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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Black Orchid

By SEABURY QUINN

An eery mystery tale of a botanical monstrosity from Madagascar—a tale of Jules de Grandin

UNDER the combined influence of an excellent dinner and two ounces of 1845 cognac our guest became expansive. "D'ye know," he told us as he passed the brandy sniffer beneath his nose, inhaling the fruity fragrance of the ancient liqueur, "I believe I've run across a new disease."

"Ah?" murmured Jules de Grandin courteously, casting a quick wink in my direction. "You interest me, *Monsieur*. What are the symptoms of this hitherto unknown disorder?"

Young Doctor Traherne beamed upon us genially. When one is barely thirty, fresh from his internship and six months' study in Vienna, there is a spice in being told that your discoveries interest physicians who were practising when you were in the cradle. "It's a—a bloodless hemorrhage," he confided.

De Grandin's narrow brows receded nearly half an inch toward the line of his sleekly brushed blond hair. "*Pardonnez-moi, Monsieur*," he begged. "I fear I do not understand the English fluently. You said—perhaps I did not hear it right?—that you had found a bloodless hemorrhage?"

Traherne applied a match to his cigar and chuckled.

"That's it, sir," he answered. "Six months ago they called me to attend old Mr. Sorensen. At first I thought he suffered from anemia, but a check-up on his blood convinced me the trouble was more quantitative than qualitative. The man showed every evidence of hemor-

rhage exhaustion, and as there was no sign of external blood escape, I naturally suspected carcinoma and internal bleeding, but when I tested him I found there was no trace of it. There he was, with no wound or lesion—absolutely no way by which he could have lost a teaspoonful of blood—bleeding to death progressively. I put him on a blood-producing diet, fed him wine and iron and liver enough to fill a fair-sized warehouse, but every morning he showed fresh evidences of prostration till I had to fall back on glucose injections, and finally resorted to transfusions."

De Grandin's interest showed more than merely formal courtesy as Traherne finished his description.

"And when did this one die?" he asked, a sudden cutting-edge of sharpness in his voice.

"He didn't," answered Traherne with a grin. "Just by luck I hit upon the idea of a cruise—thought he might as well pass out with a ship's doctor in attendance as to have me sign the death certificate—so I shipped him off on a Caribbean trip. He was back in ninety days, hale and hearty as ever, without a sign of the strange condition which had nearly caused his death."

"*Eh bien*, you are to be congratulated," said the Frenchman with a smile. "Our trade is one part science and the other nine parts luck, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"But here's the funny part," Traherne replied. "Sorensen's been home just six weeks, and he's got it again. Not only

"He leaped across the room, hands outstretched to seize the black."



that, his niece, who lives with him, has it too, and her condition's even worse than his. Hanged if I can figure it. Whatever influence has caused this condition has undoubtedly been the same in both cases—the symptoms are so exactly similar, but there's absolutely no normal or apparent explanation for it. Think of it, gentlemen. Here are two people, one a man near eighty, but remarkably vigorous and well preserved, without a single trace of degenerative disease of any sort,

the other a young woman in her early twenties, and for no apparent reason they both begin to show positively defined symptoms of extensive hemorrhage without a sign of bleeding. They respond to conventional treatment for loss of blood, but lapse into hemorrhage prostration almost overnight. If I were a Negro or a back-county Pennsylvanian I'd say it was a case of voodoo curse or hexing, but being a physician and a man of science I can only conclude these peo-

ple are victims of some strange and as yet unclassified disease. Quite probably it's contagious, too, since the niece appears to have contracted it by contact with the uncle."

"H'm," de Grandin murmured thoughtfully. "Has it occurred to you, *mon collègue*, that the evil which attacks these two is really old as Egypt's mighty pyramids or Babylon's tall temples?"

"Oh, you mean some old disease which ravaged ancient peoples and has passed out of medical memory, like the Black Death of medieval Europe?"

"*Précisément*, the blackest of black deaths, my friend."

"You know about it—you've seen such cases?" young Traherne asked, a shade of disappointment in his voice.

"I would not say that," de Grandin answered. "I have observed such symptoms, not once, but many times, but only fools attempt a diagnosis at long distance. I should greatly like to have the chance to see the victims of this so strange illness. Could you arrange an interview?"

"Why, yes," the other smiled. "I'm going to drop by Sorensen's house tonight, just to see that everything is going smoothly. Would you care to come along?"

OSCAR SORENSEN was one of those unusual characters found in many of the small, submetropolitan communities which fringe New York. Almost eighty years of age, he had served a rigorous apprenticeship as soldier of fortune, and, unlike most of that breed, he had succeeded. Late in life he retired from service to a half-score countries with military decorations enough to decorate an army corps and a fortune more than large enough to let him end the quiet close of his eventful life in luxury.

He had fought in Egypt, China, the Levant, in India and the troubled Balkans, as well as over every foot of Central America. Serving with the Cubans under Garcia, he left the island as a brigadier general of *insurrectos*, his pockets lined with fat commissions from Americans who had seen the wisdom of buying what they wanted. As a commandant of Boer cavalry he had thriftily secured enough rough diamonds to make the unsuccessful war the Dutchmen waged a most remunerative enterprise for him; the loot of half a dozen Spanish cities near the Caribbean Sea had somehow found its way into his pocket, whether he had served the Government or revolutionary forces.

He looked the part which Fate had cast him for. Over six feet tall and proportionately broad, his prominent cheekbones and narrow face bespoke his Viking ancestry, as did his fair skin and light eyes. His face was tanned to the shade of unstained oak by long exposure to the tropic sun, tiny wrinkles splayed out from the corners of his eyes, and a white crescent of scar-tissue outlined the path of an old knife or spear wound from right eye to temple.

