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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Medici Boots

By PEARL NORTON SWET

The amethyst-covered boots had been worn by an evil wanton in mediæval Florence—but what malefic power did they carry over into our own time?

FOR fifty years they lay under glass in the Dickerson museum and they were labeled "The Medici Boots." They were fashioned of creamy leather, pliable as a young girl's hands. They were threaded with silver, appliqued with sapphire silks and scarlet, and set on the tip of each was a pale and lovely amethyst. Such were the Medici boots.

Old Silas Dickerson, globe-trotter and collector, had brought the boots from a dusty shop in Florence when he was a young man filled with the lust for travel and adventure. The years passed and Silas Dickerson was an old man, his hair white, his eyes dim, his veined hands trembling with the age that precedes death.

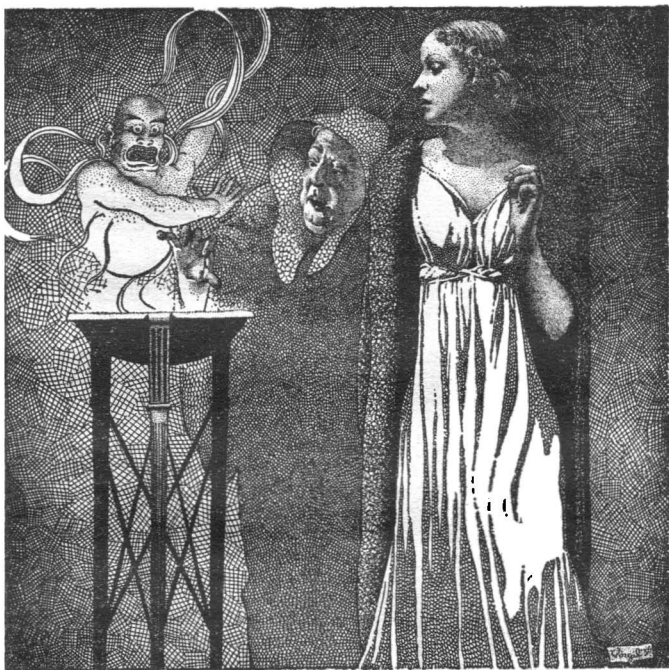
When he was ninety and the years of his wanderings over, Silas Dickerson died

one morning as he sat in a high-backed Venetian chair in his private museum. The Fourteenth Century gold-leaf paintings, the Japanese processional banners, the stolen bones of a Normandy saint—all the beloved trophies of his travels must have watched the dead man impassively for hours before his housekeeper found him.

The old man sat with his head thrown back against the faded tapestry of the Venetian chair, his eyes closed, his bony arms extended along the beautifully carved arms of the chair, and on his lap lay the Medici boots.

It was high noon when they found him, and the sun was streaming through the stained-glass window above the chair and picking at the amethysts, so that the violet stones seemed to eye Marthe, the

"She imparted to me those terrible secrets of the Black Arts which were deep in her soul."



old housekeeper, with an impudent glitter. Marthe muttered a prayer and crossed herself, before she ran like a scared rabbit with the news of the master's death.

SILAS DICKERSON's only surviving relatives, the three young Delameters, did not take too seriously the note which was found among the papers in the museum's desk. Old Silas had written the note. It was addressed to John Delameter, for John was his uncle's favorite,

but John's pretty wife, Suzanne, and his twin brother, Doctor Eric, read it over his shoulder; and they all smiled tolerantly. Old Dickerson had written of things incomprehensible to the young moderns:

"The contents of my private museum are yours, John, to do with as you see fit. Merely as a suggestion, I would say that the Antiquarian Society would snap up many of the things. A very few are of no particular value, except to me. One thing I want done, however. The Medici boots of ivory leather must either be de-

stroyed or be put for ever under glass in a *public* museum. I prefer that they be destroyed, for they are a dangerous possession. They have gone to the adulterous rendezvous celebrated in the scandalous verses of Lorenzo the Magnificent. They have shod the feet of a murderess. They were cursed by the Church as trappings of the Devil, inciting the wearer to foul deeds and intrigue.

"I shall not disturb you with all their hideous history, but I repeat, they are a dangerous possession. I have taken care to keep them under lock and key, behind plate glass, for more than fifty years. I have never taken them out. Destroy the Medici boots, before they destroy you!"

