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The PRIESTESS of the IVORY FEET by SEABURY QUINN

JULES DE GRANDIN replaced his Sèvres tea-cup on the tabouret and brushed the ends of his tightly waxed blond mustache with the tip of a well-manicured forefinger. From the expression on his little, mobile face it was impossible to say whether he was nearer laughter than tears. "And the lady, *chère Madame*," he inquired solicitously, "what of her?"

"What, indeed?" echoed our hostess. Plainly, it was no laughing matter to Mrs. Mason Glendower, and I



"A moi, Sergent; a moi, les gendarmes; I
have them!"

sat in a sort of horrified fascination, expecting momentarily to see the multiple-chinned, florid society dictator dissolve in tears before my eyes. A young woman's tears are appealing, an old woman's are pathetic, but a well-past-middle-aged, plump dowager's are an awful sight. Flabby, fat women quiver so when they weep. "What, indeed?" she repeated, all

three of her chins trembling ominously. "It would have been bad enough if she'd been a respectable shop-girl, or even an actress, but *this*—oh, it's too awful, Dr. de Grandin; it's terrible!"

My worst fears were realized. Mrs. Mason Glendower wept copiously and far from silently, and her chins and biceps, even her fat wrists, quivered

like a pyramid of home-made quince jelly on a Thanksgiving dinner table.

"*Tch-tch*," de Grandin made a deprecating click with the tip of his tongue against his teeth. "It is deplorable, *Madame*. And the young *Monsieur*, your son, he is, then, entirely smashed upon this reprehensibly attractive young woman—you can not dissuade him?"

"No!" Mrs. Mason Glendower dabbed at her reddened eyes with a wisp of absurdly inadequate cambric. "I've tried to appeal to his family pride—his pride of ancestry, I've even had Dr. Stephens in to reason with him, but it's all useless. He just smiles in a sort of sadly superior way and says Estrella has shown him the light and that he pities our blindness—our blindness, if you please, and our family pew-holders in the First Methodist Church since the congregation was organized!"

"Oh, Dr. Trowbridge"—she turned imploringly to me—"can't you suggest something? You've known Raymond all his life, you know what a clean, manly, *good* boy he's always been—it's bad enough for him to be set on marrying the young person, but to have her change his religion, drag him from the faith of his fathers into this heathenish, outlandish cult—oh, it seems, sometimes, as though he's actually losing his senses! If he'd ever drunk or caroused or inclined toward wildness it would be different, but—" And her emotion overcame her, and her words were smothered beneath an avalanche of sobs.

"*Tiens*, Madame Glendower," de Grandin remarked matter-of-factly, "a man may love liquor and have his senses sometimes, but if he love a woman—*hélas*, his case is hopeless. Only marriage remains, and even that sometimes fails to cure."

For a moment he regarded the sobbing matron with a thoughtful stare, then: "It may be Dr. Trowbridge and I can reason with the young *Monsieur*

to more purpose than you or the good pastor," he suggested. "In my country we have a saying there are three sexes—men, women and clergymen. A headstrong young man, over-proud of his budding masculinity, is apt to treat advice from mother or minister alike with contemptuous impatience. The physician, on the other hand, is in a different position. He is a man of the world, a man of science, with body, parts and passions like other men, yet with a vast experience of the penalties of folly. His words may well be listened to when those of women and priests would meet only with disdain."

I sat in open-mouthed astonishment at his temerity. To his logical Gallic mind the wisdom of his advice was obvious, but though he had lived among us several years, he had not yet learned to what heights of absurdity the Mother-cult has been raised in America, nor did he understand that it is the conventional thing to regard any woman, no matter how ignorant or inexperienced, as endowed with preternatural wisdom and omniscient foresight merely because she has at some time fulfilled the biological function of race-perpetuation. And Mrs. Mason Glendower's thought-processes were, I knew, as conventional as a printed greeting card.

"You mean," the lady gasped, a sort of horrified incredulity replacing the grief in her countenance—"you mean you actually think a *doctor* can have more influence with a son than his pastor or his *mother*?"

"Perfectly, *Madame*," he replied imperturbably. Her scandalized astonishment was lost on him; it was as though she had asked whether in his opinion novocain were preferable to cocaine as an anesthetic in appendectomy.

"Well—" I braced myself for the coming storm, but, amazingly, it failed to materialize. "Perhaps you're right, Dr. de Grandin," she conceded with a sudden strange meekness.

"Whatever you do, you can't fail any more than Dr. Stephens and I have failed."

She smiled wanly, with a trace of embarrassment. "You'll find Raymond in his room, now," she informed us, "but I doubt he'll see you. This is the time for his 'silence,' as he calls it, and—"

"*Eh bien, Madame,*" the little Frenchman chuckled, "lead us to his sanctuary. We shall break this silence of his, I make no doubt. Silence is golden, as your so glorious Monsieur Shakespeare has said, but a greater than he has said there is a time for silence and a time for speech. This, I think, is that time. But yes."

A BRAZEN bowl of incense burned in Raymond Glendower's room, its cloying, heady sweetness almost stunning us as we entered uninvited after half a dozen pleading calls and several timid knocks on the door by his mother had failed to evoke a response. Raymond perched precariously on a low, flat-topped stand similar to those used for supporting flower-pots, his legs crossed, feet folded sole upward upon his calves, his hands resting palm upward in his lap, the finger tips barely touching. His head was bowed and his eyes closed. So far as I could see, his costume consisted of a flowing white-muslin robe which might have been a folded sheet loosely belted at the waist, and a turban of the same material wound about his brow. Arms, legs, feet and breast were uncovered, for the robe hung open at the front, revealing his chest and the major portion of his torso. At first glance I was struck by the pallor of his face and the marked concavity of his cheeks; plainly the boy was suffering from primary starvation induced by a sudden diminution of diet.

"What's he been eating?" I whispered to his mother as the seated youth paid no more attention to our advent than he would have given the buzzing of a trespassing fly.

"Fruit," she whispered back, "fruit and nuts and raisins, and very little of each. It's against the discipline of the sect to eat anything killed or cooked."

"U'm," I murmured. "How long has this been going on?"

"Ever since he met that woman—nearly two months," she returned. "My poor boy's fading away before my eyes, and—"

"S-s-sh!" I warned. Like a sleeper awakened, young Glendower had opened his eyes and wriggled from his undignified perch like a contortionist unwinding himself from a knot.

"Oh, hullo, Dr. Trowbridge," he greeted, crossing the room to take my hand cordially. If he felt any embarrassment at being caught thus he concealed it admirably. "Pleased to meet you, Dr. de Grandin," he acknowledged my introduction. "Be with you in half a sec. if you'll wait till I get some clothes on."

We retired to the drawing-room, and in a few minutes the young man, normally attired in a well-tailored blue suit, joined us. His mother excused herself almost immediately, and Raymond glanced from de Grandin to me with a humorous twist of his well-formed lips.

"All right, Dr. Trowbridge," he invited, "you may fire when ready. I suppose Mother's called you in to show me the error of my ways. She had Stephens in the other day, and the reverend old fool will never know how near he came to assassination. He began by singsonging at me and ended by attacking Estrella's character. That's where I draw the line. If he hadn't been a preacher I'd have tossed him out on his neck. Just a little warning, gentlemen," he added pleasantly. "Go as far as you like in quoting Joshua, Solomon and Moses at me—I won't kick if you throw in a few passages from *Deuteronomy* for good measure, but one word against Estrella and we fight—physicians

don't share clerical immunity, you know."

"By no means, *Monsieur*," de Grandin cut in quickly. "We have not had the honor of the young lady's acquaintance, and he who condemns without having seen is a fool. Also, we have no wish to scoff at your faith. Me, I am a deep student of all religions, and the practises of Yoga and similar systems interest me greatly. Is it possible that we, as serious students, might be permitted to see some of the outward forms of your so interesting cult?"

The boy warmed to his request as a stray dog responds to a friendly pat upon the head. Plainly he had heard nothing but complaints and naggings since he became involved in the strange religion which he professed, and the first remarks by an outsider which did not imply criticism delighted him.

"Of course," he answered enthusiastically; "that is, I'm almost sure I can arrange it for you." He paused a moment, as though considering whether to take us further into his confidence, then:

"You see, Estrella is Exalted High Hierophant of the Church of Heavenly Gnosis, and though I am unworthy of the honor, her Sublimity has deigned to look on me with favor"—there was a reverential tremor in his voice as he pronounced the words—"and it is even possible she may receive a revelation telling her we may marry, as ordinary mortals do, though that is more than I dare hope for." Again his words trembled on his lips, and we could see he actually fought for breath as he spoke, as though his wildly beating heart had expanded in his breast and pressed his lungs for space.

"U'm?" de Grandin was all polite attention. "And will you tell us something of the society's history, young *Monsieur*?"

