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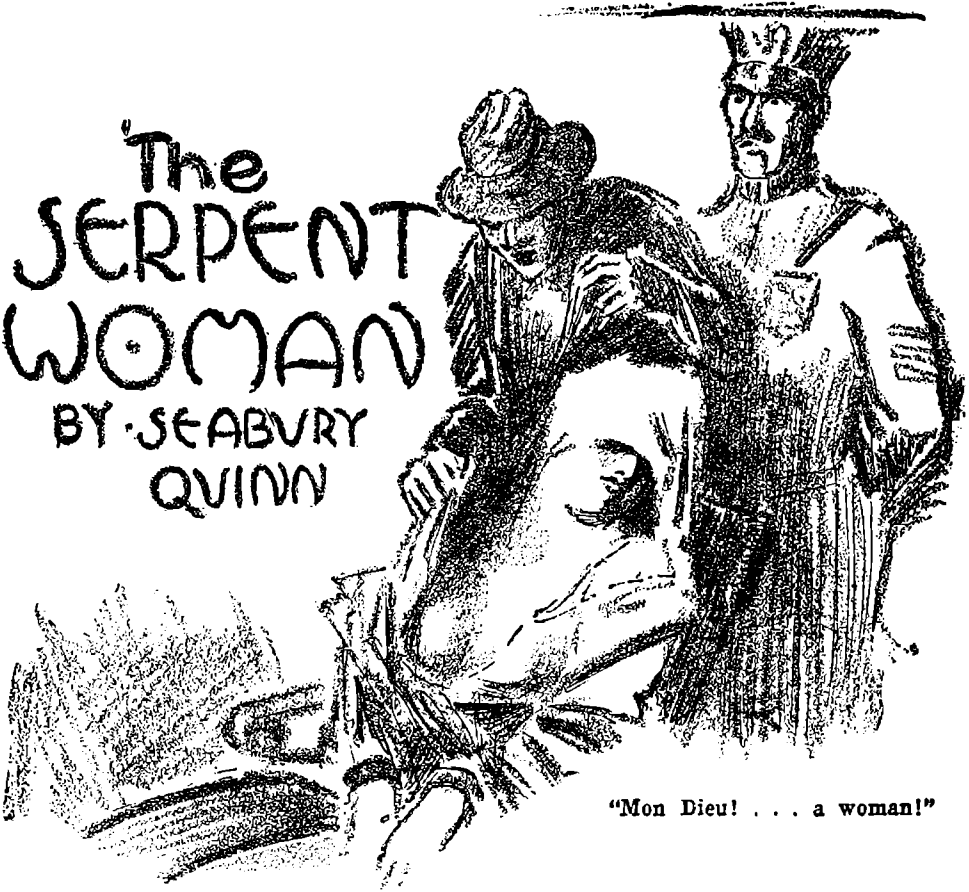
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The SERPENT WOMAN

BY SEABURY
QUINN



“Mon Dieu! . . . a woman!”

“**G**RAND DIEU, Friend Trowbridge, have a care!” Jules de Grandin clutched excitedly at my elbow with his left hand, while with the other he pointed dramatically toward the figure which suddenly emerged from the shadowy evergreens bordering the road and flitted like a wind-blown leaf through the zone of luminance cast by my headlights. “*Pardieu*, but she will succeed in destroying herself if she does that once too—” he continued; then interrupted himself with a shout as he flung both feet over the side of the car and dashed down the highway to grapple with the woman whose sudden appearance had almost sent us skidding into the wayside ditch.

Ner was his intervention a second too soon, for even as he reached her side the mysterious woman had run to the center of the highway bridge, and was drawing herself up, preparatory to leaping over the parapet into the rushing stream fifty feet below.

“Stop it, *Mademoiselle!* Desist!” he commanded sharply, seizing her shoulders in his small, strong hands and dragging her backward to the dusty planks of the bridge by main force.

She fought like a cornered wild-cat. “Let me go!” she raged, struggling in the little Frenchman’s embrace; then, finding her efforts unavailing, twisting suddenly round to face him and clawing at his cheeks with desperate, fear-stiffened fingers. “Let me go; I want to die; I must

die; I *will* die, I tell you!" she screamed. "Let me go!"

De Grandin shifted his grasp from her shoulders to her wrists and shook her roughly, as a terrier might shake a rat. "Be still, *Mademoiselle!*" he ordered curtly. "Cease this business of the fool, or, *parbleu!*"—he administered another shake—"I shall be forced to tie you!"

I added my efforts to his, grasping the raging woman by the elbows and forcing her into the twin shafts of light thrown by the car's driving-lamps.

Leaning forward, de Grandin retrieved her hat and placed it on her dark head at a decidedly rakish angle; then regarded her meditatively in the headlights' glare. "Will you restrain yourself, if we loose you, *Mademoiselle!*" he asked after a few seconds' silent inspection.

The young woman regarded him sullenly a moment, then broke into a sharp, cachinnating laugh. "You've only postponed the inevitable," she announced with a fatalistic shrug of her shoulders. "I'll kill myself as soon as you leave me, anyway. You might as well have saved yourself the trouble."

"U'm?" the Frenchman murmured. "Precisely, exactly, quite so, *Mademoiselle!* and for that reason we shall take pains not to abandon you. *Nom d'un parapluie!* are we murderers? We shall not leave you to your fate. Tell us where you live, and we shall take you there."

She faced us with quivering nostrils and heaving, tumultuous breast, anger flashing from her eyes, a diatribe of invective seemingly ready to spill from her lips. She had a rather pretty, high-bred face; unnaturally large, dark eyes, seeming larger still because of the deep violet circles under them; death-pale skin contrasting strongly with the little tendrils of dark, curling hair which

hung about her cheeks beneath the rim of her wide leghorn hat.

"*Mademoiselle!*" de Grandin announced with a bow, "you are beautiful. There is no reason for you to wish to die. Come with us; Dr. Trowbridge and I shall do ourselves the honor of escorting you to your home."

"I'm Mrs. Candace," she replied simply, as though the name would explain everything.

"*Madame!*" de Grandin assured her, bowing formally from the hips, as though acknowledging an introduction, "the very great honor is ours. I am Jules de Grandin, and this is Dr. Samuel Trowbridge. May we have the honor of your company——"

"But—but," the girl broke in, half-believingly, "you mean you don't know who I am?"

"Until a moment ago we have been denied the happiness of your acquaintance, *Madame!*" rejoined the Frenchman with another bow. "You are now ready to accompany us?" he added, glancing toward the car.