"But he did take them out!" cried Suzanne. "Uncle was holding the boots when—when Marthe found him there in the museum."

John reread the note, and looked thoughtfully at his young wife. "Yes. Perhaps he was preparing to destroy them right then. Of course, I think the poor old fellow took things a bit too seriously—he was very old, you know, and Marthe says he practically lived in this museum of his."

"And why call a pair of old boots dangerous? Of course, we all know the Medicis were plenty dangerous, but the Medici boots—that's ridiculous, John. Besides——"

Suzanne paused provocatively, her red lips pouting. She looked down at her trimly shod feet. "Besides, I'd like to try on those Medici boots—just once. They're lovely, I think."

John was frowning thoughtfully. He scarcely heard her suggestion. He spoke to Eric, instead, and his voice seemed a bit troubled.

"I believe that Uncle *was* getting ready to destroy those boots that very morning

he died; else why should he have taken them from their case—after fifty years?"

"Yes, I believe you're right, John, because that note is dated fully a month before Uncle's death. I think he brooded over leaving those boots to one he cared for. Poor old man!"

"I wouldn't call him so, Eric. He had his dreams of adventure realized more fully than most men. I—I think I'll do as he says. I'll destroy the Medici boots."

"If you'd feel better about it," assented his brother. But Suzanne did not speak. She was looking at her shoe, pursing her lips thoughtfully, seeing her feet encased in the gay embroideries of the Medici boots.

John seemed relieved by his decision. "Yes, I'd better do it. We'll be getting back to town in a few days. Old Erskine, you know, Uncle's lawyer, is coming down this afternoon. Then soon we'll be on the wing, Susie and I—Vienna, Paris, the Alps—thanks to Uncle."

"Maybe you think I'm not thankful for my chance at a bit more work at Johns Hopkins," said Eric, and they did not again speak of the Medici boots.

THE deaf old lawyer of the Dickerson estate arrived, and Suzanne, with the easy capability that was part of her charm, saw that he was made comfortable.

At seven there was a perfect dinner served on the awninged terrace outside the softly lit living-room. The stars aided the two little rosy lamps on the table, and swaying willows beside a stone-encircled pool swung the incense of the garden about them.

As dinner ended, John took from the pocket of his coat a small, limp-leather book. He pushed back his dessert plate and laid the book on the table, tapping it with a finger as he spoke.

"This is the history of the Medici boots. It was in the little wall-safe in the museum. After all Uncle said of the Medici boots, shall we read it?" And turning to the old lawyer, he told of Silas Dickerson's letter concerning the boots.

Erskine shook his head, smiling. "Most collectors get an exaggerated sense of the supernatural. Read this, by all means—it should prove interesting."

"Yes, read it, John." Suzanne and Eric spoke almost together.

So, in the circle of rosy light at their little table, John read the story of the Medici boots. It was not a long story and it was told in the language of an anonymous translator, but as John read on, his listeners were drawn together, as by a spell. They scarcely breathed, and the summer night that was so mildly beautiful seemed to take on a sense of hovering danger.

"In the palace of Giuliano de' Medici I have lived long. I am an old woman now, as the years are reckoned in this infamous place, though I am but fifty and three.

"Separated from my betrothed, duped, sold into the marble labyrinth of this hateful palace, it was long before my spirit broke and I went forth, bejeweled and attired in elegance, among the silk-clad Florentines. I was labeled the most beautiful mistress of any of the Medici. I was smirked at, fawned upon for my lord's favors, obscenely jested about in the orgies that took place in the great banquet hall of the palace.

"But in my heart always lay the remembrance of my lost love, and in my soul grew black hatred for the Medici and all their kind. I, who had dreamed only of a modest home, a kind husband, black-haired, trusting little children, was made a tool of the Medici infamy.

"In time, I almost felt myself in league with the Devil. Secretly, and with a growing sense of elation, I made frequent rendezvous with a foul hag whose very name was anathema to the churchly folk of Florence. In her hole of a room in a certain noisome street, she imparted to me those terrible secrets of the Black Arts which were deep in her soul. It was amusing that she was paid in Medici gold.