Even without having seen the man before, I realized he was little better than a wraith of his former self. Violet half-moons underneath his eyes, a waxen pallor underlying the sunburn of his face and the pinched look of distress about his nose all testified eloquently to the sudden weakness which had fallen on him.

"I've heard of you, de Grandin," he acknowledged as Doctor Traherne finished introductions, "and I think it's time we had you in for consultation. I've been telling myself that what was wrong with me was nothing but a fresh recurrence of malaria, but all along I knew

that it was nothing for a sawbones' treatment. You're a ghost-fighter, aren't you? Good. I've got a ghost for you to fight, and it'll take the best you've got to whip it, too!"

The little Frenchman raised his narrow, high-arched brows a trifle. "A ghost, *Monsieur?*" he countered. "But Doctor Traherne informs us that——"

"Excuse me," cut in Sorensen, "but this is no matter for scientific speculation, I'm afraid. Of course Traherne informs you it's some strange form of anemia we're suffering from. You're a doctor, too; but you've traveled. You've seen things outside the dissecting-rooms and clinics and laboratories. Listen:

"You've been in savage countries; you know there's something to the power that the native witches claim. Here in civilization, with gas to cook our food and electricity to light us on our way to bed, we've forgotten all the old-time powers of the witch, so we say there never was any such thing, and brand belief in it as superstition. *Valgame Dios,*" he swore in Spanish, "those who've traveled the remote spots of the world know what is so and what is superstition. In Polynesia I've seen men—whites as well as natives—shriveled and die by inches just because some native witch-doctor prayed them to death. On the African West Coast I've seen owls, owls large as eagles, perch in trees by villages, and next day some dweller in the settlement would die in frightful pain. I've seen Papuan wizards dance around their night-fires till the spirits of the dead came back—yes, by Heaven, with my own eyes I saw my mother, lying twenty years and more in her grave out there in St. Stephen's churchyard, stand across a Dyak camp-fire from me while a native sorcerer danced about the flames to the rhythm of a tom-tom!"

"*Parbleu,* but you have right, my friend," de Grandin nodded in agreement. "The dwellers in the silent places, they know these things; they have not forgotten; they remember, and they know. Me——"

"Excuse me," Traherne cut in dryly, "I hate to interrupt these reminiscences, but would you mind telling Doctor de Grandin about the onset of your illness, Mr. Sorensen?"

The old man looked at him much as an annoyed adult might regard the impertinent interruption of a child. "You've been in Madagascar?" he demanded of de Grandin.

"But naturally," the little Frenchman answered. "And you, *Monsieur?*"

"I was there with Gallieni in 1895, serving as *sous-lieutenant* of *chasseurs*, later as commandant of a detail of native guides. It was while serving with my detachment that I met Mamba. She was the daughter of an Andriana, or noble, family, distantly related to Ranavalona, the native queen just deposed by the French. Her skin was black as a minorca's wing, with a blue, almost iridescent sheen; her features were small and delicate, her body as beautiful as anything ever chiseled out of marble in the Periclean age. She had tremendous influence not only with the Hova, or middle-class natives, but with the Andriana as well; for she was reputedly a witch and priestess of 'the Fragrant One', and a word from her would bring any native, noble or commoner, from miles around crawling on his belly to lick her tiny, coal-black feet, or send him charging down upon French infantry, though he knew sure death awaited from our chassepots and Gatling guns.

"It was good politics to cultivate her friendship, and not at all unpleasant, I assure you. We were married in due

state, and I was formally invested with all the rights and dignities of an Andriana noble of the highest caste. Things went smoothly at our outpost after that, till——” he paused, and for a moment closed his eyes as though in weariness.

“Yes, *Monsieur*, and then?” de Grandin prompted as the silence lengthened.

Sorensen seemed to wake up with a start. “Then I heard how things were going over in the Caribbean, and decided to resign my commission with the French and try my luck with *Cuba Libre*,” he returned.

“Mamba didn’t make a scene. Indeed, she took it more calmly than most civilized women would have done. It had never occurred to her that our little domestic arrangement wasn’t permanent; so when I told her I’d been ordered away she merely said that she would govern in my place till my return and take good care ‘our people’ gave no trouble to the French. Then, like a fool, I told her I was through.

“For a moment she looked as though she hadn’t understood me; then, when the meaning of my words sank in, she was awful in her anger. No tears, no wailing, just a long and dreadful stare, a stare that seemed to strike right through me and to shrivel everything it touched. Finally she raised both hands above her head and called down such a curse on me as no man has had heaped upon his head since Medea called the vengeance of the gods on Jason. She finished with the prophecy:

“‘At the last you shall feel Mamba’s kiss, and your blood shall waste and dry away as the little brooks in summer, yet no man shall see you bleed; your life shall slowly ebb away as the tide ebbs from the shore, and none shall give you help; flowers shall feed upon your body while you are still alive, and the thing

you most adore shall waste and wither in your sight, yet you shall have no power to stay the doom which crushes her and which shall crush you, too, when she is gone. I have said.’”

YOUNG Doctor Traherne coughed. His manner was discreet, but none too patient, as he asked, “And you think this black woman’s curse responsible for your condition, sir?”

