

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1946

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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Kurban

THE clock on my desk registered 6:45, the patient had been dismissed, from the house came appetizing odors and the rattle of a cocktail shaker briskly agitated. Dinner would be ready in a few minutes and— The chiming of the office bell came like a warning of impending disappointment, as the late caller obeyed the "Ring and Enter" engraved on the brass plate decorating the door. Devoutly I hoped that the *pièce de resistance* would not be steak. A roast is little the worse for an extra half hour in a low oven, but a steak . . .

"Trowbridge!" Dunscomb Doniphan strode into the consulting room. "Thank goodness I caught you in. I'm almost frantic, old man."

"Sit down," I invited, noting the deep grooves etched by worry wrinkles in his brow, the long lines like parentheses that scored his cheeks, and the tired look in his eyes. Here was fatigue as plainly to be read as sky-writing on a still day, another case

of the "nervous prosperity" that had swept the country like a plague as war orders piled up and price became a matter of decreasing importance. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"Austine!" he flung the name at me as if it were a missile.

"Austine?" I echoed. "What—"

"Trowbridge, *mon vieux*, the ducklings roasting for our dinner are utterly *incinérée*, and the Martinis I have made with loving care—ah!" as he noticed Doniphan the little Frenchman paused abashed, "a thousand pardons, *Monsieur*, I did not know that Dr. Trowbridge entertained a patient—"

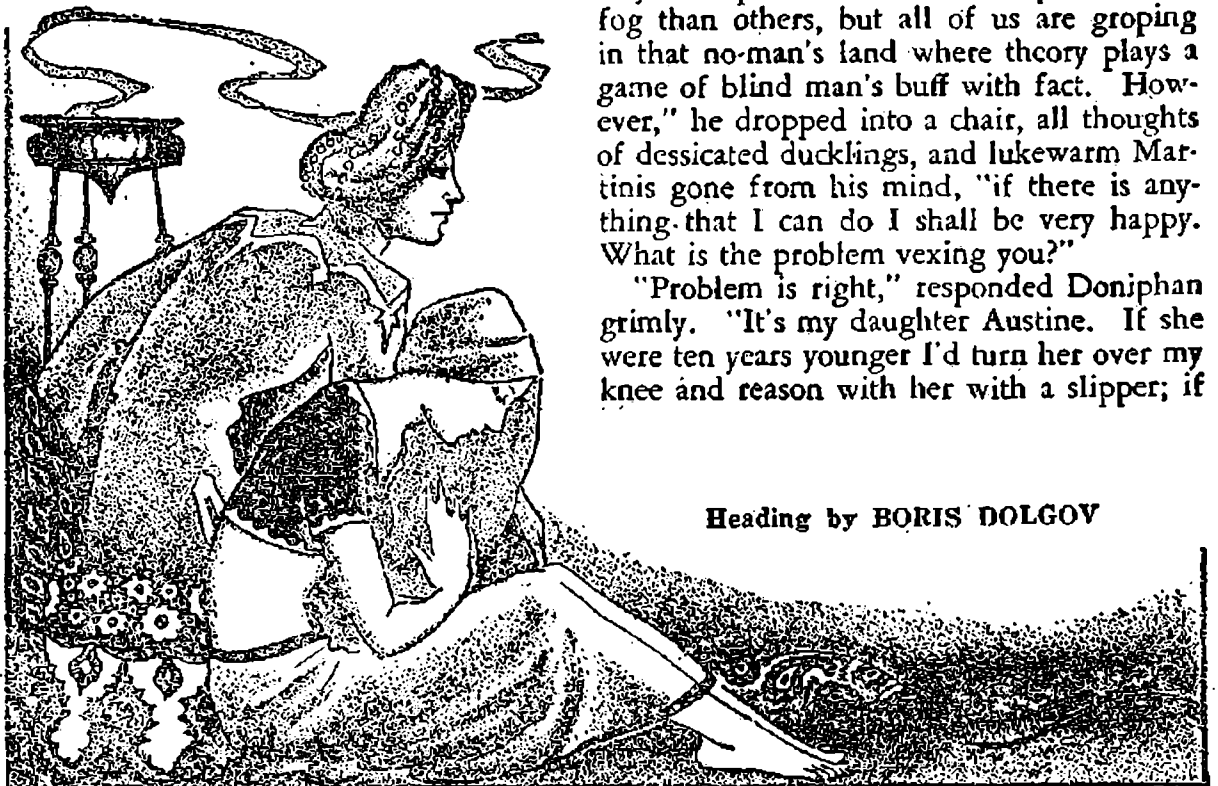
"This is Dr. de Grandin, Doniphan," I introduced. "Dr. de Grandin, Dunscomb Doniphan. We were in college together." The small Frenchman shook hands cordially and turned to leave, but:

"I've heard of you, Dr. de Grandin," Doniphan interposed. "I understand you're an expert in psychiatry."

"There are no experts in psychiatry," de Grandin denied with a smile. "Some of us may have penetrated a little deeper into the fog than others, but all of us are groping in that no-man's land where theory plays a game of blind man's buff with fact. However," he dropped into a chair, all thoughts of desiccated ducklings, and lukewarm Martinis gone from his mind, "if there is anything that I can do I shall be very happy. What is the problem vexing you?"

"Problem is right," responded Doniphan grimly. "It's my daughter Austine. If she were ten years younger I'd turn her over my knee and reason with her with a slipper; if

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV



The Swami made powerful magic . . . the magic that controls human lives.

