow Delarue met Coiquitt and took the case from Perry. Within two months his wife was as completely cured as if she'd never had a moment's illness. That started it. Case after case the rest of us had given up as hopeless was taken to Coiquitt, and in every instance he effected a complete cure, even with Bernice Stevens, who was so far gone with carcinoma hysteria that none of us would operate, because there wouldn't have been enough left of her to bury when we'd cut the morbid growth away."

"Um?" he pursed his lips. "I take it there is something more here than mere professional jealousy, my friend?"

"I shook my head hopelessly. "Of course, there is. We'd have been chagrined to have a stranger take our cases and effect cures when we'd abandoned all hope, but that

could have happened. Only—" I paused, at loss for words to continue, and he prompted softly. "Yes, only—"

Well,—oh, this sounds utterly absurd, I know—I'd never think of mentioning it to anybody else, but—hang it all, man, it seems to me there's something like black magic in his cures."

"Ah-ha? How do you say?"

"In every instance where a cure has been effected someone in the patient's family has taken ill and died within a year. Sometimes sooner, but never later."

He was silent for a moment, then, "Perhaps," he admitted thoughtfully. "The Greeks knew of such things—"

"How's that?"

"I cannot say, at least not now, *mon vieux*. I did but think aloud, and not to any great effect, I fear."

IT MIGHT have been a week later, perhaps ten days, when Camilla Castevens called on me. She was a tall young woman with copper hair and steady blue eyes, past the first flush of her youth—some thirty-two or -three—but with the added attractiveness that early maturity gives to a woman. In the light of the consulting-room lamp her face looked sad, her cheeks seemed hollow, and her red lips dipped in a pathetic downward curve. "I'm frightened, Dr. Trowbridge," she confessed.

I found it hard not to be sarcastic. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her why she did not take her fears to Dr. Coiquitt, but better sense prevailed, and instead I looked at her inquiringly. Like the priest, the doctor has to be long-suffering and patient.

"I—I'm terribly afraid," she went on as I said nothing to help her. "I don't want to die."

"Few of us do, my dear."

"But I shall have to if"—she paused a long, agonized moment, then with a burst of something like hysteria—"if Richard is to get well. He says I must!"

"He? Who?"

"Dr. Coiquitt, sir. Don't you know, haven't you noticed? He was treating Mrs. Delarue for an incurable ailment. She got well—yes, well, when all the other doctors said she hadn't a chance!—but her son Don-

In cases such as this there are no little things; all is of the importance, and I would know all that I may be of assistance to you. Begin at the beginning, *Mademoiselle*, if you please."

She rehearsed the story she had told me, and he nodded emphatic agreement as she finished. "I do not know how he does it, *Mademoiselle*," he admitted as she brought her recital to a close, "but I am as convinced as you that there is something unholy about this business. What it is remains for us to find out. Meantime, if you will oblige us by submitting to a physical examination"—he rose and nodded toward the examination room—"we should like to assure ourselves of your condition; perhaps to prescribe treatment."

There was no doubt in either of our minds when we had finished our inspection. There was a widespread area of dullness round her heart, the pulmonary second sound was sharply accented, and a murmur was discernible in the second interspace to the left of the sternum at the level of the third rib, so harsh as to be audible over the entire pericardium. Camilla Stevens was undoubtedly a victim of myocarditis, and in an advanced, almost hopeless stage.

"I shall not hold the truth from you, *Mademoiselle*," de Grandin told her gravely when she returned to the consultation room. "You are a very ill person, and in utmost danger. These"—he scribbled a prescription for some three-grain amyli nitrite capsules—"will ease the pain when it comes on. Crush one in your handkerchief and inhale the fumes freely. For the rest," his slender fingers tapped a fuguelike rhythm on the edge of the desk, "we shall have to seek the cause of your illness, and it is not in you, I assure you. Do not hesitate to call on us if you feel the need of our assistance."

"And I should dismiss Dr. Coiquitt?"

"Not at all; by no means. Desist from taking his nostrums, if you have not already done so, but permit him to attend your fiancé by all means—"

"But look here," I protested, "if your theory is correct he's already done Camilla immeasurable harm. If we permit him to stay in the case—"

"We shall know where he is and what he's up to, *parbleu*," de Grandin returned.