“I don’t know,” Sorensen answered slowly. “In China they’ve a saying that the three things which age can’t soften are a sword, a stone and the hatred of a love-crossed woman. Mamba——”

“Has probably been dead for twenty years,” Traherne supplied. “Besides, there’s half the earth between you, and——”

“Listen, son,” Sorensen broke in, “I’ve been deluding myself into thinking it was a nightmare which I suffered from—possibly the prickings of a guilty conscience—and that my subsequent illness was merely a coincidence, but I’m far from certain, now. Here’s what happened just before we called you in:

“I’d been trap-shooting over at the Gun and Rod Club, and came home thoroughly tired out. Joyce and I had dinner early and I went off to bed almost as soon as the meal was over, falling asleep immediately. How long I slept I’ve no idea, but I remember waking with a feeling of suffocation—no pain, but utter weakness and prostration—to see something hovering above my throat and to smell a smell I hadn’t smelled in years, the hot, half-spicy, half-charnel odor of the Madagascar jungle. I can’t describe the thing that hovered over me, for the darkness of the room and its very nearness obscured my vision, but I had an unaccountable but powerful impression that it was a small, black, naked

human figure, the figure of a nude black woman a scant four inches high, which poised in midair over me as a humming-bird poises above the flower from which it drains the nectar. How long I lay there in that helpless sort of lethargy I've no idea; but suddenly I became aware of a feeling like a pulling at my throat and Mamba's prophecy came back to me across the years: "Your blood shall waste and dry up as the little brooks in summer!"

"Gentlemen, I assure you I was paralyzed. Fear held me more firmly than a chain. Move I could not, nor could I cry for help. Then I think I must have fainted, for the next thing I knew it was morning.

"Weakness almost overpowered me when I tried to rise, but finally I managed to crawl from bed and stagger over to the mirror. There was no blood on my pajamas, nor any on my flesh, but on my throat there was a little wound, no larger than a needle-jab or razor-nick would make, and——"

"Tell me, *Monsieur*," de Grandin interrupted, "this wound of which you speak, was it singular or plural?"

"Eh? Oh, I see what you mean. It was a single little puncture, so small as to be barely noticeable, and with no area of inflammation or soreness round it. At any other time I should have failed to see it, I believe, but the vividness of my nightmare made me especially careful when I looked."

"But this is most unusual," the little Frenchman murmured. "Those punctures, they should be multiple."

"What's that?"

"Nothing of importance, I assure you. I did but indulge in a foolish habit and think with my lips rather than my brain, *Monsieur*. Please be so kind as to proceed."

"I don't remember a recurrence of the dream, but every morning for a week I rose from heavy sleep not only not refreshed by rest, but successively and progressively weaker. Finally we called Doctor Traherne. He's probably outlined his treatment to you."

"You agree I took the proper measures?" Traherne asked. "We had this condition entirely arrested; then——"

"*Précisément*," de Grandin nodded, "that is a most unusual feature of the case, my friend; that and the nature of Monsieur Sorensen's wound."

"Oh, Lord!" young Traherne scoffed. "Are you finding a connection between that accidental scratch and this inexplicable pathological condition? What possible——"

"But the wound is constant, is it not?" de Grandin insisted. "It is still there? Either it or a freshly inflicted one remains, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"Ye-es," Traherne admitted grudgingly. "But I've never tried to heal it. Even if it is significant, it's nothing but a symptom, and one doesn't bother to treat symptoms."

De Grandin faced Sorensen. "Your niece, Mademoiselle Joyce, she displays symptoms similar to those you first exhibited?" he asked.

"Yes," the other answered. "I'll send for her, if you wish." He pressed a button, and when a small, exceedingly neat and almost startlingly black servant appeared in answer to the summons, ordered: "Ask Miss Joyce to come to the library, please, Marshall."

"Would you object to showing us your throat while we are waiting for your niece to join us?" asked de Grandin.

"Not at all," the other answered, and undoing the collar of his soft silk shirt laid bare a strongly modeled and well-muscled neck.

The little Frenchman leant forward, scanned the patient's sunburned skin with a keen gaze, then, drawing a small lens from his pocket, held it before his eye as he pursued the examination.

"Here, *Monsieur*?" he asked, laying the tip of a small, well-manicured forefinger on Sorensen's neck a little to the right and above the Adam's apple. "Is this the place you first observed the wound?"

"Yes, and that's the spot where it reappeared when I was taken ill again," Sorensen answered.

"H'm," the Frenchman murmured. "It is, as you have said, a single wound striking directly into the skin, not looping through it. It might be from a razor cut or from a variety of other reasons——"

"Yes, and it wasn't there before my first illness; it disappeared when I recovered, and it reappeared concurrently with my second attack," Sorensen broke in.

"Precisely, exactly; quite so," de Grandin agreed with a quick nod. "There is some connection between the puncture and your trouble, *Monsieur*, I am convinced of it, but the explanation does not leap to the eye. We shall have to think of this. If——"

A RUSTLE at the doorway cut his conversation short as a young girl entered. She was tall and very slender, exceedingly fair-skinned, with a wealth of yellow hair which she wore coiled simply in a figure 8 at the nape of her neck. Her nose and mouth were small and very finely molded, and her brown eyes seemed out of all proportion to her other features, for they were almost startlingly enlarged by the deep violet semi-circles which lay beneath them. She walked slowly, haltingly, as though the

effort cost her almost every ounce of hoarded strength, and when she spoke her voice was low, partly from the natural softness of its timbre, but more, it seemed to me, from an extremity of fatigue.

"Will you tell Doctor de Grandin about your illness, dear?" Sorensen asked, his hard blue eyes softening with affection as he looked at her. "Doctor Traherne thinks possibly Doctor de Grandin and Doctor Trowbridge may have come across something like it in their practise."

Joyce Sorensen shuddered as though a chilly wind had suddenly blown across her shoulders, and her thin hands clasped together in her lap in a gesture that seemed to entreat mercy from fate. "Everything, Uncle Oscar?" she asked softly.

"Of course."