"Of course," Raymond answered. "The Heavenly Gnosis is the latest

manifestation of the Divine All which underlies everything. For thousands of years mankind has struggled blindly through the darkness, always seeking the Divine Light, always failing in its quest. Now, through the revelations of our Supreme Hierophant, the Godhead shall be made plain. Just twenty years ago the great boon came into the world, when Estrella, the Holy Child, was born. Like Mohammed and that other prophet whom men call Jesus, she was of humble parentage, but the Supreme Will follows Its own inscrutable designs in such matters—Buddha was a prince, Confucius was a scholar, Mohammed a camel-driver and Jesus the son of a carpenter. Estrella is the daughter of a laborer. She was born in a workman's shanty beside the tracks of the Santa Fe; her father was a section foreman and her mother a cook and washerwoman for the men; yet when the Holy Child was barely old enough to walk the cattle and horses in the fields would kneel before her and touch their noses to the earth as she toddled past.

"She was less than a year old when one of the workmen in her father's gang came upon her sitting between two great rattlesnakes while a third reptile reared on its tail before her and inclined its head in adoration. The man would have killed the snakes with his long-handled shovel, but the babe, who had never been heard to speak before, rebuked him for his impiety, reminding him that all things are God's creatures, and that he who takes life of any kind on any pretext is guilty of supreme sacrilege in usurping a function of Deity, and must expiate his sin through countless reincarnations."

"*Parbleu*, you astonish me!" said Jules de Grandin.

"Yes," Raymond continued with all the recent convert's fervor, "and from that day Estrella continued to prophesy and reveal truth after great truth. At her behest her parents gave

up eating the remains of any living thing and ceased desecrating the divine element of fire by using it to cook their food. Her father abandoned his work and went to live in the desert, where day by day, in the silence of the waste places, new revelations came to the Holy Child who has condescended to cast her glorious eyes on me, the most unworthy of her worshippers."

"*Mordieu, you amaze me!*" de Grandin declared. "And then?"

"When her period of preparation was done, her mother, who had committed all the wondrous things she foretold to writing, brought her East that the teeming cities of the seaboard might hear the words of truth from her own divine lips."

"*Cordieu, you overwhelm me!*" de Grandin assured him. "And have you found many converts to the faith, *Monsieur?*"

"N-no," Raymond admitted, "but those who have affiliated with us are important individually. There was Miss Stiles, a member of one of the state's oldest and wealthiest families. She was one of the first to be converted, and distinguished herself by her great ardor and acts of piety. She also brought a number of other influential people into the light, and—"

"May one inquire where this so estimable lady may be found now?" de Grandin asked softly. "I should greatly like to discuss—"

"She has passed through her final incarnation and dwells forever in the ineffable light emanated by the Divine All," young Glendower broke in. "She was summoned from battle to victory in the very moment of performing the supreme act of adoration, and—"

"In fine, *Monsieur*," de Grandin interrupted, "one gathers she is no more—she is passed away; defunct; dead?"

"In the language of the untaught—yes," Raymond admitted, "but we

who have heard the truth know that she is clothed in garments of everlasting light and resides perpetually—"

"*Mais oui,*" de Grandin cut in a trifle hastily, "you are undoubtedly right, *mon ami*. Meantime, if you will endeavor to secure us permission to meet these so fortunate ones who bask in the sunlight of *Mademoiselle's* revelations, we shall be most greatly obliged. At present we have important duties which call us elsewhere. Yes, certainly."

"**W**ELL, what about it?" I inquired as we drove homeward. "I'm frank to admit I didn't know what he was driving at half the time, and the other half I had to sit on my hands to keep from clouting the young fool on the head."

The little Frenchman laughed delightedly. "It is the love of the *petit chien* run wild, my friend," he told me. "Some young men when smitten by it turn to poetry; some attempt great deeds of derring-do to win their ladies' favor; this one has swallowed a bolus of undigested nonsense, plagiarized by an ignorant female from half the religions of the East, up to the elbow."

"Yes, but it has a serious aspect," I reminded. "Suppose he married that charlatan, and—"

"How wealthy is the Glendower family?" he interrupted. "Is the restrained elegance in which they live a mark of good taste, or a sign of comparative poverty?"

"Why," I replied, "I don't think they're what you could call rich. Old Glendower is reputed to have left a hundred thousand or so; but that's not considered much money nowadays, and—"

"But what of Monsieur Raymond's private fortune?" he demanded. "Does he possess anything outside his expectancy upon his mother's death?"

"How the devil should I know?" I answered testily.

"*Précisément*," he agreed, in no way offended by my petulance. "If you will be good enough to drop me here, I shall seek information where it can be had reliably. Meantime, I implore you, arrange with your peerless cook to prepare a noble dinner against the time of my return. I shall be famished as a wolf."

"**W**HERE the deuce have you been?" I demanded as he entered the dining-room just as Nora McGinnis, my household factotum, was serving dessert. "We waited dinner for you till everything was nearly spoiled, and—"

"Alas, my friend, I am desolated," he assured me penitently. "But consider, is not my punishment already sufficient? Have I not endured the pangs of starvation while I bounced about in a *sacré* taxicab like an egg-shell in a kettle of boiling water? But yes. They are slow of movement at the courthouse, Friend Trowbridge."

"The courthouse? You've been there? What in the world for?"

"For needed information, to be sure," he returned with a smile as he attacked his bouillon with gusto. "I learned much there which may throw light on what we heard this afternoon, *mon vieux*."

"Yes?"

"Yes, certainly; of course. I discovered, by example, that a Miss Matilda Stiles, who is undoubtedly the same pious lady of whom the young Glendower told us, passed away a month ago, leaving several sadly disappointed relatives and a last will and testament whereby she names one Mademoiselle Estrella Hudgekins her principal legatee. Furthermore, I discovered that a certain Matilda Stiles, spinster, of this county, did devise by deed, previous to her sad demise, several parcels of excellent valuable real estate in and near the city of Harrisonville to one Timothy Hudgekins and Susanna Hudgekins, his wife, as trustees for

Estrella Hudgekins. Furthermore, I found on record several bills of sale whereby numerous articles of intensely valuable personal property—diamonds, antique jewelry, and the like—were conveyed outright by the said Matilda Stiles to the aforesaid Estrella Hudgekins—*parbleu*, already I do mouth the legal jargon unconsciously, so many instruments of transference I have read this afternoon!"

"Well?" I asked.

"No, my friend, it is not well; I damn think it is exceedingly unwell." He helped himself to a generous portion of roast duckling and dressing and refilled his glass with claret. "Attend me, carefully, if you please. The young Monsieur Glendower was to receive in his own right a hundred thousand dollars from his father's estate upon attaining his majority. He passed his twenty-first birthday last month, and already the attorneys have attended to the transfer of the funds. What think you from that?"

"Why, nothing," I returned. "I'd an idea Raymond would succeed to part of the property before his mother's death. Why shouldn't he?"

"Ah, bah!" de Grandin replenished his plate and glass and regarded me with an expression of pained annoyance. "Can not you see, my old one? The conclusion leaps to the eye!"

"It may leap to yours," I replied with a smile, "but its visibility is zero, as far as I'm concerned."

2

"**Y**ou two will be the only guests outside the church tonight," Raymond Glendower warned as we drove toward the apartment hotel where the high priestess of the Church of the Heavenly Gnosis resided with her parents, "so if you'll—er—try not to notice things too much, you know I'll be awful obliged. You see—er—" he floundered miserably, but

de Grandin came to his rescue with ready understanding.

"Quite so, *mon vieux*," he agreed. "It is like this: devout members of the Catholic faith are offended when mannerless Protestants enter their churches, stare around as though they were at a museum, and fail to genuflect as they pass the altar; good Protestants take offense when ill-bred Catholics enter their churches and glance around with an air of supercilious disdain, and the Christian visitor gives offense to his Jewish brethren when he removes his hat in their synagogues, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"That's it!" the boy agreed. "You've got the idea exactly, sir."

He leaned forward and was about to embark on another long and tiresome exposition of the excellence of his faith's tenets when the grinding of our brakes announced we had arrived at our destination.

The corridor of the Granada Apartments flashed with inharmonious colors like a kaleidoscope gone crazy, and I shook my head in foreboding. The house was not only screamingly offensive to the eye, it was patently an expensive place in which to live, and the prophetess must draw heavily on her devotees' funds in order to maintain herself in such quarters.

An ornate lift done in the ultra-modernistic manner shot us skyward, and Raymond preceded us down the passage, stopping before a brightly polished bronze door with the air of a worshipper about to enter a shrine. We entered without knocking and found ourselves in a long, narrow hall with imitation stone floor, walls and ceiling. A stone table with an alabaster glow-lamp at its center was the only piece of furniture. A huge mirror let into the wall and surrounded by bronze pegs did duty as a cloak-rack. All in all, the place was about as inviting as a corridor in the penitentiary.