"He will be within the orbit of our observation. When the hunter stalks the tiger, he tethers a goat to a stake in a clearing, and waits in concealment till the striped one makes his appearance. Then, when the moment is propitious, he fires, and there is one more handsome rug to decorate a floor. So it is in this case. *Mademoiselle* and *Monsieur* her fiancé are the bait which we leave for this debased species of a charlatan. Do keep up your courage, *Mademoiselle*," he cast a smile of reassurance at Camilla, "and we shall do the rest. "Be brave; we shall not fail you."

"THE pair of you are crazy as a brace of loons," I fumed when she had taken her departure. "I can understand Camilla. It's the power of suggestion working on her. There's a book about that sort of thing in the library, written by a man named Manly Wade Wellman. He's made a study of the matter and decided that if belief in illness is induced in someone who firmly believes what is told him, he will become ill—even die—of the disease he has been told he has. It may be that Camilla had a tendency toward a weak heart. Now, if Coiquitt induced her to believe she would develop myocarditis, and administered some evil-tasting drug to be taken regularly and so keep her attention fixed on the suggestion, it might easily be that her constant worry and the fear of impending sickness and death have combined to make that latent heart-weakness active. But as for your believing such rubbish—"

"*Ab, bah*, my friend," he patted back a yawn, "you bore me. Always you must rationalize a thing you do not understand, taking the long route around the barn of Monsieur Robin Hood in order to arrive at a false conclusion.

"It was the power of suggestion, you say? Let us for the sake of argument admit that suggestion could induce such an organic condition as that we found in *Mademoiselle* Camille. *Très bien*. So much for her. But was it also suggestion that caused Madame Stevens to recover from advanced carcinoma—and her husband to develop it and die almost as she regained health? Was it the power of suggestion that pulled the young man's plane out of the sky and dashed him

to his death against the earth? Coincidence, you say. Perhaps in one case, and possibly in two, but in the three of which we know, and in the many which we damn suspect coincidence has ceased to take a great part. *Parbleu*, to say otherwise would be to pull the long arm of coincidence clear out of joint! *Non*, my friend. There is something more sinister in this business-of-the-monkey we are dealing with. Just what it is I do not know, but I shall make it my affair to secure the necessary information, you may be assured."

"How'll you go about it?" I demanded, nettled by his air of assurance.

He spread his hands and raised his shoulders. "How should I know? The case requires thought, and thought requires food. There is an excellent dinner awaiting us. Let us give it our attention and dismiss this never-quite-sufficiently-to-be-anathematized Coiquitt person from our thoughts a little while."

HE WAS rather late to dinner the next evening, and Nora McGinnis was calling on high heaven to witness that the *coq au vin blanc* she had prepared especially for him would be entirely ruined when he bustled in with that peculiar smile that told he was much pleased with himself on his face.

"Me, I have done research at the city hall this afternoon," he told me. "At the bureau of *statistiques vitales* I delved into the records. This Coiquitt person is the very devil of a fellow. A hundred cases he has had since he began the malpractice of medicine in the city, and I find he has prolonged a hundred lives for a greater or less time, but at the cost of an equal number. He is not righteous, my friend. He has no business to do such things. He annoys me excessively, *par les cornes d'un crapaud!*"

Despite myself I could not forbear a grin. "What are you going to do about it?" I asked.

He tweaked the waxed ends of his small mustache alternately, teasing them to needle-sharpness. "I do not quite know," he confessed. "At times I think perhaps it would be best if I went—*mon Dieu*, is it that we are attacked?"

The front doorbell had given a quick,

anguished peal, almost as if it wailed in pain, and as the shrilling of the gong ceased someone beat upon the panels with a frenzied knock.

I hurried to answer the summons, and Camilla Castevens almost fell into my arms. "Oh, Dr. Trowbridge," she gasped as I steadied her, "he's found out that I came to you! I don't know how he did it, but he called me on the 'phone a little while ago and told me that my time is up. Rick will get well—he seemed positively gloating when he told me that—but I must die tonight—" Her voice trailed off in a gasp and if I had not held her she would have slumped to the floor in a swoon.

I carried her into the study and stretched her on the sofa while de Grandin bathed her temples with cologne and held a glass of brandy to her lips when she revived a little.