"I recall my uncle's first attack perfectly," she began, not looking at us, but fixing a half-vacant, half-pleading gaze upon a miniature of the Madonna which hung upon the farther wall. "He'd been out shooting that afternoon and went to bed almost immediately after dinner. I had a theater engagement, and went to the *Pantoufle Dorée* to dance afterward. It must have been about one o'clock when I came home. Marshall, the butler, was in bed, of course, so I let myself in and went up to kiss Uncle Oscar good-night before going to my own room. Just as I reached his door I heard him cry out, not loudly, but terribly. It sounded something like the screaming laughs maniacs give in melodramatic motion pictures—it seemed to spout up like a dreadful geyser of insane fear, then died away to a kind of gurgling, choking murmur, like water running down a drain, or a man fighting desperately for breath.

"I tried his door and it was locked—I'm sure of that. Then in terror I ran up

to Marshall's room and beat upon his door, calling out that Uncle Oscar was dying; but he gave no answer, so I ran back to the library and snatched a sword down from the wall——" She nodded to a row of brackets where mementoes of Sorensen's grim fighting years were displayed. "I was determined to force the lock with the blade," she went on, "but when I reached my uncle's room again the door was partly open!

"Uncle Oscar lay upon his bed, the covers pushed to the floor, his hands flexed and his fingers digging into the mattress. His pajama jacket was open at the throat, and on the white skin of his neck, just below the line of tan, there was a little spot of blood, no larger than a pin-head.

"I hurried back to Marshall's room, and this time he heard me right away. Together we got my uncle back beneath the covers and made him comfortable. I spoke to him and he answered sleepily, assuring me he was all right; so I assumed he must have had a nightmare and thought no more about it. It wasn't till progressive weakness made it impossible for him to rise that we became worried and called in Doctor Traherne."

As she finished her recital de Grandin rose and leant above her. "*Pardonnez-moi, Mademoiselle,*" he begged, "but have you, too, by any chance, a stubborn so small wound which gives no pain, but which will not heal? You have noted something of the kind upon your throat?"

The quick blood dyed her face and forehead faintly as she turned startled eyes upon him. "Not on my throat, sir," she answered softly, "here."

She laid her hand upon her breast above the heart.

"Eh, death of the devil, do you say so?" he exclaimed; then, very gently: "And may we see, *Mademoiselle?*"

There was something pleading, frightened, timidly beseeching, in the eyes that never strayed from his as she undid the fastenings of her robe and bared a bosom slim as Shakespeare's Juliet's, pointing out a tiny depression which lay against the milk-white skin an inch or so below the gentle swelling of the small and pointed breast.

"Ah?" de Grandin murmured as he finished his inspection. "Trowbridge, if you please, come here and tell me what it is you see."

He passed his glass to me and, obedient to his pointing finger, I fixed my glance upon the girl's pale skin. Piercing directly downward was a tiny punctured wound, semilunar in shape and less than an eighth of an inch in length. There was no area of inflammation round it; indeed, the lips of the small aperture seemed wholly bloodless, like those of a stab-wound inflicted on a corpse.

"There is soreness?" asked the Frenchman, gently touching the skin above the wound.

"None at all," the girl replied.

"And blood?"

"A little, sometimes. Some mornings I wake feeling really rested from my sleep. On these mornings the wound seems nearly healed. Other times I am so weak I can scarcely leave my bed, and I've noticed that at such times there is a little smear of blood—oh, not more than a single drop, and that a very small one—on my skin."

"Thank you, *Mademoiselle,*" de Grandin nodded absently, his lips, beneath his trimly waxed mustache, slightly pursed, as though he were about to whistle. "Tell us, if you please, have you been troubled with unpleasant dreams, like that which plagued *Monsieur* your uncle?"

"Why, no; that is, I can't remember

any," she replied. "Indeed, I'm perfectly all right, except for this great weakness. Do you know what the disease is, Doctor? Doctor Traherne thinks it may be caused by some strange germ——"

"I make no doubt that he is right," the little Frenchman answered. "A most strange germ, *Mademoiselle*. A very strange germ, indeed."

"WELL," Traherne asked as we left the house after bidding Sorensen and his niece good-night, "what d'ye make of it, gentlemen? Have either of you ever seen anything resembling that condition, or——"

"I have," de Grandin broke in shortly. "On several occasions I have seen such things, my friend, but never with the same accompanying circumstances. If those wounds were perforated, I should be convinced. As it is, I am in doubt, but——"

"But what?" Traherne demanded as the Frenchman failed to bring his statement to conclusion.

De Grandin's voice was flat and absolutely toneless as he answered: "*Monsieur*, if I should tell you what it is I think that lies behind this so strange business of the monkey, you would scoff. You would not believe me. Your mind, *pardieu*, is far too logical. You would say to you, '*Cordieu*, I have never seen nor heard of anything like this, therefore it cannot be.' Nevertheless, I am inclined to think the cause of *Monsieur Sorensen's* illness, and that of his so charming niece, strikes back directly to that night in Madagascar when he pronounced divorce on his native wife. It is, in fine, a thing which lies below the realms of logic, therefore something to be combated by perfectly illogical counter-measures."

"Humph," Traherne grunted.

"First I advise that you secure a corps of nurses, nurses you can trust implicitly. Have one in attendance on *Monsieur Sorensen* and another on his niece at every moment of the day and night."

"O. K.," Traherne agreed, "I've been thinking of that. They're both too weak to be about. Bed-rest is bound to help them. What next?"

"I suggest that you secure a generous supply of *ail*—how do you say him? garlic?—*allium sativum* in the pharmacopeia—and have it liberally distributed at all entrances and exits of their rooms. See, too, that their windows are kept entirely closed, and that all animals are rigorously excluded from their presence."

Traherne, I could see, was angry, but he kept his temper in control as he demanded: "Then, I suppose, you'd like to have me burn some incense in their rooms, and maybe bring in an Indian medicine man to sing to them? Really, Doctor, you're amusing."