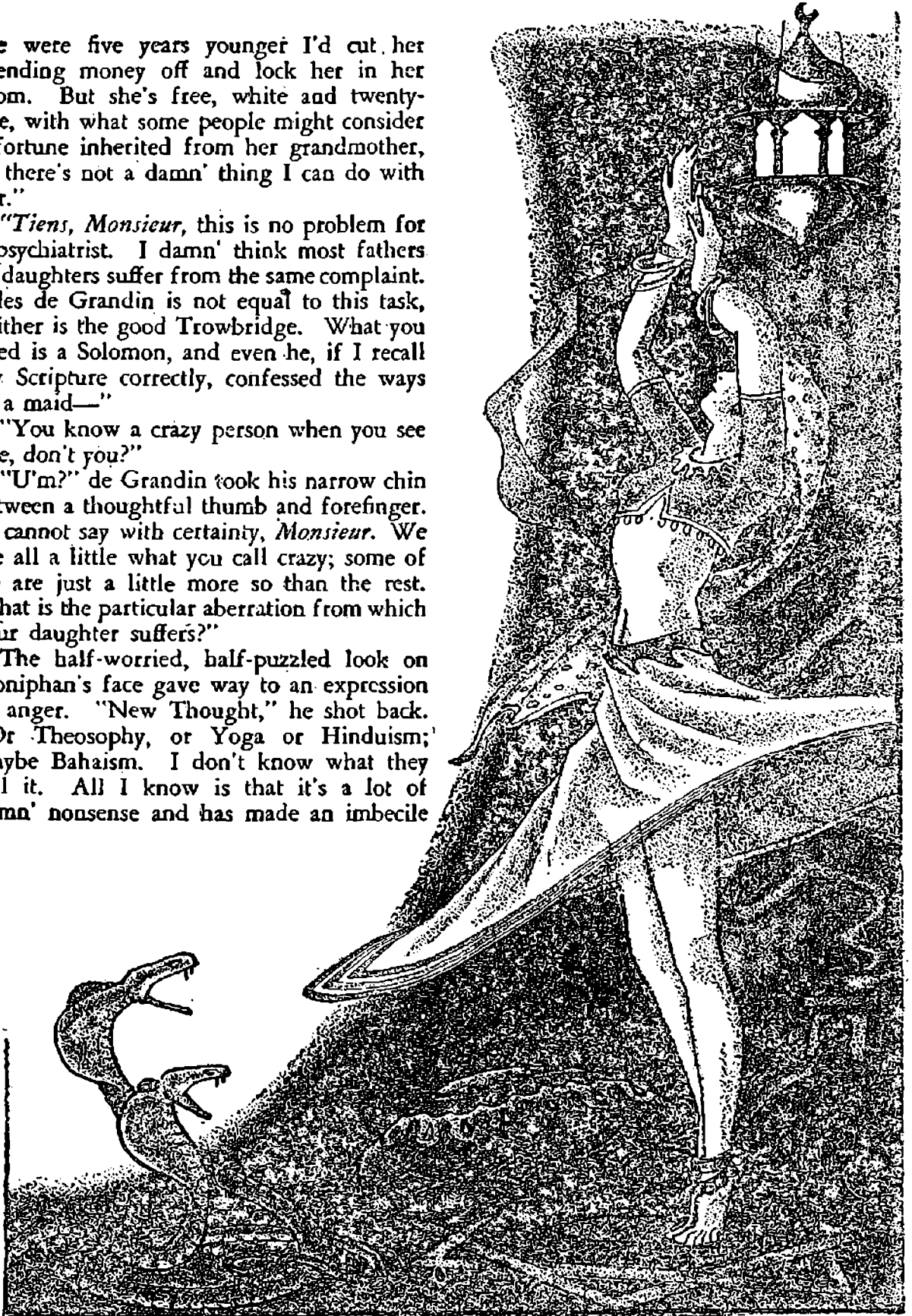
she were five years younger I'd cut her spending money off and lock her in her room. But she's free, white and twenty-five, with what some people might consider a fortune inherited from her grandmother, so there's not a damn' thing I can do with her."

"*Tiens, Monsieur*, this is no problem for a psychiatrist. I damn' think most fathers of daughters suffer from the same complaint. Jules de Grandin is not equal to this task, neither is the good Trowbridge. What you need is a Solomon, and even he, if I recall my Scripture correctly, confessed the ways of a maid—"

"You know a crazy person when you see one, don't you?"

"U'm?" de Grandin took his narrow chin between a thoughtful thumb and forefinger. "I cannot say with certainty, *Monsieur*. We are all a little what you call crazy; some of we are just a little more so than the rest. What is the particular aberration from which your daughter suffers?"

The half-worried, half-puzzled look on Doniphan's face gave way to an expression of anger. "New Thought," he shot back. "Or Theosophy, or Yoga or Hinduism; maybe Bahaim. I don't know what they call it. All I know is that it's a lot of damn' nonsense and has made an imbecile



of what was once a fairly intelligent young woman." The smoldering anger in his eyes gave way to blazing rage. "Listen, you two:

"Ten months ago this Swami Ramapali came to brighten our ignorance with the light of his countenance. Where he came from, only God knows. He might have come from India or Indiana, but wherever he hails from, he's got what the women, young and old, eat up. Started out by giving little talks at afternoon gatherings, driveling about being In Tune With the Infinite and the Nothingness of Matter, and all that sort of rot. First thing we knew he'd progressed to holding regular meetings, then to forming a congregation with a temple of its own; three months ago he bought the Judson farm out by Passaic and founded a colony. Good Lord!" he snorted in disgust.

"And this colony of which you speak, *Monsieur*. It is—"

"I don't know what it is. Nobody does. Austine had been going to this faker's meetings regularly, and contributing plenty to them, judging by the entries we found in her check books since she left home. When he set up housekeeping at the Judson place she was one of the first to join him. I haven't laid eyes on her since. Neither has her mother. We've been out there half a dozen times, but she won't see us. Sends out word she's in her Silence, or some such damnfool message."

DE GRANDIN'S slender brows went up the fraction of an inch. "You suspect it to be a place where—how do you say him?—untrammelled love is practiced?"

"I don't know what to think or suspect. I don't know anything about it, neither does anyone else. As nearly as we can find out, there are some thirty or forty people living there, mostly young women, though there's sprinkling of old spinsters and a few widows. All of 'em are wealthy and all of 'em have cut themselves off from their families as completely as Austine has broken with us. I've been to the police. They can't, or won't, do anything. Say there's no crime charged, and all that sort of legalistic rot. Now, what I want you to do is"—he leveled a stiff forefinger at de Grandin and me in turn—"find some way of getting into that booby-hatch, sizing up the situation,

and then, if you can find a shred of evidence, appear before a lunacy commission and have Austine committed. I really think she's clear off her rocker over this business, but if we can get her out and away from the Swami's influence she'll come out of it. Then—it ought to be as easy to have her declared sane as it was to have her adjudged incompetent, oughtn't it?"

"It is deplorable," de Grandin murmured.

"Ain't it," Doniphan agreed inelegantly. "To think that a well-brought-up young woman—"

"Should have such a bigoted, narrow-minded parent, *parbleu!*" interrupted the small Frenchman fiercely. "This cult to which Mademoiselle your daughter has attached herself may be all that you suspect, and more, but at any rate it satisfies her. She finds it to her liking. And you, *Monsieur*, because it does not meet with your approval, would perpetrate this dreadful thing, have your own daughter branded *alienée*—a mad women—to be forever suspected of insanity, to have her children suspect of a strain of madness in their blood. *Pardieu*, it is entirely too much, this! Me, I will have none of it. Good day, *Monsieur!*" He rose, bowed coldly, and left the room.

"Weil, Trowbridge, that's that," Doniphan murmured. "What do you say?"

"I say go slow," I temporized. "Austine may have gone off the deep end, but she'll come round in time. Just wait and see what happens."

"That your last word?"

"I'm afraid so. I couldn't lend myself to any such scheme as you propose—"

"All right. You're not the only doctor in town. I'll find one who'll be willing to listen to reason for a thousand-dollar fee."

"**BY THE** way, de Grandin," I remarked casually at dinner some nights later, "that Swami that Doniphan was so burned up about is making a talk at Mrs. Tenbroeck's this evening. Would you care to have a look at him? I must confess I'm somewhat curious after all I've heard."

He looked up from his apple tart with one of his direct cat-stares. "I think I should, my friend. He may be a *jongleur*,

quite possibly a criminal, but I should like to see this fellow who has, as Monsieur Doniphan expressed it, what the ladies devour. Yes, by all means, let us go."

THE Swami Ramapali was just finishing his discourse as de Grandin and I found seats in the Tenbroeck drawing room. He was a young man, slightly under middle height, dark-complected, but obviously not a member of the colored races. Dark hair, lustrous and inclined to curl, was smoothly parted in the middle and hung in long ringlets each side of his face, brushing the velvet collar of his dinner coat. His shirt of fine white linen was decorated with a double row of box pleats edged with fine lace, and against its immaculate whiteness there showed studs of onyx set with small star sapphires. Knotted negligently beneath his wide collar was a flowing black silk tie of the sort affected by art students of the '90's. His eyes were very large, prune-black, and held a drowsy, sensuous expression.

