

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 East Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions, Cuba, Mexico, South America, Spain, \$2.50; Canada, \$2.75; elsewhere, \$3.00. English office: Otis A. Kline, c/o John Paradise, 86 Strand, W. C. 2, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Venomed Breath of Vengeance

By SEABURY QUINN

A curious story about Jules de Grandin, occult detective and scientist, and an East Indian whose very breath was death to those upon whom he blew

I SHOOK my head reprovingly as Jules de Grandin decanted half an ounce of cream into his breakfast coffee and dropped two sugar lumps into the mucilaginous concoction.

"You're sending out an invitation to gastritis," I said warningly. "Don't you realize that mixing two such active ferments as cream and sugar in your coffee——"

He leveled an unwinking stare at me. "Am I to have no pleasure?" he demanded truculently. "May I not have the doubtful joy of getting sick without your interference? How do you amuse yourself while you preach of creamless sugar, I ask to know?"

"All right, how do I?" I responded as he paused for comment.

"By reading the obituary columns of *le journal*, to see how many of the poor misguided ones who follow your advice have gone to their long rest, where doctors prate no more of cream and sugar——"

"These don't happen to have been my patients," I cut in laughing, "but there's something queer about the way they died. Listen:

"Third Shervers Dies Mysteriously

"Truman Shervers, 25, son of the late Robert Shervers, well known importer, and brother of the late Jepson Shervers, yachtsman, of Larchmont, N. Y., was found dead in bed at the family residence in Tuscarora Avenue yesterday

morning by Mazie O'Brien, a maid in the household, when she went to his room to ascertain why he had not come down to breakfast with the family, as was his usual custom. Doctors MacLeod and William Lucas, hastily summoned, pronounced him dead of heart failure. The deceased had never been heard to complain of illness of that character, and seemed in perfect health when he went to bed the night before.

"An air of gruesome mystery is lent to the occurrence by the fact that Mr. Shervers is the third member of his family to suffer sudden death within a month. His father, the late Robert Shervers, noted as an authority on Oriental art, was found dead in the library of the family home about a month ago, while his brother Jepson was discovered in a dying condition when a New York state trooper found his car crashed against a tree beside Pelham Park Boulevard, Mount Vernon, N. Y., two weeks later. He died without regaining consciousness. Members of the family when interviewed by Journal reporters declared all three deaths were ascribed to heart failure.

"What do you make of it?" I asked as I laid the paper by and helped myself to salted mackerel.

"*Tiens*, what does one ever make of death? The gentlemen appear to have been afflicted with a cardiac condition which they did not know about, and down they went, like dominoes in line, when it attacked them."

"Humph," I nodded, unconvinced. "I knew Jepson Shervers rather well, and saw him only three days before he died. He was feeling tiptop at the time and jubilant because he'd just received reports from his insurance broker that his application for fifty thousand increase in his policies had been approved. Insurance

doctors don't usually overlook such things as cardiac conditions, especially where fifty thousand dollars is involved. Truman's death is even harder to explain. I saw him at the Racquet Club last Monday, and he'd just completed half an hour's work-out on the squash courts. That's pretty strenuous exercise for a cardiac."

"No autopsy was held?"

"Apparently not. The doctors all seemed satisfied."

"Then who are we to find fault with their diagnoses?" He drained a fresh cup of unsweetened coffee and rose. "Luncheon at half-past one, as usual? Good. I shall be here. Meantime, I have some matters to attend to at the library."

"THIS way, gentlemen," the frock-coated young man with smooth brushed hair, perfectly arranged cravat and mild, sympathetic manners met us at the door and ushered us to the back parlor of the Shervers house, where folding chairs had been set out in concentric semi-circles with the casket as their focal point.

Nothing in the way of mortuary service had been omitted by the Martin Funeral Home. Behind a bank of palms a music reproducing device played the Largo from the New World Symphony so softly that its notes were scarcely audible:

"Going home, going home,
I'm just going home . . ."

A linen runner spanned the scatter rugs that strewed the polished floors, making it impossible for anyone to trip or stumble as he passed from door to sitting-room. When folding chairs were broken out for late arrivals they opened with the softest clicks instead of sharp reports. We followed soundlessly in our conductor's wake, but as he paused beside the archway to permit us to precede him, I halted

involuntarily. "*Comment?*" demanded Jules de Grandin in a whisper.

"That youngster," I returned, nodding toward the young mortician; "he's enough like Truman Shervers to have been his twin."

"I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth . . ." Doctor Bentley began to officiate for the burial of the dead. A subdued flutter of fans, the soft swish-swish of unaccustomed black silk garments being adjusted by their wearers in the semi-hysteria women always show at funerals, the faint, muted murmurings of late arrivals at the front door, occasional low, distance-softened noises from the street outside accompanied the words.

". . . We brought nothing into the world and it is certain we can carry nothing out . . . the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away . . ." the solemn words of the liturgy proceeded. De Grandin raised his hand and thrust his forefinger between his neck and collar. It was hot as only August in a rainy spell can be, and with Gallic worship of convention he had donned his cutaway and stiff-starched linen, disdainfully refusing to put on a mohair jacket and soft shirt as I did. The air was almost unsupportable in the close-packed room. The heavy, cloyingly sweet perfume of tuberoses fell upon our senses like a sickening drug. Next to us a woman swayed upon her chair and turned imploring eyes upon the tight-shut window. Why hadn't they availed themselves of Mr. Martin's chapel? I wondered. His rooms were large and air-conditioned; people need not sit and stifle in them, but . . . The lady on my left moaned softly. In a moment, I knew, she'd be sick or fainting.

Softly, treading noiselessly on feet accustomed to step without sound, the young mortician who had ushered us into the parlor tiptoed to the window, raised

the lace-bordered blind and took the sash knobs in his hands. Watching idly, I saw him straighten with the effort of forcing up a sash warped in its casings by the spell of humid weather, and heard the faint squeak as the sash gave way and slid slowly upward. Something like this always happened when they had a funeral in the home, I ruminated. If only they had used the Martin chapel . . .

Like a flash de Grandin left his seat and dashed across the room, clasping arms about the young man's shoulders. In the act of opening the window the youngster had swayed back, almost as from a blow in the chest, and was sagging to the floor, sinking with a look of almost comical surprize upon his small, well modeled features.