A smile which had no mirth in it swept across de Grandin's mobile lips. "*Monsieur*," he answered acidly, "I regret my inability to reciprocate the compliment, but I do not find you amusing. No, not at all; by no means. I find you distinctly annoying. Your mind is literal as a problem in addition. You believe in something only if you know the cause of it; you have faith in remedies only if you know their application. Smallpox, diphtheria, scarlet fever? Yes, of course, you know them. Dementia precox, yes, you know it, too. But subtle problems of the mind—a hate, which is malign thought made crystal-hard by concentration—*morbleu*, you will have none of it! 'I have not seen it, therefore there is no such thing,' you say.

"Attend me, *mon petit bonhomme*: When every button which you wore was but a safety-pin, I was studying the oc-

cult. 'Ah,' I hear you say, 'occult—magic—balderdash!' Yes, you think I speak in terms of witches riding broomsticks, but it is not so.

"On more than one occasion I have seen men sicken and die when their symptoms were strangely similar to those of Monsieur Sorensen and Mademoiselle Joyce. Yes, by blue, I have seen them die and be buried, then rise again in dreadful life-in-death. Do not laugh, *Monsieur*; I tell you that which I have seen.

"But regard me carefully: I did not say the symptoms were the same; I said that they were similar. Those little, so small wounds the patients show, those little wounds which you think unimportant, may be the key to this whole mystery. One thing disturbs me when I think of them. They are punctured, not perforated, by which I mean they strike down in the flesh but do not wholly pierce it. They have entrances but no exits. Also their form convinces me that they were made with knives or needles or some small cutting instrument, and not by teeth, as I at first suspected——"

"Teeth!" Traherne exploded in amazement. "D'ye mean to tell me you suspected someone had bitten them?"

"Some one—or some *thing*," the Frenchman answered earnestly. "Now I think the contrary, therefore I am greatly puzzled.

"Come, my friend, when doctors quarrel patients die; let us not be stubborn. I will forego the garlic in the sickroom, for a time, at least; also I shall not insist upon their sleeping with their windows closed. Do you, for your part, seek for trusty nurses who shall watch them day and night, and we shall watch them closely, too. Do you agree?"

They shook hands upon their mutual understanding.

BUT the patients failed to show improvement. Sorensen seemed to grow no weaker, but his strength did not return, while within a week his niece became so utterly exhausted that the mere performance of the vital functions seemed to put too great a tax upon her waning strength. Saline infusions, finally liberal blood transfusions, were resorted to, and while these gave her temporary help, she soon lapsed back to semi-coma.

De Grandin and Traherne were desperate. "Trowbridge, *mon vieux*," the Frenchman told me, "there is something evil here. We have exhausted every remedy of science. Now I am convinced our treatment must pursue another pattern. Will you watch with us tonight?"

We chose the upstairs sitting-room for our headquarters. Sorensen's room lay a dozen steps beyond it to the right, his niece's was scarcely farther at the left, and we could reach either or both in twenty seconds. We made inspections of the patients every hour, and each succeeding visit heightened our morale, for both seemed resting easily, and each time the nurses reported they had shown no sign of restlessness.

"*Mordieu*, but it would seem whatever lies behind this thing knows we are here, and holds its hand in fear," de Grandin told us as the tall clock in the lower hall struck two. "This is the time when vitality is lowest, and accordingly——"

His words were broken by a strangling, choking cry which echoed through the darkened house. "Monsieur Sorensen!" he exclaimed as, with Traherne and me at his heels, he leaped across the threshold of the sitting-room and raced the little distance to Sorensen's room.

The room, which had been dimly lighted by a night lamp, was dark as Erebus, and when we found the switch

and pressed it, a sharp metallic click, but no light, followed.

"*Dieu de Dieu de Dieu de Dieu de Dieu!*" de Grandin swore. "Ten thousand small blue devils! What has happened to the lights in this infernal place?"

A rasping, gurgling sound, as of water gushing down a drain, or a man fighting desperately for breath, came through the darkness from Sorensen's bed, and with a string of curses which would have shamed a stevedore, de Grandin groped his way across the room, snatched a pocket flashlight from his pocket and played its beam upon the sick man.

Sorensen lay upon his bed, his bedclothes kicked to the floor, hands clenched in a rigidity like that of death, fingers digging deep into the mattress. His pajama coat was open at the throat, and on the white skin of his neck, just below the line of tan, was a ruby disk where warm blood welled up from a tiny wound. His eyes were open, staring wide, and on his sun-burned face was such a look of mortal terror as is seldom seen outside the fantasies of a nightmare.

"*Mademoiselle!*" de Grandin challenged sharply. "Where in blazing hell's accursed name is that *sacrée garde-malade?*" His flashlight swung around, picking up successive objects in the sick-room, coming finally to rest upon the rocking-chair where sat Sorensen's night nurse.

A chilling sense of cold, as though a freezing wind had blown upon me, made me catch my breath as the flashlight's gleam illumined her. She did not stir. She sat there rigidly, as though she had been carved out of wood. Her head was held uncomfortably downward, as though she listened to something far away; her neck was fixed and firm as though she

had been in a trance. She was, to all intents, turned to stone. There was no special look upon her face, no fear, no terror; nothing that might be expected of a woman in her plight, but she sat fixed, immovable, utterly unconscious of the world about her.

"*Mademoiselle!*" de Grandin cried again.

His hand upon her shoulder brought her back to instant consciousness, and she rose quickly, winking in the strong light of his pocket torch.

"W-why, what's happened?" she demanded.

"Happened?" Doctor Traherne almost shouted. "What's happened? Nothing, only your patient almost died while you sat dozing in your chair!"

"I haven't been asleep," the girl denied vehemently. "Marshall brought me coffee a few minutes ago, and I drank a little, but just as I put the cup down you came shouting here, and——"

"Softly, *mes amis,*" de Grandin bade, holding up his hand for silence. "Do not chide her, Friend Traherne, she is not culpable. And you, *Mademoiselle,* what of the coffee which the little black one brought you? Where is it, if you please?"