Something like gratitude shone in the young woman's eyes as she answered: "I live in College Grove Park; you may take me there, if you wish, but——"

"*Tiens, Madame!*" he interrupted, "let us but no buts, if you please."

Taking her hand in his he led her to the waiting car and assisted her to a seat.

"IT'S KIND of you to do this for me," our passenger murmured as I turned the motor eastward. "I didn't think there was anyone who'd trouble to keep me from dying."

De Grandin shot her a glance of swift inquiry. "Why?" he demanded with Gallic directness.

"Because everyone—everyone but Iring—wants to see me hanged, and sometimes he looks at me so strangely. I think perhaps he's turning against me, too!"

"Ah?" de Grandin responded. "And why should that be?"

"Because of Baby!" she sobbed. "Everyone thinks I killed him—I, his mother! The neighbors all look at me as though I were a monster—call their children away when they see me coming—and never speak to me when I pass them. Even Iring, my husband, is beginning to suspect, I'm afraid, and so I wanted to die—would have done it, too, if you hadn't stopped me."

Utter, hopeless misery was in her tones as she spoke, and de Grandin bent forward with quick impulsiveness, taking her hand in his. "Tell us the story, *Madame*," he begged. "It will relieve your nerves to talk, and it may easily be that Friend Trowbridge and I can be of help——"

"No, you can't," she negatived sharply. "Nobody can help me. There isn't any help for me this side of the grave, but——"

It was a long, heart-rending story the young mother retailed as we sped over the dusty summer road to the pretty little suburb where she lived. Ten days before, she and her husband had been to a party in New York, and it was nearly 2 o'clock in the morning when they returned to College Grove. Iring Junior, their ten-months-old baby, had been left in charge of the negro maid of all work, and both he and his nurse were fast asleep when his parents gently unlatched the front door and tiptoed down the bungalow hall. Dismissing the maid, Mrs. Candace had crept into the little blue-and-white room where the baby slept, raised the window a few inches—for the maid stedfastly refused to accept the virtues of fresh air—bent down and kissed the sleeping child, then stepped softly to her own room across the hall.

Tired to the point of exhaustion, both parents were soon in bed, but

some evil premonition seemed to keep the mother's eyelids open. Sitting up in bed suddenly, she heard a tiny whimper in the nursery, the half-articulate sound of a little boy-baby turning restlessly in his sleep, and without waiting to don either house-robe or slippers, she ran barefooted across the hall, pushed open the nursery door and switched on the bedside lamp.

The boy was gone. In the little white pillow of his crib was the dent where his curly head had rested; the shape of his straight little body could be traced by the rise of the light blanket-sheet, but, save for the brown, woolly Teddy bear and the black patent-leather cat mounting guard at the foot of the crib, the nursery was untenanted.

"I called my husband," she went on between deep, heart-racking sobs, "and we searched the house, then looked everywhere outside, but little son was nowhere to be found. The nursery door was latched, though not locked, but his baby fingers could not have unfastened it, even if he had managed to crawl that far. The nursery window was open about ten inches, and there was no screen in it, but Baby could not have crept through it, for I had the blanket fastened down at the head and foot with clamps to keep him from kicking it off during the night, and he couldn't have gotten out of bed by himself. Yet our baby was nowhere.

"We looked for him all night, and kept our search up most of next day; but there isn't any clue to his whereabouts, no sign to show how he left us, unless——"

She shuddered convulsively.

"Yes?" de Grandin prompted.

"And the rumor got about that I killed him! They say I did away with my own little baby, and they won't come near me, nor let me come near them, and when I walk down the street the mothers run and

snatch their children into the house as though I carried plague germs!"

"*Mordieu*, but this is infamous, this is intolerable, this is not to be borne!" de Grandin exploded. "You have undoubtedly advised the police of the case, *Madame?*"

"The police?" her voice was thin, high-pitched, like the muted scream of one in pain past bodily endurance. "*It was the police who started the rumor!*"

"*Nom d'un coq!*" de Grandin demanded in incredulous amazement. "You would have us to understand that——"

"I would have you to understand just that!" she mocked. "There is no clue to the manner in which my baby disappeared. No footprints, no fingerprints"—for a moment she hesitated, breathing deeply, then continued — "nothing. When the police could find nothing to go on, no person who would wish us misfortune or have a reason for stealing our baby, they said *I* must have done it. The only reason I'm not locked up this moment, waiting trial for murder, is that they have not been able to find Baby's body—though they've had our cellar floor up and knocked down half the partitions in the house—and our maid's testimony shows that Baby was alive and well fifteen minutes before my screams woke her. They can't figure how I'd had time to kill him and hide his little body in that time—that's the only reason they haven't arrested me! Now you know why I wanted to die, and why I fought you when you saved me," she concluded. "And"—defiantly—"why I'm going to kill myself the first chance I have. There won't *always* be someone to stop me!"

De Grandin's little round eyes were shining like those of a cat in the dark, and on his small, pointed-chinned face was a half-thoughtful, half-dreamy expression, like that

worn by a person trying to recall the notes of a long-forgotten tune. Suddenly he leaned forward, staring straight into the tear-stained face of the young mother.

"*Madame*," he spoke with slow insistence, "there is something you have not told us. Twice did I notice your speech halt and falter like a poorly trained horse before the hurdle. At the back of your brain lies another thought, a thought you have not clothed in words. What is it you have not yet told anyone, *Madame?*"

The girl's large, dark eyes widened suddenly, as though a light had been flashed before them. "No, no!" she almost screamed.

"*Madame*," de Grandin's tone was low, but his voice was inexorable, "you will please tell me the thing you have not yet spoken of."

"You'd think me crazy!"

"*Madame Candace*, you will tell me!" Again the low, even tone of command.

"I—I was brought up in the country," the girl stammered, fighting for breath between syllables like a runner nearly spent, or an exhausted swimmer battling with the surf. "I was brought up in the country, and the day after Baby disappeared I noticed something down at the lower end of our garden—something I hadn't seen since we lived on the farm and I used to walk barefoot on the dirt roads."

De Grandin's features contracted sharply, as though a presentiment of what she would say had come to him, but he persisted. "Yes? You saw——"

"A snake track—the track of a snake, fresh and unmistakable in the soft earth of the rose beds—but not the track of any snake I've ever seen, for it was wide as the mark of an automobile tire!"

"Ah?" the little Frenchman's voice was lower than a whisper, but

swift understanding shone in his small blue eyes. "You think, perhaps—"

"God in heaven, don't say it!" she screamed. "It's bad enough to live with the thought; but if you put it into words—"

"Trowbridge, my friend," de Grandin whispered sharply, "yonder is her home. Help me carry her there. She has swooned."