"*Courage, mon brave,*" de Grandin whispered, closing ready arms about the fainting man. "Lean on me, it is the heat."

I rose and joined them hurriedly, for despite his reassuring words I knew that it was neither the humidity nor temperature which had stricken the young undertaker. His face was pale with a blue tinge, his lips were almost purple, as though he stood beneath the neon light in a quick-picture photographer's. "Easy, son," I comforted as we helped him down the hall; "we can't afford to have folks getting all excited at a time like this."

We reached the passage leading to the kitchen and eased our charge down to the floor while de Grandin bent to loose the black and white cravat which bound his stiffly starched wing collar.

"Ah—so. Is not that better?" he asked as he bent above the gasping youth. "You will be all well in just one little minute——"

"My God, sir, he popped up right in my face!" the boy cut in, his words mouthed difficultly, as though something soft and hot lay upon his tongue. "It

was as if he waited there for me, and when I put the window up——" Thicker and thicker, softer and more soft his utterance came; finally it died away in a soft, choking gurgle. His head fell back against my arm, and I saw his jaw relax.

"Lord, let me know my end, and the number of my days; that I may be certified how long I have to live. . . ." Doctor Bentley's voice came smoothly, sonorously, from the room beyond. "O spare me a little that I may recover my strength before I go hence. . . ."

Despite the almost suffocating heat I shuddered. There was something horrifyingly appropriate in the service being read beyond that archway.

The young funeral director lay dead at our feet.

DE GRANDIN drummed a tattoo on the silver head of his black walking-stick as we drove homeward from the funeral. "My friend," he announced, suddenly, "I do not like that house."

"Eh?" I responded. "You don't like——"

"By blue, I do not. It is an evil place. It has the smell of death and tragedy upon it. I noticed it the moment that I entered, and——"

"Oh, come, now," I derided. "Don't tell me you had a psychic spell and foresaw tragedy——"

"Indeed, I did. Not that poor young man's deplorable decease, but——"

"I understand," I interrupted, "but I don't believe there's anything partaking of the superphysical about it. Just one of those coincidences that make life seem so curiously unreal at times. The average person finds something faintly grotesque in an undertaker's death—just as there's something faintly comic in a doctor's being ill—and the fact that he happened to die so tragically during the funeral serv-

ice, when so much emotional energy was focussed on the thought of death——”

He squeezed my elbow with a quick grip of affection. “My good friend!” he exclaimed. “I understand you. You will not scoff at me, and so you rationalize the entirely illogical death of that poor young man to let me down without hurt feelings. I wish I could agree with you, but I cannot. When I declare there is an aura of misfortune, tragedy and death about that house I speak no more than simple truth. Some things there are we see without beholding, or hear without sound. Attend me carefully: As a spider lurks in secret at the center of her web, so death waited in that place. And just as many flies pass by the spider’s snare unharmed, yet some eventually are caught, just so I knew the moment that I crossed the threshold that death would strike again, and soon, inside those portals. I think that we are lucky to have come away with whole skins.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” I murmured. “It was certainly a most uncanny——”

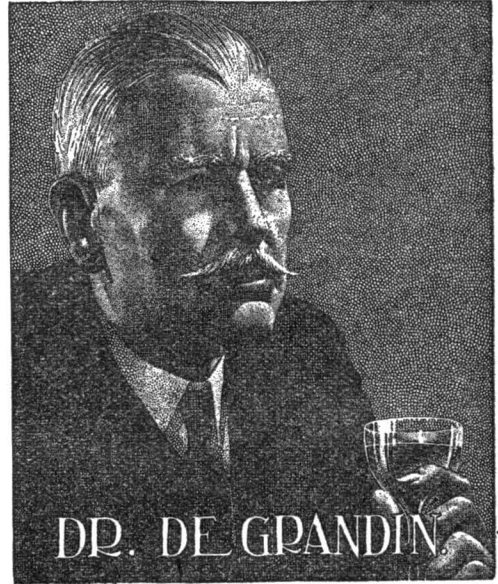
“You saw him die,” he interrupted. “Would you certify the cause of death?”

“It looked like some sort of heart seizure, there was marked cyanosis, labored breathing, difficulty in enunciation——”

“Agreed,” he broke in, “but what was it that he said as we assisted him?”

“Oh, something about someone’s waiting for him; you know what strangely garbled statements dying people make. The boy was agonizing, dying. His entire system of co-ordination was deranged, the nerves connecting thought and speech were short-circuited——”

He prodded me with a stiff forefinger. “Three persons, three members of a single family, have met death within a month. In every case the cause assigned was heart failure, an almost meaningless term, medically speaking. In no instance was there any history of cardiac disturb-



ance; in one case the deceased was certified as being in sound health within a day or so of dying. No autopsies were had, nothing but objective symptoms led the doctors to ascribe the deaths to heart conditions. Now a young and healthy man succumbs in the same way. Tell me, if you were asked to give his cause of death, would you say it was heart failure?”

“Yes,” I answered. “If it were impossible to have an autopsy and I could not have his medical history, I’d say, with no other evidence than that we have at present, that his death was due to heart failure.”

His noncommittal exclamation was half a swallow, half a grunt.

“Now then,” he faced me at the dinner table the next evening, “we are somewhat farther in our quest.”

“Are we? I didn’t know we had one.”

“Indubitably. The so strange deaths among the *famille* Shervers, the equally inexplicable dispatch of the young mortuarian, the insistence on heart failure as the cause of each—*ah bah*, they did not

make the sense. They outraged my ideas of propriety, they intrigued me. Yes. Assuredly."

"And so——"

"And so I got permission to attend the autopsy on the young man's body at the morgue today."

"And the finding was——"

"A failure of the heart, by blue!"

"I take it you do not agree?"

"Name of a piebald porcupine, my friend, you take it right! I begged, I pleaded, I entreated them to analyze the poor one's blood, for it was of a chocolate color, and I thought I smelled a characteristic odor. But would they do it? *Non!* Parnell, the coroner's physician, he laughed at me. At Jules de Grandin! 'See,' he said while grinning like a dog, 'here are the heart. It have ceased to function. Therefore it was a failure of the heart which killed him.'

