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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor



**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**

# The House of the Three Corpses

By SEABURY QUINN

*What weird statues stood guard over the grave of José Gutierrez and his wife?—a tale of poisonous centipedes, weird vengeance, and a brilliant exploit of Jules de Grandin*

WE WERE walking home from Mrs. Douglas Lemworth's garden party.

Once a year the Old Dragon of Harrisonville Society holds a "fair" for blind and crippled children, and if you are engaged in the professions you attend, buy several wholly useless knickknacks at outrageous prices, drink a glass of punch or cup of tea and eat a cake or two, then leave as unobtrusively as possible. Even in most favorable conditions her parties are horrendous; tonight it had been a foretaste of Purgatory.

Though dark had long since fallen, the city sweltered in the mid-June heat. Sidewalks and roadways were hot to the touch; even the moon, just past the full and shaped like a bent pie-plate, seemed panting in a febrile sky. Absolutely stirless, the air seemed pressing down like a black blanket dipped in steaming water, and as Jules de Grandin simmered outwardly he boiled with fury within.

"*Grand Dieu des chats,*" he fumed, "what an abominable *soirée!* It was not bad enough that they should stifle us with vapid talk and senseless laughter, that they should force us to be polite when we wished to shed our coats and shoes and act the rowdy; *non, cordieu,* they must pile insult upon injury and give us *sacré* lemon punch to drink! I am outraged and affronted. I am maimed for life; never

shall I get my face straight from that dreadful taste!"

Despite my own discomfort I could not forbear a grin. The look of wrathful incredulity upon his face when he discovered that the lemonade was only lemonade was funnier than anything I'd seen in months.

"Well, cheer up," I consoled as we turned from the side street into the avenue, "we'll be home soon and then we'll have a Tom Collins."

"Ah, lovely thought!" he breathed ecstatically. "To shed these so uncomfortable clothes, to feel the cool gin trickle down our throats—*merbleu,* my friend, is not that strange?"

"Eh?" I answered, startled by his sudden change of subject. "What?"

"Regard her, if you please. *La porte de la maison,* she is open."

Following the direction of his nod I saw the door of a big house across the street swing idly on its hinges, displaying a vista of dimly lighted hall.

In almost any other section of the city opened front doors on a night like this would have been natural as hatless men or girls without their stockings; but not in Tuscarora Avenue. That street is the last outpost of the pre-Depression era. House-girls in black bombazine and stiff white lawn may still be seen at work with mop and pail upon its low white-marble stoops at daybreak, lace curtains hang in primly

white defiance of a changing world at its immaculately polished windows, housemen in uniform come silent-footed as trained cats to take the visitor's hat and gloves and walking-stick; no matter what the temperature may be, Tuscarora Avenue's street doors are never left open. "Perhaps"—I began; then—"good heavens!"

Sharp and poignant as an acid-burn, wordless, but hair-raising in intensity, the hail came to us from the open door.

"*Allons!*" de Grandin cried. "*Au secours!*"

We dashed across the street, but at the mansion's small square porch we paused involuntarily. The place seemed so substantially complacent, so smugly assured. . . . "We shall feel like two *poissons d'avril* if what we heard was someone crying out in a bad dream," he murmured as he tapped his stick on the sidewalk. "No matter, better to be laughed at for our pains than emulate the priests and Levites when someone stands in need of help."

He tiptoed up the steps and pushed the pearl button by the open door.

Somewhere inside the house a bell shrilled stridently, called again as he pressed on the button, and repeated its demand once more as he gave a last impatient jab. But no footsteps on the polished floor told us that our summons had been heard.

"Humph, looks as if we were mistaken, after all," I murmured. "Maybe the cry came from another house——"

"*Sang du diable!* Look well, my friend, and tell me if you see what I see!" Low and imperative, his whispered command came. Through the open door he pointed toward the end of the wide hall where an elaborately carved balustrade marked the ascent of a flight of winding stairs.

Just below the stair-bend stood a Florentine gilt chair and in it, hunched forward as though the victim of a sudden case of cramps, sat a man in house-servant's

livery, green trousers and swallowtail coat corded with red braid, yellow-and-black waistcoat striped horizontally, and stiff-bosomed skirt.

I took the major details of the costume in subconsciously, for though his shirt-front was one of the least conspicuous items of his regalia, it seized and held my gaze. Across its left side, widening slowly to the waistcoat's V, was a dull reddish stain which profaned the linen's whiteness as a sudden shriek might violate a quiet night. And like a shriek the stain screamed out one single scarlet word—Murder!

DE GRANDIN let his breath out in a suppressed "*ba!*" as he stepped across the threshold and advanced upon the seated man.

"Is he—he's——" I began, knowing all the time the answer which his nod confirmed.

"*Mais oui*, like a herring," he replied as he felt the fellow's pulse a moment, then let the lifeless hand fall back. "Unless I err more greatly than I think, he died *comme ça*"—he snapped his fingers softly; then:

"Come, let us see what else there is to see, but have the caution, *mon vieux*, it may be we are not alone."

I reached the door which let off from the rear of the hall first and laid my hand upon the knob, but before I had a chance to turn it he had jerked me back. "*Mais non*," he cautioned, "not that way, my friend; do this."

Touching the handle lightly he sprang the latch, then drew back his foot and drove a vicious kick against the polished panels, sending the door crashing back against the wall.

Poised on his toes he waited for an instant, then grasped the handle of his cane as if it were a sword-hilt and the lower part as though it were a scabbard and pressed soundlessly through the doorway.

"*Bien*," he whispered as he looked back with a nod, "the way seems clear." As I joined him at the threshold:

"Never open doors that way, my friend, when you are in a house whose shadows may conceal a murderer. Not long ago, to judge by the condition of that poor one yonder, someone did a bloody killing; for all we know he is still here and not at all averse to sending us to join his other victim. Had he lurked behind this door he could have shot you like a dog, or slit your gizzard with a knife as you came through, for you were coming from a lighted room into the dark, and would have made the perfect mark. *Hé*, but the naughty one who would assassinate de Grandin needs to rise before the sun. I am not to be caught napping. By no means. Had a wicked one been standing in concealment by that door, his head would surely have been soundly knocked against the wall when I kicked it, much of the fight would have been banged from him, and the advantage would be mine. You apprehend?"

I nodded appreciation of his wisdom as we stepped from the dim light of the hall into the faint gloom of the room beyond.

It was a dining-room, a long, high-ceilinged dining-room appointed with the equipment of gracious living. A long oval mahogany table of pure Sheraton design occupied the center of the floor, its polished surface giving back dim mirrorings of the pieces with which it had been set. In the center a silver girandole held a flat bouquet of early summer roses, a silver bowl of fruit—grapes, pomegranates and apricots—stood near the farther end, while a Sheffield coffee service graced the end near us. A demi-tasse of eggshell lusterware stood near the table edge; another lay upon its side, its spilled contents disfiguring the polished wood. A pair of diminutive liqueur glasses, not entirely drained, stood near the coffee cups, their

facets reflecting the flickering light of two tall candles burning in high silver standards at each end of the table. A chair had been pushed back as though its occupant had risen hastily; another lay upon its side on the floor. To me it seemed as if the well-bred silence of the room was holding its breath in shocked surprise at some scene of violence lately witnessed.

"Nobody's here," I whispered, unconsciously and instinctively lowering my voice as one does in church or at a funeral. "Maybe they ran out when——"

"You say so?" he broke in. "*Regardez, s'il vous plaît.*"

He had seized one of the candles from the table and lifted it above his head, driving the shadows farther back into the corners of the room. As the light strengthened he pointed toward a high three-paneled Japanese screen which marked the entrance to the service-pantry.

Something hot and hard seemed forming in my throat as my eyes came to rest at the point toward which his pointing stick was aimed. Protruding from behind the screen an inch or so into the beam of candlelight was something which picked up the rays and threw them back in dichromatic reflections, a woman's silver-kid evening sandal and the ox-blood lacquer of her carefully kept toenails.

He strode across the room and folded back the screen.

She lay upon her side, a rather small, plump woman with a mass of tawny hair. One delicately tinted cheek was cradled in the curve of her bent elbow, and her mane of bronze-brown hair was swirling unconfined about her face like a cascade of molten copper. Her white-crêpe evening gown, cut in the severe lines which proclaimed the art of a master dressmaker, displayed a rent where the high heel of her sandal had caught in its hem, her corded girdle had come unfastened and trailed beside her on the floor, and on the low-cut bodice

of her frock was a hand-wide soil of red—such a stain as marked the shirtfront of the dead servant in the hall.