A YOUNG man whose face showed the deep etchings of sleepless nights and tormented days answered our ring at the cottage door. "Stella!" he exclaimed as he caught sight of his wife's white, drawn face; then, to us: "I've been looking all over for her. This terrible trouble has"—he paused as a sob choked back the words—"her mind, you know, gentlemen."

"U'm?" responded de Grandin noncommittally as we bore her to the couch.

"I've been terribly worried about you, dear," her husband told Mrs. Candace as a slow wave of returning color suffused her face. "When I couldn't find you in the house I went outside, and called and called, but—"

"I know, dear," the young wife interrupted wearily. "It was so hot and stuffy here, I thought I'd take a little walk, but it was too much for me, and these kind gentlemen brought me home."

Young Candace looked doubtfully at us a moment, as though debating whether it was safe to speak before us; then, abruptly deciding we were to be trusted, he blurted: "We've news at last, dear. Part of the mystery is cleared up. Baby's alive—if this is to be believed—and we've a chance of finding him."

"Oh!" Mrs. Candace sprang from the couch as though suddenly shocked by an electric current. "What is it, Iring? What is it?"

For answer he extended a sheet of yellow paper, the sort schoolchildren use to figure their sums upon. "I found this tucked under the screen door when I came back from looking for you," he replied.

Without pausing for permission, de Grandin gazed over the mother's shoulder as she perused the missive her husband had handed her. As she finished reading, he took the paper gently from her and passed it to me.

The words were formed of letters cut from a newspaper and pasted irregularly together, making a sort of crazy-quilt of small characters and large. Many words were grotesquely misspelled, but the message as a whole was easily decipherable:

"Mr. & Mrs. Candace, Esq., yUr kid is al right anD well anough and i aM takin gooD care of it but i aint go ing to wait foreVr I'm a poor man an I got to live and you better get me some money mighty dam quik or Ill quit makiNG a bOarding House of myseLf and forgET to feed him but i will hold him in good shape for one week more If you want to see him agan have two thousand \$ in cash mOney redy next Tuesday nite at midnite tweLve oclock and throw it from Yur automobil as YOu ride down the piKE between har-risonville an Rupleyville Throw the moneys out where You see a light in the Woods an dont try no triks on me or have the poLice with you or yull never see yur kid no more on account of i bein a desprit man an dont intend no foolin an if they do catch me I wont never tell where he is no matter how much they beat me so yur Kid will starv to deth Have the mony redy when I say an no foolin or you wont never see him agan

"Yurs trulie"

By way of signature the note was subscribed with a long, serpentine flourish, like an inverted capital S.

"*Eh bien*, F'riend Trowbridge," de Grandin remarked judicially as he took the note back into his hand, "I should say—"

A thunderous knock at the door interrupted his opinion, and a moment later a heavy-set, sandy-haired man in high, mud-spattered boots, corduroy pantaloons and a far from clean blue sweater stalked into the

room. "Evenin', Mr. Candace," he greeted, removing his battered felt hat. "Evenin'," he nodded curtly to Mrs. Candace. Of de Grandin and me he took no more notice than if we had not existed. "Did you say you'd had a note from th' kidnaper? Lemme see it."

"Hum," he commented, inspecting the patchwork piece of blackmail under the glare of the living-room electrolier. "Hum-m. When did you git this?"

"I found it tucked under the screen door a few minutes before I 'phoned you," Candace replied. "Mrs. Candace had gone out without letting me know, and I was looking for her. When I couldn't find her in the house I started out into the garden, and found this note folded under the door when I came back. I—"

"Hum." The big man cleared his throat portentously. "Mis' Candace wuz out, wuz she? An' you found this here note in th' door when you come back from lookin' for her, did you? Hum; hum-m. Yeah. I see."

"This is Mr. Perkinson, the assistant county detective," Candace offered a belated introduction, as he indicated de Grandin and me with a wave of his hand. "He's been working on the case, and when I found this ransom letter, I thought it best to get in immediate touch with him."

"Ah," de Grandin murmured softly; then, turning to the detective: "It seems, *Monsieur*, that whoever sent this letter was a cunning miscreant. He has taken most excellent precautions to disguise his handwriting, and the fact that he chose such people as Monsieur and Madame Candace for his victims argues more cleverness. They are neither rich nor poor, but comfortable *bourgeois*. A rich man would have scoured the country with his hired detectives. A poor man could not have paid a ran-

som. This villain has stolen a child of the middle class and demanded a ransom which the parents can afford to pay. What does it mean? *Parbleu*, I think it indicates he has intimate knowledge of the family's affairs, and——"

"You're damn tootin', Doc," Assistant County Detective Perkinson's agreement interrupted. "I'll say she knows th' family's affairs. Stella Candace," he put a large, freckle-flecked hand on the mother's bowed shoulder, "I arrest ye for the abduction of Iring Candace, Junior, an' it's me duty to warn ye that anything said now may be used agin ye."

"See here——" Iring Candace stepped forward angrily, his face flushed, his eyes flashing dangerously.

"You ignorant, blundering fool!" I exclaimed, thrusting myself between the officer and his prey.

To my amazement, Jules de Grandin remained perfectly calm. "Your perspicacity does you utmost credit, *Monsieur*," he assured the officer with an ironical bow. "By all means, take Madame Candace before the judge. I make me no doubt——"

"I'll be damned if he will!" protested the husband, but Mrs. Candace interposed.

"Don't resist him, Iring," she begged. "He's been aching to arrest me ever since Baby disappeared, and you'll only make matters worse if you try to interfere. Let him take me peaceably, and——"

"And tomorrow, *parbleu*, we shall seek your release on writ of *habeas corpus*!" de Grandin interjected. "After that we shall be free from interference, and may give attention to important matters."

"Good night, dear," Stella Candace turned her lips up to her husband's. "I'll be brave, and you can see a lawyer in the morning, as Dr. de Grandin says. Don't worry."

"Very well, Mr. Perkinson," she said. "I'm ready."

"Oh, my God!" Iring Candace dropped into a chair, propped his elbows on his knees, cupped his face in his hands and shook with retching sobs. "What shall I do; what *shall* I do? I can't think Stella would do such a thing; but Perkinson—there *might* be something in his suspicions, after all. It's strange I should have found that note after she'd gone out, and yet——"

"*Mordieu*, my friend, there is no yet," de Grandin cut in. "That Perkinson, he is one great zany. *Nom d'un nom*, were all his brains secreted in the hollow of a gnat's tooth, they would rattle about like a dried pea in a bass drum!"