"There was nothing one could do. One was present as a guest, and entirely without official status. And so I made him a most courteous bow. '*Monsieur,*' I said, 'permit me to congratulate you on your sublime ignorance.' Thereupon I came home to my dinner."

For upward of an hour he was busy in the surgery, and I had begun to wonder if he planned to spend the evening there when he emerged in shirt sleeves, his cuffs rolled back and a look of exultation on his face.

"Behold, observe, give attention," he commanded as he waved a test-tube like a banner shaken out in triumph. "When Parnell *l' idiot de naissance* refused to test the poor young undertaker's blood I held my lips—as much as could have been expected—but though my tongue was circumspect my hands were not. Oh, no; I was a thief, a pilferer, a criminal. I filled a little so small vial with blood wrung from a sponge and hid it in my pocket. I have subjected it to an analysis,

that blood, and these things I have found: The blood are chocolate brown, not red as blood should be; on distillation I found tiny yellow globules which smelled of crushed peach kernels; when ether had been added and permitted to evaporate I found an aniline apparent by its odor, and the isonitrille test confirmed its presence. What do you say to that, *hein?*"

"Why, it sounds like poisoning by nitrobenzol, but——"

"*Précisément*, that but, he puts an obstacle before us, *n'est-ce-pas?* That nitrobenzol, he kills quickly; one cannot take him in his mouth, then walk around while he awaits his action. No. He asks by making it impossible for blood to take up oxygen, therefore his victims have the blue face—cyanosis. Yes?"

"Yes, of course, but——"

"Very well, then. If this odor of the kernel of the peach has not been smelled, and we see his victim fall, we might be led to think he suffered failure of the heart, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"That's so, but——"

"*Bien oui.* Here in this mortuarian we have a case which might be heart failure. It misleads my good Friend Trowbridge, who is nobody's fool, it misleads that *sale chameau* Parnell who is everybody's fool, but it does not mislead me. Oh, no. I am a very clever fellow, and follow where my nose directs. Now, if the young man dies of nitrobenzol poisoning, and everyone but Jules de Grandin thinks he dies of a weak heart, are it not entirely possible those members of the Shervers family succumbed to the same subtle poison? Are it not even probable?"

"Possible, of course," I nodded, "but not highly probable. In the first place, there's no earthly reason for any of them to have committed suicide, yet nitrobenzol's not the kind of drug one can administer murderously. Its characteristic odor and sharp bitterness of taste would

warn intended victims. Besides, we were right beside him when that poor boy died. One moment he was well, next instant he was falling in profound narcosis, and within two minutes he was dead. No one could have given him the poison; he could not have taken it himself and walked across the room to attempt to open the window. No, I'm afraid your theory isn't tenable, de Grandin."

He regarded me a moment, round-eyed as a puzzled tom-cat. At length: "You said the young mortician bore resemblance to the Monsieur Shervers in whose funeral he participated? We may have something there. Is it not possible some evilly-intentioned person mistook him for a member of the Shervers family, and struck him down——"

"By administering $C_6H_5NO_2$ in broad daylight, without anybody's seeing him?" I asked sarcastically.

"*Précisément*. Exactly as you say."

"But that is utterly fantastic——"

"I quite agree with you. It is. But fantasy may be fact, too. If a thing exists we must accept it, whether it is capable of proof or otherwise. Meantime"——methodically he turned his cuffs down and snapped the fastenings of his smoked pearl links——"let us go and tender our condolences to survivors of the Shervers family. It would be a gracious gesture——and we may find out something which we do not know at present."

OLD Eustace Shervers cowered in the tufted Turkish armchair set before the fireless fireplace of the stiffly formal parlor of the house where he had brought his bride some six and sixty years before when, a young lieutenant fresh from service under Farragut, he had come home from war to take his place in the importing business founded by his Anglo-Indian father. He was a pitiable figure, vulture-bald and crippled with arthritis,

half blind with presbyopia, bent with the weight of eighty-seven years. Almost destitute of blood-kin, too, for all his family had preceded him except his great-grandson Elwood, Jepson's son, back from school in England to attend his father's funeral, and still at home when tragedy deprived him of his uncle. Now the old man fumbled with his blackthorn cane and stared at us with blue, almost blind eyes.

"Yes, gentlemen," he said in the cracked voice old age imposes on its victims, "it almost seems a curse is on our family. First came Robert's death, from heart failure, they said, though he seemed as vigorous as anyone could be, then Jepson, and now Truman. Jepson wanted more insurance, you know, and when the doctors said it was his father's heart that killed him he went down at once for examination. The doctors looked him over carefully, and certified his health as perfect. His application for \$50,000 more insurance was approved, although the policies had not been issued when they found him dead in his car on the Pelham Road.

"Now Truman's gone the same way. He'd been designated for examination for the Marine Corps, and the naval surgeons gave him perfect ratings. Although he'd studied hard to pass his written tests, he'd kept in perfect trim, and apparently he was in the best of health. Why, on the day before the night he died he played six games of squash and won them all. Could anyone about to die of heart failure have done that?"

"It seems unlikely, *Monsieur*," de Grandin answered as he gazed with more curiosity than courtesy at the family portraits hanging on the walls. Abruptly: "Who is that one, if you please?" he asked, nodding to an oval picture done indifferently in oils and representing a young man in scarlet tunic piped with

blue, a small mustache and rudimentary goatee.

His sudden change of subject shocked me hardly more than his unconcealed curiosity, and I saw old Shervers draw his bloodless lips across his false dentition at the exhibition as he answered rather stiffly, "That is my father, sir, Captain Hardon Jennings Shervers of the artillery corps of the British India Company, who fought with marked distinction through the Mutiny and helped to execute the white man's justice on the bloody dogs who massacred the women in the Cawnpore dungeons. He emigrated to America shortly afterward and engaged in Oriental trade——"

"*Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur*, is one to understand your father was commander of a battery which blew the Mutiny ring-leaders from the cannon's mouth?"

"That is correct, sir. I was a lad at the time, but I well remember how the terror of those executions spread throughout all India, how the Hindoos cringed away in fear whenever a *sahib* passed"—his purblind eyes turned backward on the savage memory and his rheumatism-knotted fingers tightened on the silver knob of his thorn stick—"I tell you, gentlemen, not for a century will those heathen forget what we did to them that day!"

