

MYSTERY of the BOULE CABINET

BY
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"What more natural, indeed! It is good reasoning, Mr. Lester," he agreed eagerly, his eyes burning like two coals of fire, so intense was his interest. "I have been from boyhood a lover of tales of mystery. I am fascinated."

"Perhaps you can assist us," I suggested, "for that theory of mine has been completely disproved."

"Disproved? In what way?" he demanded.

"The secret drawer has been found," "How?" he cried, his voice sharp with surprise. "Found? The secret drawer has been found?"

"Yes, and there was no poisoned mechanism guarding it."

He breathed deeply for an instant; then he pulled himself together with a little laugh.

"Really," he said, "I must not indulge myself in this way. Was the drawer empty?"

"No; there was a packet of letters in it."

"Delicious! Love letters of a certainty! From the Great Louis to the Montepans, perhaps?"

"No, unfortunately, they were of a much more recent date. They have been restored to their owner. I hope that you agree with me that that was the right thing to do?"

"Since the letters have been returned," he said at last, a little dryly, "it is useless to discuss the matter. Has not other explanation been found for the death of Mr. Vanline and of this stranger? You do not even know who he was?"

"Oh, yes, we have discovered that. He was a worthless fellow named Drouet, living in an attic in the Rue de la Huchette, in Paris."

M. Armand had been gazing at me intently, but now his look relaxed, and I fancied that he drew a deep breath as a man might do when relieved of a burden.

"You did not, by any chance, know him?" I asked curiously.

"No, I think not. But I do not understand what this Drouet, as you call him, was doing in the house of Mr. Vanline."

"He was trying to get possession of the letters," I said. "What none of us understands, M. Armand, is how he was killed. Who or what killed him? How was that poison administered? Can you suggest an explanation?"

"It is a nice problem," he said, "a most interesting one. I will think it over. Mr. Lester, I shall see you again Wednesday. If it is agreeable to you we may meet at the house of Mr. Vanline and exchange the cabinet nets."

"At what time?"

"I do not know with exactness. There may be some delay in getting the cabinet from the ship. Perhaps it would be better if I called for you?"

"Very well," I assented.

CHAPTER XI
I Part With the Boule Cabinet.

THE coroner's inquest was held next day. The police had discovered practically no new evidence, none certainly which shed any light on the way in which Drouet and Philip Vanline had met death.

Police Commissioner Grady did not go on the stand. He was not at the inquest. The case had been placed in Simmonds' hands, and it was he who testified on behalf of the police, admitting candidly that they were all at sea. But he had not abandoned hope and was still working on the case.

The end of the hearing was that the jury brought in a verdict that Philip Vanline and Georges Drouet had died from the effects of a poison administered by a person or persons unknown.

Godfrey joined me at the door as I was leaving.

"I was glad to hear Simmonds confess that the police are up a tree," he said. "Of course Grady is trying to snook out of it. I'll see that Simmonds gets a square deal."

"We're all up a tree, aren't we?" I said. "Since my theory about the Boule cabinet exploded I have given up hope. By the way, I'm going to turn the cabinet over to its owner tomorrow."

his name?"

"Yes. His name is Godfrey."

"A man of the law, like yourself?"

"Oh, no, a newspaperman. But he had been a member of the detective force before that. He is extraordinarily keen. But that combination was too much for him."

M. Armand snatched the drawer back into place with a little crash.

"I am glad, at any rate, that it was discovered," he said. "I will not conceal from you, Mr. Lester, that it adds not a little to the value of the cabinet."

"What is its value?" I asked. "Mr. Vanline wanted me to buy it for him and named a most extravagant figure as the limit he was willing to pay."

"Really," M. Armand answered after an instant's hesitation, "I would not care to name a figure, Mr. Lester, without further consultation with my father."

"What is it, Parks?" I said as that worthy appeared at the door.

"There's a van outside, sir," he said, "and a couple of men are unloading a piece of furniture. Is it all right, sir?"

"Yes," I answered. "Have them bring it in here, and ask the man in charge of the inventory to step over here a minute. Mr. Vanline left his collection of art objects to the Metropolitan Museum." I explained to M. Armand, "and I should like the representative of the museum to be present when the exchange is made."

"Certainly," he assented. "That is very just."

Parks was back in a moment, piloting two men who carried between them an object swathed in burlap, and the Metropolitan man followed them in.

"I am Mr. Lester," I said to him. "Mr. Vanline's executor, and this is M. Felix Armand of Armand & Son of Paris. We are correcting an error which was made just before Mr. Vanline died. That cabinet you were shipped him by mistake in place of one which he had bought. M. Armand has caused the right one to be sent over and will take away the one which belongs to him. I have already spoken to the museum's attorney about the matter, but I wished you to be present when the exchange was made."