"All, all is only seeming," he concluded in a voice that was almost a purr. "All seeming is a fantasy, a nothingness, a part of Brahm's dream. We are but shadow-shapes in the Dream of the Infinite; what we call matter is delusion. Thought only is eternal, and that which we call thought is but the echo of an echo in the Dream of the Creator."

"*Grand dieu des porcs*, he talks the double-talk, this one!" de Grandin whispered. "What is this maundering of the nothingness of something and echoes of echoes—"

"*S-s-st!*" I hissed him into silence, for the Swami had stepped forward from his place beside the grand piano and the lights which had been lowered while he spoke were turned on. The vaguely unfavorable impression the Swami had made on me when I first saw him was heightened by the full light of the chandelier. As our hostess presented us and his somber, brooding eyes fell on me with a look of almost calculating appraisal, I had a momentary feeling of revulsion as unreasonable and inexplicable, but as tangible, as a warm-blooded creature's instinctive reaction to a snake.

He spoke no word of recognition as de Grandin and I bowed. Serene, statue-still,

he received our murmured expressions of pleasure at the meeting with an air of aloofness that was almost contemptuous. Only for a fleeting instant did his expression change. Something, perhaps the gleam of mockery in the little Frenchman's gaze, hardened his large eyes for an instant, and I had a feeling that it would behoove my friend not to turn his back on the Swami if a dagger were handy.

In the dining room the long sideboard was laden with silver dishes of nuts, dried figs, dates and raisins. De Grandin sampled the contents of the first compote and turned away with a wry face. "Name of a name," he swore softly, "such vilcness should be prohibited by law!"

"Isn't it simply wonderful?" a lady with more than ample bosom and a succession of assistant chins gushed in my ear. "It's in honor of the Swami, you know. His religion forbids eating anything that has been cooked or killed. Only the kind fruits of the kind earth are spread for a repast when he is present. I'm thinking seriously of taking up the diet. Poor dear Estrella Santho took it up, you know, and it did wonders—simply wonders—for her."

De Grandin fixed his set, unwinking cat-stare on her. "And this poor dear lady, where is she now, if you please?"

Our *vis-à-vis* seemed slightly taken aback, but rallied in a moment with a sad sweet smile. "She has passed on—her faith was stronger than ours. Where we linger hesitating on the brink, afraid to take the plunge, she made the great decision and became a neophyte in the Swami's colony, the Gateway to Peace. She had completed the initial steps and was almost ready to become one of the *hieroi* when she was absorbed into the Infinite, she has passed her final incarnation and dwells forever in the ineffable light emanated by the Divine All—"

"In fine, *Madame*, one gathers she is defunct, deceased; dead?"

"In the language of the untaught—yes," the lady admitted. "It was so tragic, too. You see, the dwellers on the Threshold of Peace wear Eastern costume—no hampering Western clothes to take their minds from contemplation—and she was bitten by a snake—"

"A snake, *Madame*? You interest me:

What sort of snake was it, if you know?"

"Really, sir," the lady had apparently become tired of his catechism, "I haven't the faintest idea. What sort of snakes usually bite people in this latitude?"

"That is precisely what one asks to know," he answered, but he spoke to the departing dowager's broad back.

"Ah-h'm?" he murmured as he drew a gold pencil from his pocket and scribbled a memorandum in his notebook. "This we shall look into, I damn' think."

"What?" I demanded, but our hostess' announcement from the farther room prevented further conversation:

"The Swami has consented to perform a miracle for us. He will demonstrate the power of mind over seeming matter."

"*Qu'est-ce-qui?*" de Grandin's tightly waxed wheat-blond mustache was all a-quiver, like the whiskers of an alert tom-cat. "Come, friend Trowbridge, this is something we must not forbear to witness, not by any means."

THE drawing-room lights had been lowered again and the Swami was seated before a small table on which lay an ordinary lead pencil. He put his elbows on his knees and stared intently before him a long moment, then raised slender, ring-decked hands and moved them back and forth above the pencil. Faster and faster moved the undulating hands. It seemed, almost, they wove a pattern of invisible threads in the air. Then slowly, unbelievably, it happened. With a movement almost serpentine the pencil writhed a little, rose a full half-inch, then dropped back, the metallic band that held its rubber tip making a faint clicking sound against the polished table top. The Swami's hands wove fresh patterns above it, came together with a soft clap, then separated slowly. And as they drew apart the pencil rose unsteadily, wavered drunkenly a moment at an acute angle and, almost against its will, it seemed, balanced on its sharpened point. The half-lit room seemed vibrant with something unseen and unholy. I had a sudden feeling of uncanny dread, as if I'd witnessed the raising of a dead and stiffened body. For a moment the insensate bit of rubber, wood and graphite stood upright as a toe-dancer executing a

pirouette, then, falling drunkenly sidewise, rolled off the polished table to the floor.

"How wonderful! Marvelous! Miraculous!" the whispered comments ran around the shadowed room.

The Swami leant back in his chair, a look of physical exhaustion on his face. "Thought," he murmured tiredly, "only thought is strong. What you have seen, my friends, is but a manifestation of the power of the will. That we call matter is of no consequence, no potency. The vaunted science of the West cannot explain such things; the stupid, cold religions of the West have nothing concrete to offer. Their story-books are full of tales of miracles and wonders, all worked in the long-ago. But if you ask them for a miracle today—even such a little thing as that which I have done just now—they turn to vague excuses, saying that the age of miracles is past—"

De Grandin had tiptoed to the hall now, as the Swami paused a moment, he came back into the drawing room, his silver-headed stick beneath his elbow. "*Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur Swami,*" he interrupted, "but here is one who does not subscribe to your thesis. In one of those story-books which you deride it is recorded how Pharaoh's necromancers cast their rods upon the earth and they became live, hissing serpents. And when Aaron, Moses' brother, cast his staff upon the ground, it likewise became a serpent and devoured those rod-serpents of Pharaoh's sorcerers. *Regardez-moi, s'il vous plait—*" He dropped into a chair opposite the Swami, braced his stick between his knees and began to make passes over it. "You vitalized a little, insignificant lead-pencil, Monsieur Swami. *Très bon. Me, I shall call a walking stick to life. Attendez!*"

He waved slim hands above the silver knob of the cane a moment, and the upright stick fell from between his knees, almost struck the floor, then, rallying with a wavering, uncertain movement, slowly rose until it stood upright upon its ferrule. For a moment it swayed gently, then rose clear of the floor and fell clattering to the polished boards at his feet.

He rose and bowed to the assemblage as if he were an actor on a stage, but no applause greeted his exhibition. "What, is

there none to show appreciation of my *jonglerie?*" he demanded. "For shame, *mes-sieurs et 'dames*. Is it that you seek an explanation? *Bien*. I show you. Lights, if you will be so kind," and as the lights snapped on, he took the cane up and showed them a three-foot length of black suture silk attached to it. "You see, I fasten this small thread to the stick, then I take the ends between my hands—so." He drew the string taut, and the cane rose till it stood upon its ferrule. "*Très bien*. Then I loosen the thread, and the cane she leans from side to side. When I once more tighten the thread she comes back to the vertical. *C'est très simple, n'est-ce-pas?* It is an old, old juggler's trick, one that I learned in boyhood. Yes; certainly.