"The corruption of the Medici bred in them fear; in me a sort of reckless bravery. It was I who poisoned the wine of many a foe of the Medici. It was I who put the point of a dagger in the heart of the old Prince de Vittorio, whose lands and power and palaces were coveted by, my lord, Giuliano.

"After a time, bloodshed became an exhilaration to me; the death agonies of those who drank the poisoned cup became more interesting than the flattery of the Medici followers. Even the ladies of the house of the Medici did me the honor of their subtly barbed friendliness.

"Through this very friendliness, I conceived my plan of sweet revenge upon the monsters who had ruined my life. With so great a hatred boiling in my soul that my mind reeled, my senses throbbed, my heart rose in my throat like a spurt of flame, I cursed three things of exquisite beauty with all the fervor of my newly learned lessons in devilish lore.

"These three beautiful objects I presented to three ladies of the house of Medici—presented them with honeyed words of mock humility. A necklace of jeweled links—I pledged myself to the Devil and willed that the golden necklace would tighten on the soft throat of a lady of the Medici while she slept, and strangle her into black death. A bracelet of filigree and sapphires—to pierce by its hidden silver needle the blue vein in a white Medici wrist, so that her life's

blood would spurt and she would know the terror that the house of the Medici gave to others.

"Last, and most ingenious, a pair of creamy boots, pliable, embroidered in silver and silks, encrusted with amethysts—my betrothal jewels. In my hatred I cursed the boots, willing that the wearer, as long as a shred of the boots remained, should kill as I had killed, poison as I had poisoned, leave all thoughts of home and husband and live in wantonness and evil. So I cursed the beautiful boots, forgetting, in my hate, that perhaps another than a Medici might, in the years to come, wear them and become the Devil's pawn, even as I am now.

"In my life, the Medici will have the boots, of that I feel sure; but after that—I can only hope that this bloody history of the boots may be found when I am no more, and may it be a warning.

"I have lived to see my gifts received and worn, and I have laughed in my soul to see my curses bring death and terror and evil to three Medici women. I know not what will become of the golden necklace, the bracelet, or the boots. The boots may be lost or stolen, or they may lie in a Medici palace for age on age, but the curse will cling to them till they are destroyed. So I pray that no woman, save a Medici, will ever wear them.

"As I live and breathe and do the bidding of the lords of Florence, the accursed Medici—I have told the truth. When I am dead, perhaps they will find this book, and, in hell, I shall know and be glad.

"MARIA MODENA DI CAVOURI.

"Florence, 1476."

"**W**HEW!" said old Erskine.

John laughed. "I don't suppose this charming history would have been any more thrilling if I had read it

from the original book, in Italian, of course. Wonder where Uncle got it! There was no mention of it being in the library—but there it was."

"Now, will you destroy those boots?" asked Eric, and he was not entirely in jest.

But Suzanne said, laughingly, "Not before I find out if the Medici lady had a smaller foot than I! Are they still in the museum, John?"

"Never you mind, my dear. They're not for the likes of you."

"Oh, don't be silly, John. This is 1935, not the Fifteenth Century." And they laughed at Suzanne's earnestness.

The book that held the story of the Medici boots lay on the white cloth, looking like a book of lovely verse.

Suzanne, a small white blur against the summer dark, sat quietly while the men talked of Silas Dickerson, his life, his mania for collecting, his death that had so fittingly come to him in his museum. It was nearly twelve when Suzanne left the men on the terrace and with a quiet "good-night" entered the living-room and crossed to the long, shining stairs.

The men went on with their talk. Once, John, looking toward the jutting wing that was the museum, exclaimed, "Look at that, will you? Why—I'd swear I saw a light in the museum."

"You locked it, didn't you?" asked Eric.

"Of course; the key's in my desk upstairs. H-m. I'm probably mistaken, but it did seem as though a light shone there just a moment ago."

"Reflection from the living-room window, I think. Country life is making you jittery, John." And Eric laughed at his brother.

The men sat on, reluctant to leave the beauty of the night, and it was almost two o'clock when they finally went inside.

John said, "I think I'll not disturb Suzanne." And he went to sleep in a wide four-postered bed in a room next to his wife. Eric and the old lawyer were in rooms across the hall.