"That is a very handsome piece," said the Metropolitan man. "I am sorry the museum is not to get it."

The two men meanwhile, under M. Armand's direction, had been stripping the wrappings from the other cabinet, and it finally stood revealed. It too, was a beautiful piece of furniture, but even my untrained eye could see how greatly it fell below the other.

"The other cabinet is yours," I said to M. Armand.

"I shall hope to see you again, Mr. Lester," he said, with a cordiality which flattered me, "and to renew our very pleasant acquaintance. Whenever you are in Paris I trust you will not fail to honor me by letting me know."

"Thank you," I said. "I shall certainly remember that invitation. And meanwhile, since you are here in New York—"

"You are most kind," he broke in, "and I was myself hoping that we might at least dine together. But I am compelled to proceed to Boston this evening, and from there I shall go on to Quebec."

Then he signed to the two men to take up the cabinet and himself laid a protecting hand upon it as it was carried through the door and down the steps to the van which was backed up to the curb. It was lifted carefully inside, the two men clambered in beside it, the driver spoke to the horses, and the van rolled slowly away on the avenue.

M. Armand watched it for a moment, then murmured into the cab which was waiting, waved a last farewell to me and followed after the van. We watched it until it turned westward at the first cross street.

"Mr. Godfrey's occupation will be gone," said Parks, with a little laugh. "He has fairly lived with that cabinet for the past three or four days. He was here last night for quite awhile."

"Last night?" I echoed, surprised.

"I was sure he would be here today," I added.

The next instant I was jumping down the steps two at a time, for a cab in which two men were sitting came down the avenue and rolled slowly around the corner in the direction taken by the van. One of its occupants turned toward me and waved his hand, and I recognized Jim Godfrey.

It was with a certain exaltation of spirit that I found myself racing after Godfrey's cab, for I realized that he had not been entirely frank with me. Certainly he had dropped no hint of his intention to follow Armand.

And it suddenly dawned upon me that even I did not know the cabinet's destination. M. Armand had volunteered no information.

I reached the corner in time to see the van turn northward into Sixth avenue. At Sixteenth street it turned westward again, and then northward into Seventh avenue.

What could Armand be doing in this part of the town? I asked myself. Did he propose to leave that priceless cabinet in this dingy quarter? And then I paused abruptly and slipped into an alleyway, for the van had stopped some distance ahead and was backing up to the curb.

Looking out discreetly, I saw the cab containing Armand stop also, and that gentleman alighted and told the driver. The other cab rattled on at a good pace and disappeared up the avenue. Then the two porters lifted out the cabinet and, with Armand showing them the way, carried it into the building before which the van had stopped.

They were gone perhaps five minutes, from which I argued that they were carrying it upstairs; then they reappeared, with Armand accompanying them. He lifted them and went out also to tip the driver of the van. Then the porters climbed aboard, and it rattled away out of sight. Armand stood for a moment on the step looking up and down the avenue, then disappeared indoors.

An instant later I saw Godfrey and another man whom I recognized as Simmonds come out of a shop across



I Saw the Cab Containing Armand Stop.

the street and dash over to the house into which the cabinet had been taken. They were standing on the doorstep when I joined them.

It was a dingy building, entirely typical of the dingy neighborhood. The ground floor was occupied by a laundry which the sign on the front window declared to be French, and the room which the window lighted extended the whole width of the building except for a door which opened presumably on the stairway, leading to the upper stories.

Godfrey's face was flaming with excitement as he turned the knob of this door gently-gently. The door was locked. He stooped and applied an eye to the keyhole.

"The key is in the lock," he whispered.

Simmonds took from his pocket a pair of slender pliers and passed them over.

Godfrey inserted the pliers in the keyhole, grasped the end of the key and turned it slowly.

"Now!" he said, softly opened the door and slipped inside. I followed, and Simmonds came after me like a shadow, closing the door carefully behind him.

Then we all stopped, and my heart, at least, was in my mouth, for from somewhere overhead came the sound of a man's voice talking excitedly.

Even in the semidarkness I could see the look of astonishment and alarm on Godfrey's face as he stood for a moment motionless, listening to that voice. I also stood with ears a-strain, but I could make nothing of what it was saying. Then suddenly I realized that it was speaking in French. And yet it was not Armand's voice—that I was certain.

Fronting us was a narrow stair mounting steeply to the story overhead, and after that moment's amazed hesitation Godfrey sat down on the bottom step and removed his shoes quietly, motioning us to do the same. Simmonds obeyed phlegmatically, but my hands were trembling.