The room beyond, immensely large and almost square in shape, was

mellowly lighted by a brass floor-lamp with a shade of perforated metal; its floor was covered with a huge Turkey carpet; the walls were hung with Persian and Chinese rugs. Beneath the lamp, its polished case giving back subdued reflections, like quiet water at night, was a grand piano flanked by two tall Japanese vases filled to overflowing with long-stemmed red roses. Near the opened windows, where the muted roar of the city seeped upward like the crooning of distant waves, was grouped a number of chairs no two of which were mates. Several guests were already seated, talking together in hushed tones like early arrivals at a funeral service.

Oddly, though it was really a most attractive apartment, that rug-strewn room struck a sinister note. Whether it was the superheated atmosphere, the dimly diffused light or the vague reminiscence of incense which mingled with the roses' perfume I do not know, but I had a momentary feeling of panic, a wild desire to seize my companions by the arms and flee before some unseen, evil presence which seemed to brood over the place bound us fast as a spider enmeshes a luckless fly.

Near the piano, where the lamp-light fell upon her, stood the high priestess of the cult, Raymond's "Holy Child," and despite my pre-conceived prejudices, I felt forced to admit the cub had good excuse for his infatuation.

Her extremely décolleté gown of black velvet, entirely devoid of ornamentation, clung to her magnificent figure like the drapery to the Milo Venus and set off her white arms and shoulders in startling contrast. Above the pearl-white expanse of bosom and throat, the perfectly molded shoulders and beautifully turned neck, her face was set like an ivory ikon in the golden nimbus of her hair. She was tall, beautifully made and supple as a mountain lioness. A mediæval master-painter would have joyed in

her physical perfection, but assuredly he would not have painted her with a child at her breast or an aureole surrounding her golden head. No, her beauty was typical of the world, the flesh, and the franker phases of love.

Her upper lip was fluted at the corners as if used to being twisted in a petulant complaint against fate, and her long amber eyes slanting upward at the corners like an Asiatic's, were cold and hard as polished topaz; they seemed to be constantly appraising whatever they beheld. She might have been lovely, as well as beautiful, but for her eyes, but the windows of her soul looked outward only; no one could gaze into them and say what lay behind.

"Bout d'un rat mort," whispered Jules de Grandin in my ear, "this one, she is altogether too good-looking to be entirely respectable, Friend Trowbridge!"

The slow smile with which she greeted Raymond as he bowed almost double before her somehow maddened me. "You poor devil," it seemed to say, "you poor, witless, worshipping Caliban; you don't amount to much, but what there is of your body and soul that's worth having is mine—utterly mine!" Such a smile, I thought, Circe might have given the poor, fascinated man-hogs wallowing and grunting in adoring impotence about her table. As for Raymond, plain, downright adulation brought the tears to his eyes as he all but groveled before her.

As de Grandin and I were led forward for presentation I noted the figures flanking the priestess. They were a man and woman, and as unlovely a pair as one might meet in half a day's walk. The man was like a caricature, bull-necked, bullet-headed, with beetling brows and scrubby, bristle-stiff hair growing low above a forehead of bestial shallowness. Though his face was hard-shaven as an actor's or a priest's, no overlay of barber's

powder could hide the wiry beard which struggled through his skin. His evening clothes were well tailored and of the finest goods, but somehow they failed to fit properly, and I had a feeling that a suit of stripes would have been more in place on him.

The woman was like a vicious-minded comic artist's conception of a female politician, short, stocky, apparently heavy-muscled as a man and enormously strong, with a wide, hard mouth and pugnaciously protruding jaw. Her gown, an expensive creation, might have looked beautiful on a dressmaker's lay figure, but on her it seemed as out of place as though draped upon a she-gorilla.

These two, we were made to understand, were the priestess' parents.

Estrella herself spoke no word as de Grandin and I bowed before her, nor did she extend her hand. Serene, statue-still, she stood to receive our mumbled expressions of pleasure at the meeting with an aloofness which was almost contemptuous.

Only for a fleeting instant did her expression change. Something, perhaps the gleam of mockery which lurked in de Grandin's gaze, hardened her eyes for a moment, and I had a feeling that it would behoove the little Frenchman not to turn his back on her if a dagger were handy.

Raymond hovered near his divinity while de Grandin and I proceeded to the next room, where a long sideboard was loaded with silver dishes containing dried fruits, nut-kernels and raisins. The Frenchman sampled the contents of a dish, then made a wry face. "Name of the Devil," he swore, "such vilness should be prohibited by statute!"

"Well?" I asked, nodding questioningly toward the farther room.

"*Parbleu*, no; it is far from such!" he answered. "Of *Mademoiselle la Prêtresse* I reserve decision till later, but her sire and dam—*mordieu*, were

I a judge, I should find them guilty of murder if they came before me on a charge of chicken-theft! Also, my friend, though their faith may preclude the use of cooked or animal food, unless Jules de Grandin's nose is a great liar, there is nothing in their discipline which forbids the use of liquor, for both of them breathe the aroma of the gin-mill most vilely."

Somewhat later the meeting assumed a slightly more sociable aspect, and we were able to hold a moment's conversation with the prophetess.

"And do you see visions of the ineffable, *Mademoiselle?*" de Grandin asked earnestly. "Do you behold the splendor of heaven in your ecstasies?"

"No," she answered coldly, "my revelations come by symbols. Since I was a little girl I've told my dreams to Mother, and she interprets them for me. So, when I dreamed a little while ago that I stood upon a mountain and felt the wind blowing about me, Mother went into her silence and divined it portended we should journey East to save the people from their sins, for the mountain was the place where we then lived and the wind of my dream was the will of the Divine All, urging me to publish His message to His people."

"And you believe this?" de Grandin asked, but with no note of incredulity in his tone.

"Of course," she answered simply. "I am the latest avatar of the Divine All. Others have come before—Buddha, Mithra, Mohammed, Confucius—but I am the greatest. By woman sin came upon mankind; only by woman can the burden be lifted again. These others, these male hierophants, showed but a part of the way; through me the whole road to everlasting happiness shall be made plain."

"Even when I was a tiny baby the

beasts of the field—even the poison serpents of the desert—did reverence to the flame of divinity which burns in me!" She placed her hand proudly on her bosom as she spoke.

"You remember these occasions of adoration?" de Grandin asked in a sort of awed whisper.

"I have been told—my Mother remembers them," she returned shortly as she turned away.

"*Grand Dieu,*" de Grandin murmured, "she believes it, Friend Trowbridge; she has been fed upon this silly pap till she thinks it truth!"

ALL through the evening we had noticed that the guests not only treated Estrella with marked respect, but that they one and all were careful not to let themselves come in contact with her, or even with her clothes. Subconsciously I had noted this, but paid no particular attention to it till it was brought forcibly to my notice.

Among the guests was a little, homely girl, an undersized, underfed morsel of humanity who had probably never in all her life attracted a second glance from any one. Nervous, flutteringly attentive to the lightest syllable let fall by the glorious being who headed the cult, she had kept as close to Estrella as was possible without actually touching her, and as we were preparing to take our departure she came awkwardly between Timothy Hodgekins and his daughter.

Casually, callously as he might have brushed an insect from his sleeve, the man flipped one of his great, gnarled hands outward, all but oversetting the frail girl and precipitating her violently against the prophetess.

The result was amazing. Making no effort to recover her balance, the girl slid to the floor, where she crouched at Estrella's feet in a perfect frenzy of abject terror. "Oh, your Sublimity," she cried, and her words came through blenched lips on

trembling breath, "your High Sublimity, have pity! I did not mean it; I know it is forbidden to so much as touch the hem of your garment without permission, but I didn't mean it; truly, I didn't! I was pushed, I —I—" her words trailed away to soundlessness, and only the rasping of her terrified breath issued from her lips.

"Silence!" the priestess bade in a cold, toneless voice, and her great topaz eyes blazed with tigerish fury. "Silence, Sarah Couvert. Go—go and be forever accursed!"

It was as though a death-sentence had been pronounced. Utter stillness reigned in the room, broken only by the heart-broken sobs of the girl who crouched upon the floor. Every member of the cult, as though actuated by a common impulse, turned his back upon her, and weeping and alone she left the room to find her wraps.

Jules de Grandin would have held her costly evening cloak for her, but she gestured him away and left the apartment with her face buried in her handkerchief.

SANG du Diable, my friend, look at this, *regardez-vous!*" cried de Grandin next morning at breakfast as he thrust a copy of the morning paper across the table.