One glance at her face, the startled, suffering expression, the half-closed eyes, the partly opened lips, told us it was needless to inquire further. She too was dead.

“*E H BIEN,*” de Grandin tweaked the needle-points of his mustache, “he was no retailer, this one. When he went in for murder he did it in the grand manner, *n'est-ce-pas?* Put the screen back, if you please, exactly as we found it. We must leave things intact for the police and the coroner.”

He led the way into the wide, bay-windowed drawing-room at the front of the house, raised his candle a moment; then: “*Nom d'un nom d'un nom d'un nom,* another!” he exclaimed.

He had not exaggerated. Lying on the low ottoman beside the door communicating with the hall was a man in dinner clothes, dark-skinned, sleek, well groomed, hands folded peacefully upon his breast, silk-stockinged ankles crossed, and on the white surface of his dress shirt was the same ghastly stain which we had found upon the servant in the hall and the murdered woman in the dining-room.

De Grandin eyed the oddly composed corpse in baffled speculation, as if he added up a column of figures and was puzzled at the unexpected answer. “*Que extraordinaire!*” he murmured, then, amazingly, gave vent to a low chuckle. “*Comme le temps de la prohibition, n'est-ce-pas?*”

His Gallic humor failed to register with me. “I don't see anything so droll about it,” I scowled, “and what had Prohibition to do with——”

“*Tenez,* ever literal as a sausage, are you not, my old one? Cannot you see the connection? Observe him closely, if you please. No one ever died like that, not even in his bed. No, certainly. He was

carried here and arranged thus, much in the way the gangsters of the Prohibition era laid their victims out when they had placed them on the spot.

“But yes, this business is clear as water from a spring. It fairly leaps to meet the eye. This was no robbery, no casual crime. It was carefully premeditated, planned and executed in accordance with a previously-agreed-upon program, as pitilessly as the heartlessness of hell. The servant might have been, and doubtless was, killed to stop his mouth, the woman looks as if she might have died in flight, but this one? *Non.* He was killed, then dragged or carried here, then carefully arranged as if to fit into his casket.”

Something evil and soft-footed seemed to stalk into that quiet room. There was no seeing it or hearing it, only the feeling, sudden and oppressive, as if the mid-June heat evaporated and in its place had come a leering, clammy coldness. Small red ants seemed crawling on my scalp; there was an oddly eery prickling in the hollows of my legs behind the knees. “Let's get out of here,” I pleaded. “The police——”

He seemed to waken from a reverie. “But yes, of course,” he assented, “the police must be notified. Will not you call them, *mon vieux?* Ask for the good Costello; we need his wisdom and experience in such a case.”

I scurried back into the entranceway, picked up the receiver, and dialed police headquarters. No buzzing answered as I spun the dial. The rubber instrument might have been a spool of wood for all the life it showed. Again and again I snapped the hook down, but without result.

“You have them—he is coming, the good sergeant?” de Grandin asked, emerging from the dining-room with the candle in one hand, his sword-stick in the other.

“No, I can't seem to get any response,” I answered.

"U'm?" He pressed the instrument against his ear a moment. "One is not surprised. The wires have been cut."

He put the phone back on its tabouret and his small, keen face, flushed with heat and excitement, was more like that of an eager tom-cat than ever.

"My friend," he told me earnestly, "I damn think we have put our feet into a case which will bear scrutinizing."

"But I thought you'd given up criminal investigation——"

"*En vérité*, I have so; but this is something more. Tell me, what does ritualistic murder suggest to your mind?"

"One of two things, a malevolent secret society or a cult of some sort."

He nodded. "You have right, my friend. Murder as such is criminal, though sometimes I think it fully justified; but the killing of a man with ritual and deliberation is an affront not only to the law, but to the Lord. It is the devil's business, and as such it interests me. Come, let us go."

WE HURRIED to the cross street, walked a block down Myrtle Avenue and found an all-night pharmacy.

"*Holà, mon vieux*," I heard him call as his connection with headquarters was established, "I have a case for you. *Non*, great stupid one, not a case of beer, a case of murder. Three of them, *par la barbe d'un corbeau rouge!*"

Then he closed the phone booth door to shut the traffic noises out, and his animated conversation came to me only as an unintelligible hum.

"The sergeant tells me that the owners of the house have been living on the Riviera since last year," he told me as we started toward the murder mansion. "They rented it furnished to a family of Spaniards some eight months ago. That is all he knows at present, but he is having an investigation made. As soon as he has

viewed the scene he'll take us to headquarters, where we may find——"

"Look out!" I warned, seizing his elbow and dragging him back to the curb as he stepped down into the street. A long, black, shiny, low-slung car had swung around the corner, driven at a furious pace and missing him by inches.

"*Bête, miserable!*" he glared at the retreating vehicle. "Must you rush him to his grave so quickly?"

I stared at him, astonished. "What——"

"It was a hearse," he explained. "One of those new vehicles designed to simulate a limousine. *Eh bien*, one wonders if it fools the dead man as he rides in it and makes him think he is alive and going for a pleasure trip?" He set a cigarette alight, then muttered angrily: "I saw his number. I shall report him to the good Costello."

The big police car, driven like the wind and turning out for no one, drew alongside the curb just as we reached the house, and Costello ran across the sidewalk to shake hands.

"There musta been some doin's here, from what you tell me, sor," he greeted.

"There were, indeed, my friend. Three of them there were, one in the entrance-way, one in the dinging-room, one in the——*mon Dieu*, Friend Trowbridge, look!"

I glanced past him into the hall, steeling my nerves against the sight of the dead houseman keeping silent vigil over his dead employers, then gasped in sheer astonishment. Everything was as we'd left it; the hall lamp still glowed warmly in its shade of bronze fretwork, the big gilt chair still stood below the curve of the stairway, but——the murdered man had disappeared.

COSTELLO mopped his streaming forehead with a sopping handkerchief. "Where's this here now dead guy, sor?" he asked.

De Grandin muttered something unintelligible as he led us through the hall,

across the darkened dining-room, and pushed back the carved screen. Nothing but the smudge of shadow where our bodies blocked the candlelight was there.

"*Parbleu!*" de Grandin muttered, tugged the tip of his mustache, and turned upon his heel to lead us to the drawing-room. The low ottoman, upholstered in brocaded satin, stood in the same position against the damask-draped wall, but on it was no sign or trace of the dead man we'd seen ten minutes earlier.

Costello drew a stogie from his pocket and bit its end off carefully, blowing wisps of tobacco from his mouth as he struck a match against his trousers. "There doesn't seem to be much doin' in th' line o' murder here right now, sor," he announced, keeping eyes resolutely fixed upon the match-flame as he drew a few quick puffs on his cigar. "Ye're sure ye seen them dead folk here—in this house? These buildin's look enough alike to be all five o' th' Dionne quins. Besides, it's a hot night. We're apt to see things that ain't there. Maybe——"

"'Maybe' be double-broiled upon the grates of blazing hell!" de Grandin almost shrieked. "Am I a fool, a simpleton, a zany? Have I been a physician for thirty years, yet not be able to know when I see a dead corpse? *Ab bab*, I tell you——"

Upstairs, apparently from the room immediately above us, there came a sudden wail, deep, long-drawn, rising with swift-tightening tension till it vanished in the thinness of an overstrained crescendo.

"Howly Mither!" cried Costello.

"Good heavens!" I ejaculated. "What the——"

"*Avec moi, mes enfants!*" de Grandin shouted. "Come with me. Corpses come and corpses go, but there is one who needs our help!"<sup>1</sup>

With cat-like swiftness he rushed up the steps, paused a moment at the stair-head, then turned sharply to the left.

I was close behind him as he scuttled down the hall and kicked against the door that led into the chamber just above the drawing-room. Panting with the labor of the hurried climb, Costello stood at my elbow as the door flew back with a bang and we almost fell into the room.

Sitting in the middle of the floor, stockings straight out before her, like a little girl at play, was a young woman—twenty-one or -two, I judged—dressed in a charming dinner frock of pastel blue georgette, a satin sandal in each hand. As we entered she shook back the strands of her almost iridescent black hair from before her face and beat against the floor with her slippers, like the trap-drummer of a band striking his instruments, then fell to laughing — a high-pitched, eery laugh; the laugh of utter, irresponsible idiocy.