"Here," she answered, pointing to a half-filled cup upon the table by her chair.

He picked the little vessel up, smelled it cautiously, then, dipping the tip of his forefinger into the brown liquid, put it to his tongue. "*Mais non,*" he shook his head in disappointment; then, to the girl:

"You say the negro butler brought you this?"

"Yes, sir; he's very thoughtful. He brings me coffee every night about this time."

"U'm, one wonders, Let us have a talk with him."

He strode across the darkened room and gave the call-bell button a sharp push.

WHILE we waited for the servant to arrive we made a quick examination of the lights. All were in working order, but each bulb had been twisted in its socket until it just missed contact with the feed line, making the switch entirely useless. "*Parbleu*, it seems there has been business of the monkey here," de Grandin told us as he screwed the bulbs in place. "Now, if we can but——"

"You rang, sir?" asked the colored butler, appearing at the bedroom door as silently as a disembodied spirit from the mists of limbo.

"Emphatically," the Frenchman said. "You brought coffee to the nurse a little time ago?"

"Yes, sir," the black answered, and I thought I caught the sparkle of sardonic humor in his eye. "I bring coffee to both Miss Tuthill and Miss Angevine about this time each night."

"Eh, and drug it, one surmises?" snapped de Grandin.

The servant turned to the nurse, his manner a curious compound of respect and insolence. "How much coffee did you drink, Miss Tuthill?" he asked.

"Not more than half a cup," she answered.

"And is this the cup?"

"Yes."

"Ah," his impudence was superb as he reached out his hand, took up the half-filled cup and drained it at a gulp.

He looked the little Frenchman in the eye, a smile of half-concealed amusement on his face. "If the coffee is drugged, as you suspect, it surely ought to act on me—sir," he announced, just enough pause between the statement and the title of

respect to give his words a tone of insolent bravado.

"Sit down, my little one," de Grandin answered with surprising calmness. "We shall see what we shall see anon." He bent above Sorensen, bandaging his wounded throat. "By the way," he flung across his shoulder casually, "you are not American, are you?"

"No, sir," said the butler.

"No? Where is it you were born, then?"

"Barbados, sir."

"U'm? Very well. I apologize if I have accused you wrongfully. That will be all, at present."

INSPECTION of Joyce Sorensen's room showed the girl sleeping peacefully and the nurse alertly wakeful. "Have you had your coffee yet, *Mademoiselle*?" de Grandin asked.

"No," Miss Angevine replied. "Marshall hasn't brought it yet. I wish he'd hurry, it helps a lot."

The little Frenchman gazed at her reflectively a moment; then: "*Mademoiselle*," he ordered, "I desire that you join Miss Tuthill in Monsieur Sorensen's room. He is decidedly unimproved, and it is best that both of you stay with him. I shall undertake to watch your patient."

"What——" I began, but his upraised hand checked my question.

"Quickly, my friend," he bade, "behind the lounge!"

"Eh? Behind——"

"Species of an artichoke, conceal yourself with speed, and if you would not die in great discomfort, be sure you make no sound or move which might betray your presence. Me, I shall be the bait, you the silent spectator." He crossed the room and rang the bell; then, as he resumed his seat beside the sick girl's bed: "Remember," he repeated, "on no account

are you to move until I give the signal, no matter how great you deem the provocation."

"You rang, sir?" Marshall asked, appearing in the doorway with his silent, ghost-like tread.

"Yes, I should like a cup of coffee, if you please. The nurse is feeling indisposed, and I have taken her responsibility."

Something like a gleam of triumph flickered in the little black man's eyes, but it died as quickly as it came, and with a murmured, "Very good, sir," he vanished in the darkness of the hall.

Five minutes later he returned with a silver tray containing coffee-pot and cup.

De Grandin rose and strode across the room, pausing beside the bed and gazing thoughtfully at the sleeping girl. His back was toward the servant; the opportunity to drug his coffee was perfect, made to order, it appeared to me.

But nothing untoward happened. The butler placed the tray upon the table, stood demurely waiting further orders, then, as de Grandin failed to turn, withdrew with his usual silent tread.

Ignoring my presence completely, the Frenchman resumed his chair, drank his coffee at a draft, and picked up a magazine.

Eight, ten, a dozen minutes passed. Nothing happened. Then suddenly the tomb-like quiet of the room was broken by a gentle guttural sound. I looked out from my ambush in fascinated horror. De Grandin's head had fallen forward, the magazine had slipped down to the floor. He was asleep—and snoring.

About to leave my place and seize him by the shoulder, I felt, rather than heard, the butler's quick approach, and hastily retreated to my hiding-place.

Stepping softly as a cat, the servant came into the room, bearing a tray with

pot and cup exactly duplicating those which stood upon the table at de Grandin's side. Quickly he exchanged the new utensils for the old, poured out a half-cup of fresh coffee, and arranged the things so carefully that, had I not observed the substitution, I should have been prepared to swear that the cup upon the table was the one from which de Grandin had refreshed himself.

These preliminaries finished, the fellow bent and looked into de Grandin's face; then, satisfied the Frenchman was asleep, he turned and tiptoed to the bed where Joyce Sorensen lay. For a moment he stood looking at her and a smile of wicked malice flickered on his features.

"Broken heart for broken heart, wasted life for wasted life, tears for tears and blood for blood," he murmured. "Thus shall Mamba be avenged."

Drawing a short, wide-bladed knife from underneath his jacket he ripped the girl's silk sleeping-robe from neck to hem with a single quick slash.