"COUVERT HEIRESS A SUICIDE"

I read in bold-faced type:

"The body of Miss Sarah Couvert, 28, heiress to the fortune of the late Herman Couvert, millionaire barrel manufacturer, who died in 1910, was found in the river near the Canal street bridge early this morning by Patrolman Aloysius P. Mahoney. The young woman was in evening dress, and it was said at her house when servants were questioned that she had attended a party last night at the apartment of Mr. and Mrs. Timothy Hudgekins in the Granada. When she failed to return from the merrymaking her housekeeper was not alarmed, she said, as Miss Couvert had been spending considerable time away from home lately.

"At the Hudgekins apartment it was said Miss Couvert left shortly before 11 o'clock,

apparently in the best of spirits, and her hosts were greatly shocked at learning of her rash act. No reason for her suicide can be assigned. She was definitely known to be in good health."

Then followed an extended account of the career of the genial old Alsatian cooper who had amassed a fortune in the days before national Prohibition decreased the demand for kegs and barrels. The news item ended:

"Miss Couvert was the last of her family, her parents having both predeceased her and her only brother, Paul, having been killed at Belleau Wood in 1918. Unless she left a will disposing of her property, it is said the entire Couvert fortune will escheat to the state."

Reaching into his waistcoat pocket de Grandin removed one of the gold coins which, with the Frenchman's love for "hard money," he always carried.

"This bets the Couvert fortunes are never claimed by the Commonwealth of New Jersey, Friend Trowbridge," he announced, ringing the five-dollar piece on the hot-water dish cover.

He was justified in his wager. Two weeks later Sarah Couvert's will was formally offered for probate. By it she left substantial amounts to all her servants, bequeathed the family mansion and a handsome endowment as a home for working-girls, and left the residuum of the estate, which totaled six figures, to her "dear friend, Estrella Hudgekins."

3

AN UNDERSIZED individual with ears which stood so far from his head that they must have proved a great embarrassment on a windy day perched on the extreme forward edge of his chair and gazed pensively at the top of the brown derby clutched between his knees. "Yes, sir," he answered de Grandin's staccato questions, "me buddy an' me have had th' subject under our eye every minute since you give th' case to th' chief. He wuz to his lawyer's today an' ordered a will drawn, makin' Miss

Hudgekins th' sole legatee; he called her his feeancy."

"You're sure of this?" de Grandin demanded.

"Sure, I'm sure. Didn't I give th' office boy five bucks to let me look at a carbon copy o' th' rough draft o' th' will for five minutes? That sort o' information comes high, sir, an' it'll have to go in on th' expense account."

"But naturally," the Frenchman conceded. "And what of the operative at the Hotel Granada, has she forwarded a report?"

"Sure." The other delved into his inner pocket, ruffled through a sheaf of soiled papers, finally segregated a double sheet fastened with a wire clip. "Here it is. Th' Hudgekinses have been holdin' some sort o' powwow durin' th' last few days; sent th' chicken away to th' country somewhere, an' been doin' a lot o' talkin' an' plannin' behind locked doors. Number Thirty-three couldn't git th' drift o' much o' th' argument, but just before th' young one wuz packed off she heard th' old woman tell her that her latest dream meant Raymond —by which I take it she meant th' young feller we've been shadderin'—has been elected—no, 'selected' wuz th' word—selected to perform th' act o' supreme adoration, whatever that means."

"*Morbleu*, I damn think it means no good!" de Grandin ejaculated, rising and striding restlessly across the room. "Now, have you a report from the gentleman who was to investigate Miss Stiles' case?"

"Sure. She wuz buried by Undertaker Martin, th' coroner, you know. Her maid found her dead in bed, an' rang up Dr. Replier, who'd been attendin' her for some time. He come runnin' over, looked at th' corpse, an' made out a certif'cate statin' she died o'"—he paused to consult his notebook—"o' cardiac insufficiency, whatever that is. Coroner Martin wanted a autopsy on th' case, but on

account o' th' old lady's social prominence they managed to talk him out o' it."

"H'm," de Grandin commented non-committally. "Very good, my excellent one, your work is deserving of highest commendation. Should new developments arise, you will advise me at once, if you please."

"Sure," the detective promised as he rose to leave.

"For heaven's sake, what's it all about?" I demanded as the door closed behind the visitor. "What's the idea of having Raymond Glendower and this girl trailed by detectives as if they were criminals?"

"Ha," he laughed shortly. "The young Glendower is a fool for want of judgment; of the young *Mademoiselle*, I do not care yet to say whether she be criminal or not. I hope the best but fear the worst, my friend."

"But why the investigation of Miss Stiles' death? If Replier said she died of cardiac insufficiency, I'm willing to accept that vague diagnosis at face value; he's able, and he's honest as the day is long. If—"

"And therefore he is as likely to be hoodwinked as your own trustful self, *mon vieux*," the little Frenchman interjected. "Consider, if you please:

"The young Glendower, anxious to impress us with the importance of the converts to this new religion of his, tells us what concerning the death of the old *Mademoiselle* Stiles? That she died in the very moment of performing 'the act of supreme adoration'.

"Very good. What says the evidence gathered by my men? That she died in her bed at home—at least she was found dead there by her maid-servant. Somewhere there is a discrepancy, my friend, a most impressive one. What this act of adoration may be I do not know, nor do I at present very greatly care, but that the excellent deceased lady performed it in her death-bed I greatly doubt. No, my friend, I think she died else-

where and was taken to her home that she might be found dead in her own bed, and her decease therefore considered natural. The fact that she had been ailing of a heart affection for some time, and under treatment by the good Dr. Replier, made the deception so much easier."

"But this is fantastic!" I objected. "We've not one shred of evidence on which to base this theory, and—"

"We have a great sufficiency," he contradicted, "and more will be forthcoming anon. Meantime, if only—"

A vigorous ring at the front doorbell, seconded by a shrill whistle, interrupted him. "Special delivery for Dr. de Grandin," the boy informed me as I answered the summons.

"Quickly, Friend Trowbridge, let me see!" the Frenchman cried as I took the letter from the messenger.

"Ah, *parbleu*," he glanced quickly through the document, then turned to me triumphantly, "I have them on the hip, my friend! Regard this, if you please; it is the report of the Charred Detective Agency's San Francisco branch. I intrusted them with the task of tracing our friend's antecedents. Read it, if you please."

Taking the paper, I read:

HUDGEKINS, TIMOTHY, alias Frank Hireland, alias William Faust, alias Pat Malone, alias Henry Palmer.

Description: Height 5 feet 8 inches, weight 185 pounds, inclined to stoutness, but not fat, heavily muscled and very strong. Hair, black mixed with gray, very coarse and stiff. Face broad, heavy jaw, arms exceptionally long for his height. Eyes gray.

Was once quite well known locally as prizefighter, later as strong-arm man and bouncer in waterfront saloons. Arrested and convicted numerous times for misdemeanors, chiefly assault and battery. Twice arrested for robbery, but discharged for lack of evidence. Tried on charge of murder (1900) but acquitted for insufficient evidence.

Convicted, 1902, for badger game, in conspiracy with Susanna Hudgekins (see report below), served two years in San Quentin Prison.

Apparently reformed upon release from prison and secured job with railroad as laborer. Industrious, hard worker, well thought of by superiors there. Left job voluntarily in 1910. Not known locally since.

HUDGEKINS, SUSANNA, alias Frisco Sue, alias Annie Rooney, alias Sue Cheney, wife of above.

Description: Short, inclined to stoutness, but very strong for female. Height 5 feet 4 inches, weight about 145 pounds. Hair brown, usually dyed red or bleached. Face broad, very prominent jaw. Eyes brown.

This party was waitress and entertainer in number of music halls prior to marriage to Timothy Hudgekins (see above). Maiden name not definitely known, but believed to be Hopkins. Arrested numerous times for misdemeanors, chiefly drunkenness and disorderly conduct, several times for assault and battery. Was co-defendant in robbery and murder cases involving her husband, as noted above. Acquitted for lack of evidence.

Convicted, 1902, with Timothy Hudgekins, on charge of operating a badger game. Served 1 year in State Reformatory.

Apparently reformed upon discharge from prison. Accompanied husband on job with railroad. Disappeared with him in 1910. Not known locally since.

In 1900 this couple, showing an excellent record for industry and honesty, applied to Bidewell Home for Orphans, Los Angeles, for baby girl. They were most careful in making selection, desiring a very young child, a blond, and one of exceptionally good looks. Said since they were both so ugly, they particularly wanted a pretty child. Were finally granted permission to adopt Dorothy Ericson, 3 months old, orphan without known relatives, child of poor but highly respected Norwegian parents who died in tenement fire two months before. The child lived with her foster parents in railroad camps where they worked, and disappeared when they left the job. Nothing has been heard of her since.

"EXCELLENT, superb; *magnifique!*" he cried exultantly as I finished reading the jerkily worded but complete report. "Behold the *dossier* of these founders of a new religion, these Messiahs of a new faith, my friend!"