THE still summer night closed about the house of Silas Dickerson, and when the moon lay dying against the bank of cloud, puffed across a sky by the little wind that came before dawn, young Doctor Eric Delameter awoke, suddenly and completely, to a feeling of clammy apprehension. He had not locked his door, and now, across the grayness of the room, he saw it slowly opening.

A hand was closed around the edge of the door—a woman's hand, small and white and jeweled. Eric sat straight and tense on the edge of his bed, peering across the room. A woman, young and slender, in a long, trailing gown, came toward him smiling. It was Suzanne.

With a gasp, Eric watched her approach till she stood directly before him.

"Suzanne! You are asleep? Suzanne, shall I call John?"

He thought that perhaps he should not waken her; there were things one must remember about sleep-walkers, but physicians scarcely believed them.

Eric was puzzled, too, by her costume. It was not a night-robe she wore, but an elaborate, trailing dress upon which embroideries in silver shone faintly. Her short black curls were bound about three times with strands of pearly beads, her slim white arms were loaded with bracelets. The pointed toes of little shoes peeped beneath her gown, little shoes of creamy leather. An amethyst gleamed on each shoe.

The sight of these amethystine tips affected Eric strangely, much as though he had looked at something hideously repulsive. He stood up and put out a hand to touch Suzanne's arm.

"Suzanne," he said, gently. "Let me take you to John. Shall I?"

Suzanne looked up at him, and her brown eyes, usually so merry, were deeply slumberous, not with sleep, but with a look of utter abandon. She shook her pearl-bound head slowly, smilingly.

"No, not John. I want you, Eric."

"Mad! Suzanne must be mad!" was Eric's quick thought, but her caress was swifter than his thought. Both jewelladen arms about his neck, Suzanne kissed him, her red lips pouting warmly upon his.

"Suzanne! You don't know what you're doing." He grasped both her hands in his and with a haste that would have seemed ludicrous to him had he viewed the scene in a picture-play, he hurried her out of his room and across the hall.

Eric opened her door softly and with no gentle hand shoved Suzanne inside her room. She seemed like a little animal in his grasp. She hissed at him; clawed and scratched at his hand. But when he had shut the door, she did not open it again, and after a moment he went back to his own room.

HIS mouth set in a firm line, his heart beating fast, Eric locked his door with a noiseless turn of the key. It was almost dawn, and the garden lay like a rare pastel outside his window; but Eric saw none of it. He scarcely thought, though his lips moved, as if chaotic words were struggling for utterance.

He looked down at his hand, where two long red scratches oozed a trickle of blood. After he had washed his hand, he lay down on his bed and covered his eyes with his arm, against the picture of Suzanne. Above all else there stood out the gleaming tips of her little shoes, as he had glimpsed them through the dim light of his room when she came toward him.

"She wore the Medici boots! The Medici boots! Suzanne must have taken them from the museum!" Over and over he said it—"The Medici boots! The Medici boots!"

Eric rather dreaded breakfast, but when he came down at eight, to the terrace where a rustic table was set invitingly, he found John and the lawyer awaiting him. John greeted his brother affectionately.

"Morning, old boy! Hope you slept well. Why so solemn? Feeling seedy?"

"No, no. I am perfectly all right," Eric replied hastily, relieved that Suzanne was not present. He added with a scarcely noticeable hesitation, "Suzanne not coming down?"

"No," replied John, easily. "She seemed to want to sleep awhile. Sent her regrets. She'll see us at lunch."

John went on, "I certainly had a nightmare last night. Thought a woman in a long, shining dress came into my room and tried to stab me. This morning I found that a glass on my bed-table was overturned and broken, and, by George, I'd cut my wrist on it."

He showed a jagged cut on his wrist. "Take a look, Doctor Eric."

Eric looked at the cut, carefully. "Not bad, but you might have bled to death, had it been a quarter of an inch to the left. If you like, I'll fix it up a bit for you after breakfast."

Eric's voice was calm enough, but his pulse was pounding, his heart sick. All morning he rode through the countryside adjoining the Dickerson estate, but he let the mare go as she liked and where she liked, for his mind was busy with the events of the hour before dawn. He knew that the slash on his brother's wrist was made by steel, not glass. Yet when the ride was over, he could not bring himself to tell John of Suzanne's visit.