"But if Stella's not guilty, how are we going to recover our boy? The police are convinced she did it; we can get no help from them, and the kidnaper will——"

"*Monsieur!*" de Grandin interrupted, offended dignity in his voice. "Have I not said I would undertake the case? *Parbleu*, this kidnaper shall meet his just deserts, be he human or be he—never mind; if I do not apprehend this stealer of little children I am more mistaken than I think I am."

"How will you manage it?" the bereaved father asked with hopeless matter-of-factness. "What can you do that the police haven't already done? The kidnaper will surely suspect if you try to trap him; then our little boy is lost. Oh!"—a fresh burst of sobs broke his words to fragments—"oh, my little son; my little baby boy!"

"*Monsieur*," the Frenchman assured him, "I am Jules de Grandin. What I undertake, that I accomplish."

"*Allons*, Friend Trowbridge," he turned to me; "there remains much to be done and little time in which to do it before we have this child-stealer by the heels."

NOM *d'un moucheron*, but it is strange!" Jules de Grandin muttered to himself the following morning as he finished his after-breakfast perusal of the *Journal*. "It is unusual, it is extraordinary, it is ghastly, yet I make no doubt it has some connection with the vanished little one."

"Eh, what's that?" I demanded.

"Read, my friend," he thrust the newspaper into my hand. "Read, and tell me what it is you see."

"JERSEY DEVIL IN NEW GUISE?"

queried the headline to which his neatly manicured forefinger directed my attention. Below, couched in facetious journalese, was a short article:

"Has the well-known and justly celebrated Jersey Devil assumed a new form this summer? William Johannes, a farmer living near Rupleyville, thinks so. Little has been heard of this elusive specter this season, and tired newspapermen had about decided he had retired on a much-needed vacation when Johannes sent in a hurry call to inform the world at large and the *Journal's* city room in particular that he had seen the Devil, and he didn't mean perhaps, either.

"Shortly after 8 o'clock last night William, who vows he hadn't had a thing stronger than his customary cup of Java with his dinner, was startled to hear an unearthly concert of squeals emanating from the direction of his pig-pen. Armed with his trusty bird gun, William set out hot-foot to see who was disturbing the repose of his prize porkers. As he neared the odoriferous confines of the porcine domicile, he was astonished to hear a final despairing squeal invoke high heaven for assistance, and to see a great, brownish-green snake, at least forty feet in length, go sliding through the bars of the pig-coop. He fired at the monster, but apparently his shot had no effect, for it wriggled away among the bushes and was quickly lost to sight.

"Arriving at the pig-sty, William was desolated to discover that three of a litter of six prize Cochin China sucking pigs had completely disappeared, leaving their mother, Madam Hog, in a state bordering on nervous collapse.

"In proof of his story William showed your correspondent the tracks of the marauding monster in the soft loam of the

woodland adjoining his pig-pen. There were two well-defined trails, one coming, the other going, serpentine in course, and about the width of an automobile—not a Ford—tire. Both were plainly visible for a distance of some twenty feet, after which they were lost in the leaf-strewn ground of the woods.

"William says he doesn't mind good clean fun, but when it comes to stealing three valuable piglets the matter ceases to be a joke, and he's going to have the legislature pass a law or something about it."

"Humph!" I grunted, passing the paper back to him. "Some smart-Alec reporter's practising his imagination again. That 'Jersey Devil' is a standing joke in this state, de Grandin, like the annual sea-serpent fable at Cannes, you know. There's always a stack of fool stories like this in the newspapers about this time of year."

"Indeed?" he raised narrow, black eyebrows. "Do you say so? Nevertheless, my friend, I shall interview the so excellent Monsieur Johannes. It is probable that the journalist is a facile liar, but we did not beat back the *boche* by leaving anything to chance. Me, I shall prove each step of this business."

"What business?" I asked as he pushed back his chair and sought his hat and walking-stick.

"Ah bah, my friend," he replied, "you do ask too many questions for the sake of listening to your own voice. Expect me when I return."

"TROWBRIDGE, *mon vieux*, behold what it is I have discovered," he ordered, bursting into my study some four hours later. "*Parbleu*, but the young man of the press did us an inestimable favor, though he knows it not, when he wrote his tale of the Devil of New Jersey. Observe, if you please!" With a hand that trembled with excitement he extended a bit of folded paper to me.

Opening the slip I beheld what might have been the paring from a

horse's hoof made by a blacksmith when preparing to fit a new shoe to the beast.

"Well?" I asked, turning the thing over curiously. "What is it, and what of it?"

"As to what it is, I did not expect recognition from you," he admitted with one of his quick, elfin smiles. "As to its significance—who shall say? That, my friend, is a chip from the belly-armor of a great snake. I did find it after two hours' search upon my hands and knees beside the tracks left by the serpent which raided the sty of Monsieur Johannes' pigs last night. At present I am not prepared to say definitely what sort of reptile shed it, but my guess is in favor of a Burmese python or an African boa. Also, from this scale's size, I should say that terror and astonishment lent magnifying lenses to Monsieur Johannes' eyes when he beheld the snake, for the thing is more likely twenty than forty feet in length, but the good God knows he would be sufficiently formidable to meet, even so."

"Well?" I queried again.

"Well?" he mocked. "Well, what? What does it mean?"

"As far as I can see, it doesn't mean anything, except——"

"*Dieu de Dieu*," he interrupted impatiently, "except that Madame Candace was stating only the literal truth when she said she recognized snake tracks in her garden, and that there is actually such a monster abroad in the countryside."

"Why," I stammered as the enormity of his statement struck me, "why, you mean the little Candace boy might have been devoured by this monster? That would account for his disappearance without clues; but what about the ransom letter we saw last night? A snake might eat a child, though I've always understood the process of ingestion is rather slow, and I can't quite see

how he could have swallowed the little boy before Mrs. Candace reached the nursery; but even you will admit a snake would hardly have been likely to prepare and send that letter demanding two thousand dollars for the child's return."

"Sometimes, Friend Trowbridge," he assured me solemnly, "I think you a fool. At others I believe you only dull-witted. Can you not reconcile the possibility of a great serpent's having made off with the little one and a ransom letter being sent?"

"No, I'm hanged if I can," I admitted.