"Also behold the answer to the puzzle which has driven Jules de Grandin nearly frantic. A lily may grow upon a dung-heap, a rose may rise from a bed of filth, but two apes do not beget a gazelle, nor do carrion crows have doves for progeny. No,

certainly not. I knew it; I was sure of it; I was certain. She could not have been their child, Friend Trowbridge; but this proves the truth of my premonition."

"But what's it all about?" I demanded. "I'm not surprised at the Hudgekins' pedigree—their appearance is certainly against them—nor does the news that the girl's not their child surprise me, but—"

"But' be everlastingly cooked in hell's most choicely heated furnace!" he interrupted. "You ask what it means? This, *cordieu*!"

"In California, that land of sunshine, alkali dust and crack-brained, fool-fostered religious thought, these two cheap criminals, these out-sweepings of the jail, in some way stumbled on a smattering of learning concerning the Eastern philosophies which have set many a Western woman's feet upon the road to madness. Perhaps they saw some monkey-faced, turbanned trickster from the Orient harvesting a crop of golden dollars from credulous old ladies of both sexes who flocked about him as country bumpkins patronize the manipulators of the three cards at county fairs. Although I should not have said they possessed so much shrewdness, it appears they conceived the idea of starting a new religion—a cult of their own. The man who will demand ten signatures upon a promissory note and look askance at you if you tell him of interplanetary distances, will swallow any idle fable, no matter how absurd, if it be boldly asserted and surrounded with sufficient nonsensical mummery and labeled a religion. Very well. These two were astute enough to realize they could not hope to impose on those possessing money by themselves, for their appearance was too much against them. But ah, if they could but come upon some most attractive person—a young girl endowed with charm and beauty, by preference—and put her forward as the prophetess of their cult while

they remained in the background to pull the strings which moved their pretty puppet, that would be something entirely different!

"And so they did. Appearing to reform completely, they assumed the guise of honest working-folk, adopted a baby girl with unformed mind whom they trained to work their wicked will from earliest infancy, and—*voilà*, the result we have already seen.

"Poor thing, she sincerely believes that she is not as other women, but is a being apart, sent into the world to lighten its darkness; she stated in guileless simplicity what would be blasphemy coming from knowing lips, and by her charm and beauty she snares those whose wealth has not been sufficient to fill their starved lives. Ah, my friend, youth and beauty are heaven's rarest treasures, but each time God creates a beautiful woman the Devil opens a new page in his ledger. Consider how their nefarious scheme has worked:

"Take the poor little rich *Mado-moisselle Couvert*, by example: Endowed with riches beyond the dream of most, she still lacked every vestige of personal attractiveness, her life had been a dismal routine of emptiness and her starved, repressed soul longed for beauty as a flower longs for sunlight. When the beauteous priestess of this seventy-nine-thousand-times-damned cult deigned to notice her, even called her friend, she was ecstatic in her happiness, and it was but a matter of time till she was induced by flattery to make the priestess her heir by will. Then, deliberately, I believe, that *sale bête*, Hudgekins, pushed her against his daughter, thus forcing her unwittingly to disobey one of the cult's so stupid rules.

"Consider, my friend: We, as physicians, know to what lengths the attraction of woman for woman can go—we see it daily in schoolgirl 'crushes,' usually where a younger woman makes a veritable goddess of an older one. Again, we see it when

one lacking in charm and beauty attaches herself worshipfully to some being endowed with both. To such starved souls the very sight of the adored one is like the touch of his sweetheart's lips to a love-sick youth. They love, they worship, they adore; not infrequently the passion's strength becomes so great as to be clearly a pathological condition. So it was in this case. When Mademoiselle Estrella mouthed the words she had been taught, and bade her worshipper depart from her side, poor Mademoiselle Couvert was overwhelmed. It was as if she had been stricken blind and never more would see the sun: there was nothing left in life for her; she destroyed herself—and her will was duly probated. Yes.

"Very well. What then? We do not know for certain how the old Mademoiselle Stiles came to her death; but I firmly believe it was criminally induced by those vile ones who had secured her signature to a will in their daughter's favor.

"But yes. What next? The young Glendower is not greatly wealthy, but his fortune of a hundred thousand dollars is not to be sneezed upon. Already we have seen how great a fool he has become for love of this beautiful girl. There is nothing he would not do to please her. We know of a certainty he has made his will naming her as sole beneficiary; perchance he would destroy himself, were she to ask it.

"Will she marry him? The hope has been held out, but I think it a vain one. These evil ones who have reaped so rich a harvest through their villainous schemes, they will not willingly permit that their little goose of the golden eggs shall become the bride of a man possessing a mere hundred thousand: besides, that money is already as good as in their pockets. No, no, my friend; the young Glendower is even now in deadly peril. Already I can see their smug-faced lawyer rising to request probate of

the will which invests them with his property!"

"But this 'act of supreme adoration' we keep hearing about," I asked, "what can it be?"

"*Précisément*," he agreed with a vigorous nod. "What? We do not know, but I damn fear it is bound up with the young Glendower's approaching doom, and I shall make it our business to be present when it is performed. *Pardieu*, I shall not be greatly astonished if Jules de Grandin has an act of his own to perform about that time. *Mais oui*; certainly! It might be as well, all things considered, if we were to get in touch with the excellent——"

"Detective Sergeant Costello to see Dr. de Grandin!" Nora McGinnis appeared at the drawing-room door like a cuckoo popping from its clock, and stood aside to permit six feet and several inches of Hibernian muscle, bone and good nature to enter.

"*Eh bien, mon trésor*," the Frenchman hailed delightedly, "this is most truly a case of speaking of the angels and immediately finding a feather from their wings! In all the city there is no one I more greatly desire to see at this moment than your excellent self!"

"Thanks, Dr. de Grandin, sor," returned the big detective sergeant, smiling down at de Grandin with genuine affection. " 'Tis Jerry Costello as can say th' same concernin' yerself, too. Indade, I've a case up me sleeve that won't wur-rk out no ways, so I've come to get ye to help me fit th' pieces together."

"*Avec plaisir*," the Frenchman replied. "Say on, and when you have done, I have a case for you, too, I think."

4

"**W**ELL, sor," the detective began as he eased his great bulk into an easy-chair and bit the end from the cigar I tendered him, "'tis like this: Last night somethin' after two

o'clock in th' mornin', one o' th' motorcycle squad, a bright lad be th' name o' Stebbins, wuz comin' out of a coffee-pot where he'd been to git a shot o' Java to take th' frost from his bones, when he seen a big car comin' down Tunlaw Street hell-bent fer election. 'Ah ha,' says he, 'this bur-rd seems in a hurry, maybe he'd like to hurry over to th' traffic court wid a ticket,' an' wid that he tunes up his 'cycle an' sets out to see what all th' road-burnin' was about.

"'Twas a powerful car, sor, an' Stebbins had th' devil's own time keepin' it in sight, but he hung on like th' tail to a dog, drawin' closer an' closer as his gas gits to feedin' good, an' what d'ye think he seen, sor?'"

"*Le bon Dieu* knows," de Grandin admitted.

"Th' limousine turns th' corner on two wheels, runnin' down Tuscarora Avenue like th' hammers o' hell, an' draws up before Mr. Marschaulk's house, pantin' like a dog that's had his lights run out. Next moment out leaps a big gorilla of a felly supportin' another man in his arms, an' makes fer th' front door.

"What's th' main idea?" Stebbins wants to know as he draws up alongside; 'don't they have no speed laws where you come from?'

"An', 'Sure they do,' answers th' other guy, bold as brass, 'an' they has policemen that's some good to th' public, too. This here's Mr. Marschaulk, an' he's been took mighty bad. I like to burned me motor out gittin' him home, an' if ye'll run fer th' nearest doctor, 'stead o' standin' there playin' wid that book o' summons, I'll be thinkin' more o' ye.'

"Well, sor, Stebbins is no one's fool, an' he can see wid half an eye that Mr. Marschaulk's in a bad way, so he notes down th' car's number an' beats it down th' street till he sees a doctor's sign, then hammers on th' front door till th' sawbones—ask-

in' yer pardon, gentlemen—comes down to see what its all about.

"They goes over to Marschaulk's in th' All America speed record, sor, an' what do they find?"

"*Dieu de Dieu*, is this a guessing-game?" de Grandin cried testily. "What did they find, *mon vieux*?"

"A corpse, sor; a dead corpse, an' nothin' else. Mr. Marschaulk's body had been dumped down in his front hall promiscuous-like, an' th' guy as brought him an' th' car he brought him in had vamoosed. Vanished into thin air, as th' felly says.