"'Ah, but,' you say, 'the Monsieur Swami had no thread to make his pencil dance upon its tip. He are a really-truly supernatural someone.' Ah, bah!" So quickly none of us divined his purpose, he lashed a hand out, thrust his fingers into the Swami's waistcoat pocket and dragged out the pencil with which the miracle had been worked. From its upper end, close to the metal cap that held the rubber to the wood, there dangled eighteen inches of hair-fine black silk thread.

A flush stained the Swami's cheeks and brow, his great dark eyes suffused with tears of embarrassment. "It is a trick," he almost shrieked. "A trick—"

"But certainly, *mon ami*," the Frenchman laughed delightedly. "A trick it is, and a most good one, too. Come now, confess that you did make the innocent joke tonight. They asked you for to perform some wonder, and you did do it for them. Very well you did it, too. I could not have done it better myself, and I am very clever. Let us make no hard feelings"—he clapped the Swami jovially upon the shoulder—"let us all be jolly friends together."

The amiability he sought to rouse was something less than hilarious, but at least the tension had been broken, and half an hour later we took our leave with a rather wintry good-bye from our hostess.

"NAME of a small green man!" he chuckled delightedly as we drove to my house. "Did I not make a monkey out of

him, friend Trowbridge? I think that he will not try to make the dancing pencil very soon again; not before that audience, at any rate."

"H'm," I rejoined. "You surely showed him up, but all the same I have a feeling everything was not as innocent as it seemed. There was an atmosphere of something evil—"

"*Parbleu*, you felt it, too? I am delighted!"

"Delighted!"

"But certainly. I had a feeling of *malaise*, of something sinister and ugly, directly I went into that room where he drooled his senseless dribble, but I am the suspicious one. I have traveled much among the fakirs and seen the so-called holy men at their unholy monkey-business. I do not like or trust those ones. To me they have the odor of dead fish.

"It was no parlor trick that he performed tonight, my friend. He was in deadly earnest, and would have let the imposition stand, had I not unmasked it. It was as false as his philosophy and his alleged religion, but—did you take note of that gathering?" he changed the subject abruptly.

"How do you mean?"

"Its composition. Did you notice the preponderance of women? And what sort of women? Not young, not old, but middle-aged.

"A very dangerous age indeed, my friend. Too old for romance, yet too young for resignation, and obviously well supplied with cash. Such people make the ideal victims for the charlatan. I damn think I shall follow the investigation of this Monsieur Swami farther in the morning. Yes, certainly."

HE WAS late for dinner the next evening, and when he came in there was that expression in his little round blue eyes that told me he had made an important discovery. "Well?" I demanded as we took our seats.

"Non, my dear, good friend, I do not think that it is well," he denied as he sipped his Martini. "Upon the contrary, I fear that it is very not-so-well. I have apologized to Monsieur Doniphan and agreed to take his case."

"You mean you'll be a party to having Austine declared insane—"

"Better temporarily insane than dead, *mon vieux*. Perhaps she will be both before this business has come to its end. Attend me, if you please," he leveled his soup spoon at me. "This morning I went to the court house and asked to see the wills that have been probated in the last three months."

"Yes?"

"*Oui-da*. Among them I did find the one I sought, that of the poor dear Mademoiselle Santho, of whom the lady of the several chins told us last night. Dear she may have been, but certainly she was not poor. She had a comfortable fortune, oh, a very comfortable one of two hundred thousand dollars. And what did she do with it, I ask you? *Parbleu*, she willed it to her dear friend the Swami Ramapali! What do you make from that?"

"Undue influence?"

"Indubitably. Damn yes. But there is something more, a something sinister that does not leap immediately to the eye. She died, if you recall, of snake-bite."

"Yes, I remember hearing that."

"Very well, or, more precisely, very bad. She made her will upon a Wednesday. Upon the following day, Thursday, she was bitten fatally by a snake. Was it not a most accommodating serpent who dispatched her so conveniently and quickly?"

"Good heavens, d'ye think—"

"Not yet, my friend. I do not think. I am like a blind man in an unfamiliar place. I feel about me, grope for something which will show me where I am and how I should proceed, and what is it my searching fingers find? Nothing, *pardieu!* Nothing at all. It may be that I raise the shadow of a bugaboo unnecessarily, but—can you spare tomorrow morning to go out to Monsieur Swami's colony where Mademoiselle Austine has taken residence? I should greatly like to see that place."

IT WAS evident that Swami Ramapali did not welcome visitors to the colony, for a cement wall some ten feet high surrounded the grounds, and the morning sunlight glinted on the raw edges of a triple row of broken bottles set in mortar on its top. The only entrance was a narrow door of heavy

planking reinforced with iron straps and fitted at man's height with a little wicket through which callers might be inspected.

De Grandin struck a sharp, authoritative knock on the door, then, as no answer came to his hail, repeated the summons more loudly. The wicket in the door flew open abruptly and a dark face topped by a soiled white cotton turban scowled at us. "Go away," the porter ordered. "Your noise annoys the silence of this holy place."

"*Tiens*, Monsieur Dirty-Hat, you will experience even more annoyance if you do not make your door open all soon. I am Dr. Jules de Grandin and this is Dr. Samuel Trowbridge, and we would talk with Mademoiselle Austine Doniphan. Conduct us to her quickly, if you please."

The panel snapped shut suddenly as it had opened, and we were left to view the door again in silence.

"*Queue d'un rat mort*, they shall not shut their twenty-times-accursed door in our faces!" de Grandin swore. "They shall not—"

The heavy door swung open slowly and the porter greeted us with a salaam. "Be pleased to enter through the Gateway to Peace," he announced sonorously.

"Ah, now, my friend, you use the gas for culinary purposes," de Grandin complimented as we stepped across the threshold.

We followed our guide down a long alley lined with little cement hutches no larger than good-sized dog houses and, like dog houses, having only one opening shaped like an inverted U and so low that whoever entered would have to crawl on hands and knees. Crossing the alleyway were other even narrower passages, apparently forming a series of concentric circles radiating from a low one-story structure of stucco with a pagoda-like roof and low porch surrounded by a series of interlaced trefoil arches. There was no sign of life in the street through which we passed, but in the transverse alleys we caught-glimpses of white-robed figures kneeling before the kennel-like houses, heads bent, hands clasped in what seemed silent contemplation. Curiously enough, several of them seemed to combine cigarettes with their devotions, for we saw them raise the little paper tubes to their mouths, draw

deeply at them, and blow smoke slowly from their nostrils.

We reached the central structure, mounted the low single step that led to its veranda and paused before a curtained doorway. "Proceed into the presence of the Sublimity," our guide bade, holding back the hanging of striped cotton goods that draped the doorway, and we stepped into the almost total darkness of a bare, unfurnished room. As my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I descried a seated figure at the far side of the apartment. He was squatting on a large pillow, legs crossed, feet folded sole-upward upon his calves, hands resting palm-up in his lap, with fingertips barely touching. As far as I could see his costume consisted of a sheet of saffron-yellow cotton loosely belted at the waist, leaving arms, chest, legs and feet uncovered. His head was bowed, nor did he look up as we entered, but:

"You would speak with her who in the world was known as Austine Doniphan?" he asked in a low voice, and instantly I recognized the Swami Ramapali.

But how changed! Where there had been luxuriant dark hair the night we saw him at the Tenbroeck house we now saw only naked scalp, for his head was shaven smooth as an egg, giving him at once a curiously infantile and aged appearance.