"*Sí, sí, sí, sí!*" she cried, then fell into a sort of lilting, rhythmic song. "*Escolopendra! La escolopendra! La escolopendra muy inhumana;*" She drummed a sort of syncopated accompaniment to the words against the floor with her sandals, then raised the tempo of her blows until the spool-heels beat a sustained rat-tat on the boards as though she were attempting to crush some vile crawling thing that crept invisible around her on the floor.

"*Escolopendra, escolopendra!*" The words rose to a shriek that thinned out to a squeaking wail as she leaped unsteadily to her silk-cased feet and her wisp of frock swirled round her slender graceful legs when she bounded to the center of the bed and gathered her skirts round her, for all the world like a woman in deadly terror of a mouse.

"*Esto que es?*—what is this?" Costello asked as he stepped forward. "What talk is this of *una escolopendra*—a centipede—*chiquita?*"

"*Ohé, caballero,*" the girl cried tremulously, "have pity on poor Constancia and

save her from the centipedes. They are all about, scores of them, hundreds, thousands! Help, oh, help me, I implore you!" She held her little hands beseechingly to him, and her voice rose to a thin and rasping scream as she repeated the dread word, "*escolopendra—escolopendra!*"

"Whist, mavourneen, if 'tis centipedes as scares ye, ye can set yerself aisy. Sure, it's Jerry Costello as won't let one of 'em come near ye."

Reaching up, he gathered her into his arms as if she were a child. "Come on, sors," he suggested, "let's git goin'. This pore gur-rl's real enough, 'spite of all th' gallopin' corpses that ye've seen around here."

De Grandin in the lead, we hastened down the hall, and were almost at the stairs when he halted us with upraised hand. "*A silence!*" he commanded, "*écoutez!*"

Very faintly it came to us, more a whimper than a moan; low, frightened, weak. "*Morbleu!*" de Grandin exclaimed as he turned the handle, kicked the door, and disappeared into the bedroom like a diving duck.

I followed, and Costello, with the girl still in his arms, came after me. In a wicker chair beside the chamber's window sat a young man, the mad girl's brother, judging by their strong resemblance to each other, gently rocking to and fro and moaning softly to himself. He was dressed in dinner clothes, but they were woefully disheveled.

His collar had been torn half from his shirt; his tie, unknotted, hung limply round his neck; the bosom of his shirt had been wrenched from its studs and bellied out from his chest like the sail of a full-rigged ship standing before the wind.

"Howly Moses!" Costello tilted his straw hat down on his nose, then pushed it back upon his head. "Another of 'em?"

"Gregorio, *hermano mio!*" the girl Cos-

tello carried cried. "Gregorio—*las escolopendras—*"

But the young man paid no heed. He bent forward in his chair, eyes riveted upon his shoe-tips, and hummed a sort of tuneless song to himself, pausing now and then to utter a low moan, then smile foolishly, like a man fuddled with liquor.

"Hey, Clancy," Costello hurried to the stairhead and called down, "come up here on th' run; we got a couple o' nuts!"

The burly uniformed patrolman came up the stairs three at a time, joined us in the bedroom and drew the drooling youth up from his chair. "Up ye come, young felly me lad," he ordered. "Come on out o' this, an' mind ye don't make anny fuss."

The boy was docile enough. Tottering and staggering as though three-quarters drunk, but otherwise quite tractable, he went with Clancy down the stairs and made no effort at resistance as they thrust him into the police car.

Costello placed the girl in the back seat beside her brother and turned uncertainly to de Grandin. "Well, sor, now we got 'em, what're we goin' to do wid 'em, I dunno?" he asked.

"Do with them?" the little Frenchman echoed acidly. "How should I know that? What does one usually do with lunatics? Take them riding in the park, take them to dinner and the theatre, buy them lollypops and ice cream—if all else fails, you might convey them to the City Hospital. Me, I go to research that never-quite-sufficiently-to-be-anathematized house. I tell you that I saw three corpses there, as dead as mut-ton and as real as taxes. I shall not rest till I have found them. Can they play hide-and-seek with me? Shall three cadavers make the monkey out of me? I tell you no!"

"O. K., sor, I'll go wid ye," agreed Costello, but to me he whispered, "Stay wid 'im, Doctor Trowbridge, sor. I'm



feared th' heat has touched 'im in th' head."

WITH the little Frenchman in the lead we marched into the hall again and, following the line of our first search, paused before the screen that masked the entrance to the service-pantry.

"See, look, observe," he ordered as he found the light switch and snapped the current on. "I tell you that a woman's body lay right here, and—*a-ab?*" He dropped upon his knees and pointed to a globular black button on the polished hardwood floor.

"U'm?" Costello grunted noncommittally, bending forward to inspect the globe. "What is it, sor, a bit o' jet?"

"Jet?" de Grandin echoed in disgust. "*Grand Dieu des porcs*, where are your eyes? Touch it!"

The sergeant put a tentative forefinger on the gleaming orb, then drew back suddenly, his heat-flushed face a thought paler. Where his finger had pressed it the button had gone flat, lost its rotundity and become a tiny pool of viscous liquid. What he had mistaken for a solid substance was a great drop of partly congealed blood.

"Bedad!" he wiped his finger on his trousers, then scrubbed it with his handkerchief. "What wuz it, sor? It looks like——"

"*Précisément*. It is," the Frenchman told him in a level, toneless voice. "That is exactly what it is, my friend. The heart's blood from the poor dead woman whom neither I nor good Friend Trowbridge saw here before we called you."

"Well, I'll be——" Costello began, and:

"One can almost find it in his heart to hope you will," cut in de Grandin. "You have made me the insult, you have intimated that I did not know a corpse when I beheld one, that I had hallucinations

in the head—*ab bab*, at times you do annoy me past endurance!"

Grinning half maliciously, half derisively, he straightened from his knees and nodded toward the stairs.

"Let us go up and see what else it was Friend Trowbridge and I imagined when we first came to this house of the three corpses," he ordered.

We climbed the winding stairs, every sense alert for token of the unseen murderers or their victims, and walked down to the room where we had found the mad girl raving of the centipedes.

"Now," de Grandin cast a quick, stock-taking glance around the chamber, "one wonders why she babbled of '*las escolopendras*.' Even the insane do not harp upon one string without some provocation. It might have been that—stand back, my friends; beware!"

We stared at him in open-mouthed amazement, wondering if the room's influence had affected him, but he paid us no more heed than if we had been bits of lifeless furniture. Slowly, stepping softly on his toes, silent-footed as a cat that stalks a mouse, he was creeping toward the chintz-draped bedstead in the center of the room. And as he advanced noiselessly I heard a faint, queer, clattering sound, as though some mechanical toy, almost run down, were scratching on the bare, bright polished floor beyond the shadow of the bed.

Chin thrust forward, lips drawn back in a half snarl, mustache aquiver, the little Frenchman advanced some three feet or so, then quickly slipped the rapier blade from his sword-stick and stood poised, one foot forward, one drawn back, knees slightly bent, his bright blade slanting down in the beam of the electric light.

"*Sa-ba!*" He stabbed swiftly at the shadows and whipped his blade back. As he held the steel aloft for our inspection we saw a thing that writhed and twisted on its

point, an unclean thing six inches or so long; a many-jointed, horn-armed bit of obscenity which doubled convulsively into a sharp horseshoe-curve, then bent itself into a U, and waved a score or more of crooked, claw-armed legs in pain and fury as it writhed.

"Observe her very carefully," he ordered. "Medusa on a hundred legs, '*la escolopendra*.' I have seen her kind in Africa and Asia and South America, but never of this size. One does not wonder that the poor young *mademoiselle* was frightened into idiocy by the knowledge that this lurked among the shadows of the room. It is a lucky thing I heard her clawing on the floor a moment since and recognized her footsteps; had she gotten up a trouser-leg and sunk her venomous mandibles in one of us—*tiens*, that one would soon have found himself immersed in flowers, but unable to enjoy their scent. Yes, certainly."