"Stebbins had th' license number, as I told ye, an' right away he locates th' owner. It were Mr. Cochran—Tobias A. Cochran, th' banker, sor; an' he'd been in his bed an' asleep fer th' last two hours. Furthermore, he told Stebbins he'd let his Filipino chauffeur go to New York th' day before, an' th' felly wuz still away. On top o' that, when they came to examine th' garage, they found unmistakable evidence it had been burglarized, in fact, th' lock wuz broke clean away."

"U'm," de Grandin murmured, "it would seem Monsieur Cochran is not implicated, then."

"No, sor; aside from his fine standin' in th' community, his alibi's watertight as a copper kettle. But ye ain't heard nothin' yet."

"It were a coroner's case, o' course, an' Mr. Martin didn't let no grass grow under his feet orderin' th' autopsy. They found Mr. Marschaulk had been dead th' better part o' two hours before Stebbins an' th' doctor found him, an' that he died o' mercuric cyanide—"

"*Bon Dieu*, the poisonest of the poisons!" de Grandin ejaculated. "Very good, my friend, what have you found? Has the man been apprehended?"

"He has not, sor, an' that's one reason I'm settin' here this minute. Stebbins wuz so taken up wid gittin' th' car's number an' runnin' fer a

doctor that he didn't git a good look at th' felly. In fact, he never even seen his face, as he kept it down all th' time they wuz talkin'. That seemed natural enough at th' time, too, as he wuz supportin' Mr. Marschaulk on his shoulder, like. Th' most we know about him is he wuz heavy-set, but not fat, wid a big pair o' shoulders an' a voice like a bull-frog singin' in a clump o' reeds."

"And you can find no motive for the killing, whether it be suicide or homicide?"

"That we can't sor. This here now Mr. Marschaulk wuz a harmless sort o' nut, sor; kind o' bugs on religion, from what I've been told. Some time ago he took up wid a new church o' some kind an' has been runnin' wild ever since, but in a harmless way—goin' to their meetin's an' th' like o' that, ye know. It seems like he wuz out wid some o' th' church folks th' very night he died, but when we went to round up th' evidence, we drew a blank there."

"Just a little before ten o'clock he called at Mr. Hudgekins' apartment in th' Granada, but left sometime around eleven by himself. We've th' Hudgekins' word fer it, an' th' elevator boy's an' th' hallman's, too. He'd been there often enough fer them to know him by sight, ye see."

"U'm, and Monsieur and Madame Hudgekins, did they remain at home?" de Grandin asked casually, but there were ominous flashes of cold lightning in his eyes as he spoke.

"As far as we can check up, they did, sor. They say they did, an' we can't find nobody who seen 'em leave, an' about a quarter after twelve Mr. Hudgekins himself called th' office an' asked fer more heat—though why he asked th' saints only know, as 'twas warm as summer last night an' them apartments is heated hot enough to roast a hog."

"*Tête du Diable*," de Grandin swore, "this spoils everything!"

"How's that, sor?"

"Tell me, my sergeant," the Frenchman demanded irrelevantly, "you interviewed Monsieur and Madame Hudgekins. What is your opinion of them?"

"Well, sor," Costello colored with embarrassment, "do ye want th' truth?"

"But certainly, however painful it may be."

"Well, then, sor, though they lives in a fine house an' wears fine clothes an' acts like a pair o' howlin' swell, if I seen 'em in different circumstances, I'd run 'em in on suspicion an' see if I couldn't make a case later. Th' man looks like a bruiser to me, like a second-rate pug that's managed to git hold of a pot o' money somewhere, an' the' woman—Lord save us, sor, I've run in many a wan lookin' far more respectable when I wuz poundin' a beat in uniform down in th' old second ward!"

"*Bien oui*," de Grandin chuckled delightedly. "I have not the pleasure of knowing your so delectable second ward, my old one, but I can well guess what sort of neighborhood it was. My sergeant, your intuitions are marvelous. Your inner judgment has the courage to call your sight a liar. Now tell me, how did Mademoiselle Hudgekins impress you?"

"I didn't see her, sor. She were out o' town, an' has been fer some time. I checked that up, too."

"*Barbe d'une anguille*, this is exasperating!" de Grandin fumed. "It is 'stalemate' at every turn, *parbleu*!"

"Oh, you're obsessed with the idea the Hudgekins are mixed up in this!" I scoffed. "It's no go, old fellow. Come, admit you're beaten, and apply yourself to trying to find what Marschaulk did and where he went after leaving the Granada last night."

"I s'pose ye're right, Dr. Trowbridge, sor," Sergeant Costello admitted sorrowfully, "but I'm wid Dr. de Grandin; I can't get it out o' me nut that that pair o' bur-rds had sumpin

to do wid pore old Marschaulk's death, or at least know more about it than they're willin' to admit."

"*Hélas*, we can do nothing here," de Grandin added sadly. "Come, Friend Sergeant, let us visit the good Coroner Martin; we may find additional information. Trowbridge, *mon vieux*, I shall return when I return; more definite I can not be."

I WAS finishing a solitary breakfast when he fairly bounced into the room, his face drawn with fatigue, but a light of elation shining in his little blue eyes. "*Triomphe*—or at least progress!" he announced as he dropped into a chair and drained a cup of coffee in three gigantic gulps. "Attend me with greatest care, my friend:

"Last night the good Costello and I repaired to Coroner Martin's and inspected the relics of the lamented Monsieur Marschaulk. Thereafter we journeyed to the Hotel Granada, where we found the same people on duty as the night before. A few questions supplied certain bits of information we had not before had. By example, we proved conclusively that those retainers of the house remembered not what they had done, but what they thought they had done. They all insisted it would have been impossible for anyone to have left the place without being seen by them, but anon it developed that just before eleven o'clock there rose a great cloud of smoke in the alley which flanks the apartment, and one and all they went to investigate its source. Something smoked most vilely in the middle of the passageway, and when they went too near they found it stung their eyes so they were practically blinded. Now, during that short interval, they finally admitted, it would have been possible for one to slip past them, through the passage on the side street and be out of sight before they realized it. Much can be accomplished

in a minute, or even half a minute, by one who is fleet of foot and has his actions planned, my friend."

"Yes, that's all very well," I conceded, "but you're forgetting one thing. How could Hudgekins call up and demand more heat at twelve o'clock if he had sneaked out at eleven? Do you contend that he crept back into the house while they were looking at another smoke screen? If he did, he must have worked the trick at least four times in all, since you seem to think it was he who brought Marschaulk's body home and stole Cochran's car to do it."

He looked thoughtfully at the little disk of bubbles forming above the lump of sugar he had just dropped into his third cup of coffee. "One must think that over," he admitted. "Re-entrance to the house after two o'clock would not have been difficult, for the telephone girl quits work at half-past twelve, and at one the hall-man locks the outer doors and leaves, while the lift man goes off duty at the same time and the car is thereafter operated automatically by push buttons. Each tenant has a key to the building so belated arrivals can let themselves in or out as they desire."

"But the telephone call," I insisted; "you haven't explained that yet."

"No," he agreed, "we must overcome that; but it does not destroy my theory, even though it might break down a prosecution in court."

"Consider this: After leaving the hotel, we returned to see Monsieur Martin, and I voiced my suspicions that Mademoiselle Stiles' death needed further explanation. Monsieur Martin agreed.

"Thereupon the good Costello and I resorted to a *ruse de guerre*. We told all we knew concerning Monsieur Marschaulk's death, but suppressed all mention of that *sacré* telephone call.

"My friend, we were successful.

Entirely so. At our most earnest request Monsieur Martin forthwith ordered exhumation of Mademoiselle Stiles' body. In the dead of night we disentombed her and took her to his mortuary. It was hard to get Parnell, the coroner's physician, from his bed, for he is a lazy swine, but at last we succeeded in knocking him up and forced him to perform a post-mortem examination. My friend, *Matilda Stiles was done to death; she was murdered!*"

"You're crazy!" I told him. "Dr. Replier's certificate stated—"

"Ah bah, that certificate, it is fit only to light the fire!" he cut in. "Listen: In Mademoiselle Stiles' mouth, and in her stomach, too, we did find minute, but clearly recognizable traces of Hg(CN) — mercuric cyanide! I repeat, Friend Trowbridge, she was murdered, and Jules de Grandin will surely lay her slayers by the heels. Yes."

"But—"

The shrill, insistent summons of the phone bell interrupted my protest.

The call was for de Grandin, and after a moment's low conversation he hung up, returning to the breakfast room with grimly set mouth. "*L'heure zéro* strikes tonight, Friend Trowbridge," he announced gravely. "That was the excellent detective I have had on young Glendower's trail. He reports they have just intercepted a conversation the young man had by telephone with Mademoiselle Estrella. He is to make the 'act of supreme adoration' this night."