She was pitiable in her terror. Her lower lip began to quiver and she caught it savagely between her teeth to steady it. Her fingers twisted and untwisted themselves, and at the base of her throat we could see the pulsing of an artery as her tortured heart jumped like a frightened rabbit with each beat. "Be calm, *ma pauvre*," de Grandin ordered gently. "You will do yourself an injury if you give way. Now, tell us just what happened. You say he threatened you?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't call it a threat so much as a statement—like a judge pronouncing sentence. He told me I should never see another sunrise—"

"*Nom d'un bouc vert!* Did he, indeed? And who in Satan's stinking name is he to pass judgment of life and death upon his fellow creatures, and especially on the patients of Jules de Grandin and Samuel Trowbridge, both reputable physicians? Do you rest quietly beside the fire, *Mademoiselle*. If you should have a fit of oppression use the amylinite capsules we gave you. If you desire it, a little brandy cannot do you harm. Meanwhile—come, friend Trowbridge," he turned to me imperatively, "we have important duties to perform."

"Duties? Where?"

"At Dr. Colquitt's, in the street of the funny name, *pardieu!* We shall talk with that one, and in no uncertain words—"

"We can't go barging in on a man like that—"

"Can we not, indeed? Observe Jules de Grandin, if you please, my friend, and you shall see the finest instance of barging ever barged, or I am one infernal, not-to-be-believed liar. Come, *alors; allez-vous-en!*"

DR. COQUITT'S house in Dahlonaga Road loomed dark as Dolorous Garde against the smalt blue of the winter sky. In keeping with his bizarre personality its owner had had the place painted black, with no relieving spot of color, save for the silver nameplate on the door that bore the single word COQUITT. No chink showed in the tightly drawn shutters, no ray or spot of light came from the house, but not to be deterred by the tomblike air of the place de Grandin beat a tattoo on the panels with the handle of his military swagger stick. "*Nom d'un nom d'un nom d'un artichaut,*" he promised savagely, "I shall stand here hammering until I bring the filthy place down on his ears, or till he answers me!"

At last his persistence was rewarded. A shuffling step sounded beyond the portal and the door drew back on a crack, not swinging on hinges, but sliding in a groove on oiled bearings. It would have taken a battering-ram to force the place, I thought, as I noted the strong steel of the track in which the heavy oak door traveled.

A Negro, heavy-set and obviously powerful, but dreadfully hunchbacked, peered at us through the aperture. "The doctaire is not seeing patients now," he announced in an accent I could not quite place, but which sounded vaguely French.

"Nevertheless, he will see us, *mon sieur,*" de Grandin promised, and launched into a torrent of words, speaking in a patois I could not make out, but which the other understood instantly.

"One moment, if you please, *M'sieu,*" he begged as he drew back the door and stood aside for us to enter. "I shall be pleased to tell the doctaire—"

"Non, by no means," de Grandin denied. "Do not disturb him at his lucubrations. We shall go to him all quietly. I know that he will see us gladly."

"*Bien, M'sieu.* You will find him at the

head of the stairway," the servant answered as we stepped across a long hall carpeted in black, with black, lack-luster walls and ceilings.

"He is a Haitian, that one," de Grandin confided as we crept up the black-carpeted stairway. "He thinks that I am an initiate of voodoo, a *papaloi*. I did not tell him that I was—in just so many words—but neither did I deny it. And now"—he halted, braced himself as for a physical encounter, and struck the black-enameled door before us with his knuckles.

"*Entrez,*" a deep voice answered, and we stepped across the threshold.

The room was positively bewildering. It ran across the full width of the house, some thirty feet or more, and the floor above had been removed so that the vaulted ceiling was at least eight yards above us. The floor was of some black and shining composition, strewn with rugs of leopard skin with the heads and claws left on, and the glass eyes set in the beasts' stuffed heads blazed at us with a threatening fury. The walls were dull black and emblazoned with a great gold dragon that seemed marching round and round the room, while across the farther end was built a divan upholstered in black silk and strewn with red and cloth-of-gold pillows. Here and there against the walls were cabinets of ebony or buhl containing large and strangely-bound books, scientific paraphernalia and bits of curiosa such as skeletons of small animals, stuffed gila monsters and serpents coiled as if forever in the act of striking, and baby crocodiles. A human skeleton, fully articulated, swung from a frame of ebony like a gallows, and in a tiled fireplace there stood a retort hissing over a great bunsen burner. Incongruously, on a book-strewn table in the center of the room, there was a massive silver vase containing a great bouquet of orchids.