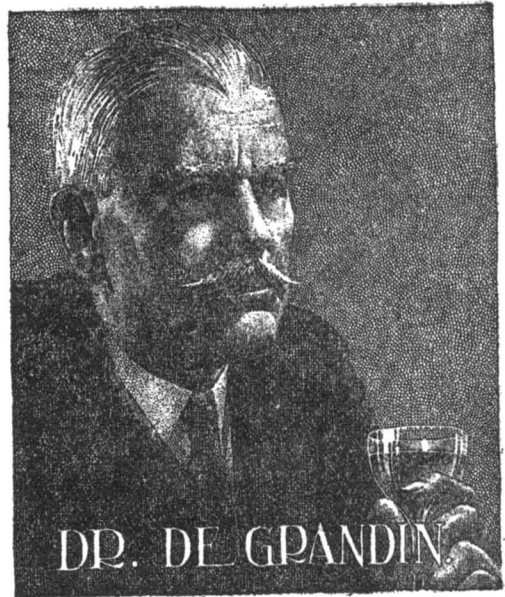
"Ye said a mouthful there, sor," Costello agreed. "I've seen 'em in th' Filly-pines—'twas there I learnt th' Spanish lingo so's I understood th' pore gur-rl's ravin's—an' no one needs to tell me about 'em. Shtep careful, sors; perhaps there's more of 'em about. They hate th' light like Satan hates th' Mass, an' our pants would make a fine place for their hidin'. It's glad I am ye seen th' poison little divil first, Doctor de Grandin, sor."

"CALLING all cars; attention all cars," a voice was droning through the police car's radio as we left the house. "Be on the lookout for a funeral car—a limousine hearse—license number F373-471. Reported stolen from in front of 723 Westmorland Street. License number F373-471. That is all."

"*Ab-ba*," de Grandin exclaimed. "*Ab-ba-ba?*"

"What is it, sor?" Costello asked.

"The joke has been on me, but now I



think that we shall turn the laugh on them. One sees it all. But of course!"

"What——" I began, but he motioned me to silence.

"The hearse which almost ran me down, whence did it come, Friend Trowbridge?"

"Down this street; it almost clipped you as we started to cross at——"

"*Précisément, exactement*; quite so. You have very right, my friend. And the address whence the stolen car was pilfered, where is it, *mon Sergent?*"

"Right round th' corner, sor. 'Bout halfway between this street an' Myrtle Avenoo——"

"Perfectly. It fits together like a picture-puzzle. Consider, if you please: Three bodies lie here, a hearse is stolen just around the corner; the bodies disappear, so does the hearse. Find one and you shall find the others, I damn think."

"THANK you kindly, gentlemen; all contributions to our stock of assorted nuts are gratefully received." Doctor Donovan, in charge of H-3, the psychopathic ward at City Hospital, grinned amiably at us. "You say you found 'em bab-

bling in a house in Tuscarora Avenue? Pair o' howlin' swells, eh? Well, we'll try to make 'em comfortable, though they can't have caviar for breakfast, and we're just fresh out o' pâté de foie gras. Still——"

"Doctor Donovan"—an interne pushed the superintendent's office door four inches open and nodded to our host.

"Yes, Ridgway?" asked Donovan.

"It's about the man and woman just brought in. It looks to me as if they had been drugged."

"Eh? The devil! What makes you think so?"

"Doctor Amlie took the girl and I examined the man. He seemed half drunk to me, and as I was preparing the test for alcoholism an urgent message came from Doctor Amlie.

"I left my patient with a male nurse and hurried over to the women's section. Amlie was all hot and bothered. 'What d'ye think o' this?' she asked me as she pointed to a spot of ecchymosis bigger than a silver dollar on her patient's arm. It was just above the common tendon of the triceps, and surrounded the pit of a big needle-wound. Looked to me as if she'd had a hypo awkwardly administered. She couldn't 'a' given it to herself.

"Amlie wanted to test for morphine or cocain, but I talked her out of it. Cocain's hardly ever injected except for surgery, and morphine makes 'em lethargic. This girl was almost hysterical, jabbering Spanish or Italian, I don't know which, and stopping every other moment to giggle. Then she'd seem about to fall asleep, and suddenly wake up and go through the whole turn again.

"I'd just finished reading Smith's *Forensic Medicine in the East*, and had a hunch."

"Uh-huh?" Donovan encouraged.

"Well, sir, I withdrew one-point-fifty-four cc's of blood from her arm, directly in the ecchymosed area, and gave it the

Beam test, using ethyl chloride instead of alcoholic potash——"

"Talk English, son; I'm rusty on my toxicology," Donovan broke in. "What'd you find?"

"Galenical cannabis indica, sir."

"U'm? Any objective symptoms?"

"Yes, sir. Her reflexes were practically nil, the heart action was markedly accelerated and the pupils dilated. Just now she seems about to drop off to sleep, but there are periods of hysteria recurring at gradually increasing intervals."

"Uh-huh. How about your patient?"

"Doctor Amlie came over to the male section with me and we put my man through the same tests. Everything checked, but his symptoms are more marked. I'd say he had a heavier dose, but both of 'em have been doped with cannabis indica injected intravenously."

"How long d'ye think this condition'll last?"

"According to the text books not much longer than an ordinary drunk. They should sleep it off in eight to ten hours, at most."

"Pardon," de Grandin interrupted, "but is there not some way that we can hold these persons *incommunicado*? In France it would be easy, but here——"

"Sure, there is," Costello broke in. "You an' Doctor Trowbridge say you seen three corpses in that house, an' ye believe that they wuz murdered. These kids wuz found there, an' might know sumpin' 'bout it. We can hold 'em as material witnesses any reasonable time."

"Very good, take the necessary steps to keep them in restraint, and when they are recovered from their drugged sleep let me see them."

"**SAY**, Trowbridge," Doctor Donovan's voice came to me on the telephone next morning, "who wants to break in to see a nut?"

"Who wants to what?" I answered, mystified.

"You heard me right, feller. There was some monkey business down here last night, and one of those kids you and de Grandin and Costello brought here is mixed up in it. Can you and de Grandin come down here?"

Dawkins, the night chief orderly of the psychopathic ward, was waiting for us in the superintendent's office when we reached the City Hospital, and launched upon his story without preface.

"I was sittin' just inside the safety door—the grating, you know—and it was just ten minutes after one when the funny business started," he told us.

"How do you place the time with such exactitude?" de Grandin asked.

Dawkins grinned. "I went on duty at eleven, and wouldn't be relieved till seven in the morning. About one o'clock I began to get pretty sleepy, so I sent Hosmer to the kitchen for a pot o' coffee and some sandwiches. It seemed to me he took a little longer than he should, and I'd just looked up at the electric clock on the wall just opposite my chair when I heard a funny-sounding noise.

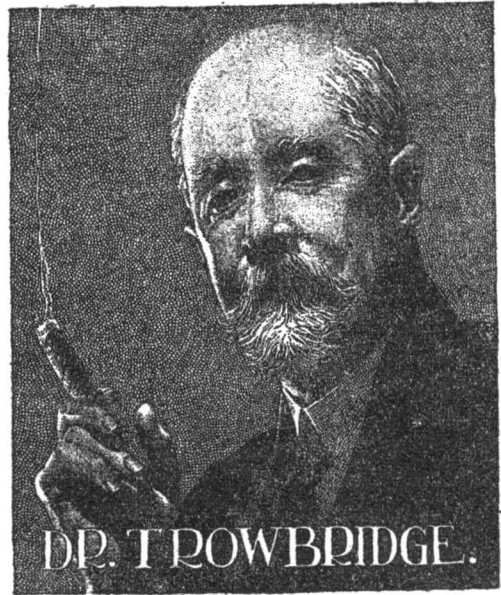
"It wasn't quite like anything I'd ever heard before, for while it was a sort of whistling, like a sudden wind, it was also something like the humming of a monster bee, perhaps an airplane."

De Grandin tweaked his mustache ends. "You say it combined a hum and whistle?"

"That's just about the way to describe it, sir."

"Very good, and then?"

"Then I saw the shadow, sir. You know, there's a ceiling light in the main corridor—the one connecting the ambulance entrance with the emergency ward—just around the corner from the hallway leading to H-3. Anybody standing around the corner of the junction of the two corridors, but between that light and the angle



made by our hallway branching off, casts a shadow down our hall. Many a time I've spotted nurses and orderlies standing to talk there when they should have been about their duties. Well, when I heard this funny noise I got up, and as I did I saw this shadow. It wasn't any of the hospital employees. It was someone with a derby hat on, and it looked to me as if he had a club or something in his hand. I didn't like his looks too much."

"You were suspicious? Why?"