"But what can we do?" I asked, filled with vague forebodings despite my better judgment. "If—"

"*Eh bien*, first of all we can sleep; at least, *I* can," he answered with a yawn. "*Morbleu*, I feel as though I could slumber round the clock—but I will thank you to have me called in time for dinner, if you please."

A LLO?" de Grandin snatched the telephone from its hook as the bell's first warning tinkle sounded. "You say so? It is well; we come forthwith, instantly, at once!"

Turning to Costello and me he announced: "The time is come, my friends; my watcher has reported the young Glendower but now left his house en route for the Hudgekins' dwelling. Come, let us go."

Hastening into our outdoor clothes we set out for the Granada and were hailed by the undersized man with the oversized ears as we neared the hotel. "He went in ten minutes ago," the sleuth informed us, "an' unless he's got wings, he's still there."

"*Eh bien*, then we remain here," de Grandin returned, nestling deeper into the folds of the steamer rug he had wrapped about him.

Half an hour passed, an hour, two; still Raymond Glendower lingered. "I'm for going home," I suggested as a particularly sharp gust of the unseasonably cold spring wind swept down the street. "The chances are Raymond's only paying a social call anyway, and—"

"*Tiens*, if that be true, his sociability is ended," de Grandin interrupted. "Behold, he comes."

Sure enough, young Glendower emerged from the hotel, a look of such rapt inattention on his face as might be worn by a bridegroom setting out for the church.

I leaned forward to start the motor, but the Frenchman restrained me. "Wait a moment, my friend," he urged. "The young *Monsieur*'s movements will be watched by sharper eyes than ours, and it is of the movements of Monsieur and Madame Hudgekins I would take note at this time."

Again we entered on a period of waiting, but this time our vigil was not so long. Less than half an hour after Raymond left the hotel a light

delivery truck drove up to the *Grenada*'s service entrance and two men in overalls and jumper alighted. Within a few minutes they returned, bearing between them a long wooden box upholstered in coarse denim. Apparently the thing was the base of a combination couch and clothes-chest, but from the slow care with which its bearers carried it, it might have been filled with something fragile as glass and heavy as lead.

"U'm," de Grandin twisted viciously at the tips of his tightly waxed wheat-blond mustache, "my friends, I damn think I shall try an experiment. *Trowbridge, mon ami*, do you remain here. Sergeant, will you come with me?"

They crossed the street, entered the corner drug-store and waited something like five minutes. The Frenchman was elated, the Irishman thoughtful as they rejoined me. "Three times we did attempt to get the Hudgekins apartment by telephone," de Grandin explained with a satisfied chuckle, "and three times Mademoiselle the Central Operator informed us the line did not answer and returned our coin. Now, Friend Trowbridge, do you care to hazard a guess what the contents of that box we saw depart might have been?"

"You mean—"

"Perfectly; no less. Our friends the Hudgekins lay snugly inside that coffin-like box, undoubtlessly grinning like cats fed on cheese and thumbing their noses at the attendants in the hotel lobby. Tomorrow those innocent ones will swear upon a pile of Bibles ten meters high that neither the amiable Monsieur Hudgekins nor his equally amiable wife left the place. More, I will wager they will solemnly affirm Monsieur or Madame Hudgekins called the office by 'phone and demanded more steam in the radiators!"

"But they can't do that," I protested. "There's an inside 'phone in the house, and a call made from

an instrument outside would not be taken over one of the house 'phones. They couldn't—"

My argument was cut short by the approach of a nondescript individual who touched his hat to de Grandin. "He's gone to 487 Luxor Road," this person announced, "an' Shipley just 'phoned a furniture wagon drove up an' two birds lugged a hell of a heavy box up th' stairs to th' hall.

"Oh, sure," he nodded in response to the Frenchman's admonition. "We'll call their apartment every fifteen minutes from now till you tell us to lay off."

"Très bien," de Grandin snapped. "Now, Friend Trowbridge, to 487 Luxor Road, if you please. Sergeant, you will come as soon as possible!"

"You betcha," Costello responded as he swung from the car and set off toward the nearest police station.

IT WAS an unsavory neighborhood through which Luxor Road ran, and the tumble-down building which was number 487 was the least respectable-appearing to be found in a thoroughly disreputable block. In days before the war the ground floor had housed a saloon, and its proprietors or their successors had evidently nourished an ambition to continue business against the form of the statute in such case made and provided, for pasted to the grimy glass of the window was a large white placard announcing that the place was closed by order of the United States District Court, and a padlock and hasp of impressive proportions decorated the principal entrance. Another sign, more difficult to decipher, hung above the doorway to the upper story, announcing that the hall above was for rent for weddings, lodges and select parties.

Up the rickety stairs leading to this dubious apartment de Grandin led the way.

The landing at the stairhead was dark as Erebus; no gleam of light

seeped under the door which barred the way, but the Frenchman tiptoed across the dusty floor and tapped timidly on the panels. Silence answered his summons, but as he repeated the hail the door swung inward a few inches and a hooded figure peered through the crack. "Who comes," the porter whispered, "and why have ye not the mystic knock?"

"*Morbleu*, perhaps this knock will be more greatly to your liking?" the Frenchman answered in a low, hard whisper, as his blackjack thudded sickeningly on the warden's hooded head.

"Assist me, my friend," he ordered in a low breath, catching the man as he toppled forward and easing him to the floor. "So. Off with his robe while I make sure of his good behavior with these." The snap of handcuffs sounded, and in a moment de Grandin rose, donned the hooded mantle he had stripped from the unconscious man, and tiptoed through the door.

We felt our way across the dimly lighted anteroom beyond and parted a pair of muffling curtains to peer into a lodge hall some twenty feet wide by fifty long. Flickering candles burning in globes of red and blue glass gave the place illumination which was just one degree less than darkness. Near us was a raised platform or altar approached by three high steps carpeted with a drugget on which were worked designs of a triangle surrounding an opened eye, one of the emblems appearing on the lift of each step. Upon the altar itself stood two square columns painted a dull red and surmounted by blue candles at least two inches thick, which burned smokily, diluting, rather than dispelling, the surrounding darkness. Each column was decorated with a crudely daubed picture of a cockerel equipped with three human legs, and behind the platform was a reredos bearing the device of two interlaced triangles enclosing an

opened eye and surrounded by two circles, the outer red, the inner blue. Brazen pots of incense stood upon each step, and from their perforated conical caps poured forth dense clouds of sweet, almost sickeningly perfumed smoke.

Facing the altar on two rows of backless benches sat the congregation, each so enveloped in a hooded robe that it was impossible to distinguish the face, or even the sex of various individuals.

Almost as de Grandin parted the curtains a mellow-toned gong sounded three deep, admonitory notes, and, preceded by a blue-robed figure and followed by another in robes of scarlet, Estrella Hudgekins entered the room from the farther end. She was draped in some sort of garment of white linen embroidered in blue, red and yellow, the costume seeming to consist of a split tunic with long, wide-mouthed sleeves which reached to the wrists. The skirt, if such it could be called, depended forward from her shoulders like a clergyman's stole, and while it screened the fore part of her body, it revealed her nether limbs from hip to ankle at every shuffling step. Behind, it hung down like a loose cloak, completely veiling her from neck to heels. Upon her head was a tall cap of starched white linen shaped something like a bishop's miter and surmounted by a golden representation of the triangle enclosing the opened, all-seeing eye. Beneath the cap her golden hair had been smoothly brushed and parted, and plaited with strings of rubies and of pearls, the braids falling forward over her shoulders and reaching almost to her knees.

As she advanced into the spot of luminance cast by the altar candles we saw the reason for her sliding, shuffling walk. Her nude, white feet were shod with sandals of solid gold consisting of soles with exaggeratedly upturned toes and a single metallic instep strap, making it impossible for

her to retain the rigid, metallic foot-gear and lift her feet even an inch from the floor.

Just before the altar her escort halted, ranging themselves on each side of her, and like a trio of mechanically controlled automata, they sank to their knees, crossed their hands upon their breasts and lowered their foreheads to the floor. At this the congregation followed suit, and for a moment utter quiet reigned in the hall as priestess and votaries lay prostrate in silent adoration.

Then up she leaped, cast off her golden shoes, and advancing to the altar's lowest step, began a stamping, whirling dance, accompanied only by the rhythmic clapping of the congregation's hands. And as she danced I saw a cloud of fine, white powder dust upward from the rug and fall like snow on marble upon the whiteness of her feet.

"Ah?" breathed Jules de Grandin in my ear, and from his tone I knew he found the answer to something which had puzzled him.

The dance endured for possibly five minutes, then ended sharply as it had commenced, and like a queen ascending to her throne, Estrella mounted the three steps of the altar, her powder-sprinkled feet leaving a trail of whitened prints on the purple carpet as she passed.