The man who sat at the table raised his eyes as we entered, and as I met his gaze I felt a sudden tingling in my spine—the sort of feeling one has when in the reptile house at the zoo he looks down into a pit filled with lizards and nameless crawling things.

Coquitt's eyes were black as polished obsidian and strangely shiny, yet unchanging in their stare as those of one newly dead, and almost idly, as one takes minute note

of such trifles at such times, I noticed that the lids above the odd, unchanging eyes had a faint greenish tinge and a luster like that of old silk. For a moment he raked us with a glance of cold, ophidian malignancy, then abruptly lowered his lids, as if he drew a curtain between us and his thoughts.

"Good evening, gentlemen—dare I say colleagues?" There was suave mockery that threatened to become stark savagery at any moment in his voice. "To what am I indebted for the honor of this wholly unexpected and I'm sure quite undeserved visit?"

The anger that had shown in Jules de Grandin's face had given way to a puzzled frown, and beneath his sharply waxed, diminutive mustache his lips were pursed as if he were about to whistle. For a long moment he made no reply, and his silence seemed to goad the other into sudden fury. "Quoi?" he demanded almost shrilly. "Is it that you come to see a marvel, and are stricken speechless at the sight? I am not on display, my simple ones. Speak up and state your business and be off!"

"*Morbleu!*" Surprise seemed to have forced the word from de Grandin.

"What is it that you—" began the other, but de Grandin ignored him completely.

"Not *Coiquitt!*" he almost shouted at me.

"Not *Coiquitt*, Trowbridge, *pour l'amour d'un porc touche!* It is Dessiles, Pierre Dessiles, the apostate, false alike to his country and his Aesculapian oath as a physician! Dessiles the necromancer, the *sals espion*, dismissed from the *faculté de médecine*, convicted of conniving with the filthy Boche to sell his country's secrets, and condemned to penal servitude for life on Devil's Island!" He leveled his small swagger stick at the other as if it were a weapon and continued his denunciation: "I had heard he had escaped from confinement and made his way to Haiti and become a member of the voodooists, and when I first saw him at the hospital I was almost sure I recognized him, though when he turned to face me I was just as certain that I was mistaken, for in the olden days his eyes were gray, now they are black. I do not know how he has done it, but I know beyond a doubt now that he is Dessiles, despite the changed color of his eyes. I cannot be mistaken in that voice, that monstrous egotism of the ass who struts

about in a lion's skin. However much the leopard has succeeded in effacing his spots or Dessiles in changing his eye-color, the leopard still is but an overgrown, great pussy-cat and Dessiles remains a stinking charlatan and traitor!"

"TOUCHE!" the man behind the table laughed with a low hard raucousness like the crackling of crushed paper. "You are right on every count, my little droll one, and since your knowledge goes no farther than yourself, and you shall go no farther than this room, you might as well know all." With an almost incredibly quick motion he flung open a drawer in the table and snatched a heavy automatic pistol from it, swinging it in a quick arc between de Grandin and me, steady as a pendulum and deadly as a serpent poised to strike. "Be seated, gentlemen," he ordered rather than invited. "When the time has come to say *au 'voir* you may stand, if you wish, but until then I must insist that you sit—and keep your hands in plain sight."

I collapsed into the nearest chair, but de Grandin looked about him deliberately, chose a comfortable divan, and dropped on it, resting his short swagger stick across his knees and beating a tattoo on it with lean, nervous fingers. "And now," he prompted, heedless alike of the menacing, blank stare in Coiquitt's glassy eyes and the threat of the pointed pistol, "you were about to regale us with the story of your adventures, were you not, *Monsieur?*"

"I was about to say that I survived the green hell of the *Ile du Diable*. They penned me in like a brute beast, stabled me on stinking straw in a sty no pig with *amour propre* would consent to live in, made me drag a ball and chain behind me, starved me, beat me—but I survived. And I escaped. Through swamps that swarmed with crocodiles and poison snakes and reeked with pestilence and fever, I escaped. Through shark-infested waters and shores that swarmed with gendarmes on the watch for me, I escaped, and found safe sanctuary in the *boymforts* of the *voudois*.