"She must have been sleep-walking,

though I can't account for the way she was decked out. I've always thought Suzanne extremely modest in her dress, certainly not inclined to load herself with jewelry. And those boots! John must get them today and destroy them, as he said. Silly, perhaps, but——" His thoughts went on and on, always returning to the Medici boots, in spite of himself.

ERIC came back from his ride at eleven o'clock, with as troubled a mind as when he began it. He almost feared to see Suzanne at lunch.

When he did meet her with John and Mr. Erskine on the cool, shaded porch where they lunched, he saw there was nothing to fear. The amorous, clinging woman of the hour before dawn was not there at all. There was only the Suzanne whom Eric knew and loved as a sister.

Here, again, was their merry little Suzanne, somewhat spoiled by her husband, it is true, but a Suzanne sweetly feminine, almost childish in a crisp, white frock and little, low-heeled sandals. Their talk was lazily pleasant—of tennis honors and horses, of the prize delphiniums in the garden, of the tiny maltese kitten which Suzanne had brought up from the stables late that morning and installed in a pink-bowed basket on the porch. She showed the kitten to Eric, handling its tiny paws gently, hushing its plaintive mews with ridiculous pet names.

"Perhaps I'm a bigger fool than I know. Perhaps it never happened, except in a dream," Eric told himself, unhappily. "And yet——"

He looked at the red marks on his hand, marks made by a furious Suzanne in that hour before the dawn. Too, he remembered the cut on John's wrist, the cut so near the vein.

Eric declined John's invitation to go through the museum with him that after-

noon, but he said with a queer sense of diffidence, "While you're there, John, you'd better get rid of the Medici boots. Creepy things to have around, I think."

"They'll be destroyed, all right. But Suzanne is just bound to try them on. I'll get them, though, and do as Uncle said."

Eric remained on the terrace, speculating somewhat on just what John and Suzanne would do, now that the huge fortune of Silas Dickerson was theirs. Eric was not envious of his brother's good luck, and he was thankful for his share in old Silas' generosity.

At five o'clock he entered the hall, just as Suzanne hurried in from the kitchen. She spread out her hands, laughingly.

"With my own fair hands I've made individual almond tortonis for dessert. Cook thinks I'm a wonder! Each masterpiece in a fluted silver dish, silver candies sprinkled on the pink whipped cream! O-oh!"

She made big eyes in mock gluttony. Eric forgot, for a moment, that there ever had been another Suzanne.

"You're nothing but a little girl, Suzie. You with your rhapsodies over pink whipped cream! But it's sweet of you to go to such trouble on a warm afternoon. See you and the whatever-you-call-'ems at dinner!"

"They're tortonis, Eric, tortonis."

Suzanne ran lightly up the stairs. Eric followed more slowly. He entered his room thinking that there were some things which must be explained in this house with the old museum.

TWENTY minutes before dinner Eric and John were on the terrace waiting for Suzanne. John was talkative, which was just as well, as he might have wondered at his brother's silence. Eric was torn between a desire to tell his

brother his reluctant suspicions concerning the Medici boots and Suzanne and his inclination to leave things alone till the boots could be destroyed.

He said, diffidently, "John, has Suzanne those—those boots?"

John chuckled. "Why, yes. I saw them in her room. Do you know she went down to the museum last night and took those boots? It *was* a light I saw in the museum. It was her light. Suzanne has ideas. Wants to wear the boots just once, she says, to lay the ghost of this what's-her-name—Maria Modena. Suzanne says she couldn't sleep much last night. Got up early and tried on those boots. Well, I think I'll destroy 'em tomorrow. Uncle's wish, so I'll do it."

"Tried them on, did she? Well, if you should ask me, I'd say that history of the boots was a bit too exciting for Suzanne. It *was* a haunting story. Uncle must have swallowed it, hook, line, and sinker, eh?"

"Of course. His letter showed that. But Suzanne lives in the present, not the past, as Uncle did. I suppose Suzanne will wear those boots, or she won't feel satisfied. I don't exactly like the idea, I must confess."

Something like an electric shock passed through Eric. He said, somewhat breathlessly, "I don't think Suzanne ought to have the Medici boots."