De Grandin bent a sharp look on him. "It seems that I was right, Monsieur Swami," he announced. "I could have sworn that you were crowned with a wig. Your hair, apparently, is no more genuine than your magic—"

"You would speak with her who in the world was known as Austine Doniphan?" the Swami interrupted in the same low, level voice.

"By blue, we would, and quickly, if you please, *Monsieur*. My patience is no longer than my nose, and nature has not gifted me with a long proboscis."

The Swami struck his hands together with a sharp clap. "Bid Savatri to the presence," he ordered as our late guide paused upon the threshold with a deep salaam.

We waited for perhaps five minutes while de Grandin and the Swami seemed to be engaged in seeing who could stare the other down, then a shaft of sunlight stabbed the shadows as the doorway curtain was pulled

back and a girl stepped soundlessly into the room.

I HAD not seen Austine Doniphan for some time, and probably should not have recognized her if I'd passed her in the street. Certainly the odd figure which crept into our presence bore no resemblance to the girl I'd known. Her costume seemed to consist of some yards of soiled white cotton cloth wrapped round and round her body from bosom to ankles almost as tightly as mummy-bandages. Her arms and shoulders were uncovered, as were her feet and ankles, and so tightly was the cotton bound about her knees that she walked like a hobbled animal, setting one foot precisely before the other, and turning her hips with an exaggerated motion. A loose end of her winding sheet had been brought up to drape her head with a sort of veil, secured by a long wooden pin passed through cloth and hair. Her arms were held stiffly at her sides, hands at right angles to wrists, palms parallel to the floor. On her brow above the bridge of her nose a small daub of bright vermilion showed like a fresh wound against the skin.

Her eyes were large and fine, with long, silky lashes, and though her face was thin with sunken-cheeked thinness, there was no evidence of ill-health. I recognized the symptom. Primary emaciation resulting from sudden diminution of diet.

Looking neither right nor left, without so much as indicating by the lifting of an eyebrow that she saw us, she slipped forward with her oddly creeping walk and came to a halt before the Swami.

A moment she paused thus, head bent demurely, hands clasped together palm to palm, the fingers pointing downward, then like a hinged dummy she sank to her knees, raised both hands above her head, bent forward, laying them upon the floor palm-upward, and dropped her forehead between them.

"Name of a name!" de Grandin swore. "This is indecent, this! Arise, thou foolish one, stand on thy feet—"

"Rise, follower of the Eternal Truth," the Swami bade, and at the command the girl struggled to her knees, awkwardly, for the tightness of her winding-sheet was like a fetter, raised her hands above her head and joined them palm to palm, but kept

her eyes downcast. "Look on these men," he ordered. "Dost thou know them?"

She cast a quick, almost frightened glance in our direction, then bent her head again. "I know one of them, Sublimity. He is a friend of my father—"

The Swami struck his palms together sharply. "Remember thy oath, Savatri! Thou has no father nor mother, nor any friends or kin. Thy every thought is centered on the Infinite Eternal—"

The girl lurched forward till she lay full-length before him and beat her forehead on the floor. "Forgive, forgive, Sublimity! Be patient with the dullest of thy pupils!" Her self-abasement was so complete that I felt almost sick with embarrassment for her.

"Proceed, then, but be mindful of your vow," he ordered.

"One of them, Sublimity, was known to me in the house wherein I dwelt in the world of ignorance," she replied in a low, frightened voice as she once more struggled to her knees. "He was a doctor—a physician who in his ignorance pretended to have power to cure the ills of the flesh—"

"Instruct him, Savatri," the Swami nodded to her.

"Dr. Trowbridge," she turned her great eyes, large and gentle as a gazelle's, full on me, "I pity you. You struggle in the dark, even as I did before the light of Truth Eternal fell on me. Do you not know, you foolish old man; that what we call the flesh, the body, all that we think material, are but the faintest shadows of shadows, and nothing real exists in the universe but thought? By treating what we call our bodies with contempt, by starving them, tormenting them, bringing them to utter and complete subjection, we weaken them but strengthen our souls. Anon we shall succeed in sloughing them away, flinging off the useless and undying—"

"*Cordieu, Mademoiselle*, you interest me," de Grandin broke in. "And the end of it is—"

"Nothing," she replied. "From the Infinite we came, and slowly toward the Infinite we struggle through countless incarnations. At last we shall attain perfection and be absorbed into the Infinite, all trace of self—of what you call the personality—forever lost and blotted out."

"Well said, my pupil," the Swami commended softly. "But is not the Way of Truth too hard for you? I have thought sometimes you were not able to endure the task of bodily subjection—"

"Sublimity!" Austine fell forward on her face and clasped her hands across her bowed neck. "Have gracious pity! Do not send me hence, I beg! If I have faltered in my duty it was not because I lacked the will; I had not strength to beat the flesh into complete subjection—"

THERE was something subtle and beguiling in the soft tone of his voice as he broke in: "For those who have the courage there is a short way to *Kailas*. There is a long and toilsome way, and a short, easy path.

"Omkar holds the door of *Kailas* open for those who would be reabsorbed into the Infinite without necessity for countless re-incarnations—"

A tremor like a spasm shook the girl's bowed body. "Sublimity," she panted, "say that I may take that way! Give me leave to go to *Kailas* through *Kurban*! Grant permission for my entry into the Ineffable Nothingness that brings rest and oblivion. I would be *Kurban*, Sublimity!"

"*Grand Dieu!*" de Grandin breathed.

"Ah," the Swami let the syllable out slowly. "Thou has made the choice thyself, Savatri. Remember, only thou canst make the choice—"

"I know, I know!" the girl broke in, breath coming in quick, sobbing gasps. "None but I can make the choice, none in heaven or in earth can revoke it. Record the vow, Sublimity! Freely, fully, voluntarily, I have made the choice. I will be *Kurban!*"

At a sign from the Swami she rose and turned to us. "I'm sorry, Dr. Trowbridge," she said gently, every trace of the frenzy that had possessed her completely gone. "You can never understand, neither can the others. I have come here of my own free will, and here I shall remain. In this place I have found such peace as I had never hoped to find on earth. Thank you for coming, and good-bye. I go to greater joys than ever woman knew before." She stretched a slender hand out, took mine in

a firm clasp, and turned away with a murmured, "Peace be with you."

"See here," I told the Swami as Austine slipped from the room, "I don't know what all this nonsense is about, but it's obvious to me Miss Doniphan is not sound mentally. I came here to observe her, and in my opinion she's not responsible—"

"You think so?" Ramapali interrupted sarcastically. "However unusual her actions may have seemed at first, you can hardly say she seemed irrational when she left, Dr. Trowbridge. Do you honestly believe any jury would commit her to an institution if she appeared as normal as she did a moment since? Perhaps you'll see things in a different light when you have thought them over."

"*Eh bien, Monsieur Swami*, we have not yet begun our thinking; I assure you," answered Jules de Grandin. "It may be we shall meet again—"

"I greatly doubt it, Dr. de Grandin," the Swami broke in. "Now, if you will excuse me—I would resume my contemplation."

"*Au 'voir, Monsieur*, but by no means *adieu*," de Grandin answered as he turned on his heel.

IT WAS shortly after three o'clock that afternoon when he called up to ask permission to bring a friend to dinner. "A most delightful person, friend Trowbridge. An Indian gentleman named Ram Chitra Das who has been most kind and helpful, and I will be more so. Yes."