"*Morbleu*——" he began furiously, then paused, one of his quick smiles driving the annoyed frown from his face. "Forgive me, good, kind friend," he implored. "I do forget you have not had the benefit of my experience at the *Sûreté*. Attend me: Ten days ago the little lad did vanish. The police have been notified, the news of his disappearance has become public. There is no clue to the manner of his going; as yet the pig-ignorant police have no theory worthy of the name. The snake might well be responsible for all this, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"I suppose so," I admitted.

"*Très bien*. Now suppose some misercant desired to trade upon the misery of those bereaved parents; what then? Granting that he knew their circumstances, which I strongly suspect he does, what would be easier than for him to concoct such a letter as the dastardly thing we read last night and transmit it stealthily to Monsieur and Madame Candace, knowing full well they would jump at any chance, and pay any sum within their means, to see their baby boy once more?"

"You mean some fiend would trade on their heartbreak to swindle them out of two thousand dollars—knowing all the time he was unable to keep his wretched bargain

and return their child?" I asked, horrified.

His small, sensitive mouth set in a grim, straight line beneath the trimly waxed ends of his little blond mustache. "*Précisément*," he nodded. "Such things have been done many times. We of the Paris *Sûreté* are familiar with many such cases."

"But, for the Lord's sake——" I began.

"Exactly," he responded. "For the Lord's sake, and for the sake of those two poor ones whose little man has been stolen away, and for the sake of all other parents who may suffer a similar fate, I shall make it my sworn duty to apprehend this villain, and, by the horns of the Devil, if it turns out he knows not the whereabouts of the little boy, he will pray lustily for death before I have done with him."

"But——"

"*Ah bah*, let us bother with no buts at this time, my friend. Tomorrow night is the appointed time. Me, I hasten, I rush, I fly to New York, where I would consult with certain expert artificers. By the belly of Jonah's whale, but I shall give this kidnaper such a surprize as he does not suspect! *Adieu*, Friend Trowbridge. I return when my business in New York is completed."

"**H**AVE a care, my friend," de Grandin ordered the following night as I relieved him of a small black satchel while he climbed into the tonneau of the Candace motor car. "Treat the bag with respect; coddle it like an infant, and, whatever you do, touch not its handles, but hold it by the sides."

Consulting the diminutive watch strapped to the under side of his wrist, he nodded shortly to Candace, who sat at the wheel in a perfect fever of excitement and impatience. "Let us go, *Monsieur*," he ordered, and the powerful motor-car turned

southward toward the little Italian settlement of Rupleyville, its engine gaining speed with each revolution of the wheels.

"Do you keep sharp watch on your side of the road, Friend Trowbridge," he directed, driving a sharp elbow into my ribs. "Me, I shall glue my eyes to mine.

"More speed, Monsieur Candace," he urged as the car entered a long, narrow stretch of roadway between two segments of dense pine woods. "Never will our fish rise to the bait if we loiter along the highway. Tread on the gas, I beseech you!"

His face set in grim lines, eyes narrowed as he peered intently before him, Iring Candace advanced his spark and pressed his foot on the accelerator. The car shot ahead like a projectile and darted down the tunnel between the ranks of black-boughed pines with a roar like that of an infuriated beast.

"Good, most excellently good," the Frenchman commended. "At this rate we should—*grand Dieu*, there is the light!"

As the car roared round the bend of the road the sudden yellow gleam of a stable lantern suspended from a tree-bough shone out against the black background of the woods. "Continue—carry on—keep going, *pour l'amour de Dieu!*" de Grandin gritted in the driver's ear as Candace involuntarily slackened speed. Next instant he leaned far out of the rushing car, seized the small black satchel from my lap and hurled it toward the flickering lantern like a football player making a lateral pass.

"Gently—gently, my friend," he counseled, nudging Candace between the shoulder blades as the car rounded the bend, "do but slow down sufficiently to permit us to alight, but keep your *moteur* running and your muffler out. We must persuade the despicable one we are still on our way." Next instant he flung open the tonneau door, dropped si-

lently to the hard-surfaced roadway, and motioning me to follow, crept toward the underbrush bordering the highway.

"Have you your gun ready?" I whispered as I crouched beside him in the long weeds fringing the road.

"S-s-sh!" he cautioned sibilantly, reaching under his jacket and bringing out a small, cloth-covered package resembling a folded sheet-music stand. Feverishly he tore the flannel wrappings from the slender steel bars and began jointing the rods together. In a moment's time he held an odd-looking contrivance, something like an eel-spear, except that it possessed only two tines, in his left hand, while from an inside pocket he produced a skein of strong, braided horsehair rope terminating in a slip-noose, and swung it loosely, lasso-wise, from his right fist.

"*Allez vous en!*" he rasped, crawling farther into the undergrowth.

Cautiously, moving so slowly it seemed to us we scarcely moved at all, we approached the swinging lantern. Nothing indicative of human presence showed in the tiny circle of light cast by the swinging lamp; neither form nor shadow stirred among the tall black pines.

"The Devil!" I exclaimed in furious disappointment. "He's got away."

"Quiet!" warned the Frenchman angrily. "Be still; he does but wait to make sure we were not followed by the police. Lie low, my friend, and be ready—*nom d'un bête*, behold him!"

Like the shadow of a shadow, moving furtively as a weasel between the tree trunks, a man, slender as a youth, stoop-shouldered and narrow-chested, but incredibly quick-footed, had slipped forward, seized the black bag de Grandin flung from the car, and darted back among the sheltering pines, even as the Frenchman gave his warning cry.

Next moment the midnight quiet of the woods was broken by a sudden retching sneeze, another and yet another, and a rushing, stumbling figure emerged from the darkness, blundering blindly into bush and shrub and heavy tree bole, clawing frantically at his face and stopping every now and again in his crazy course to emit a tortured, hacking cough or sternutative sneeze.

"Ha, Monsieur Child-stealer, you expected coin of another sort, *n'est-ce-pas?*!" de Grandin fairly shrieked, leaping forward to trip the blinded, sneezing fellow with a deft movement of his foot. "On him, Friend Trowbridge!" he shouted. "Sit upon him, grind his face into the earth, seize him, bind him—off to the bastille!"

I rushed forward to comply, then started back, cold horror grasping at my throat. "Look out, de Grandin!" I screamed. "Look out, for God's sake——"

"Ha?" The Frenchman's sharp interrogative exclamation was more an expression of satisfied expectancy than of surprize. Almost, it seemed, the monstrous snake which had risen up from the pine needles at our feet was something he had awaited.

"Is it indeed thou, *Monsieur le Serpent?*?" he demanded, skipping backward between the trees, advancing his two-pronged fork before him as a practised swordsman might swing his foil. "It would seem we are met, after all," he added, dancing back another step, then, with the speed of forked lightning, stabbing downward with his prong.