"Well, we haven't had anything of the kind happen for some years, but in the old days when the gangs were running liquor, two-three times gunmen broke into the hospital and shot up fellers we had in here. Once they rubbed out an orderly because he tried to stop 'em.

"So I started down to the other end of the ward. Dennis was on duty there, and he's a pretty good one to have with you in a scrap. O' course, we aren't allowed to carry weapons—not even billies—in H-3. Too much chance of some lunatic's getting hold of 'em and going on a rampage. But I wanted Dennis to take a gander at this guy's shadow, and if he thought what

I did, we could call up the main office and have someone with a gun come round and grab him from behind while we went out to tackle him in front. So I started down to get Dennis."

"Yes, and then?"

"Well, sir, just as I got abreast of 34, the room they'd put Doctor Ridgway's patient in, I heard a sound that seemed to cut through the queer noise I've been telling you about, like someone filing a piece of metal.

"The patient was asleep and I thought he might be snoring—some of 'em make mighty funny noises—but when I looked through the peep-hole in the door I saw a feller on the outside, cutting through the window grating.

"You know how our windows are. There's a strong steel netting on the outside, then the glass, then another grating on the inside. This feller was working on the outside grating with a saw of some sort, and had already cut a hole two inches long.

"D'ye know what I think?"

"Nothing would delight us more than hearing it, my friend."

"Well, sir, I think that funny noise I heard was made to cover up the noise the saw made as it cut that grating."

"Your theory does great credit to your perspicacity. Did you see the one who sought to cut the grating?"

"Not very good, sir. He seen me about the same time that I spotted him, and ducked down out o' sight. Funny thing about him, though. I'd say he was a foreigner. Anyhow, he was mighty dark and had black hair and a large nose."

Donovan took up the story: "Dawkins turned in the alarm, and we rushed around to see about it. Of course, we found no one in the main corridor, but that's not strange. There's no guard at the ambulance entrance, and anyone can come or go that way at will. If we hadn't found the cut

screen we'd have thought he dreamed it.

"Now, what I want to know is this: Who'd want to help those kids escape? As I understand it, they're being held as witnesses to a murder——"

"*Excusez-moi!*" de Grandin cut in; then, to Dawkins: "Will you take me to the window this one tried to cut through, if you please?"

They were back in less than three minutes, and a grim look set upon the little Frenchman's face as he opened his folded handkerchief and spread it out on Donovan's desk. "*Regardez!*" he directed.

Upon the linen lay some particles of glass, evidently portions of a smashed test-tube, and the crushed but clearly recognizable body of a four-inch centipede.

"THERE is a black dog running through my brain," he complained as we sat waiting in the study after dinner the next evening. "This case puzzles me. Why should it not be one thing or the other? Why should it be a hybrid? Somewhere"—he spread his hands as if to reach for something—"just beyond my fingertips the answer lies, but I cannot touch it."

"What puzzles you particularly?" I asked. "What they've done with the missing bodies?"

"*Ah, non.* That is comparatively simple. When the police find the stolen hearse, as they are sure to do in time, they will find the bodies in it. It is the half-caste nature of the case which causes me confusion. Consider him, if you please." He spread his fingers out fanwise and checked the items on them:

"We come on three dead corpses. There is nothing strange in death. It has been a scientific fact since Eve and Adam first sinned. All indications are that they were murdered. Murder, in and of itself, is no novelty. It has been going on since Cain slew Abel; but surrounding circumstances are unusual. Oh, yes, very. The servant

and the woman had been left as they had died, one in his chair, the other on the floor; but the man is carried to the drawing-room and laid out carefully. Is it that the killers first arranged him, and were about to do the same for their two other victims when we were attracted by the young girl's scream, and interrupted them? There is a thought there.

"Then about the young man and his sister. Both had been drugged with hashish and left in their respective rooms to be killed by poison centipedes. Why? one wonders. Why were they not killed out of hand, like the three others; why were they drugged instead of being bound and gagged when they were left as prey for the vile myriapods?"

"And why should they be Spaniards, as they obviously are?"

Despite myself I grinned. "Why, for the same reason that you're French and I'm American," I answered. "There's nothing strange about a Spaniard being Spanish, is there?"

"In this case, yes," he countered. "If they had been Orientals I could understand some phases of the puzzle—the hashish and the so vile piping heard about the hospital when the attempt to drop the centipede into the young man's room was made. But their being Spanish upsets all my theories.

"Hashish is a drug peculiar to the East. They eat it, smoke it; sometimes, though not often, they inject it. *Alors*, we may assume that he who used it on these children was an Eastern, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"As for the so peculiar music—the 'funny sound'—which the good Dawkins heard, I know her. She is a very high, shrill sound produced by blowing on a specially prepared reed, and has a tendency to shock the sensory-motor nerves to a paralysis; something like the shrieking of the Chinese screaming boys, whose high, thin, piercing wail so disorganizes the hear-

er's nervous system that his marksmanship is impaired and often he is rendered all but helpless in a fight. Our agents in the Lebanon mountains report this music has been used by—*mon Dieu*, I am the monumental stupid-head! Why did I not consider it before?"

"What in the world——" I began, but before I had a chance to frame my question Nora McGinnis announced from the study entrance:

"Sergeant Costello an' a young lady an' man, sors, if yez plaze."

"GOOD evenin', gentlemen," the big detective greeted. "I brought 'em, as ye asked. These are Señorita and Señor Gutierrez y del Gado de Jerez."

Though the youngsters had been confined in the hospital it was evident that access to their wardrobe had not been denied them, and their appearance was far different from that of the babbling imbeciles we'd found in Tuscarora Avenue. The lad was positively seal-sleek; if anything, a thought too perfect in his grooming. He wore more jewelry than good taste required and smelled unnecessarily of lilac perfume.

As for Constancia, only the knowledge that she'd been in custody continuously, and so could not have sent a substitute, enabled me to recognize the wild-haired, panic-ridden girl of the previous night in the self-contained and assured young woman who occupied the chair opposite me. I'd forgotten how intensely black her hair was when we'd rescued her. Now it seemed even blacker. Drawn severely back in a French roll and parted low on the left side, it glistened like a grackle's throat in the lamplight. Dressed with pomade, two curls like inverted question marks were plastered close against her cheeks where a man's sideburns would be, and were rendered more noticeable by the long pendants of green jade that hung nearly to her creamy shoulders from her ear-lobes. Her

backless, strapless evening gown of shimmering black satin fitted almost as tightly as a stocking, covering to some extent but by no means concealing any of her narrow, lissome figure. Her ear-pendants and the emerald clasps of her stilt-heeled sandals were her only jewelry and the only spots of color in her costume. The vivid carmine of her painted lips glowed like a red rose fallen in the snow, for her face, throat, shoulders and tapering arms and hands were dead-white in their pallor as the petals of a gardenia. Despite her immaturity of figure and youthfulness of face—she seemed much younger than on the night we'd first seen her—there was a strange allure about her, and I caught myself comparing her to Carmen in a Paris frock or Francesca da Rimini with Rue de la Paix accessories.

Ankles crossed demurely, hands folded in her lap, she cast a glance from burnished-onyx eyes on Jules de Grandin. "Señor," she murmured in a throaty rich contralto, very different from her reedy ravings of the other night, "they tell me that our parents are—have been killed. Is it truly so?" Her English was without accent, save for a shortening of the *i*'s and a slight rolling of the *r*'s.

"Alas, I fear that it is true, *señorita*," de Grandin answered. "Can you tell me any reason anyone should wish them harm?"

Her sultry eyes came up to his beneath their curling fringe of long black lashes, and if it had been possible, I'd have said their darkness deepened. "I cannot tell you who wished evil to them," she replied, "but I know they lived in fear of someone or some thing. I am seventeen years old, and never in my life have I lived long enough in any place to know it well or call it home or make a lasting friendship. Always we have been upon the move, like gipsies or an army. London, Paris, the Riviera, Zurich, Rome, California, New York—we have flown from one to an-

other like birds pursued by hawks that will not let them rest in any tree. Never have we owned a home—no, not so much as the beds we slept on. I grew up in villas rented ready furnished, in *pensions* and hotels. We were like the orchid that draws sustenance from the air and never sinks its roots into the soil beneath it. The nearest to a home I ever had was the three years that I was at convent school near Cologne. I think if they had let me stay there I should have found that I had the vocation, but"—her narrow naked shoulders came up in a shrug—"it was like the rest. No sooner had I learned to love it—found peace and contentment there—than they took me away."