Mr. Das proved a pleasant surprise. I had had visions of a sloe-eyed Oriental with a pink or green turban and an air of insufferable condescension. Had I not known his origin I should have mistaken the man de Grandin brought to dinner for a Spaniard or Italian. His dark eyes were alert and keen with more than a suggestion of humor in them, his features small and regular, his tailoring faultless and his accent reminiscent of Oxford. He was, it appeared, the son of the tenth son of a Nepalese princeling who had so far forgotten the conventions as to fall in love with and actually marry a *nautchni*—a solecism comparable to an American parson's son marrying a burlesque strip-teaser. But because the old prince loved his son, and because the son was so far removed from the throne

that the possibility of his succession was practically nil, the only punishment inflicted was banishment on a pension which equaled the income he would have enjoyed had he remained in the palace.

Ram Chitra Das was born in British India and for his first ten years was educated by a queer mixture of Mission School and native *gurus'* teaching. It was his father who insisted on his English education and his mother who saw that he received the training of a high-caste Hindu. "The dear old girl was frightfully keen on the princely blood, you know, even though the strain had begun to run pretty thin by the time it reached me."

When he was ten his father sent him to a good public school in England. He had been only fifteen when the World War broke out, but was given a commission as subaltern in an Indian regiment, fought in France, took his degree at Oxford after the war, and returned to India as a member of the Intelligence Section of the British Indian Police.

"Lord, no; I'm no Brahmin," he laughed when I commented on the ample justice he had done the roast beef at dinner. "The pater's caste was broken when he married the mater, you know, and whatever caste I had was smashed to bits when I crossed the ocean to England. I hadn't any desire to go through the disagreeable ceremony of having it restored. Sometimes I wonder what I really am. I was nurtured in the belief of the old gods of Hind, and several English parsons, not to mention kind old ladies, labored manfully to make a Christian of me. The net result is that I try to follow St. Paul's advice to prove all things and hold fast to that which is good. I've found a lot of good—and some things not entirely to my liking—in all religions."

"But you recall your early training?" de Grandin asked.

"Oh, yes, just as a worldly Christian adult recalls the catechisms he learned as a child. Like this, you mean?" He looked about him, finally crossed the drawing room and took a tiny ivory figure from a curio cabinet. It was perhaps an inch high and represented a peacock with spread tail.

Placing it on the coffee table, he stared fixedly at it, elbows on knees, hands inter-

laced beneath his chin. A moment—two—went by, and I experienced a slight chill along my spine as I saw the carved ivory rise half an inch from the table, circle round as if in flight, then settle down at least a foot from the spot where he had placed it.

"Why, that's the trick the Swami did!" I exclaimed, but Mr. Das shook his head.

"No, Dr. Trowbridge, that's the trick this fellow you call Ramapali pretended to do, and which Dr. de Grandin exposed so neatly. I assure you I had no strings tied to your peacock, and you saw that my hands were motionless and never nearer than my chin to the ivory."

"But—that's magic. True magic."

A GAIN he shook his head. "I wouldn't call it that, sir, although there are many who would. I don't pretend to understand it, any more than the dear old ladies who practice table tipping can explain why lifeless wood will vibrate and dance all round the parlor beneath their fingers. But just as I'm perfectly sure that spooks have nothing to do with the movements of the ladies' tables, I'm certain that neither gods nor demons had anything to do with making that bit of ivory seem to defy gravity. It's just one of those things for which we have no ready explanation—yet."

"Now," his laughing eyes became suddenly serious, "I'm interested in this Swami Ramapali, as he calls himself. From what Dr. de Grandin tells me, I think I know him. Some twenty years ago a young man named Michael Quinault was sent to jail in Bombay for practicing Christian wiles on the heathen in his blindness. He had been some sort of confidence man in the States, I understand. He certainly lacked confidence that day in Bombay when the judge sahib sentenced him to five years penal servitude for fleecing a Parsee widow out of her insurance money.

"He really should have thanked the judge, however, for jail proved just the thing he needed. No"—as I prepared a question"—it didn't reform him. It opened up new vistas. In jail he made the acquaintance of our slickest native criminals, and they can be very slick, believe me. He got a smattering of Hindustani, and a fair-working knowledge of Hindu philosophy

and religion. Learned something about Yoga, too. In fine, when he came out he was equipped to palm himself off as a genuine *guru*—that means holy man, or teacher, sometimes miracle-worker—on anybody not too well acquainted with the genuine article. He also had another souvenir of imprisonment. A severe case of fever had made him totally and permanently bald as an egg. That might have proved a handicap to most; it was a valuable asset to him in his new role of religious teacher and revealer of the Truth. We hear of him occasionally—he's swindled his way clear across the continent of Europe and the British Isles with his merry little masquerade, and done a handsome business in the States. His victims are nearly always women. There is a certain type of Western woman to whom anything oriental is simply irresistible, just as there's a type of oriental female who can't resist a Western man. He's an adept at picking his—what is it you chaps call 'em?—suckers?

"If it were just a matter of separating credulous ladies from their cash I shouldn't be so much concerned. That sort of thing's been going on since time began, and will probably continue till eternity replaces time. But from what Dr. de Grandin tells me there's something far more serious involved here."

"Indeed?" I answered. "What?"

"Murder."

"Murder?" I echoed, horrified.

"Murder, *parbleu!*" de Grandin seconded. "Consider, if you please: This Mademoiselle Santho who willed her whole estate to the Swami Ramapali-Quinault, then so conveniently shuffled off the mortal coil by snake-bite. I was greatly interested in her. So to the Bureau of Vital Statistics I went and looked at her death certificate: It was signed by Dr. William Macwhyte of Tunlaw Mills. You know him?"

"No."

"So did I. But I made his acquaintance. According to his report he was roused from bed early in the morning to minister to a lady at the Swami's colony who had been bitten by a serpent. 'What sort of serpent?' I ask him.

"A rattlesnake," he tells me.

"Indeed?" I asked to know. "And did you

you satisfy yourself concerning this, *cher collègue?*"

"But certainly," he tells me. "She was bitten in the ankle. The venom was injected directly into the posterior tibial artery about four inches above the astragalus. Death must have supervened within a very short time. There were the characteristic punctures where the fangs had pierced the epidermis and the derma to the subcutaneous tissue; slight lividities around the wounds, and considerable coagulation of the blood."

"Does it not leap to the eye?"

"Perhaps it leaps to yours. Not to mine."

"Forgive me, friend Trowbridge. I do forget you are a general practitioner, and though a very skillful one, not familiar with reptile bites. The venom of the rattlesnake destroys the protoplasm of the blood, rendering it uncoaguable. It is about ninety-eight percent blood-destroying in its action. The venom of the cobra, *tout le contraire*, permits the blood to thicken, since its action is a swift paralysis, the poison attacking the nerve centers at once, and being only two to five percent blood-destroying. You see?"

"Can't say I do."

"*Mordieu*, I did forget. Perhaps you did not read him: Just two weeks prior to la Santho's death two cobras—king cobras, *ophiophagus elaps*—were secretly abstracted from the reptile house at the zoological garden. I remembered reading of it in *le Journal* and wondering who would be such a great fool as to steal two six-foot tubes of sudden death. Then, when I put the pieces of the so unfortunate lady's death-puzzle together, 'Jules de Grandin,' I say to me, 'we have something here, Jules de Grandin,' and 'It are indubitably as you say, Jules de Grandin,' I reply to me, 'Just what it are we have I do not rightly know, but beyond the question of a doubt, we have something.'"