"*Sa-ha, Monsieur*, how do you care for that?" he demanded, his voice high and thin with hysterical triumph as the sharp steel tines sank into the soft earth each side of the great snake's neck, pinning his wicked, wedge-shaped head fast to the ground.

"*Eh bien*, it seems I am one too many for you, *mon ami*," de Gran-

din remarked calmly as he slipped the noose of his hair rope beneath the squirming head, drew it taut and nonchalantly flung the rope's free end over a low-hanging tree bough. "Up we go," he announced cheerfully, drawing sharply on the rope and hoisting the monster reptile from the earth until it hung suspended from the branch, the tip of its pointed tail and some four feet of brown-mottled body lashing furiously at the scrub pines which grew rank underfoot.

The noisome thing beat the earth futilely with its tail a moment, then drew its glistening body, thick as a man's thigh, upward, wrapping it about the bough to which its neck was pinioned, knotted there a moment in agony, then slid in long, horrifying waves again toward the earth.

"Squirm, my friend," de Grandin ordered, surveying the struggling serpent with a smile of grim amusement. "*Parbleu*, wriggle, writhe and twist, it will do you small good. 'Twas Jules de Grandin tied those knots, and he knows how to deal with your sort, whether they travel on their bellies or their feet. Which reminds me"—he turned toward the struggling man on the ground—"it seems we have you, also, *Monsieur*. Will you be pleased to rise when I can induce my good Friend Trowbridge to cease kneeling on your biceps?"

"Did you get him?" Candace crashed through the undergrowth, brushed me aside and seized the prisoner's shoulder in an iron grip. "Where's my son, you devil? Tell me, or, by God, I'll——"

"Meestair, let me go!" the captive screamed, writhing in Candace's clutch. "I ver' good man, me. I was passing through the woods, and saw where someone had left a lantern—a good, new lantern—out here, and come over to get him. As I try and take him from the tree, somebody come by and throw a satchel at me,

and I think maybe it have money in him, so I pick him up, and then my eyes go all——”

“You lie!” Candace was almost frothing at the mouth as he shook the fellow again. But de Grandin drew him away with a word of caution.

“Softly, my friend,” he whispered. “Remember, it is your son we wish to recover. Perhaps we may succeed only in frightening him into silence if we attempt intimidating here. At Harrisonville is a barracks of the state *gendarmerie*. Let us take him there. Undoubtedly the officers will force a confession from him, and Madame Candace will be cleared before all the world thereby. Let us go.”

“All right,” Candace agreed grudgingly. “Let’s get going. We can get there in half an hour, if we hurry.”

THE lights of the troopers’ barracks streamed out into the moonless summer night as Candace brought his car to a halt before the building and fairly dragged the prisoner from the vehicle.

“*Bon soir, Messieurs les Gendarmes,*” de Grandin greeted, removing his soft felt hat with a ceremonious flourish as he led the way into the guardroom. “We are this minute arrived from Rupleyville, and”—he paused a moment, then motioned toward the undersized prisoner writhing in Candace’s grip—“we have brought with us the kidnaper of the little Candace boy. No less.”

“Oh, have you?” the duty sergeant responded unenthusiastically. “Another one? We’ve been getting all sorts of tips on that case—got a stack o’ letters a foot high—and we have about a dozen ’phone calls a day, offering us the lowdown on the——”

“*Monsieur le Sergent*”—de Grandin’s amiability vanished like the

night’s frost before the morning sun—“if you are of opinion that we rush about the countryside at midnight for our own amusement, you are greatly mistaken. Look upon this!” He thrust the ransom letter under the astonished policeman’s nose, and as the other concluded his perusal of the missive, launched on a succinct account of the evening’s adventures.

“Huh, looks as if you’ve got something we can sink our teeth in, for a fact,” the sergeant complimented.

“Where’s the kid?” he turned brusksly to the prisoner. “Speak up, you; it’ll be worse for you if you don’t.”

“Meestair,” the captive returned with an expressive elevation of his narrow shoulders, “I not know what you talk of. Me, I am hones’ man; ver’ poor, but hones’. I not know nothing about this keed you ask for. Tonight I walk through the woods on my way home, and I see where someone have left a good, new lantern hanging up. I go to get him, for I need him at my house, and these gentlemens you see here come by in a fast automobile, and—*whizz!*—they throw something into the woods. I think maybe they are bootleggers running from police, so I go to see what’s in the bag, and right away something go off right in my face—*pouf!*—like that. It make me all blind, and while I run around like a fish out of water, these gentlemens here, they come up and say, ‘You—you steal da keed; we kill you pretty dam’ quick if you no tell us where he is!’ I not know why they say so, Meestair. Me poor, hones’ man. Not steal no keed, not steal nothing. No, not me!”

“Humph!” the sergeant turned to de Grandin with a shrug. “He’s probably a damn liar, most of ’em are; but his story’s straight enough. We’ll just lock him up for a couple of days and give him time to think

the matter over. He'll be ready to admit something by the time we have him arraigned, I hope."

"But, *Monsieur*," de Grandin protested, "can not you see how absurd that is? While you have this so villainous miscreant in a cell, the little boy whom we seek may starve to death. Your delay may mean his death!"

"Can't help it," the young officer replied resignedly. "I've had more experience with these fellows than you have, and if we try mauling him he'll call on all the saints in the calendar to witness his innocence and yell bloody murder, but we'll never get an admission from him. Give him time to think it over in a nice, solitary cell—that's the way to crack these yows' shells."

"*Morbleu*"—I thought the little Frenchman would explode with amazed anger—"you have more experience than I—I, Jules de Grandin of *le Sûreté*? Blood of the Devil; blood of a most ignoble cat! We shall see what we shall see. You admit your inability to force a confession from this one. May I try? *Parbleu*, if I fail to make him talk within ten little minutes I shall turn monk and live upon prayers and detestable turnips for the rest of my life!"

"U'm?" the sergeant regarded the angry little Frenchman speculatively. "Promise not to hurt him?"

De Grandin tiptoed across the room and whispered something in the policeman's ear, waving his slender hands like a windmill in a hurricane the while.

"Okeh," the officer agreed, a broad grin spreading over his features. "I've heard a lot about the way you fellows work. Let's see you strut your stuff."

"*Merci*," de Grandin acknowledged, crossing the guardroom and pausing before the tall cast-iron stove which heated the place in winter.