"One sympathizes with you, *señorita*. You have no idea who or what it was your parents fled?"

"No, *caballero*. I only know they feared it greatly. We would come to rest in some new place, perhaps a little *pension* in Paris or Berlin, perhaps a furnished cottage in some English village, or a hotel in Switzerland, when one day *Mama* or the *Padre* would come in with fear upon his face, looking backward as he walked, as though an *asesino* dogged his steps, and, 'They are here,' or 'I have seen them,' one would tell the other. Then in hot haste we packed our clothing and effects—always we lived with *porte-manteux* in readiness—and off we rushed in secrecy, like criminals fleeing from the law.

"But I do not think the *Padre* ever was a criminal, for everywhere we went he was most friendly with the police. Always when we came to live in some new place the *cuartel general de policia*—the police headquarters—was one of the first places which he visited. Is that the way a fugitive from justice acts?"

"That's right, sor," Costello confirmed. "Colonel Gutierrez came to headquarters when he first moved here nine months ago, an' asked 'em to give orders to th' man on

his bate to give special attention to his house. Told 'em he'd been burglarized three times in his last residence, an' his wife wuz on th' verge of a breakdown."

DE GRANDIN nodded as he turned back to the girl. "The sergeant called your father Colonel Gutierrez, *señorita*. Do you know what army he served in?"

"No, *señor*, he had quit the military service before I was born. I never heard him mention it, nor did I ever see a picture of him in his uniform."

The Frenchman nodded understandingly. Apparently this conversation, so meaningless to me, confirmed some theory he had formed. "What of the night we found you?" he asked. "Precisely what occurred, *señorita*?"

Young Gutierrez leaped up and advanced a step toward Jules de Grandin. "*Señor*," he exclaimed, as he clasped his slender, ring-laden hands in a perfect ecstasy of entreaty, "we—my sister and I—are in the dreadful trouble. These scoundrels have put the slight upon us. They have slain our parents. Blood calls for blood. It is the *rifa*, the *contienda*—the blood-feud—we have with them. We call on you to help us get revenge!"

"Gregorio! *Hermanito mio!*" the girl called softly as she rose and laid a hand upon her brother's arm. "*Silencio, corazónito pequeño!*" To us she added rapidly in English:

"Forgive him, *señores*. He lives in a small world of his own. He is, alas, *un necio dulce*—one of God's little ones."

There seemed magic in her touch, for the young man quieted immediately, and sat silently with her hand clasped in his as she responded to de Grandin's query.

"We had finished dinner, and Gregorio and I had been excused while *Mama* and the *Padre* had their coffee and liqueur. He—my brother—and I were going to the cinema and were changing from our din-

ner clothes when I heard a sudden cry downstairs. It was my mother's voice, pitched high and thin, as if she suffered or were very frightened."

"*A-a-ah?*" de Grandin cut in on a rising note. "And then, if you please?"

"I heard no more, but as I ran to see if I could be of help a hand was laid upon my doorknob and two men rushed into my room. One held a cane or stick of some sort in his hand and as I shrank back from him he thrust it at me. There must have been a pin or steel point on it, for it pierced my arm and hurt me dreadfully, but only for a moment."

"A moment, *señorita*? How do you mean?"

She looked at him and managed a wan smile. "There was the oddest feeling spreading through me — like a sudden deathly fatigue, or, perhaps, a sort of numbness. I still stood upon my feet, but I had no idea how I kept on them. I seemed to have grown to a giant's height, the floor seemed far away and unreal, as the earth does when you look at it from the top of a high tower; and I knew that in a moment I should fall upon my face, but even as I realized it I knew that I'd not feel it. I felt as if I never should feel anything again.

"Then I was on the floor, with the cool boards pressing on my cheek. I had fallen, I knew, but I had not felt the impact. One moment I was standing; the next I lay upon the floor, with no recollection how I got there.

"One of the men had a small cage of woven willow, something like the little straw cages that the Japanese keep crickets in, and suddenly he upset it and shook it. Something—several things—came tumbling, squirming, out of it, and I recognized them as great centipedes—the deadly poisonous *escolopendras* whose bite is terrible as that of a tarantula. Then they laughed at me and left.



"The centipedes were writhing toward the corners of the room as I tried to rise and run, but I could not. The numb, half-paralyzed sensation was gone, but in its stead I seemed to suffer from a sudden overpowering dizziness. And my eyes were playing tricks on me. The lamplight seemed to glow and glitter with prismatic colors, and the edges of the room began to curl in on me, like the petals of a folding flower. I was in deadly terror of the centipedes, but somehow it seemed I was too tired to move.

"Then one of them came running at me from the shadow of the bed. Its eyes looked bigger than the headlights of a motor car and seemed to glow with fire-red flashes. Somehow I managed to sit up and tear the sandals off my feet and beat the floor with them. I couldn't reach to strike the centipede, for if I leaned this way or that I knew that I would topple over, and then my face would be down on the floor where it was! But when I pounded on the floor with my shoes it seemed to be afraid and ran back to the shadows.

"I have no idea how long I sat there and drummed upon the floor, but presently I heard a woman scream and scream, as though she'd never stop. After a little while I realized it was I who screamed, but I was powerless to stop it. It might have been five minutes or an hour that I sat and screamed and drummed on the floor with my shoes; I could not say. But presently my door was opened and you gentlemen came in. To God and you I owe my life, *señores*." The smile with which she swept us was positively ravishing.

"*Eh bien, señorita*, we are indebted to you for a very lucid exposition of that so trying night's occurrences," de Grandin said. "We need not trouble to interrogate your brother. From all that we have seen we may assume that his experiences were substantially the same as yours.

"You have heard about the attempt on his life at the hospital?"

"But yes," she answered tremulously. "Is there no safety for us anywhere? What have we done to anyone? Why should anybody wish to harm poor us?"

"Please understand me, *señorita*," he returned. "It is for your own safety, not because we think of you as criminals, that we have arranged to lodge you in the city prison. Even in the hospital you are not safe, but in the prison with its fast-locked doors and many guards your safety is assured. As for who it was that orphaned you and then administered a drug and tried to kill you with the poison centipedes, I do not know, but I shall find out, never fear. I am Jules de Grandin, and Jules de Grandin is a very clever fellow."

"**B**E th' way, sor," Costello whispered as he prepared to escort the young people to the safety of the prison, "they've found th' missin' hearse. It wuz in th' bay, where it'd been run off Whitman's Dock. The plates wuz missin', but Joe Valenti, th' Eyetalian undertaker, identified it."

"Ah, that is good. The bodies were in it, of course?"

"No, sor, they weren't. Th' Harbor Squad's draggin' th' bay on th' off chance they mighta dropped out, but I don't think they'll find 'em. Th' hearse doors wuz all shut when it wuz fished up, an' hardly any water had seeped in. 'Tain't likely th' bodies fell out of it."

**T**HE sergeant came to dinner three nights later, and did full justice to the "*ragout irlandais*" which Nora had prepared for his especial benefit. Not until the meal was over and we had adjourned to the study would de Grandin speak about the case; then, as he took his stance before the empty fireplace: "My friends," he announced as he drew a sheaf of papers

from his pocket, "I damn think I have the answer to our puzzle. You will remember Señorita Gutierrez knew her father had resigned his commission before her birth and had never spoken of his military service in her hearing. Perhaps you wondered at it. We old soldiers are not wont to minimize the tales of our adventures. Yet there was good reason for his reticence.

"I have his record here. I have cabled to the *Suret * and the *Minist re de la Guerre*, and they replied at length by air mail via South America.

"Constantino Crist bal Jos  Gutierrez y del Gado de Jerez was, we knew, a Spaniard; we did not know he quit his country in extraordinary haste with the *guardia civil* upon his heels. When the Barcelona riots broke out in 1909 he was a young subaltern fresh from military school at Toledo, where he had been educated in the traditions of Pizarro and Cortez. You recall what happened after that uprising? How Francisco Ferrer the great educator was tried by a court-martial? *Tiens*, when a military court tries a soldier it metes out substantial justice. When it tries a civilian one may wager safely that it was convoked to find him guilty of all charges.

"Our young *sous-lieutenant* was among the prosecution's witnesses and when the trial was completed the sentence sent the defendants to the firing-party.

"The whole world shuddered at the outrage, and the pressure of mankind's opinion was so great that three years later another military court revoked the first one's findings, and branded testimony given against Ferrer and his co-defendants as perjury.