"They welcomed me for my learning, but, *pardieu*, they had much to teach me, too! I learned, by example, how to make a *zombi*, how to draw the soul from the body

ald who was her idol died just as he was about to receive his commission in the Air Corps when his plane crashed in his final practice flight. Oh, I know you'll say it was coincidence; that his plane would have cracked up just the same if his mother had died instead of getting well. But it didn't. She got well and he died. Then there was Bernice Stevens. Nobody thought she had an earthly chance, and she herself prayed daily for death to release her from her dreadful suffering; but he took her case and cured her—and Bert Stevens died within ten months. Of cancer, too. Perhaps *that* was coincidence, also. How many coincidences do we have to have to make a certainty, Doctor?

"I'll tell you—" She leaned forward, and in the light of my desk lamp her eyes seemed hard and expressionless as blue gems inlaid in an ivory face. "I have proof! The man's a wizard; just as much a wizard as those dreadful men they hanged and burned in medieval days. He is—he *is!*" Her voice rose almost to a shriek, and as I smiled incredulously, "Listen:

"You know that Richard Bream and I have been in love for years. We went in grade school together, and to high school, and afterwards to college. We'd planned to be married just after commencement, but the depression came along just then, and Richard couldn't get a start in his law practice. They took his furniture for debt, and evicted him from his office, and he couldn't get even a clerkship anywhere; finally he was forced to take a place as a soda dispenser in a drug store—Richard Bream, Esquire, bachelor and master of laws, Phi Beta Kappa and Sigma Nu Tau, a soda-jerk at ten dollars a week, and glad to get that much! I had twelve dollars weekly from my work as a stenographer, but two people can't live on twenty-two dollars a week, and besides, I had mother to look after. Then finally Rick secured a place as law clerk with Adleman and Sinclair, and just as we were planning to get married his father died, and he had his mother to support. It was just one thing after another, Doctor. Every time we thought our period of waiting was over something came up to destroy our hopes. I've heard the Indians sometimes tormenting their prisoners by tying them to stakes and light-

ing fires around them, then, when the torture had become unbearable, offering the poor wretches bowls of cool water, only to dash them from their lips as they were about to drink. That's the way it's been with Rick and me for nearly twelve years, Doctor. We've starved and thirsted for each other, and time and again it seemed our period of waiting had come to a close when"—she raised her hands in a gesture of futility—"something else happened to postpone our marriage. At last the war came, and Rick got his commission. There seemed nothing that could halt us now, and then—this unsuspected heart ailment appeared; Rick was discharged from the Army on a medical certificate and went to Dr. Dahlgren and half a dozen other specialists. All told him the same thing. He might live one year, maybe two—he might drop dead any minute.

"I wanted to get married right away. I'm making fifty dollars a week now, and that would keep us. I could love and cherish him for whatever time remained to us, and—oh, Doctor, I love him so!" She broke down utterly and bowed her head upon her clasped hands, crying almost silently with body-shaking sobs. At last: "I was desperate, Dr. Trowbridge. I'd heard about the wonderful cures Dr. Coiquitt had made, and went to see him." A shudder, more of horror than of fear, it seemed to me, ran through her. "I tell you, the man is a wizard, sir.

"His office is more like a necromancer's den than a physician's place. No daylight penetrates it; everything about the place is black—black floors, black walls, black ceiling; black furniture upholstered in black silk brocade. The only light in the place is from a black-shaded lamp on the desk where he sits and waits like a—like a great spider, sir! He wasn't kind and sympathetic as a doctor ought to be; he wasn't glad to see me; he didn't even seem surprised that I had come. It was as if he knew I'd have to come to him, and had been waiting with the patience of a great cat sitting at a rat-hole.

"When I told him about Rick's case he seemed scarcely interested; but when I'd finished talking he said in that heavy foreign accent of his: 'These matters have to be adjusted, Miss Castevens. I can cure your

lover, but the risk to you is great. Do you love him more than you love life?

"Of course I vowed I did, that I would gladly die if Rick could live, and he smiled at me—I think that Satan must smile like that when a new damned soul is brought to him.

"For every one who leaves the world another comes into it," he told me. "For every one who cheats Death, Death must have another victim. I have pondered long upon this matter; I have learned the wisdom of the ancients and of people you Americans in your ignorance call savage. I know whereof I speak. I do not prescribe for the ailing. I give my medicine—and thought—to the well, and they, by sympathy, affect the suffering. If you will agree to do just as I say I can cure your lover, but it may be that your life will be the forfeit demanded for his. You must understand this clearly; I would not have you embark on the case unknowingly."