"*Tiens*, I damn think you have right, *mon ancien*," de Grandin murmured; then, irrelevantly: "Tell me, if you please, how did your most respected father die?"

Once more the old man's withered lips were puckered back against his false teeth as though a drawstring tightened them. "He died of heart disease."

"And had he suffered long with the complaint?"

"He had not; no, sir. Like my son and grandsons, he was in what seemed to be good health up to the time he died. He passed away while sleeping."

"One sees." For a moment he was silent, studying the bent old man as an Egyptologist might look upon some relic of a vanished time and race. At length he rose and bowed with Continental courtesy. "Thank you for your information, and again we ask you to accept our sympathy," he said.

"**N**OM *d'un nom d'un nom d'un nom*," he muttered as we drove home, "it is a puzzle with two tails we have here, good Friend Trowbridge! I have grasped one of them, but the other still eludes me."

"What the deuce?" I queried.

"Precisely, exactly, quite so. I ask the same. Consider: We have here a family descended from a British officer who officiated at the blowing from the guns of sepoy mutineers. We heard the old one boast about the white man's vengeance and say that never in a hundred years would Indians forget. *Tenez*, I think he spoke more truly than he knew when he said that, for the corollary of the white man's vengeance is the vengeance of the Indian. If they hold the memory of those executions for a hundred years who shall say they do not hold the thought of retribution for an equal time?"

"But holding grudges and satisfying them aren't necessarily the same thing."

"*Mais non*, but think: Old Monsieur Shervers' father died of heart disease. He was in good health, there were no warning symptoms, but he died. So did his grandsons. In every case it was the same. All were apparently in good health, all were stricken dead by heart disease. Even the young mortician who had the sad misfortune to resemble one of them was smitten by the same malady, apparently. *Mordieu*, coincidence's arm is long, but these happenings pull it out of joint. It does not make the sense. Death is not obliged to give us notice of our dispos-

session from our bodies, but usually he does so. Not so with these ones. First they are strong and vigorous; then *pouf!* they are not even sick. They die. What is the answer?"

"But your blood tests seem to indicate the undertaker died of nitrobenzol poisoning."

"They do, indeed, and I should like to wager that if we could perform similar tests upon the others' blood we'd find that they too died of just that sort of 'heart disease.' I am convinced these so-called natural deaths are most unnatural. That dying lad was not delirious when he declared one was waiting for him by the window."

"Who was it, have you any idea?"

"Not the slightest, or, to be more accurate, only the slightest. I think that I can guess what he was, but who? *Hélas, non.* I grope, I feel about with searching fingers like the blind man who has lost his dog and stick, but darkness shuts me in on every side. I am at fault. It is as well that it grows late. Let us go to bed and sleep upon the problem. Tomorrow I may see more clearly."

"IT IS unfortunate we could not see young Monsieur Elwood last night," de Grandin told me at the breakfast table next morning. "He might have added something to the old one's statement which would help us understand the case. Old people have their eyes set on the past; the modern viewpoint might be helpful——"

"I'll call and ask him to drop over," I volunteered. "We'd better not go over there, it might excite the old man."

Picking up the breakfast room telephone I dialed the Shervers' number, heard the smooth purr of the dial tone give way to the rhythmic buzzing of the automatic signal; then, "Hello?" I called as a woman's muffled voice came to me on

the wire. Queer, I thought, it seemed almost as if her words were choked with crying, but:

"Good Lord!" I dropped the telephone back in its cradle and stared at Jules de Grandin in incredulous dismay.

"*Comment?*" he looked up from his plate of sausages and cakes.

"Eustace Shervers died last night. They say that it was——"

"*Non!* Do not tell me; let me guess; it was the heart disease, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"That makes the fourth death in a month——"

"And unless we act with speed a fifth will follow quickly, I damn think!"

Dashing to the telephone he called the Martin Funeral Home, found that the old man's body had not yet been taken from his house, and with a muttered farewell ran full-tilt toward the front door and out into the street as though he were pursued by all the fiends of Pandemonium.

In half an hour he was back and shut himself up in the surgery. Occasionally I could hear the clink of glass on glass mingled with the low hum of his voice as he sang his private and entirely indecent version of a French translation of Saint James' Infirmary Blues. When he emerged there was a look of triumph on his face as he thrust a test-tube forward for inspection. "*C'est tout de même,*" he declared. "The old one's blood test shows the same reaction as the poor young mortuarian's. He too was poisoned by administration of nitrobenzol, and died of 'heart disease'."

"How'd you get a specimen——" I began, but he waved my question airily aside.

"One does not serve for years as agent of *le sûreté* and not learn tricks, my friend. I met the body of Monsieur Eustace as it came to the embalming-room. I requested that I be allowed to look at

it, and while no one was looking I filled a syringe with his blood. *Voilà*. I brought it back with me; I tested it, and here it is, with every evidence of poison in it."

"But why, how——" I began.

"Why? *C'est tout simple*. The father's sins were visited upon the son—and on the sons' sons and their sons. The white man's vengeance which old Eustace boasted of last night begot the vengeance of the Hindoos. Did he not say they never would forget? *Parbleu*, it seems that they have not!

"As to the how, the *modus operandi* of the poisonings, that is for us to find, but find it out we must, unless we wish to see the funeral of the last one of the Shervers family."

"SURELY, you're not serious, Doctor?" Young Elwood Shervers looked curiously at the small Frenchman. "Why, it's utterly preposterous! Who would want to wipe the Shervers' family out? We've never injured anyone that I can think of, and as for a family curse, or Nemesis, as you have termed it, it's too absurd to talk about. Of course, I'm grateful for your interest, and all that sort o' thing, but—well, we're English stock, you know. If we were French or Irish we might have family *Dames Blanches* or banshees, but"—the slightest trace of patronage showed in his voice—"we're not, and we haven't. And that's definitely that."