Accumulated paper and a few sticks of light wood lay in the heater's cylinder, and de Grandin set them alight with a match, thrusting the long, steel poker into the midst of the leaping flames. "Will you help, Friend Trowbridge?" he asked as he took a skein of stout cord from his pocket and began making the captive fast to his chair with skilful knots.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked wonderingly.

"Stand ready to hand me a bit of ice from the cooler," he whispered softly in my ear; then, as the poker slowly glowed from gray to red, and from red to pale orange in the fire, he seized its handle and advanced with a slow, menacing stride toward the bound and helpless prisoner, his little, round blue eyes hardening to a merciless glare as the eyes of a kindly house-cat flash with fury at sight of a mongrel street dog.

"Kidnaper of little children," he announced in a voice so low as to be hardly audible, but hard and merciless as a scalpel's edge, "I am about to give you one last chance to speak the truth. Say, where is the little one you stole away?"

"*Signor*," replied the prisoner, twisting and straining at the cords. "me, I have told you only the truth. *Per l'amore della Madonna*—"

"*Ah bah!*" the Frenchman advanced the glowing steel to within an inch of the fellow's face. "You have told only the truth! What does a child-stealer know of true words? *Nom d'un chat*, what does a duck know of the taste of cognac?"

Advancing another step, he suddenly snatched a towel from above the washstand, looped it into a loose knot and flung it over the prisoner's face, drawing it tightly about his eyes. "Observe him well, my friends," he commanded, reaching out to snatch the bit of ice I had abstracted from the water-cooler at

his nod of silent command, then ripping the bound man's collar open.

Fascinated, we watched the tableau before us. De Grandin seemed as savage and implacable as the allegorical figure of Nemesis in a classic Greek play. Facing him, trembling and shaking as though with a chill, despite the warmth of the night, his swarthy visage gone corpse-pale, sat the fettered prisoner. He was an undersized man, scarcely more than a boy, apparently, and his small, regular features and finely modeled, tiny hands and feet gave him an almost feminine appearance. His terror was so obvious that I was almost moved to protest, but the Frenchman waited no further word.

"Speak, child-stealer, or take the consequences!" he exclaimed sharply, bringing the scorching poker to within a half-inch of the prisoner's quivering throat, then snatching it back and thrusting the bit of ice against the shrinking white skin.

A shriek of hopeless anguish and pain burst from the captive's lips. He writhed and twisted against his bonds like a scotched snake in the flame, biting his lips till bloody froth circled his mouth, digging his long, pointed nails into the palms of his hands. "*Santissima Madonna—caro Dio!*" he screamed as the ice met his flesh.

"Make answer, villain!" de Grandin commanded, boring the ice farther into the prisoner's neck. "Answer me, or, *pardieu*, I shall burn your lying tongue from your throat!"

The bound man twisted again, but only hoarse, inarticulate sounds of fright and pain escaped his bloody lips.

"*Nom d'un sacré singe*—but he is stubborn, this one," de Grandin muttered. "It seems I must yet burn his heart from his breast."

Dropping the poker into the fire again, he snatched at the prisoner's soiled white shirt with his free hand,

ripping the fabric apart and exposing the bosom.

"*Mon dieu!*" he ejaculated as the garment parted in his grasp.

"Good heavens!" I exclaimed in amazement.

"For Gawd's sake—a woman!" the constabulary sergeant gasped.

"*Santa Madonna, Santissima Madre!*" the prisoner gave a choking, gurgling cry and slumped against her restraining cords, head hanging, bleeding lips parted, her bared white bosom heaving convulsively.

"Quick, Friend Trowbridge," de Grandin commanded sharply. "Some water, if you please. She is unconscious."

THE woman's eyelids fluttered upward, even as I hastened to obey de Grandin's command. "*Sì, sì, signori,*" she answered. "I am a woman, and—I took the little one from the Candace house."

For a moment she paused, swallowing convulsively, raising one of her slender hands, from which de Grandin had cut the bonds, to her throat, feeling tentatively at the spot where the Frenchman had pressed the ice, then shuddering with mystified relief as she discovered no brand from what she had thought the red-hot poker.

"I"—she gulped back a sob—"I am Gioconda Vitale. I live in Rupleyville, down by the railroad tracks. The people of College Grove know me as one who works by the day, who scrubs, who tends fires, washes. You, Signor Candace, have seen me in your house more than once, but never have you noticed me more than if I had been a chair or table.

"Last year my man, my Antonio, he die. It was the in-flu-enza, the doctor say, and he went ver' quick, like falling asleep after a hard day's work. In life he had been—how do you call it? snake-charmer?—with the circuses in Italy, then at Coney

Island. We make plenty money while he was living, for he ver' good man with the snakes—they call him 'King of the Serpents' on the billboards. But I not like them. All but Beppo, he was ver' good, kind snake. Him I like. That Beppo, the python, my man like best of all, and I like him, too. He has a good, kind heart, like a dog. I not have the heart to sell him like I sell all the others when my 'Tonio die. I keep him, but he ver' hard for to feed, for he eat much every month—chicken, rabbit, anything he can get his hand on. When I not have money for get him what he want, he go out and get it himself.

"'Beppo,' I tell him, 'you get us in plenty trouble if you keep on,' but he not pay me no 'tention. No.

"*Signori*"—she swept us with her large, dark eyes—"when my man die I was left all alone, yet not alone, for there was another with me, the answer to my man's love and my prayers to *la Madonna*. Yes.

"Without my man, all heavy as I was, I go out and work, work, work till I think the bone come through my finger-ends, and at night I sit up and sew, that the *bambino* who is to come should have everything all nice. Yes.

"Presently he come, that beautiful little boy. His eyes are blue like my man's who are in heaven with the blessed saints, for Antonio was of Florence, and not dark like us Sicilians. *Santo Dio*, how I love him, how I worship him, for he was not only the child of my body; he was my man come back to me again! I christen him Antonio, for his father who is gone to God, and every night when I come home from work he smile on me and seem to say, '*Madre mia*, my father up in heaven with the blessed ones, he see all you do, and love you still as when he held you in his arms on earth. Yes, *signori*, it is so.

"The good God knows His ways, but they are ver' hard for women to understand. My little one, my token of love, he were taken from me. The doctor say it is something he have eat, but me, I know it were because he were too beautiful to stay on earth away from the holy angels and the blessed innocents who died that our Lord might live in the days of King Herod.

"Then I have only Beppo. He were a good snake; but no snake, not even the favorite of my dear man, can take the place of the little one who has gone to God. Beppo, he follow me out the door sometimes when I go out to walk at night—mostly when he are hungry, for it cost so much to feed him—but I say, 'Beppo, go back. What the people say if they see me walking with a snake? They tell me I have the Evil Eye!'