"Well, it sounded utterly absurd, but I was desperate, so I agreed. He went into a back room and I heard him clinking glass on glass, then presently he came out with a syringe which he thrust into my arm and drew blood from it. Then he disappeared again for a short time, and finally came back with a tall glass in which some black liquor steamed and boiled. "Drink this," he ordered, "and as you drink it pronounce after me, "Of my own free will and accord I agree to give myself in his stead, whatever may betide." I took the glass into both hands and drained it at a gulp as I pronounced the words he told me, and instead of being boiling hot the liquid seemed as cold as ice—so cold it seemed to send a chill through every vein and artery in my body, to make my toes and fingers almost ache with sudden chill, and freeze my heart and lungs until I breathed with difficulty.

"Before I left he gave me another bottle filled with black liquor and told me, "Take this three times a day, once before each meal and once before you say your prayers at night. You do pray, don't you?"

"Yes, sir," I answered. "Every night and morning."

"So much the better. Take an extra dose of this before your morning prayer, then, and I shall call on Mr. Bream in the morn-

ing, make a careful note of his condition, and report to you. In three days he should begin to improve. In two months he should be completely recovered." That was all, and I left that queer, black-walled den of his feeling foolish as if I'd been to consult a fortune-teller.

"But the next day when I called the hospital to inquire after Richard they told me he was showing marked improvement, and his improvement has been constant ever since."

"That's wonderful," I commented, and she caught me up abruptly, sarcastically:

"Yes, isn't it? It's wonderful, too, that as Richard gained in strength I've lost weight steadily, and for the past two weeks have suffered agonizing pain in my right breast and arm, and have these dreadful smothering fits when it seems that a pillow has been clamped across my nose and mouth. I tell you, Doctor Trowbridge, I am dying; dying surely as if I had been sentenced to death by a court. Rick's getting well, and, of course, I want that; but I'm afraid, sir, terribly afraid. Besides, if I die, what shall we have gained? Rick will have life, but not me, and I—I shall have nothing at all!" Her voice rose to a wail of pure despair.

"Camilla!" I admonished sharply. "Such things don't happen. They can't—"

"By blue, my friend, I think they do and can," de Grandin's sharp denial came as he stepped into the consulting room. "You must excuse me, *Mademoiselle*," he bowed to Camilla, "but I could not help hearing something of the things you said to Doctor Trowbridge as I came in. You need have no fear your confidence will be violated. I, too, am a physician, and whatever I have heard is under the protection of my oath of confidence. However," he lifted brows and shoulders in the faint suggestion of a shrug, "if you will consent that I try, I think perhaps that I can help you, for I am Jules de Grandin, and a very clever person, I assure you."

REMINDED by his announcement that the amenities had not been observed, I introduced them formally, and he dropped into a seat facing her. "Now, if you please," he ordered, "tell me all that you have told Friend Trowbridge, and leave out nothing.

and leave only an automaton that moves and breathes, but has no mind or reason. I learned from them how it is possible to cast the illness out of one and into another—even how to swerve the clutching hand of death from one to another. Poor little fool, do you know that in the mountain fastnesses of Haiti there are men and women still young and strong and virile who were, old when Toussaint l'Ouverture and Henri Christophe raised the banner of revolt against the French? How? Because, *parbleu*, they know the secret I alone of all white men have learned from them—how to turn the hand of death from one man to another. But there must be a willing victim for the sacrifice.

"There must be one who says that he will die in place of the other. Granted this, and granted the such power as I possess, the rest is easy. Life begins at forty, some Yankee has said fatuously. *Pardieu*, it can begin again at seventy or eighty or a hundred, or flow back strong and vibrant into one who lies on death's doorsill, provided always there is one who will become the substitute of him whose time is almost sped.