De Grandin took a quick puff at his cigarette and narrowed his eyes against the smoke, looking hard at Elwood. "*Monsieur*, this is no laughing matter, I assure you. Inspect the record, as your so magnificent Al Smith advises: Your first American ancestor fell victim to a heart attack, yet no one suspected he was menaced by the ailment. Your father and your uncles died, all in the prime of health, two of them with fresh certificates of health from doctors trained

and paid to find the slightest defect. 'Heart disease—heart failure,' the cause of death is given as monotonously as the chanting of an auctioneer who invites bids——"

"Oh, yes, we've been all over that," young Shervers interrupted. "But it's not a bit of use, sir. There must have been a strain of cardiac weakness somewhere, although no one suspected it. When Truman died, the strain and shock were just too much for poor old Grandpa Eustace. The wonder is the poor old chap hung on so long. Now, I'm a different temperament, I'm——"

"You are most woefully mistaken, *Monsieur*. Granting sorrow joined with shock to bring death to your relatives, what of the other one, the young mortuarian who died in this house during your uncle's funeral?"

Elwood fumbled at the red and blue necktie which marked him as a public school man. "Coincidence?" he muttered.

"Coincidence, my friend, is what the fool calls fate," de Grandin shot back. "The coincidence which caused the young man's death was that he happened to resemble Truman Shervers. We saw him cross the room to raise a window; we saw him stagger back as though he had been struck; we heard him say that someone waited for him at the window; we saw him die within two minutes. And did he also die of heart disease? By blue, he did not! Listen carefully:

"Human sight is fallible. A skilled physician looking at the blue-hued face of one who dies from nitrobenzol poisoning might be misled to think that he had died of heart failure. But chemistry makes no mistakes. When this and that is mixed with that and this, reactions are invariable. There is no room for argument. So when I tell you that I made a test of the young undertaker's blood and

found that he was dead of nitrobenzol poisoning I do not make a statement which can be debated." He paused, then, earnestly: "The same tests prove your *gran'père* died of nitrobenzol poisoning, *Monsieur.*"

"What?" Elwood looked to me for confirmation or denial.

I nodded. "We can't explain it, Elwood, but undoubtedly the tests were positive. It was poison and not heart disease that killed them both."

Elwood Shervers' patronizing manner vanished like a morning mist before the rising sun. "Good Lord!" he almost wailed. "If that's so, what's to hinder them from killing me?"

"Only Jules de Grandin, my young friend."

"Then what do you advise, sir? I'll do anything in reason——"

"Ha, the fear of death, like fear of God, is the beginning of wisdom, it appears. Your behavior is a matter of concern, *Monsieur.* Walk, ride, play golf, do exactly as you please, but always in the company of others. Meanwhile, at home, be careful not to stand by any opened door or window, and permit no one to interview you while you are alone. You comprehend? It is not a rigorous routine."

"Oh, I say, you must be spoofing, aren't you? If someone's out to do me in, as you seem sure he is, why should I give 'em opportunity to slip the old stiletto in my back by walking in the street, yet keep away from open doors and windows in the house? Are they like the influenza, coming in on drafts?"

"*Mais oui*, they are as subtle as *la grippe*, but infinitely more deadly, I assure you. This evening we shall call upon you. If they run true to form your periods of greatest danger will be between sunset and daybreak."

"Right-ho, I'll follow through with your prescription, Doctor, and we'll gather round the festive board for dinner about seven."

DINNER was not what might be called a jovial meal. Shervers forked vaguely at the food upon his plate and I did little more than play with mine. De Grandin, as always appreciative of good food, did full justice to the soup and fish and roast and kept Ordway, Shervers' butler, occupied with the chablis bottle and the claret cruet. But time and time again I caught his keen glance straying to the long windows at the north end of the room. As for me, my eyes were hardly turned away from them, for the observation he had made as we drove over rang insistently against my inner ears: "We do not know in what guise death will come, but we are certain it will try to enter through the windows."

At last we had completed the ordeal by food and moved into the little drawing-room where Ordway brought us coffee, chartreuse and cigars. The room was rather small, not more than twenty long by eighteen feet in width, and in its furnishings one read the Shervers family's traits and history. A few examples of Georgian mahogany were almost lost among an assemblage of more exotic pieces, a Dutch-Chinese highboy, a teakwood table set with tortoise-shell, Chinese panels, Japanese prints, old Russian and Greek ikons, carved Italian candlesticks, books bound in Persian covers, Bokhara rugs upon the floor. In the bow-window was a tabouret of Chinese red and on it a tall vase of Peking blue held a bouquet of summer roses. Above a fireplace fashioned in Damascus tiles was crossed a pair of swords, that worn by Eustace Shervers when he fought with Farragut at Mobile Bay and the one his father wore when he served the guns that

blasted back the Sepoy Mutineers at Lucknow.

Shervers filled his chartreuse glass and his hand shook so the green liqueur slopped over and dripped down on the silver tray. "Damn!" he muttered, then, half peevishly, half challengingly to de Grandin: "You're certain that my ancestor's connection with the execution of the mutineers is what's behind all this?"

"I am convinced of it, *Monsieur*."

"Well, I'm convinced you're off your rocker. Of course, I don't know much about these Hindoo Johnnies, but they can't be quite as fierce as you make out. There were some of 'em at school with me in England, and they seemed as mild as milk-and-water. Suppose my great-great-grandfather did officiate at antemortem exercises for some of 'em, that was a hundred years ago, almost, and you'd hardly think these crumpets would retain a grudge that long. Why, they always seemed a cross between white rabbits and black guinea-pigs to me. Nothing vindictive about 'em."

There was something almost pitying in the look de Grandin gave him. "Mild-mannered, did you say, *Monsieur*? *Bien oui*, so is the serpent when he lies at ease and suns himself upon a rock; so is the tiger, in repose. Have you never stood before a tiger's den at the menagerie and wondered how the lovely, sleepy-seeming creature lying there like an enlarged edition of the fireside tabby-cat could be considered fierce and dangerous?"

"My friend, if you had said these so demure ones were bred from cobras crossed with tigers you would have come much nearer to the truth than when you said they seemed like cross-breeds of the rabbit and the guinea-pig. Your father's grandsire's father knew the breed much better, I assure you. He had been born and reared in India, he knew of Nana

Sahib and the things he did at Cawnpore."