"*Signor*"—she turned directly to Candace—"you know what it mean to have empty arms. Me, I was that way. I was one crazed woman. Each time I see a happy mother with her child something inside me seem to say, 'Gioconda, but for the curse of God, there goes you!'

"Pretty soon I can not stand it no more. In Signor Candace's house is a little boy about the size of my lost one if he had lived till now. I watch him all day when I go there to work. All the time my empty heart cry out for the feel of a baby's head against it. Finally, a week—maybe two—ago, I go clear mad. All night I stand outside the window where the little one sleeps and watch the light. Late, ver' late, his mother come in and lean over and kiss him good-night. My heart burst with the nothing which is inside. I can not stand it. *Santa Madre*, I can not stand it! When she put out the light and raise the window, I take a stepladder from the kitchen porch and climb up the house, take the little one from his bed all quiet, re-

place the ladder, and run to my house.

"Ah, how sweet it are to have a child once more in my arm, to feel the little head against my breast, to kiss back the cries he makes when he wakes up at night! I am wild for joy.

"But how am I, a poor woman, whose husband is with the blessed saints, to bring up this child? I can sell Beppo, but how much money will they give me for him? Not much. A hundred dollar, perhaps. That will not do. No, I can not get enough that way. Then I remember Signor Candace is rich. His wife not have to scrub floors or wash clothes. She is young, too; more children will come to gladden their home, but for me there is only the little *bambino* which I have stole. I shall make the rich father support his child, though he knows it not.

"So I make the letter which ask for money, and threaten to kill the little one if he does not pay. I kill him? *Dio mio*, sooner would I starve myself than have him go without the good red wine, the goat's milk and the fine white bread every day!"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the horrified father. "Is she feeding *my* child that?"

The woman paid no heed, but hurried on: "*Signori*, I am a wicked woman. I see it now. If I suffer because the good God, who own him, take my little boy to heaven, how much more shall this other poor mother suffer because a mortal, sinful woman, who have no right, steal away her little son from her? Yes.

"You come with me"—she cast big, tear-dimmed eyes pleadingly on each of us in turn—"I take you to my house and show you how nice I keep the little man and how he hold out his baby hands and smile when he see me come in."

Jules de Grandin twisted his mustache furiously and strove man-

fully to look fierce, but the voice which he tried to make stern had a surprizingly tender tone as he replied: "Take us to your house; we shall get the little one, and if all is as you say, it may be you shall not suffer too greatly for your crime."

"AND now, my friends," de Grandin began when the little boy had been restored to his hysterically happy mother's arms, "you are due an explanation of my cleverness.

"When first I heard of the marks Madame Candace saw in the earth of her garden I knew not what to think. Snakes of the size the marks seemed to indicate are not native to this soil; I thought perchance she might be mistaken, even"—he made a quick, apologetic bow to Mrs. Candace—"that she might be stating something with no greater foundation than her imagination.

"When I did behold the letter asking for ransom I thought, 'Surely, this is the explanation of it all. We shall take this miscreant red-handed, perhaps recover the stolen child, as well; but at any rate, we shall take the kidnaper.

"Next morning I read where the excellent Monsieur Johannes lost a pig to a great snake. '*Parbleu*,' I say to me, 'this must be investigated. It may be the snake whose track Madame Candace saw did thrust his so hideous head into the room where her little one slept as lesser snakes thrust their heads into birds' nests, and made off with the baby.' It was not a pleasant thought, my friends; but we must see what we should see.

"So I interviewed Monsieur Johannes, and sure enough, I found the evidence of a real snake, a large one. 'Now, what to do?' I ask me.

"It may easily be someone who knows nothing of the little man's whereabouts was, trying to cheat

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The Serpent Woman

(Continued from page 752)

Monsieur and Madame Candace of two thousand dollars, I know. I have seen such cases. He have asked in his letter that we throw the money from an automobile. 'Ah-ha, Monsieur the Kidnapers,' I say, 'Jules de Grandin shall throw you something you do not expect.'

"I go to New York and have an artizan make me a satchel which is only one great tear-gas bomb disguised. In its top are many tiny holes, and inside its metal interior is much tear-gas, pumped in at great pressure. The handle is like a trigger, and the minute anyone grasps it the holes in the bag's top are opened and the gas rushes out, blinding the person who holds the handles. Remember, Friend Trowbridge, how I warned you not to touch those handles?

"Very good. 'But what connection have the snake with the stealing of the child?' I want to know. Not much, I believe, yet one thing make me stop and think. Was it only coincidence that those tracks appear in Madame Candace's garden the night her little boy was stolen? Perhaps so; perhaps not. At any rate, Jules de Grandin does not sleep when wakefulness is necessary. I have made also a fork something like the notched sticks the Burmese use to catch the great snakes of their country—the snakes which later make shoes for the pretty ladies. Now, I am ready for human kidnapers or reptile devourers of children.

"We go to the woods as the note directs, we fling out the bag, and the little woman who stole to refill her aching, empty heart, is caught by the fumes of my so clever bomb-satchel.

"So far all is well, but it was as well I had my snake-stick with me,

for the excellent Beppo, who doubtless was a most affectionate snake, was also there, and I, not being aware of his good qualities, was obliged to exterminate him in self-defense. *Eh bien*, Beppo is not the first to die because of evil appearances.

"Friend Trowbridge, I think our work is done. We have restored the little boy to his parents; we have made one great fool of that so odious Perkinson person who suspected Madame Candace of killing her son; we have apprehended the kidnaper. Let us go."

He bowed to the company, strode to the door, then paused abruptly, a half-diffident, ingratiating smile on his face. "Monsieur Candace," he asked, "as a favor to me, if you feel at all obligated for the little I have done, I would ask that you be merciful to the poor, bereaved mother when her trial comes up. Remember, though she sinned against you greatly by stealing your child, her temptation was also great."

"Trial, hell!" Candace retorted. "There isn't going to be any trial. D'ye think I'd have the heart to prosecute her after what she told us at the barracks? Not much! As far as I'm concerned, she can go free now."

"*Eh bien*, Trowbridge, my friend," de Grandin confided as we walked down the garden path, "I do admire that Monsieur Candace immensely. Truly, the great heart of America is reflected in the great hearts of her citizens."

As we reached the waiting car he paused with a chuckle. "And the great thirst of the great desert is reflected in Jules de Grandin," he confided. "Come, make haste, my friend, I pray. I would imbibe one of your so glorious gin rickies before I bid myself good night."