John looked at him curiously and laughed. "I never knew you were superstitious, Eric. But do you really think——"

"I don't know what I think, John. But if she were my wife, I'd take those boots away from her. Uncle may have known what he was talking about."

"Well, I think she's intending to wear them at dinner, so prepare to be dazzled,

Here she is, now. Greetings, sweet-heart!"

Suzanne swept across the terrace, her gown goldily shimmering, pearls bound about her head, as Eric had seen her in the dim hour before dawn. Again the rows of bracelets were weighting her slim arms. And she wore the Medici boots, the amethyst tips peeping beneath her shining dress.

John, ever ready for gay clowning, arose and bowed low. "Hail, Empress! A-ah, the dress you got in Florence on our honeymoon, isn't it? And those darned Medici boots!"

Suzanne unsmilingly extended her hand for him to kiss.

John arched an eyebrow, comically. "What's the matter, honey? Going regal on me?" And retaining her hand, he kissed each of her fingers.

Suzanne snatched away her hand, and the glance she gave her husband was one of venomous hauteur. To Eric she turned a look that was an open caress, leaning toward him, putting a hand on his arm, as he stood beside his chair, stern-lipped, with eyes that would not look at John's hurt bewilderment.

The three sat down then, in the low wicker chairs, and waited for dinner—three people with oddly different emotions. John was hurt, slightly impatient with his bride; Eric was furious with Suzanne, though there was in his heart the almost certain knowledge that the Suzanne beside them on the terrace was not the Suzanne they knew, but a cruelly strange woman, the product of a sinister force, unknown and compelling.

No one, looking on Suzanne's red-lipped and heavy-lidded beauty, could miss the knowledge that here was a woman dangerously subtle, carrying a power more devastating than the darting lightning that now and then showed it-

self over the tree-tops of the garden. Eric began to feel something of this, and there shaped in his mind a wariness, a defense against this woman who was not Suzanne.

"No *al fresco* dining tonight," said John, as the darkening sky was veined by a sudden spray of blue-green light. "Rain on the way. Pretty good storm, I'd say."

"I like it," replied Suzanne, drawing in a deep breath of the sultry air.

John laughed. "Since when, sweet-heart? You usually shake and shiver through a thunderstorm."

Suzanne ignored him. She smiled at Eric and said in a low tone, "And if I should lose my bravery, you would take care of me, wouldn't you, Eric?"

Before Eric could reply, dinner was announced, and he felt a relief and also a dread. This dinner was going to be difficult.

John offered his arm to his wife, smiling at her, hoping for a smile in return, but Suzanne shrugged and said in a caressing voice, "Eric?"

ERIC could only bow stiffly and offer his arm, while John walked slowly beside them, his face thoughtful, his gay spirits gone. During dinner, however, he tried to revive the lagging conversation. Suzanne spoke in a staccato voice and her choice of words seemed strange to Eric, almost as though she were translating her own thoughts from a foreign tongue.

And finally Suzanne's promised dessert came, cool and tempting in its silver dishes. Eric saw a chance to make the talk more natural. He said, gayly, "Johnny, your wife's a chef, a famous pastry chef. Behold the work of her hands! What did you say it was, Suzanne?"

"This? Oh—I do not know what it is called."

"But this afternoon as you were leaving the kitchen—didn't you say it was almond something or other?"

She shook her head, smiling. "Perhaps it is. I wouldn't know."

The maid had placed the tray with the three silver dishes of dessert before Suzanne, that she might put on them the final sprinkling of delicate silver candies. Daintily, Suzanne sifted the shining bubbles over the fluff of cream. Eric, watching her, felt very little surprise when he saw Suzanne, with almost legerdemain deftness, sift upon one dish a film of pinkish powder which could not be detected after it lay on the pink cream.

Waiting, he knew not for what moment, he watched Suzanne pass the silver dishes herself, saw her offer the one with the powdered top to John. And it was then that their attention was attracted by the entrance of the maltese kitten. So tiny it was, so brave in its careening totter across the shiny floor, small tail hoisted like a sail, that John and Eric laughed aloud.

Suzanne merely glanced down at the little creature and turned away. The kitten, however, came to her chair, put up a tiny paw and caught its curved claws in the fragile stuff of Suzanne's gown. Instantly, her face became distorted with rage and she kicked out at the kitten, savagely, and with set lips. It seemed to Eric that the amethysts on the Medici boots winked wickedly in the light of the big chandelier.