"That is the secret of the cures I've made, my silly little foolish one. I have not changed the score. Death still collects his forfeit, but he takes a different victim; that is all. Yet I grow rich upon the hope and the credulity of those who see only the credit columns of the ledger Death keeps. They do not realize, the fools! that every credit has its corresponding debit, and when Death finally strikes his balance, 'Too bad,' they say, 'he had so much to live for, yet he died just as she regained health.' Ha-ha, it is to laugh at human gullibility, *mes enfants*. You, by example, would never stoop of practicing such chicanery, I am certain. Oh, no! If you could not effect a cure you would permit the patient to die peacefully, and raise your hands and eyes to heaven in pious resignation. Me, I am different. As long as there are fools there will be those to prey on them, and I shall keep Death's books, collect my stipend for my work, and be known as the great doctor who has never lost a case—"

"I fear you have lost this one, *cher savant*," the ghost of an ironic grin appeared beneath the waxed ends of de Grandin's

small mustache. "We have heard all we desired, and—"

"And now the time has come to say '*Adieu pour l'éternité*!'" the other broke in savagely as he leveled the pistol, steadying his elbow on the table. "You think—"

"*Non*, by blue, it is that I damn know!" de Grandin's voice was hard and sharp as a razor as he raised one knee slightly, pressed his hand against the leather knob of his swagger stick and gave it a sharp half-turn.

The report was no louder than the bursting of an electric light bulb, and there was no smoke from the detonation of the cartridge in the gun-barrel hidden in the cane, but the missile sped to its mark with the accuracy of an iron-filing flying to a magnet, and Coiquitt swayed a little in his chair, as if he had been struck by an unseen fist. Then, between the widow's peak of the black hair that grew well down on his forehead and the sharply accented black brows above the glassy, unchanging black eyes, there came a spot of red no larger than a dime, but which spread till it reached the size of a quarter, a half-dollar, and finally splayed out in an irregular red splash that covered almost the entire forehead. There was a look of shocked surprise, almost of reproof, in the cold visage, and the black, lack-luster eyes kept staring fixedly at de Grandin.

THEN suddenly, appallingly, the man seemed to melt. The pistol dropped from his unnerved hand with a clatter and his head crashed down upon the table, jarring the great silver bowl of orchids till it nearly overturned, and dislodging a pile of books so they crashed to the floor.

"And that, unless I am much more mistaken than I think, is that, my friend," de Grandin rose and walked across the room to stand above the dead man slumped across the table. "The English, a most estimable people, have a proverb to the effect that the one who would take supper with the devil would be advised to bring with him a long spoon. *Eh bien*, I took that saying to heart before coming to this place, *mon vieux*. This little harmless-seeming cane, she is a very valuable companion in the tight fix, I do assure you. One never knows when he may find himself in a case where he cannot make

use of his pistol, when to make a move to draw a weapon would be to sign one's own death warrant; but he who would shoot quickly if he saw you reach for a weapon would never give a second thought or glance to this so little, harmless seeming stick of mine. No, certainly. Accordingly, when he had bidden us be seated and threatened us with his pistol, I took great care to seat myself where I could aim my cane at him as I held it across my knees, with nothing intervening to spoil the shot I knew I must take at him sooner or later. *Tiens*, am I not the clever one, *mon vieux*? But certainly, I should say yes."

"You certainly got us out of a tight fix," I admitted. "Five minutes ago I shouldn't have cared to offer a nickel for our chance of getting out of here alive."

He looked at me reproachfully. "While I was with you, Friend Trowbridge?"

For a moment he bent over the man sprawled across the table, then, "*Ab-ha!*" he cried jubilantly. "*Ab-ba-ha!* Behold his stratagem, my friend!"

I went a little sick as I looked, for it seemed to me he gouged the dead man's eyes out of their sockets, but as I took a second glance I understood. Over his eyeballs, fitted neatly underneath the lids, Coiquitt had worn a pair of contact lenses that simulated natural eyes so well that only a fixed stare betrayed them, and they were made with black irides, entirely concealing the natural gray of his eyes.

"He had the cunning, that one," de Grandin grudgingly admitted as he dropped the little hemispheres of glass upon the table. "He made but one great mistake. He underestimated Jules de Grandin. It is not wise to do that, Friend Trowbridge."

"How will you explain his death," I asked. "Of course, you shot in self-defense, but—"

"But he stewed in sulphur and served hot with brimstone for Satan's breakfast," he broke in. "The man was an escaped convict, a traitor to France and a former agent of the Boche. I am an officer of the Republic, and had the right to apprehend him for the American authorities. He resisted arrest, and"—his shrug was a masterpiece, even for him—"he is no longer present. *C'est tout simple, n'est-ce pas?*"

The telephone began to ring with a shrill insistence and instinctively I reached for it, but he put out his hand to arrest me. "Let it ring, my friend. He is past all interest in such things, and as for us, we have more important business elsewhere. I would inspect Mademoiselle Camille—"

"You think she may have—"

"I do not know just what to think. I have the hope, but I cannot be sure. Come, hasten, rush, fly; I entreat you!"