"Gutierrez, now a captain, took offense at this supposed reflection on his veracity, challenged one of the court to a duel and killed him at the first pass. His opponent was a major, partly crippled by a wound he had received in Cuba, very wealthy and of an influential family. Captain Gutierrez

killed his own career in the Spanish army when he killed his adversary, and had to flee in greatest haste to avoid arrest.

"*Eh bien*, he landed where so many disappointed soldiers land, in the Foreign Legion. He had the blood of the *Conquistadores* in him, that one. Embittered, bold and reckless, he was the *l gionnaire par excellence*. By the end of the Great War he was a colonel.

"Then, as now and always, the Riffs and Druses were in revolt, actual or prospective, and Colonel Gutierrez when assigned to the Intelligence proved successful in obtaining military information from the captured rebels. The Spaniard has a flair for torture, my friends. Cruelty is as native to him as delicacy is to a Frenchman. Some few of Colonel Gutierrez' prisoners escaped, some he released when they had served their turn. All went back home crippled and deformed, and his popularity with the hillmen waned in inverse ratio to the number of their tribesmen he disfigured.

"*Tenez*, at length an elderly Druse gentleman named Abn-el-Kader fell into our brave colonel's none too gentle hands, and with him was captured his daughter Jahanara, called *lalla aziza*, the beautiful lady. She was indeed a lovely creature, just turned thirteen, which in the East meant budding into womanhood, with copper-red hair rolling low upon her snowy forehead and passionate, dreamy, wistful eyes into which a man looked once, then never cared to look away again.

"*Eh bien*, he was stubborn, that one. He was not at all talkative. Rather than disclose his tribesmen's plans he chose to die, which he did in circumstances of elaborate discomfort, and Jahanara was not only a prisoner, but an orphan as well.

"*Corbleu*, my friends, romance is much like history in that the more it changes the more it is the same wherever it is found. Race, religion and the custom of

blood-feud as old as the Lebanon Hills stood between them, but the captor had become the captive, and *Monsieur le Colonel* was eyebrow-deep in love with Lalla Aziza Johanara. One wonders if she loved or hated him the more when they first kissed, whether she would not rather have drunk his heart's blood than his eager, panting breath as he took her in his arms. *Tiens*, love conquers all, as Ovid says. In a little while she wed the man at whose command her father died in torment.

"But though the prince had wed his Cinderella it was not to be his lot to live in peaceful happiness with her. Oh, no! The Druses are a prideful, stiff-necked people. Their ancient tribal law forbids their women marrying outside their race. They have a proverb, 'No Druse girl mates with any but a Druse, and if she does, her father and her brothers track her down and slit her heart, though she be lying in the Sultan's arms.' The Druse maids understand this perfectly. Before they come of marriageable age they swear an oath to keep the ancient tribal law on pain of death—death by the knife of vengeance for themselves, and if they have borne hybrid children—'may they be the prey of centipedes.'

"You apprehend, my friends? Cannot you understand why Colonel Gutierrez quit the Legion and with his Druse bride, and later with his half-blood children, lived a hunted, fugitive existence, seeing a threat in each strange face, starting frightfully at every vagrant shadow, never feeling safe in any one place very long? Yes, certainly.

"Ordinarily only the unfaithful Druse woman and her children are the objects of the tribal Nemesis, but the hillmen had a long score to settle with the colonel. The memory of the missing hands and feet, the burnt-out eyes, the slit and speechless-babbling tongues of their blood brethren festered like a canker-sore in their minds.

They owed him a long-standing debt of vengeance. *Tiens*, it seems they paid it."

"REGARD him, if you please," he ordered me at breakfast two days later, handing me a copy of the morning *Journal*.

"GUTIERREZ CHILDREN RETURN HOME"

the headline read, and under it a short item:

"Senorita Constancia Gutierrez and her brother Gregorio, who have been undergoing treatment at City Hospital for the past few days, are now fully recovered and have returned to their residence, 1502 Tuscarora Avenue, where they will hereafter be at home to their many friends."

"Is it not magnificent?" he asked.

"I don't see anything magnificent about it," I returned. "It doesn't even seem like good make-up to me. How did they ever come to stick an unimportant little item like that on the first page instead of burying it in the Society column? Who cares whether Constancia and Gregorio have gone home or not?"

"You and I do, by example," he answered with a grin. "The good Costello does, but, most important of us all, several gentlemen from the Djebel Druse are greatly interested in their movements. As long as they were lodged in City Prison they were safe. Now that they are home again——"

"Good heavens, d'ye mean that you're deliberately exposing them to——"

"*Mais oui*, my friend. We set the trap, we wait, we spring, *parbleu!* One might recast the old jingle to read:

" 'Will you walk into my parlor?  
Said de Grandin to the Druses.'"

THE cry came quivering down the hall, shrill, sharp, fright-frighted.

For half an hour we had waited in the

darkened room adjoining that in which Constancia and her brother were, ears strained to catch the slightest sound which might betray arrival of the Druses. Downstairs, patrolmen waited in the drawing-room and kitchen, two others lurked in ambush in the back yard. Our baited trap seemed escape-proof, yet . . .

The scream came once again, then stopped abruptly, like a radio-transmission when the dial is curtly turned.

"*Morbleu*, they have won through!" de Grandin cried as he blew his police whistle and we tumbled through the door and dashed into Constancia's room.

From downstairs came the police guard, clattering and pounding on the steps. The bedroom fairly boiled with armed men, but nowhere was there any sign of the youngsters.

"No one came through th' front way," a policeman told Costello, and:

"Same wid th' kitchen," supplemented another. "A mouse couldn't 'a' got past us——"

"The screen is out," de Grandin interrupted, "and a drain pipe runs within a foot of the window. A moderately agile climber might have——"

"Hey, youse down there!" Costello bawled to the patrolmen in the back yard, "seen anybody?"

There was no answer. "*Ab bah*, we waste the time," de Grandin snapped. "It is probable they knifed the guards as they did the servant when they killed the colonel and his lady. After them!"

"They can't 'a' took 'em very far," Costello panted as we rushed downstairs. "Th' alley's too narrow for a car; they'll have to carry 'em."

The two patrolmen lay inert as corpses on the lawn, but a hurried glance assured us they were merely stunned, and we left them and rushed out into the alley.

Where the luminance of a street lamp gleamed dully from the alley-head at the

cross street we saw a group of hurrying figures, and de Grandin raised his pistol. "*Canaille!*" he rasped, and fired. One of the fugitives fell staggering, but the others hurried on, and as they neared the light we saw they struggled with two shrouded figures.

They had perhaps two hundred feet start of us, and de Grandin did not dare to fire again for fear of injuring the captives. Though we raced at top speed they reached the cross street before we could close the gap sufficiently to fire with safety, and as we emerged from the alley we saw them scrambling into a car waiting at the curb with engine running. Next instant they roared past us and we caught a glimpse of Constancia's blanched face as she peered through the tonneau window.

Half a dozen blasts on Costello's whistle brought two squad cars rushing round the corner, and the chase was on.

Perhaps a quarter-mile away, but losing distance with each revolution of the wheels, our quarry sped. De Grandin hung upon our running-board, his pistol raised, waiting opportunity to send a telling shot into the fleeing car.

Eight, ten, a dozen blocks we raced at breakneck speed, our sirens cleaving through the sultry darkness like lightning-lances. We were less than half a block behind them when they swerved sharply to the right and darted down a cross street. When we reached the corner they had disappeared.

Like hounds at fault we looked about us. To the left a creek cut through the town, and most streets ended at it, only one in each five being bridged. The two cross streets to the right were torn up for repaving; they could not have fled that way, and no glimmering tail light showed in the street in which we stood.

Most of the houses in the block were deserted, and any of them might afford a refuge for the Druses and their prisoners,

but nowhere, look sharply as we would, could we espy a sign of their old motor. From house to darkened house we went, looking in the back yards for some trace of the car. At last:

"My friends, come quickly!" called de Grandin. He was standing at the creek bank, pointing to the shallow muddy water. Nose-foremost in the stream was a decrepit motor, its tail light still aglow. "*Tiens*, it seems to be a habit with them, throwing their equipage into the water," he remarked; then: "*En avant, mes enfants. A la maison!*"

"No, be of the quietness," he warned as Costello put his shoulder to the door. "Let me do it." From his pocket he produced a thin strip of metal, worked at the lock for a moment; then, "*Entrez!*" he invited as the lock snapped back with a soft click.