He turned to Ram Chitra Das. "Tell him what *Kurban* means, if you will be so kind," he ordered.

"*Kurban*," the Indian replied, "means self-immolation, the offering of oneself voluntarily as a human sacrifice. A Hindu woman may find quick access to *Kailas*—heavenly oblivion—by voluntarily offering herself as a sacrifice on the altar of Okmar,

which is one of Siva's less admirable attributes. Or a widow, who is doomed to countless incarnations for the sin of having permitted her husband to predecease her, may avert the curse by *Kurban*. Perfectly ridiculous, of course, yet it differs more in degree than kind from the Christian woman's entering a convent or enlisting in the Salvation Army or going as a nurse in a lepersorium."

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed. "We heard her say she wanted to become *Kurban*—"

"*Précisément*," de Grandin agreed. "I, too, heard it. Therefore, my friends, in half an hour Captain Chenevert of the State *gendarmarie* will meet us on the Andover Road, and to that sixty-three-times damned colony we go to see what happens. Are you with us, *mon vieux?*" he turned to Mr. Das.

"Oh, absolutely, old thing. This Quinault bloke led our police a merry chase. I'd like to be in at the death."

A HIGHWAY patrol car waited for us a mile or so out on the Andover Road, and as we drew abreast, Captain Chenevert thrust his head from a window. "Good evening, Dr. de Grandin; evening, Dr. Trowbridge," he greeted. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Das," as de Grandin introduced our guest. "What's all this hush-hush stuff about? If I hadn't worked with you before and didn't know you've always got something on the ball I'd have said, 'The hell with it,' tonight. I've got a big day tomorrow—"

"*Parbleu*, my worthy one, and you shall have a fine large night of it tonight, or Jules de Grandin is more greatly mistaken than he thinks! But yes."

Briefly he outlined the situation, and Chenevert's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. "Baldy Quinault?" he murmured. "Masqueradin' as a Hindu faker an' bumpin' women off with trick snakes. Well, what d'ye know? Let's get going."

"Softly, my friends, be silent, I implore you!" de Grandin bade as we drew up before the entrance-way of the colony. "We must make no noise—"

At his gestured command we flattened ourselves to the wall and he struck three

peremptory knocks on the door. There was no answer, but after the third repetition of the summons the wicket shot back, and though we could not see from our positions, we knew the porter looked through the spy-hole.

De Grandin crouched out of the warder's line of vision, silent as a shadow, till the wicket slammed shut, then beat three thunderous blows upon the planking of the gate. This time the response was instantaneous. The wicket shot back violently, the porter took a second look, then, seeing nothing, slipped the heavy bar from its braces and swung the door back a few inches, thrusting his head out.

Merci bien; merci bien une mille fois— a thousand thanks, my friend!" de Grandin chuckled. His blackjack swung in a short arc, not downward where its impact would have been cushioned by the fellow's turban, but sidewise, so that it took him squarely on the frontal bone and dropped him to his knees like a steer bludgeoned on the killing floor of a slaughter house.

Chenevert took over momentarily. "Two of you stay here," he ordered the four troopers who accompanied him. "If this bird comes out of it, see that he doesn't raise a holler. McCarty, you and Hansen come with me. Have your riot guns ready; we're apt to need 'em in a hurry. Okay, Dr. de Grandin. It's your ball from here on."

NOT a light showed anywhere, nor was there any sign of life among the little buildings of the colony, but from the central structure came a muted wailing of reed pipes played in tuneless unison and the muttering rhythm of a tom-tom. "Ah-ha?" the Frenchman whispered. "They have lost no time, these ones. Forward, *mes enfants!*"

Stepping high to avoid unseen obstacles, breathing through our mouths lest our respiration betray us, we hastened toward the central building, mounted its low single step and paused a breathless moment at its curtained doorway. "*Entrez, mais en silence!*" ordered Jules de Grandin.

Twin bronze braziers burned at the far side of the room, shedding a ruddy glow that stained rather than lightened the darkness of the place, and from them curled long spirals of heady incense as kneeling

women fed handfuls of aromatic powder on their glowing charcoal. The air was sickening with the mingled scents of aloes, sandalwood and cedar, and—even mixed with the perfumes of the aromatics its odor could not be disguised—*cannabis Indica*, the *bbang*, or hashish of the East, the drug of madness compared to which the marijuana of the West is as beer to brandy.

About the darkened room, their robes of cotton shining ghostly, leprous white against the gloom, some thirty figures, mostly women, crouched in attitudes of abject prostration, humming a low, wailing chant and emphasizing its crescendos by rising to their knees, hands held aloft, and clapping them together softly.

The mournful canticle came to a close, and from a farther doorway stepped the Swami Ramapali. His yellow robe had been replaced by a white gown of rhinestone-studded satin, a turban of white silk was bound about his head, and from its knot a brooch of brilliants caught the red reflection of the braziers' glow. Jeweled sandals shod his feet, and in his hand he held a rod of polished wood tipped with a knob shaped like an acorn. At sight of him the congregation groveled on the floor, then as a brazen gong clanged ominously rose to their knees and raised their hands in salute.

Two more deep, clanging strokes came from the unseen gong, and through the curtains of the door behind the Swami came Austine Doniphan. She, too, had changed her costumé. Gone was her wrapped robe of soiled cotton, and in its place she wore a short bodice of purple satin and a full skirt of gold tissue bound about the waist and hips with a scarf of crimson silk. Silver anklets clinked and chimed with each step that she took, and band on band of silver circled wrists and arms. Her dark hair had been smoothly parted in the middle, and down the part there ran a streak of vivid red. As I glanced at her bare feet I saw their soles were painted red to match the part in her hair, and when she raised her hands in salute to the Swami I saw their palms were stained a brilliant yellow. Memory rang a horrifying bell in my mind: Years ago I had been told by a missionary that the colors daubed on Austine's

head, hands and feet were thus applied to the bodies of Hindu women whose husbands survived them, and were never smeared on till the time and place of cremation had been fixed.

THE girl bent in a deep salaam to the Swami, then as the gong boomed three dull, brazen strokes, elevated hands above her head, pressed their yellow-painted palms together, and, rising on tiptoe, began gyrating rapidly. Faster and faster she whirled; the weighted hem of her gold-tissue dress rose slowly with centrifugal force until the garment stood out from her like a wheel and she was like a golden-petaled flower of which her white legs were the stem, the stiffly outstanding skirt the blades, and her body from the waist upward, the pistil.

"Look, for God's sake!" rasped Chenevert in my ear, and I choked on a horror-stricken breath as something like a narrow streak of shadow rippled from the doorway just behind the madly whirling girl. It was about the thickness of a steamship's hawser, and about its color, too, and bent and twisted sinuously in a series of conjoined W's, then coiled upon itself until the circle of its body and upreared head were like a giant, obscene Q. Then it uncoiled once more, lay upon the floor in a long, twisted line, and reared its wedge-shaped head to thrust forth a forked tongue. Slowly the steely whip of elongated body crept across the floor, nearer the girl's white, whirling feet, nearer—nearer.

The breath stopped in my throat. What was it Dr. Macwhyte had told de Grandin? Estrella Santho had died of snake-venom, injected directly into her posterior tibial artery, the great blood vessel that supplies the back of the foot—about four inches above the astragalus or ankle bone.