"Nana?" echoed Elwood. "I always thought that was a woman's name. Didn't Zola write a novel——"

"*Morbleu* — and you have been to school! Attend me, if you please, while I amend your education: Nana Sahib was the leader of the mutineers at Cawnpore. After he had put the British garrison to death with most revolting tortures, he forced two hundred Englishwomen and their children into a small cellar, then sent professional butchers in to kill them. *Parbleu*, for upward of two hours their cries and screams and prayers for mercy filled that dismal cellar while the ruthless killers slaughtered them as if they had been sheep, sparing neither infirm bel-dame, tender toddling babe nor young and lovely maiden. There we have a sample of the so mild manners of the cross-bred guinea-pigs and rabbits which you spoke of. It was an act of useless cruelty this Nana Sahib did; he knew the British under Havelock were almost within striking distance of his trenches. He ordered these assassinations only that his innate lust for cruelty and blood might be appeased. Now hear me, if you please" — he thrust a finger rigid as a bayonet at our host — "these ones we have to deal with, I believe, are lineal descendants of the men who carried out the bloody Nana's orders, or others very like them. India sleeps, you think? *Mais certainement*, but while she sleeps she dreams a dream of vengeance. The recollection of the crushing defeat fifty thousand Englishmen administered to almost as many million Indians rankles in her racial consciousness like a splinter in a festered sore. They owe a debt of deep humiliation to the English, and every Briton killed is so much interest on the long-delayed account. You comprehend? It is more than merely probable that you and

yours have been marked for assassination since the day the guns your grandsire served blew captured mutineers to bits in vengeance for the Massacre at Cawnpore. Yes, certainly. Of course."

The look upon young Shervers' face reminded me of that a half-grown child might wear while listening to an adult tell a tale of Santa Claus. He drained his *pousse-café* glass at a gulp. "I think you're talking rot," he growled. "Furthermore, I'd just a lief be killed by those assassins whom you talk about as smother here with all the windows down." He glared defiantly at de Grandin, then rose and crossed to the bow-window. "I'm goin' to let some air in here."

"Don't!" I cried, and:

"*Insensé, imbécile, nigaud!*" de Grandin shouted. "*Nom d'un sacré nom*, you will destroy yourself completely!"

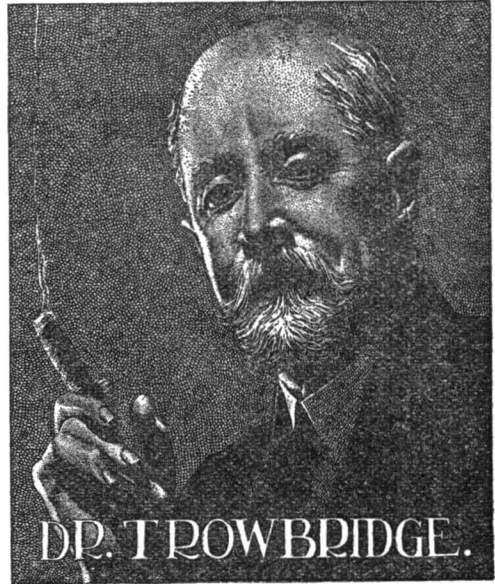
With an impatient gesture Elwood threw the curtains back, ran up the laced-edged blind and raised the sash.

Something like a long-drawn, venomous hiss—yet strangely like a cough—came to us from the outside darkness. There was a flash of white eyes in a swarthy face, the gleam of white teeth in a smile of gloating triumph, and the window-shade cord swayed as though a light breeze blew it.

Shervers staggered backward, both hands raised to clutch his throat, then stumbled crazily as though a cord had stretched across the floor to snare his feet, and dropped full length, face-upward, on the Mosul carpet.

Crash—tinkle! The shattering of splintered glass accompanied the roar de Grandin's pistol made as he snatched the weapon from his dinner jacket pocket and fired point-blank at the momentary silhouette of the dark face and evil smile that showed outside the window. A mocking laugh responded and the tap of fleeing feet came back to us from the

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brick walk that circled round the house and let into the alley.

"See to him—artificial respiration!" de Grandin cried as he vaulted through the window in pursuit of the dark visitant.

I turned the fainting man face-downward, rolled my dinner coat into a wad and thrust it underneath his chest, then began applying Schaefer's method, pressing firmly down upon the costal margins, swinging back, then bearing down again, counting twenty rapidly between each alternating pressure. "Ordway!" I shouted. "Ordway, bring some brandy and water!"

"Yes, sir?" The butler tiptoed through the doorway, his disapproval of my rowdy manners written plainly on his smoothly shaven face. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing much," I answered tartly. "Only someone nearly murdered Mr. Elwood. Get some water and brandy, and be quick about it!"

IT MIGHT have been five minutes, though it seemed much longer, before the boy began to breathe in shuddering sighs instead of stifled gasps. I bent my arm be-

hind his shoulders, raised him and poured brandy mixed with water down his throat. "Easier now?" I asked.

He shuddered as though he were chilled. "He—he seemed waiting out there for me—popped right up in my face! It"—he coughed and retched—"it was like fire—like smoke—like something that exploded in my face!"

A grisly feeling of malaise came over me. "He seemed waiting out there for me"—the words the dying funeral director gasped when we helped him from the window where he had been stricken! I had the eerily uncomfortable feeling that small red ants were running up my spine and neck and through my hair. "Ordway," I called again, "see to Mr. Elwood. Give him a sip of brandy every few minutes, and fan him steadily with something. I'll be back directly."

Climbing through the window I looked around for Jules de Grandin. There was no sign of him. "Hi, de Grandin!" I called. "Where are you?"

"*Ohé, mon vieux—à moi!*" the hail came from the rear of the garden. "Come and see the fish that we have caught!"

The gleam of his white shirt-front guided me to where he sat upon the grass, a cigarette between his lips, a smile of utter satisfaction with himself upon his face. Thirty feet or so away something writhed upon the shadowed lawn and cursed venomously in a whining voice with thick-tongued words. "Good heavens, what is it?" I asked.

For answer he drew out his pocket flashlight and shot its beam upon his quarry. In the diffused circle of pale orange light I saw an undersized dark man, emaciated as a mummy, sparsely bearded, turbaned. There was something horribly reminiscent of a June-bug on a string about the way he clawed a little distance on the grass, then stopped abruptly with a cry or curse of pain and

slipped back, as if he had been pinioned by a tether of elastic. Then I saw. Biting cruelly on his left leg were the saw-toothed jaws of a steel trap, and anchoring the trap was a strong chain made fast to a stout peg.