There was something devilish in his deftness. Bending close, he drew apart the lips of the slit robe, and gently blew upon the girl's white body. Locked in the thrall of deep, exhaustive sleep, she flinched from the current of his breath, turning slightly from him, and as she did so he tweaked the silk robe gently, pulling an inch or so of it from underneath her. Again and again he repeated the maneuver, slowly, patiently forcing her across the bed, bit by little bit withdrawing the nightrobe, till at last she had shed the garment utterly and lay there like a lovely statue hewn from ivory.

I saw a spot of bright blood form and grow as he pierced the skin below her left breast with the sharp point of his knife, and had flexed my muscles for a spring when his next move struck me stone-still with amazement.

From beneath his jacket he drew forth something like a bundle of coarse moss, dangled it before him from a silken cord and began to swing it through the air. Faster and faster, till it whirled round his head like a wheel of light, he swung the odd-appearing thing; then, as he reduced its speed and dangled it above the blood-spot on the girl's bared breast, I saw that closely twisted tendrils had worked open, and assumed the form of two capital Ys joined together at the base. Leaning quickly downward he dropped the object on the red-dyed wound which jeweled the whiteness of the girl's uncovered breast, and my eyes almost started from my head in horror as I saw the tiny thing begin to show a dreadful sort of change.

One of the branches of the lower Y had touched the drop of ruby blood which welled up from the tiny wound he had inflicted on Joyce Sorensen, and like a blotter—or a leech—it drank the ruddy fluid up, slowly swelling, growing, taking on the form of life. Like a tiny balloon, inflated by a gentle flow of breath, the shriveled Y-bars filled out gradually, took on the form of human arms and legs; a head appeared between the outspread branches of the upper Y, and, balanced like a ballet dancer on one toe, a small, black human form pirouetted over Joyce Sorensen's heart.

Strangely life-like, oddly human in form it was, yet with something of the plant about it, too, so that as I gazed in fascination I could not determine whether it was a minute black dwarf which resembled some obscene variety of flower, or some dreadful flower which presented an indecent parody of humanity.

THE sleeping girl stirred distressfully, moaning as if in torment, and her hands twitched spasmodically. It seemed

as though the dancing horror balanced over her were forcing realization of its presence down through her unconsciousness.

"Trowbridge, *mon vieux*, take him, seize him, do not let him pass!" With a bound de Grandin was out of his chair, every trace of sleep gone from him. He leaped across the room, hands outstretched to seize the black.

With a snarl of bestial fury the little fellow dodged, hurling himself toward the door. I squirmed from my concealment and put myself in his path. As he ran straight at me I let drive my fist, catching him squarely on the point of the jaw and knocking him backward to de Grandin's waiting arms.

"*Bête, chien, chameau!*" the Frenchman whispered fiercely as he seized the undersized man's elbows in an iron grip and forced them to his sides. He slipped his hands down the butler's forearms, gripped him by the wrists and bent his arms upward in a double hammerlock. "Thou species of a spider, thou ninety-nine-times-damned example of a dead and rotten fish, take that flower of hell from *Mademoiselle*, and see that not a root is left to fester in her wound!" he ordered.

The little black man snarled like a trapped cat. "You think that you can make me?" he demanded. "Kill me, French oppressor, cut me in pieces, break my arms and drag my heart from out my breast, but you cannot save the woman. Tomorrow they will find her as she lies, unclothed for all to look on, bloodless and breathless——"

De Grandin bent the speaker's twisted arms a half-inch nearer to his shoulders. "You think so?" he demanded. "*Par les plumes d'un coq*, we shall see if you are right!"

Tiny goutts of perspiration glistened on

the little black man's forehead, his mouth drew taut with agony and his eyes thrust forward in their sockets like a frog's as de Grandin slowly tightened his torturing grip upon his arms. Step by step he forced his prisoner toward the bed, hissing epithets in mingled French and English in his ear.

As they reached the couch where Joyce Sorensen lay, the captive dropped upon his knees with a short gasp of anguish.

"Let me go," he begged. "Let me go, you French beast. I'll take the flower off of her."

De Grandin eased his grip upon one arm. "Do it with one hand," he ordered. "I need both."

The Frenchman twisted the bent arms again and the butler crumpled to the floor unconscious.

"Water, if you please, Friend Trowbridge," he commanded. "I am too fully occupied to get it."

I snatched a carafe from the table and dashed a glassful of chilled water in the prisoner's face.

"And now, my little truant out of hell," de Grandin whispered softly as the captive winced beneath the shock of the cold liquid and his eyelids fluttered upward, "you will please remove that thirty-thousand-times-accursed thing from *Mademoiselle*, or I shall surely twist your arms from off your body and thrust them piecemeal down your throat!" Once again he bent his prisoner's arms until I thought that he would surely crack the bones.

One wrist freed, the black man reached out, seized the gyrating black thing and lifted it carefully from the wound in Joyce Sorensen's breast. Like a blown-up bladder punctured with a pin, the infernal thing began to wilt immediately. In thirty seconds it had shrunk to half its former size; before a minute passed it

had shriveled in upon itself, and was nothing but a ball of moss-like fiber from the fraying ends of which there dripped small drops of ruddy moisture.

"*Bien*," announced de Grandin as he eased his hold upon his prize. "Trowbridge, my friend, go and bid the nurse return, if you will be so kind. Me, I have a few important questions I would ask of this one—and I think I shall elicit better answers if I ask them in the privacy of the garage. I shall rejoin you soon."

"*HOLA, mes enfants!*" smiling in complete self-approval, Jules de Grandin joined us in Sorensen's upstairs sitting-room. "The germ which caused this new disease our colleague Traherne found has been isolated. *Morbleu*, he is completely isolated in the *poste de police*—unless they put him in restraint in the hospital. I fear I was a trifle rough with him before his story was completed."