When I looked up Godfrey and Simmonds were stealing slowly up the stair, revolver in hand. I followed them, but I confess my knees were knocking together, for there was something weird and chilling in that voice going on and on. It sounded like the voice of a madman. There was something about it at once ferocious and triumphant.

Godfrey paused an instant at the stair head, listening intently. Then he moved cautiously forward toward an open door, from which the voice seemed to come, motioning us at the same time to stay where we were. And as I knelt, bathed in perspiration, I caught one word, repeated over and over:

"Revenge, revenge, revenge!"

CHAPTER XII
"Death."

GODFREY, on hands and knees, was peering into the room. Then he drew back and motioned us forward.

In the middle of the floor stood the Boule cabinet, and before it, with its back to the door, stood a man ripping savagely away the strips of burlap in which it had been wrapped, talking to himself the while in a sort of savage singsong and passing from moment to moment to gibes at a maddened homicide lying on the floor against the opposite wall. For a time I could not make out what this homicide was. Then, straining my eyes, I saw that it was the body of a man, wrapped

round and round in some weblike fabric.

And as I stared at him I caught the glimmer of his eyes as he watched the man working at the cabinet—a glimmer not to be mistaken—the same glimmer which had so frightened me once before. What was the meaning of this ferocious scene?

My heart leaped into my throat, for Godfrey, with a sharp cry of "Stop!" spring to his feet and dashed into the room. Simmonds at his heels.

I suppose two seconds elapsed before I reached the threshold, and I stopped there, staring, clutching at the wall to steady myself.

There was the cabinet with its wrappings torn away, but the figure on the floor had disappeared, and before an open doorway into another room stood a man, a giant of a man, his hands above his head, his face working with fear and rage, while Godfrey, his lips curling into a mocking smile, pressed a pistol against his breast.

Then, as I stood there staring, it seemed to me that there was a sort of

licker in the air above the man's head, and he screamed shrilly.

"Death!" he shrieked. "Death!"

For one dreadful instant longer he stood there motionless; then, with a strangled cry, he pitched forward heavily at Godfrey's feet. I have a confused remembrance of Godfrey stooping for an instant above the body, starting at it, and then, with a sharp cry, hurling himself through that open doorway. In a moment Godfrey was back in the room, crossed it at a bound and dashed to the door opening into the hall, just as it was slammed in his face.

I saw him tear desperately at the knob, then retreat two steps and hurl himself against it. But it held firm, and from the hall outside came a burst of mocking laughter that fairly froze my blood.

Simmonds was quicker than I, and together they threw themselves at the door. It cracked ominously, but still held. Again they tried, and this time it split from top to bottom. Godfrey kicked the pieces to either side and slipped between them, Simmonds after him.

I reached the stair head in time to see Godfrey try the front door and then turn along the lower hall leading to the back of the house. An instant later a chorus of frenzied women's shriels made my hair stand on end.

How I got down the stairs I do not know. But I, too, turned back along the lower hall, expecting any instant to come upon I knew not what horror. I reached an open door, passed through it and found myself in the laundry in the midst of a group of excited and indignant women, who greeted my appearance with a fresh series of screams.

Unable to go farther, I sat slumped down upon a box and looked at them. I was still sitting there when Godfrey came back, breathing heavily, chagrin and anger in his eyes.

"A crime has been committed upstairs," he said to the manager. "This gentleman with me is Mr. Simmonds of the detective bureau," and at the words Simmonds showed his shield. "We shall have to notify headquarters," Godfrey went on, "and I would advise that you keep your girls at their work. I don't suppose you want to be mixed up in it."

"Sure not," agreed the manager promptly, and while Simmonds went to the phone and called up police headquarters the manager had the girls back at their work in short order.

Godfrey came over to me and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Why, Lester," he said, "you look as though you were at your last gasp."

"I am," I said. "I'm going to have nervous prostration if this thing keeps up. You're not looking particularly happy yourself."

"I'm not happy. I've let that fellow kill a man right under my nose—literally under my nose—and then get away!"

"Kill a man!" I repeated. "Do you mean?"

"Go upstairs and look at the right hand of the man lying there," said Godfrey curtly, "and you'll see what I mean."

Simmonds joined us with a twisted smile on his lips, and I saw that even he was considerably shaken.

"I got Grady," he said, "and told him what had happened. He says he's too busy to come up and that I'm to take charge of things. The ambulance will be around at once. We'd better get our shoes on and go back upstairs and see if anything can be done for that fellow."

Simmonds knelt beside the body and held up the limp right hand for us to see.

Just above the knuckles were two tiny incisions, with a drop or two of blood oozing away from them, and the flesh about them swollen and discolored.

Continued next week

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