CAMILLA lay upon the study sofa much as we had left her, and smiled wanly at us as he hurried into the room. "You did see him, didn't you?" she asked with something akin to animation in her voice.

"We did, indeed, *Mademoiselle*," de Grandin assured her, "and what was much more to the point, he saw us."

"I knew you must have talked to him and made him relent, for just a little while ago—it couldn't have been more than ten or fifteen minutes—I had another dreadful attack, and just when I had given up all hope and knew that I was dying it stopped, and I found I could breathe freely again. Now I feel almost well once more. Perhaps"—hope struggled with fear in her eyes—"perhaps I shall recover?"

"Perhaps you shall, indeed, *Mademoiselle*," he nodded reassuringly. "Come into the examination room if you will be so kind. It is that we should like to see what we can see."

It was amazing, but it was true. The most minute examination failed to show a symptom of angina pectoris. There was no area of dullness, no faint suggestion of a heart murmur, and her pulse, though rather light and rapid, was quite steady.

"Accept our most sincere congratulations, *Mademoiselle*," de Grandin murmured as he helped her from the table. It seems you are on the highway to complete recovery."

"Oh!" her exclamation was a small, sad sound, and there was an enmeshed, desperate look in her eyes. "Rick! If I get well, he'll—"

De Grandin made a little deprecating sound with his tongue against his teeth. "It may be even as you say, *ma chère*. I would not give you the false hope. Again, it may

be quite otherwise. Have you courage to go with us to the hospital and see?"

THE supervisor of the third floor where young Bream's room was, met us at the elevator. "It's really amazing," she confided as we walked down the corridor. "Mr. Bream has been improving steadily these past six weeks, but shortly after ten o'clock tonight he had a dreadful paroxysm, and we thought it was the end. We had to get Dr. Carver the house physician, for all our efforts to get Dr. Coiquitt on the 'phone were useless. Dr. Carver gave us no hope, but suddenly—almost miraculously, it seemed to me—the spasm passed and Mr. Bream began to breathe freely. In a little while he fell asleep and has been resting ever since. I never knew a patient sick as he was with myocarditis to recover fully, but—"

"Strange things are happening every day, *Madame*," de Grandin reminded her. "Perhaps this is one of them."

I had not treated Bream, and so had no basis of comparison between his condition as I found him and his former state, but careful examination revealed nothing alarming.

His pulse was weak and inclined to be thready, and his respiration not quite satisfactory, but there was no evidence of organic affection. With bed-rest and good nursing he should make an excellent prospect for some life insurance salesman in a year or less, I thought. De Grandin agreed with me, and turned to Camilla, eyes agleam with delight. "You may congratulate him on his impending recovery, *Mademoiselle*," he whispered, "but do it softly—gently. The aching sweetness of a lover's kiss—*morbleu*,

but it can play the very devil with a normal heart, when one is not so strong—have the discretion, *Mademoiselle*."

"I'm hanged if I can understand it," I confessed as we left the hospital. "First Bream is dying, then Coiquitt, or Dessiles, seems to cure him, but makes Camilla wilt and wither like a flower on the stem as he improves. Then, when you shoot him, she makes an amazing recovery and Bream seems practically well. If he had retrogressed as she recovered—"

He chuckled delightedly. "He called himself Death's Bookkeeper. *Très bon*. He was balancing the books of Death when I shot him, and as you say so drolly in America, caught him off his balance. The scales were even. She he had sent the psychic message to, but not in quite enough force. Had he endured five little minutes longer, he might have forced her to her death. As it was I damn think I did not delay one little minute too long in eliminating him. At the same time he endeavored to cause her to die he attempted to undo the work he had done for young Monsieur Bream, but his death cut short that bit of double-dealing, also, and the young man lapsed again into the state of almost-wellness he had attained when the *sale trompeur* tried to kill him to death. Yes, undoubtedly it is so. I can no more explain it than I can say why a red cow who eats green grass gives white milk. I know only that it is so.

"And in the meantime, if we walk a block in this direction, then turn twenty paces to the left, we shall arrive at a place where they purvey a species of nectar called an old-fashioned—a lovely drink with quantities of lovely whiskey in it. Why do we delay here, my friend?"