"Then it was a germ disease——" Traherne began, but de Grandin interrupted with a laugh.

"*Mais oui, mon brave*," he chuckled. "A small and wholly vicious germ which traveled on two legs, and bore with him the strangest orchid any botanist could dream of. Attend me, if you please:

"When Monsieur Sorensen told us of his Madagascan interlude, I thought I smelled the odor of the rat. Madagascar, *mon Dieu*, what a place! A land of mystery more terrible than Africa, more subtle than China, more vengeful than India! When our forces overthrew the native government there in 1896 they incurred the never-dying hatred of the Andriana, or Malagasy nobility, and that hatred still crops up in strange and inexplicable murders of the French officials.

"You will recall Monsieur Sorensen referred to his native wife as Mamba, and called her a priestess of 'the Fragrant One'? Very good. Mamba, my friends,

is a native term for a terrible, strange black orchid said to infest the jungles of inland Madagascar. It is supposed to be a kind of vampire plant, or vegetable leech, and if it be placed upon an open wound it blossoms in the likeness of a human figure and nourishes itself upon the blood of its unfortunate host till he or she is dead. According to the stories I was told in Madagascar, the habitat of this strange plant is strictly guarded by the priesthood which serves 'the Fragrant One,' which is the native name for the more or less mythical man-eating tree of which such dreadful tales are told.

"Very well. What had we before us? A man who had incurred the hatred of a native noblewoman who was also a priestess of a dark, malevolent religion, a noted sorceress, a woman whose very name was identical with that of a strange and dreadful kind of parasitic plant. This man lived beneath a curse pronounced upon him by this woman, and in the curse she foretold that he should be stricken with a malady which should cause his blood to waste away like little brooks in summer. Also that before he died he should see the one whom he loved most slowly wilt away and die.

"And what else did we see? This man was wasting steadily away; his niece, the apple of his eye, was also sinking rapidly. Was it not apparent that the curse had found him out? It seemed entirely possible.

"But if it were a curse which worked by magic, why had he grown better when you sent him off upon a cruise? And why did his malady return when he came home? Apparently, there was some connection between his house and his disease. What was this link? Ah, that was for me to find out.

"I have seen men die when stricken by a vampire—do not laugh, Monsieur Traherne, I tell you it is so!—but the

vampire bites his victim on the throat; Monsieur Sorensen's wound was from a knife or pin, not from a tooth, and a similar wound was on his niece's breast.

"I looked around, I noticed things; it is a habit which I have.

"I saw this colored butler, Marshall. This Marshall is a black man, but he is not a Negro. Neither are the Malagasy. When they are pure-bloods, unmixed with Malay or Chinese or Hindoo stock, their skin is black, but their features are small and straight and fine-cut, without a negroid trace, their hair straight and uncurled, their bodies firmly made, but small.

"Again, this Marshall, as he called himself, spoke with an English accent. I knew he was not reared in this country, but when he said he was from Barbados I also knew he lied. Negroes from Jamaica speak like Englishmen; those from Barbados, for some strange reason, speak with a strong Irish brogue. "There is the smell of fish upon this business, Jules de Grandin,' I inform me.

"Tonight we find Miss Tuthill drugged; it is apparent, yet the butler offers a good alibi. 'I will test him further,' I decide, and so I send the other nurse away, ask him for coffee and pretend to fall into a drug-caused sleep. He rises to the bait. *Mon Dieu*, he rises nobly! He——"

"How did you manage to shake off the effects of the drug so quickly?" I interposed. "The nurse was absolutely paralyzed, yet you——"

"*Tiens*," he broke in with a laugh, "those who would make the fool of Jules de Grandin need to rise early in the day, my friend. Did you think I drank that coffee? *Quelle naïveté! Pab. Regardez!*"

From his pocket he drew out a handkerchief, soaking with brown stickiness.

"When one knows how, the trick is simple," he assured us. "*Le mouchoir*, I

stuff him in my collar underneath my chin while my back is turned to Marshall, then *pouf!* I pour the coffee into him when I pretend to drink. *Ab bab*, it is hot, it is sticky, it is most damnably uncomfortable, but it leaves me in possession of my faculties. Yes, certainly; of course.

"Then, while he thinks I am asleep he does the thing he has done many times before, but tonight would have been the curtain for Mademoiselle Joyce. He was prepared to break Monsieur Sorensen's heart by killing his niece before administering the *coup de grâce* to him.

"*Ha*, but I slept the sleep of the pussycat, me! When my small, black mouse was too far from his hole to make retreat I pounced upon him with the help of good friend Trowbridge, and thereafter he had many troubles.

"It took persuasion to make him tell his story, but he finally told it, though he finished with a broken arm. He was a nephew of this Mamba, this sorceress, this priestess of 'the Fragrant One,' this orchid-woman who had put a curse on Monsieur Sorensen. Through the years

he watched his opportunity, finally coming to this country, taking service with Sorensen, gaining his full confidence, waiting for his chance to plant the strange, black orchid on his throat.

"'You shall feel the kiss of Mamba,' said the Malagasy woman, and it was in truth the kiss of Mamba—Mamba the black orchid, not Mamba the black woman—which had drained him of his blood and almost caused his death when you called us in the case, Monsieur Traherne."

"Where's that black orchid now?" asked Traherne.

"It was not safe to have around. I threw it in the furnace—*morbleu*, it writhed and twisted like a tortured living thing when the flames devoured it!" answered Jules de Grandin with a grimace. "The memory of it nauseates me. Await me here, my friends, I go for medicine."

"I've some tablets in my bag——" Traherne began, but de Grandin made a gesture of dissent.

"Not that, *mon brave*," he interrupted. "The medicine I seek is in a bottle on the sideboard down below. It bears the name of Messieurs Haig & Haig."