"Good Lord, man! What——" Involuntarily, I stepped forward to release the tortured prisoner.

"Keep back, my friend!" de Grandin warned. "*Retirez vous!*"

The warning came a thought too late. As I leant forward the trapped man roused upon an elbow, pursed his lips and blew his breath into my face. I stepped backward, choking. Overwhelmingly powerful, the fumes of some gas, hot and scalding-bitter, stung my throat and nostrils, strangling me. The world seemed whirling like a carousel gone crazy, blindness fell upon me, but it was a blindness shot with bursting lights. My head seemed swelling to the bursting-point. Dully, I felt, yet scarcely felt, the impact of my fall. Half senseless, I realized I lay upon my back, weak, limp and sick as though anesthetized with ether, yet with slowly rising consciousness returning.

"Wha—what?" I gasped, then choked and coughed and gasped again.

"*C'est un empoisonneur vicieux!*" I felt my wrists seized in a firm grip as Jules de Grandin pumped my arms up and down vigorously. Gradually the breath refilled my lungs, the dizziness subsided, and I sat up, staring round me in bewilderment. "You said it was a vicious poisoner——"

"*Mai oui.* I did, indeed, my friend. He is just that, the naughty fellow. Everything is all clear now, but there remain some things to be attended to." Methodically he cut a long switch from a lilac bush and stripped its leaves off. "Behold how I apply the antidote," he ordered as he advanced upon the prisoner

and struck him a cruel cut with the peeled withe.

I watched in a paralysis of fascination. Oddly, repulsively, the pantomime was more like the torture of a snake than the torment of a man. The wretched creature on the ground writhed and wriggled like a serpent, clawed the grass, whined and hissed. Time and time again he tried to reach de Grandin, rearing up upon his elbows, thrusting forth his head and blowing at him with a hissing sibilation.

"*Sa-ba!*" The little Frenchman leaped back nimbly, as from a physical attack, and struck and struck the prisoner again, now on his skull-thin face, now across the writhing shoulders or the twisting back, now on the legs.

The poor wretch slowly weakened in his efforts to defend himself. Between the pain of merciless beating and the torture of the steel trap clamped about his ankle, he was tiring rapidly, but de Grandin was relentless. "Blow, breathe at me, exhale, *diablotin!*" and the swish and clapping impact of his lash gave punctuation to his orders.

"Stop it, man!" I cried, almost sickened at the spectacle.

The look he turned on me made me shrink back, a hand involuntarily raised in defense. Once as a lad I'd tried to take a baby chick from my pet cat, and the recollection of the transformation of my gentle playmate to a snarling small edition of a tiger had never quite been banished from my mind. It was such a transformation that I witnessed now. His lips curled back in a snarl that bared his small, sharp teeth, his little blond mustache reared upward like the whiskers of a furious tom-cat, de Grandin seemed an incarnation of the god of vengeance.

"Keep clear!" he ordered savagely. "This affair is mine, to handle as my judgment dictates."

I retreated. It would have taken one

far bolder than I was to try to take his prey away from him.

Cut—lash! His whip descended on the groveling man until it seemed that he desisted more from weariness than mercy. At last he threw the switch aside and stood looking at the trembling, sobbing wretch stretched on the grass before him. "I think that is enough," he told me matter-of-factly. "His venom-sac should be exhausted now."

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"*Tout à l'heure,*" he cut me short. "At present we have duties to perform, my friend." Twisting his handkerchief into a cord he bound the prisoner's wrists securely at his back; then: "Put your foot down here, if you will be so good," he ordered, pointing to an arm of the steel trap, and rested his foot on the other prong, heaving downward at the saw-toothed jaws and releasing the man's ankle from their grip.

"Go, march, *en avant!*" he commanded, digging the muzzle of his pistol in the captive's back and pushing him toward the house. To me:

"Will you be kind enough to telephone the police and inform them that we have a tenant ready for the bastille?"

All spirit seemed to have been whipped out of our prisoner. The demoniacal gleam had faded from his eyes, his shoulders sagged, once or twice he shuddered and shook as if with overmastering sobs. "*Jo hoegha so hoegha*—what is written must come to pass!" he muttered.

"Beard of a green goat, never have you said a truer word, my wicked one!" de Grandin agreed as he thrust his pistol deeper in the small of the man's back.

"**B**UT no, my friends," he told us as, highball glass in hand, he faced us in the Shervers' little drawing-room, "it was all most beautifully simple, or, more exactly, beautifully complex."

Resting his glass on the mantelpiece he spread his finger fanwise and ticked the first point off upon his thumb.

"To commence at the beginning: It seemed strange to me when Doctor Trowbridge first related how the Shervers family was being stricken by heart disease in series. Such things do occur, of course, but they are of sufficient unusualness to excite our wonder. However, I was but mildly interested until that day we came here to the funeral and saw young Monsieur Oldham, the mortician, die. His death seemed due to heart disease, but there were certain things about it which rang warning bells inside my brain. His face was cyanotic—blue-hued—which is evidence of heart failure, but not the sort of evidence which excludes all other diagnoses. Also, about him, on his linen, in his breath, there was a subtle, faint perfume. Not of *l'eau de Cologne*, not *parfum social*, but of bitter almonds—crushed peach kernels. Why?

"That odor is found in a number of strong poisons, in prussic acid, in its deadly volatile derivative, hydrocyanic gas. But these kill very quickly. The young man had seemed well and strong—then he was dead. He could not have committed suicide by such means, and it seemed impossible anyone had killed him; yet he was very dead, and my experiments were later to convince me that he died from breathing fumes of nitrobenzol. However, we anticipate.

"When we called upon your venerable ancestor and saw his father's portrait on the wall, I found a basis for these deaths, but still I did not see the way the murders were committed.

"It is a matter of historic record that some of those who helped to execute the Sepoy Mutineers—and their children and their children's children—died in circumstances so unusual as to point to vengeance killings, and in some instances

these were of a nature which precluded anything but magic having been involved." Elwood Shervers gave vent to a snort of incredulity; de Grandin stared him down as a master might stare down a noisy pupil in the class room, and proceeded:

"But if a ghost pursued the Shervers family, working out an ancient blood-feud, he would be discriminating. He would not kill the poor young mortuarian because he was unfortunate enough to bear a close resemblance to the Shervers. Human beings make such errors in the flesh, they do not make them when they are translated into spirit form. Furthermore, a ghost would not employ the simple way of poison. They have other ways of doing violence, those ones. Accordingly, I was obliged to seek a human agency in this.