"Come forth, O chosen of the Highest; advance, O happiest of the servants of the One," chanted one of the cowled figures who had escorted the priestess. "You who have been chosen from among the flock to make the Act of Supreme Adoration; if you have searched your soul and found no guile therein, advance and make obeisance to the Godhead's Incarnation!"

There was a fluttering of robes and a craning of hooded heads toward the rear of the hall as a new figure advanced from the shadows. He was all in spotless linen like the priestess, but as he strode resolutely forward we

saw the smock-like garment which enveloped him was drawn over his everyday attire.

"*Morbleu*," de Grandin murmured, "I have it; it is easier that way! Dressing a corpse is awkward business, while stripping the robe from off a body is but an instant's work. Yes."

"Forasmuch as our brother Raymond has purified and cleansed his body by fasting and his mind and soul by meditation, and has made petition to the All-Highest for permission to perform the Act of Supreme Adoration, know ye all here assembled that it is the will of the Divine All, as manifested in a vision vouchsafed His priestess and Incarnation, that His servant be allowed to make the trial," the hooded master of ceremonies announced in a deep, sepulchral voice.

Turning to Raymond, he cautioned: "Know ye, my brother, that there is but one in all the earth deemed fitting to pass this test. The world is large, its people many; dost thou dare? Bethink you, if there be but one small taint of worldliness in your most secret thoughts, your presumption in offering yourself as life-mate to the priestess is punishable by death of body and everlasting annihilation of soul, for it has been revealed that many shall apply and only one be chosen."

To the congregation he announced: "If the candidate be a woman and pass the test, then shall the priestess cleave unto her so long as she shall live, and be forever her companion. If he be a man, he may ask her hand in marriage, and she may not refuse him. But if he fail, death shall be his portion. Is it the law?"

"It is the law!" chanted the assembly in one voice.

"And dost thou still persist in thy trial?" the hooded one demanded, turning once more to Raymond. "Remember, already two have tried and been found wanting, and the wrath

of the Divine All smote and withered them, even as they performed the act of adoration. *Dost thou dare?*"

"I do!" said Raymond Glendower as his eyes sought the lovely, smiling eyes of the white-robed priestess.

"It is well. Proceed, my son. Make thou the Act of Supreme Adoration, and may the favor of the Divine All accompany thee!"

IT WAS deathly silent in the room as Raymond Glendower dropped upon his knees and crept toward the altar steps. Only the sigh of quickly in-drawn breath betrayed the keyed emotion of the congregation as they leaned forward to see a man gamble with his life as forfeit.

Arms outstretched to right and left, head thrown back, body erect, the priestess stood, a lovely, cruciform figure between the flickering candles as her lover crept slowly up the altar steps.

At the topmost step he paused, kneeled erect a moment, then placed his hands palm downward each side the priestess' feet.

"Salute!" the hooded acolyte cried. "Salute with lips and tongue the feet of her who is the living shrine and temple of the Most High, the Divine All. Salute the Ivory-footed Incarnation of our God!"

Lips pursed as though to kiss a holy thing, Raymond Glendower bent his head above Estrella's ivory insteps, but:

"My hands, beloved, not my feet!" she cried, dropping her arms before her and holding out her hands, palm forward, to his lips.

"*Mordieu*," de Grandin whispered in delight. "Love conquers all, my friend, even her mistaught belief that she is God's own personal representative!"

"Sacrilege!" roared the hooded man. "It is not so written in the law! 'Tis death and worse than death for one who has not passed the test to touch the priestess' hands!"

A shaft of blinding light, gleaming as the sunlight, revealing as the glow of day, shot through the gloom and lighted up the hate-distorted features of Timothy Hudgekins, beneath the monk's-hood of the robe he wore. "Sacrilege it is, *parbleu*, but it is you who make it!" de Grandin cried as he focused his flashlight upon the master of ceremonies and advanced with a slow, menacing stride across the temple's floor.

"*You?*" Hudgekins cried. "You rat, you nasty little sneak, I'll break every bone——"

He launched himself on Jules de Grandin with a bellow like an infuriated bull.

The slender Frenchman crumpled like a broken reed beneath the other's charge, then straightened like a loosed steel spring, flinging Hudgekins sprawling face downward upon the carpet where the priestess had performed her dance.

"*A moi, Sergent; à moi, les gendarmes*; I have them!" he cried, and the stamping of thick-soled boots, the impact of fist and nightstick on hooded heads, mingled with the cries, curses and lamentations of the congregation of the Church of the Heavenly Gnosis as Costello led his platoon of policemen in the raid.

"Susanna Hudgekins, alias Frisco Sue, alias Annie Rooney, alias Sue Cheney, alias only the good God alone knows what else, I charge you with conspiracy to kill and murder Raymond Glendower, and with having murdered by conspiracy Matilda Stiles and Lawson Marschaulk—look to her, Sergeant," de Grandin cried, pointing a level finger at the second hooded form which had accompanied the priestess to the altar.

"What'll we do wid th' he one an' th' gur-rl, sor?" Costello asked as he clasped a pair of handcuffs on Susanna Hudgekins' wrists.

"The man——" de Grandin began, then:

"*Grand Dieu*, behold him!"

Timothy Hudgekins lay where he had fallen, his face buried in the deep-piled, powder-saturated carpet on which the priestess had danced. A single glance told us he was dead.

"I damn think the city mortuary would be his last abiding-place—till he fills a felon's grave," de Grandin announced callously. "He is caught in his own pitfall."

To me he explained: "When I flung the filthy beast from me his vile face did come in contact with that carpet which was saturated in cyanide of mercury. It was on that they made their poor, deluded dupe dance till her feet were covered with the powdered poison; then he who kissed and licked them perished instantly. So died Mademoiselle Stiles and so died Monsieur Marschaulk, and, *grâce à Dieu*, the poison he spread for the young Glendower has utterly destroyed that vile reptile of the name of Hudgekins. Half stunned from his fall, he breathed the deadly powder in, it dusted on his lips and swept into his mouth. So he died. I am very pleased to see it."

"What about th' gur-rl, sor?" Costello reminded.

"Nothing," de Grandin returned shortly. "She is innocent, my friend, the dupe and tool of those wicked ones. Should you seek her for questioning anon, I think you will find her in Monsieur Glendower's custody, by all appearances."

We turned with one accord toward the altar. In the light of the guttering candles Raymond Glendower and Dorothy Ericson, whom we had known as Estrella Hudgekins, were locked in each other's arms, and kissing each other on the lips, as lovers were meant to kiss.

"CERTAINLY, Mr. Hudgekins called the office," the Granada telephone girl answered de Grandin's query. "Just a few minutes after twelve o'clock he called and asked us to send up more heat."

"Did he now?" Costello asked. "Bedad, he's some guy, that felly, ain't he, Dr. de Grandin, sor?"

"You called the Hudgekins apartment at intervals?" de Grandin asked the sleuth we'd left to watch the hotel.

"Sure," that worthy replied. "Every fifteen minutes, regular as clockwork. Always got th' same answer: 'Yer party doesn't answer,' an' by th' way, sir, all them nickels I spent to call will have to go in on th' expense account."

"But of course, cert—" de Grandin began, then: "Thief, cheat, robber, *voleur*! Would you make a monkey of me? How comes it you would charge for calls you could not make?"

The detective grinned sheepishly, and de Grandin patted his shoulder with a smile. "Eh bien, mon petit brave," he relented, "here is five dollars; will that perhaps cover the total of those nickels you did not spend?"

Costello leading, we entered the Hudgekins' elaborate suite. One glance about the living-room, and the Frenchman shouted with glee. "Look, behold, see, admire!" he ordered triumphantly. "Laugh at my face now, Friend Trowbridge, ask me again to explain those *sacré* 'phone calls!"

Before the telephone was an ingenious device. A mechanical arm was fastened to the receiver, while in front of the mouthpiece was a funnel-shaped horn connected with a phonograph sound-box and needle which rested on a wax cylinder. The whole was actuated by clockwork, and the lever releasing the springs was attached to the bell-clapper of a large alarm clock set for fifteen minutes after twelve.

Stooping, de Grandin turned the clock's hands back. As they reached a quarter past twelve there was a light buzzing sound, the arm lifted the receiver from its hook, and in a moment a deep, gruff voice we all

recognized spoke into the mouthpiece: "Hullo, this is Mr. Hudgekins. Please have the engineer send more heat up. Our apartment is cold as ice." A pause, during which a courteous hotel official might have assured the tenant his wants would be attended to, then: "Thank you, very much. Good-night."

"Well" — Costello stared open-

mouthed at the mechanism which would have provided an unshakable alibi in any criminal court—"well, sors, I'll be damned!"

"Undoubtedly you will, unless you mend your ways," de Grandin agreed with a grin. "Meantime, as damnation is a hot and thirsty business, I vote we adjourn to Friend Trowbridge's and absorb a drink."