A ripple of movement showed in the wavering light cast by the braziers and a second cobra joined the first, its sphenoid head raised inquiringly, its molasses-colored tongue flickering forward like a jet of flame.

"Don't shoot! I heard Chenevert caution the troopers. They're too close. We'd be sure to hit her—"

Beside me, coming unexpectedly as a clap

of thunder on a clear day, there rose a sudden spiral of sound. Not strident, but soft, melodious, lilting, liquid as an ocarina played in middle register. With hands pressed tight against his lips, Ram Chitra Das was imitating the notes of an Indian flute. The music fluctuated from a slender spider-web of sound to a soft and throaty murmur like that of pigeons busy with their courtship. It was in a minor key, the mourning, sad lament that stamps all Oriental music, yet underneath its liquid, muted tones there was the faint suggestion of shrill, spiteful laughter.

The cobras heard it, and halted their zig-zagging course toward the madly whirling girl. One of them raised its head questioningly, then the other. Suspiciously they paused a moment, swaying slowly, uncertainly, then turned away from Austine and faced Ram Chitra Das. The foremost snake raised half a yard of mottled body from the floor, and as it reared itself the hood behind its head expanded slowly till it looked like a gigantic toadstool fastened to the sinuous barrel of its body just behind the head. The second cobra seemed to struggle for a moment, then, like the first, began to rise. Slowly, apparently unwillingly, they rose and rose; now they were balancing upon what seemed no more than half a foot of coiled tail, and their heads swayed slowly with a circular motion in time to the flute's rhythm.

"Get her to hell away from there!" Rari Chitra Das brought his cupped hands down from his lips an instant. "I'll hold the snakes—be quick!"

"Take her, Trowbridge, *mon vieux*," de Grandin cried as he kicked his way through the groveling congregation toward the Swami. "Take her in your arms and bear her hence. This one is mine!"

Avoiding the charmed snakes as widely as I could, I put my arms about Austine and drew her to me. She made no struggle as I lifted her, but lay as limp and helpless as a woman in a swoon.

The little Frenchman's fist shot out and cracked against the Swami's chin with a sharp impact. "*Hola, mon ami*," he cried, "here is company you did not expect at your party!" A second uppercut sent the Swami reeling back against the wall, and before

he could regain his balance handcuffs snapped upon his wrists. "I make you arrested for the murder of Estrella Santho and the attempted murder of Austine Doniphan, Michael Quinault alias Ramapali," de Grandin announced. "This time, *par la barbe d'un babouin rouge*, I think you will not beat the rap. No, not at all, by damn it!"

Ram Chitra Das had followed us, and stood above the swaying cobras. "*Hayah-bou!*" he cried as he ceased humming the flute-tune. "The dance is ended, favored ones of Brahm. The time for rest has come!"

Slowly, as if they had been lowered on invisible threads, the almost erect snakes sank to the floor and lay there inertly, quivering slightly, but giving no further sign of life. Unceremoniously as if he gathered up two lengths of rope Ram Chitra Das picked them up, seizing them carefully behind the head, and bore them, tails trailing flaccidly on the floor, through the doorway whence they had emerged.

"Nobody move!" Chenevert's voice rang like metal striking metal. "You're all under arrest as material witnesses. Take 'em in charge, McCarty."

"**M**OST of it's plain," I told de Grandin as he, Ram Chitra Das and I disposed of a bottle of champagne in my study some hours later. "I'm frank to admit, though, that what was plain as a pikestaff to you meant nothing to me until you'd pointed it out. But how d'ye account for Austine's apparent desire to offer herself as a sacrifice? Self-preservation is one of the strongest instinctive urges—"

"In normal people, yes," he agreed. "But this young woman, like all too many of her generation, is definitely neurotic. We all have a queer streak in us somewhere, and if the streak becomes too wide we are thrown off our mental balance. Man's innate impulse, as we know all too well, is to take, and woman's is to give. It is this 'give complex'—a series of emotionally accented impulses in a suppressed state—that fills our hospitals with nurses, that makes daughters devote their lives to selfish parents, keeps women true to underserving husbands. But when this natural trend in

woman gets out of hand it becomes pathological. We call it masochism, sometimes algolagnia. Very well. Consider:

"She is neurotically unbalanced, this Mademoiselle Austine. Guided in the proper channels her over-developed 'give impulse' might have made her a second Florence Nightingale. Alas, it had no guidance. It was left to run riot, and her inhibitions were naturally less strong than those of normal young women. When first we met her in the colony of the Swami I thought that I detected the scent of cannabis Indica—hashish—on her hair and garments. This drug, as you know, has a powerful tendency to increase dormant, suppressed desires, to render them unnaturally—sometimes overwhelmingly—strong. When Captain Chenevert and I went through the Swami's private rooms we found hundreds of drugged cigarettes—tobacco mixed with hashish—what you call reefers. These he had systematically led his followers to smoke until they had become addicts, living in an unreal world of drug-created fantasy, wholly free from the inhibitions which ordinary sane people possess as brakes upon their impulses, especially their unnatural or 'queer' impulses. Yes. Certainly. Of course.

"Now, when one takes a sensitive, neurotic young woman and keeps her in a virtually continuous state of drug-intoxication for upward of three months she makes a fertile soil in which suggestion—either good or bad—may be implanted. Constantly, without remission, this so vile Quinault had dinned into her ears the suggestion that she give herself as a sacrifice—that she become *Kurban*. She had completely lost whatever inhibitions she once had. Her instinct for self-preservation was entirely blotted out, and her natural womanly instincts cried incessantly 'give—give—give!' with thousand-tongued insistence, until she felt the only way to happiness lay in offering herself as a sacrifice.

"You remember when she told the Swami she would become *Kurban*? She hesitated for a long moment before she made the declaration, then, all at once she burst out with the offer of herself so frenziedly that she could scarcely make her words coherent. That was entirely symptomatic. So was the

claim that followed when she had made the hard choice. They had so constantly suggested the act to her that her poor drugged brain had come to regard it as inevitable. Natural love of life had fought against the act, but when she'd finally given way and made the decision to become *Kurban* she felt a positive relief. The long, hard, losing struggle had come to an end.

"The poor Mademoiselle Santho was less fortunate. Her they inveigled into making a will leaving her fortune to the unspeakable Quinault, then killed her ruthlessly. Mademoiselle Austine was next in line, and when we finish our investigation I am convinced that we shall find that every person in that colony is wealthy in his own right, and able to dispose of a neat fortune by will. Yes, I am certain.

"Some they would have killed as they killed la Santho and attempted to kill Mademoiselle Austine. The others they would

have blackmailed mercilessly, for all of them were parties to the murders in a way, and would have paid and paid to keep their part in them from being known. But of course—"

"Why did you take those cobras up?" I asked Ram Chitra Das. "You could have killed them easily enough."

The Indian grinned amiably at me. "I didn't serve with the police for nothing, sir. Those snakes alive will make good evidence against Quinault when they try him for the murder of Miss Santho and the attempted murder of Miss Doniphan. They'd have been no use to us if I had killed them."

"*Mon brave,*" the little Frenchman complimented. "My old wise one! *Morbleu,* but you do think of everything! Come; let us have another little so small drink"—he refilled our glasses and raised his toward the Indian—"to your cleverness, which is second only to de Grandin's, my friend!"