The kitten was flung some ten feet away, and lay in a small, panting heap.

John sprang up. "Suzanne! How could you?" He took the kitten in his arms and soothed it.

"Why its heart's beating like a trip-hammer," he said. "I don't understand, Suzanne——"

As the kitten grew quiet, he took a

large rose-leaf from the table-flowers and spread it with a heaping spoonful of the pink cream from his dessert. Then he put the kitten on the floor beside it.

"Here, little one. Lick this up. It's fancy eating. Suzanne's sorry. I know she is."

The kitten, with the greed of its kind, devoured the cream, covering its small nose and whiskers with a pinkish film. Suzanne sat back in her chair, fingering her bracelets, her eyes on Eric's face. John watched the kitten, and Eric watched, too—watched tensely, for he sensed what would happen to it.

The kitten finished the cream, licked its paws and whiskers and turned to walk away. Then it spun around in a frantic convulsion, and in a moment lay dead on its back, its tiny red tongue protruding, its paws rigid.

Outside, the storm glowered, and in the chartreuse light of the forked lightning, the great chandelier was turned to a sickly radiance. Thunder rolled like muffled drums.

Suddenly Suzanne began to laugh, peal after peal of terrible laughter, and then, after a glare of lightning, the big chandelier winked out. The room was plunged into stormy darkness, and they could hear the rain lashing through the garden to hurl itself against the windows.

"Don't be frightened, Suzanne." It was John's solicitous voice, and it was followed by a quick movement from Suzanne's side of the table.

A sheet of blue-green light illumined the room for an instant, and Eric saw Suzanne struggling in her husband's arms, one jeweled arm uplifted and in her hand a shining dagger.

WITH a bound that was almost involuntary, Eric reached them and struck at the knife in Suzanne's hand. It clattered to the floor. And as though the

fury of the storm and Suzanne's madness both were spent, the slashing rain and the lightning stopped abruptly, and Suzanne ceased to struggle.

"Light the candles, Eric—quickly—on the mantel to your right! Suzanne is hurt!"

In the candle-light, palely golden and swaying, Eric saw Suzanne slumped limply in John's arms. The hem of her golden dress was redly wet and one cream-colored little shoe was fast becoming soaked with blood from a slash across the instep.

"Let's get her over to the window-seat, Eric. Do something for her!—Oh, sweet-heart, don't moan like that!" There was no question or reproach in John's voice, only compassion.

Eric took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves. His mouth was grimly set, his hands steady, his voice crisply professional. "Take off those shoes, John. She'll—be herself, then. I mean that she'll be Suzanne—not a murderess of the Medicis. Take them off, John! They're at the bottom of this."

"You mean——" John's voice was breathless, his lips trembling.

"I mean those hellish boots have changed Suzanne from a sweet and lovely girl to—well, do as I tell you. I'll be back with gauze and some things I need."

When Eric hurried back, there were three servants grouped at the dining-room door. He spoke to them brusksly and they

left, wide-eyed and whispering. Eric closed the door.

While the wet leaves tapped against the windows and stars struggled through the clouds, Eric worked, silently, expertly, grimly, by the light of a flashlight held in John's unsteady hands and the light of the flickering candles. The house lights were all snuffed out by the storm.

"There," Eric gave a satisfied grunt. The brothers stood looking at Suzanne, who seemed asleep. Her golden dress glimmered in the candle-light and the pearls were slipping from her dark hair. The Medici boots lay in a limp and bloody heap in a corner, where Eric had flung them.

"When she awakes, I shouldn't tell her about any of this, if I were you, John."

"There are things you haven't told me, Eric, aren't there? Things about—the Medici boots?"

Eric looked steadily at his brother. "Yes, old fellow; and after I've told you, those boots must be destroyed. We'll burn them before this night is over. We mustn't move her now. We'll go out on the terrace—it's wet there, but the air is fresh. Did you smell—something peculiar?"

For, as they passed the corner where the Medici boots lay slashed and bloody, Eric could have sworn that there came to him a horrid odor, fetid, hotly offensive—the odor of iniquity and ancient bloody death.