Down the narrow, dust-strewn hall we crept, tried several doors without result, then began to mount the stairway, treading on the extreme outer edges of the boards to avoid betraying creaks.

An oblong of slate-gray against the darkness told us where a window opened from the upper hall, and toward it we stole silently, halting as de Grandin gave a low hiss. Thin as a honed razor-blade, but not to be mistaken in the gloom, a narrow line of faint light trickled from beneath a tight-closed door.

"You are ready, *mon Sergent?*"

"Aye, sor."

Like twin battering-rams they launched themselves against the door. Its flimsy panels splintered as if they were match-wood, and in the subdued light of a single electric bulb pendant from the ceiling we saw three men facing two figures lashed to chairs.

Constancia Gutierrez sat facing us, and beside her was her brother. Both were gagged with wide strips of adhesive tape across their lips; both had their shoes and

stockings stripped away; more wide bands of adhesive tape bound their feet and ankles to the chair legs in such manner that they could not lift them from the floor.

One of the men was emptying a small cage of woven wickerwork as we crashed in, and as its little door flapped open we saw three writhing centipedes come tumbling out and strike the dusty floor beside the girl's bare feet.

A moan of terror—a scream of anguished horror muted by the gag across her lips—came from Constancia as the poisonous insects struck the floor; then her head fell forward as her senses failed.

At the crashing of the door the three men wheeled upon us, and there was something almost military in the singleness of their gesture as they reached beneath their unkempt jackets, ripped out eighteen-inch knives and rushed at us. "*Ya Rabaoiu!*—O foreigners!" one cried, but his words were drowned out by the thunderous roar of pistols.

De Grandin's little automatic seemed to blaze a single stream of fire, Costello's big revolver bellowed like a field gun. It was as if the three men walked into a wall. Like troops obeying a command they halted, wavered, stumbled. One hiccupped, gasped and slumped down slowly, bending at the knees. Another spun half around and fell full length upon his face. The third stood goggling at us, empty-eyed and open-mouthed, then stepped back shufflingly, seemed to trip on nothing and fell flat on his back.

"Excellent, superb, magnificent!" de Grandin commented. "We be marksmen, thou and I, *mon Sergent.*" With a leap he cleared the foremost body, bounded up into the air and came down heavily, flat-footed. His small feet banged on the bare floor like the metaled shoes of a tap-dancer as he ground the centipedes to unclean pulp beneath his heels.

"HERE'S sumpin I can't figure, sor," admitted Costello as we proceeded with our search of the house.

A surprising miscellany had turned up in the half-hour we'd been working since we sent Constancia and Gregorio under escort to the hospital. In the room adjoining we had found the Druses' living-quarters, an evil-smelling, unkempt room with four bed-rolls, some cook-pots and valises filled with none too clean clothing. In the basement was a table like a carpenter's work bench, two pressure tanks, an airpump, several airbrushes of varying sizes, and, plugged into an electric outlet, a large fan. The table and the floor were mottled with dried spots of what looked like shellac, some white stuff resembling plaster of Paris, and here and there dull-glowing patches like metallic paint.

Now Costello handed us a filled-in printed form. It was a deed entitling José Gutierrez to full rights of burial in a six-grave plot in St. Rose's Cemetery—"Lot No. 3, Range 37, Section M."

"St. Rose's is a Cath'lic cemetery," Costello reminded us; "what th' divil were these haythens doin' wid a deed from it?"

De Grandin scarcely seemed to hear. His little eyes seemed all pupil, like those of a startled cat; his small blond mustache was fairly twitching with excitement. "The fan, the plaster, the blow-guns," he murmured. "One blows the paint and plaster with the airbrush, one dries it quickly with the fan, one then—*mais oui*, it is entirely possible. Come, my friends, let us hasten with all speed to the cemetery of the sainted Rose. I think our trail ends there!"

BY NO stretch of the imagination could the cemetery superintendent's greeting have been called cordial when, in response to Costello's thunderous banging on his door, he finally let us into his small, cluttered office.

"Sure, I sold a plot to Josie Gooteez,"

he admitted. "He an' his three brothers come to get it last Thursday. They wuz Mexicans or sumpin, I think. Anyhow, they didn't speak good English."

"And they made immediate interments?" asked de Grandin.

"Naw, they ain't buried nobody yet. But they stuck up a couple o' monuments. Damndest-lookin' things yuh ever seen, too. They come here yesterday wid two statoots in a truck, an' set 'em up their-selves—'fore th' cement bases wuz quite finished dryin'."

"Indeed? And of what were these so weird statues, if you please?"

"Huh, your guess is good as mine about that. They looked as if they had been meant to represent a man an' woman, but they ain't so hot. Seemed to me as if they'd molded 'em in cement, then painted 'em with bronze paint, like a radiator. We hadn't ought to let such things be put up here, but that plot's in th' cheapest section, an' almost anything goes there. That's where th' haythens and such-like bury."

THE superintendent's criticism of the effigies was entirely justified by all artistic canons. Standing on twin concrete bases, some eight feet apart, two statues faced each other. One was of a woman, one a man, and both were execrably executed.

The woman's costume seemed to be some sort of evening gown, but its folds were obscured by the clumsiness with which they had been reproduced. Of her features little could be discerned; the face had been so crudely shaped as to resemble a half-chiseled stone portrait. Only humps and hollows in appropriate places told where eyes and nose and mouth were.

The male figure was as uncouth as the other. Only after looking at it for some time were we able to determine that its clothes were meant to represent a dinner

suit. Like the woman's, his face was little more suggestive of a human countenance than a poorly executed plaster mask.

"*Mordieu—quel imparfait!*" muttered Jules de Grandin. "They must have been in hot haste, those ones. Me, I could do a better piece of work myself."

For a moment he stood staring at the concrete atrocities, then walked across the gravelly lawn to a partly opened grave. The diggers had left tools beside the trench when they knocked off working for the day, and he took up a pick-ax, weighed it in his hand a moment, then approached the woman's statue.

"My friends," he announced, "here we end our search. *Regardez!*"

The statue swayed upon its base as he struck it with the flat side of the pick, waited for a moment, then struck a second time.

"Hey, what th' devil do you think you're doin'?" stormed the superintendent. "I'll have th' law on you——"

"Take it aisy, feller," soothed Costello. "I'm the law, an' if he wants to bust that thing to pieces you're not goin' to sthop 'im. Git me?"

The Frenchman drew his pick back once more and launched a battering smash against the statue's knees. This time it shattered like a piece of broken crockery, and where a three-foot flake of cement dropped away there showed a stretch of something pale and almost colorless. No need to tell a doctor what it was. Every first-semester student of anatomy knows dead human flesh at sight.

"Good Lord, sor, is it her?" Costello gasped.

"Indubitably it is she, my friend," de Grandin answered. "It is none other than Señora Gutierrez. And that monstrosity"—he pointed toward the other statue with his pick-ax—"conceals her husband. Call your men, *mon Sergent*. Have them take these dreadful things away and break them

up, then put the bodies in the city morgue."

"H'm, wonder what they did wid th' other one?" the sergeant asked.

"The servant?" The Frenchman pointed to the disturbed earth between the statues' bases. "I cannot say with certainty, but it is my guess that if you dig there you will find him."

"ONE reconstructs the crime," he told us sometime later at my house. "I was as much at sea as you when first we went into that house where they had taken Señorita Gutierrez and her brother. Coupled with the disappearance of the bodies from the stolen hearse, the spots of paint and plaster on the cellar floor, the airbrushes and the drying-fan should have told me how the corpses had been hidden, but it was not till you found the burying-deed that I had the idea. Even then I thought that they had bought the burial plot and put the bodies in it after casing them in cement so the earth would not cave in upon them too soon and thus disclose their hiding-place.

"But when the superintendent told us of the statues and we looked upon their dreadful crudity, the whole thing became clear to me.

"*Toutefois*, the credit goes to you, *mon Sergent*. It was you who put the riddle's key into my hands when you showed me that burial-deed. Yes, it is unquestionably so.

"Do not forget to tell them when you make your report to headquarters."

He helped himself to an enormous drink, and:

"*Quelle facétie monumentale!*" he murmured with a wry face.

"What's a 'monumental joke'?" I demanded.

"*Pardieu*, the one those so abominable ones played on Colonel Gutierrez and his lady—to make them stand as monuments above their own graves!"