"The young Monsieur Oldham had gasped out something of a man—or thing—which waited for him at the window just before he had his fatal seizure. Well then, we were to seek for one who lurked at windows. Your uncles died in bed or sitting in the house. A murderer could enter at the window and administer the poison to them while they slept. Your father died upon the highway, presumably of a heart failure. But he was in a closed coupé. Had someone asked a ride of him and been taken in his car, conditions would have been ideal for that one to have gassed him as they rode. Your grandsire died in bed, but he was old and weak. A burglar might have entered through the window, released the deadly gas upon him, then left all quietly. The gas of nitrobenzol is highly volatile. In half an hour there would remain no telltale odor to arouse suspicion. Only an autopsy would disclose the true nature of his death, and the mistaken diagnosis of heart failure precluded the necessity of a post-mortem.

"There seemed a ritual in these killings. One of the oldest Eastern curses is: 'May you see your children and your children's children blotted out, and live to die alone in bleak despair, without the hope of progeny.' Such a course, it seemed, these killings took. Sons and grandsons perished, called to death from perfect health, while your grandsire lingered on. You alone were spared, perhaps because the killer thought he had dispatched you when he killed young Monsieur Oldham.

"This we could not have. We must act with speed if you were to be saved. The killer might go home, believing his work done, then months or years afterward find he was mistaken, and come back to complete the extirpation of your family. We had to force his hand immediately. Therefore I asked you to display yourself in public, but to have a care of open doors and windows.

"Our strategy succeeded. The miscreant who sought your life became aware of his mistake; he would come back, I knew; but how or where he'd strike I did not know. Accordingly, I made the preparation for his coming. I visited your house this afternoon and saw the way a man would take if he desired to hasten from a ground-floor window to the alley, whence he could make his get-away unseen. Then in his way I placed a steel trap, trusting he would step into it as he ran. I desired you should be seen through the window, but I did not wish to have you open it. But you disobeyed my orders, and almost forfeited your life in doing so. Into your face he blew the poison fumes; then off he ran pellmell and—stepped in Jules de Grandin's trap.

"The fact that Doctor Trowbridge was at hand to give first aid enabled you to live where others died. Had we known the nature of his illness we could have saved the poor young Monsieur Oldham,

too, but"—he raised his shoulders in a shrug—"ignorance has cost more lives than one.

"Now I had thought the poisoner was armed with some sort of a tank in which he kept his gas in concentrated form; therefore I followed him with caution until I saw him stumble in the trap and saw his hands were empty. Then I almost made the fatal error. I advanced on him; he roused upon his hands and blew his breath on me. *Parbleu*, I thought that instant was my last! But we were in the open air, and he struck too quickly, before I had come near enough. I revived, and Doctor Trowbridge came and suffered as I had.

"Jules de Grandin, what sort of man is it who breathes out sudden death?" I asked myself.

"Think, Jules de Grandin, you great stupid-head,' I reply to me, 'are he not an Indian, a Hindoo, and in India do they not have persons who are bred from infancy to ply the trade of poisoner?'

"It is exactly as you say, my clever Jules de Grandin,' I reply. 'Some of these poisoners are so venomous the mere touch of their hand will kill an ordinary man; others can blow poison breath, exactly like the fabled dragons of the olden days——'

"You mean to say that man could kill a person merely by breathing on him?" I interrupted. "I've heard about those Indian poisoners, but I'd always thought the stories old wives' tales."

"The beldame's tale is often just a garbled version of a scientific truth," he answered. "Consider, if you please:

"You know how quickly human bodies set up tolerance to medicine. The man who suffers pain and takes an opiate today will take a dose three times as large next year, a dose which would be fatal to an ordinary man, yet which will hardly register upon a system which has been

habituated to the drug. The pretty ladies who take arsenic for the sake of their complexions become habituated to the poison till they can take an ounce or more a day, yet not be inconvenienced by it. It is like that with these ones, only more so. Habituated to the deadliest of poisons from their early infancy, these naughty men can ingest doses large enough to kill a dozen ordinary persons, yet feel no evil consequences.

"How did this one work? It was as simple — and as subtle — as a juggler's trick. Nitrobenzol, known commercially as oil of mirbane or artificial oil of almonds, is highly deadly. Fifteen drops compose a lethal dose, and its fumes are almost deadly as its substance. Upon inhaling them one becomes unconscious quickly — remember the young mortuarian—and death comes in a few minutes. The victim's face is cyanotic, having a blue tinge, as though heart failure were responsible. That is because the poison works by making it impossible for blood to take up oxygen. One cannot greatly blame the doctors who were misled. External symptoms all said 'heart disease,' and there was no reason why foul play should be suspected.

"Very well. Before going on a foray this one drank a quantity of nitrobenzol. It is highly volatile, and his stomach's warmth rendered it still more so. He approached a victim all unarmed. Could

anyone suspect him? *Non.* Ah, but when he came within a breathing-distance, by a sudden torsion of the muscles of his thorax and abdomen, he induced an artificial eructation—the poison gas was belched forth from his mouth, his victim fell and —*voilà tout!*"

"I see," I exclaimed, "that's why you beat him so unmercifully! You wanted him to discharge all the poison gas his stomach contained. . . . I'm very glad, de Grandin; I'd thought that you were merely taking vengeance on him——"

He flashed his quick, infectious grin at me. "You are very good and very kind—too much so, sometimes, good Friend Trowbridge—but there are times when I have serious reason to believe you are not as well equipped with brains as you might be. Of course, I beat the miscreant. Was it his life against ours? While he still retained the power to spew the poison gases out we dared not go near him, nor could the police take him, for he needed but to breathe to free himself. I am not a cruel man, but I am logical. I do the needful when the need for doing it arises. Yes.

"But this poison——" began Shervers.

"Poison assumes many guises," interrupted Jules de Grandin. "At present, if you please, I should like some from that lovely bottle standing at your elbow." He drained his highball glass and held it out to be replenished.

