The Mystery of the Five Hundred Diamonds

Robert Barr

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CHAPTER I. THE FINDING OF THE FATED FIVE HUNDRED

WHEN I say I am called Valmont, the name will convey no impression to the reader one way or another. My occupation is that of private detective in London, but if you ask any policeman in Paris who Valmont was he will likely be able to tell you, unless he is a recent recruit. If you ask him where Valmont is now, he may not know, yet I have a good deal to do with the Parisian police.

For a period of seven years I was chief detective to the Government of France, and if I am unable to prove myself a great crime hunter, it is because the record of my career is in the secret archives of Paris.

I may admit at the outset that I have no grievances to air. The French Government considered itself justi− fied in dismissing me, and did so. In this action it was quite within its right, and I should be the last to dispute that right; but, on the other hand, I consider myself justified in publishing the following account of what actually occurred, especially as so many false rumours have been put abroad concerning the case. How− ever, as I said at the beginning, I hold no grievance, because my worldly affairs are now much more prosperous than they were in Paris, my intimate knowledge of that city and the country of which it is the capital bringing to me many cases with which I have dealt more or less successfully since I established myself in London.

Without further preliminary I shall at once plunge into an account of the case which riveted the attention of the whole world a little more than a decade ago.

The year 1893 was a prosperous twelve months for France. The weather was good, the harvest excellent, and the wine of that vintage is celebrated to this day. Everyone was well off and reasonably happy, a marked contrast to the state of things a few years later, when dissension over the Dreyfus case rent the country in twain.

Newspaper reader may remember that in 1893 the Government of France fell heir to an unexpected treasure which set the civilized world agog, especially those inhabitants of it who are interested in historical relics. This was the finding of the diamond necklace in the Chateau de Chaumont, where it had rested undiscovered for a century in a rubbish heap of an attic. I believe it has not been questioned that this was the veritable neck− lace which the court jeweler, Boehmer, hoped to sell to Marie Antoinette, although how it came to be in the Chateau de Chaumont no one has been able to form even a conjecture. For a hundred years it was supposed that the necklace had been broken up in London, and its half a thousand stones, great and small, sold separately. It has always seemed strange to me that the Countess de Lamotte−Valois, who was thought to have profited by the sale of these jewels, should not have abandoned France if she possessed money to leave that country, for exposure was inevitable if she remained. Indeed, the unfortunate woman was branded and imprisoned, and afterwards was

dashed to death from the third story of a London house, when, in the direst poverty, she sought escape from the consequences of the debts she had incurred.

I am not superstitious in the least, yet this celebrated piece of treasure−trove seems actually to have exerted a malign influence over everyone who had the misfortune to be connected with it. Indeed, in a small way, I who write these words suffered dismissal and disgrace, though I caught but one glimpse of this dazzling scintil−lation of jewels. The jeweler who made the neck− lace met financial ruin; the Queen for whom it was con− structed was beheaded; that high−horn Prince Louis Rene Edouard, Cardinal de Rohan, who purchased it, was flung into prison; the unfortunate countess, who said she acted as go−between until the transfer was con− cluded, clung for five awful minutes to a London win− dow sill before dropping to her death to the flags below; and now, a hundred and eight years later, up comes this devil's display of fireworks to the light again!

Drouilliard, the workingman who found the ancient box, seems to have pried it open, and ignorant though he was he had probably never seen a diamond in his life before realized that a fortune was in his grasp. The baleful glitter from the combination must have sent madness into his brain, working havoc therein as though the shafts of brightness were those mysterious rays which scientists have recently discovered. He might quite easily have walked through the main gate of the chateau unsuspected and unquestioned with the dia− monds concealed about his person, but instead of this he crept from the attic window on to the steep roof, slipped to the eaves, fell to the ground, and lay dead with a broken neck, while the necklace, intact, shim− mered in the sunlight beside his body.

No matter where these jewels had been found the Government would have insisted that they belonged to the treasury of the Republic; but as the Chateau de Chaumont was an historical monument, and the property of France, there could be no question regarding the ownership of the necklace. The Government at once claimed it, and ordered it to be sent by a trustworthy military man to Paris. It was carried safely and de− livered promptly to the authorities by Alfred Dreyfus, a young captain of artillery, to whom its custody had been intrusted.

In spite of its fall from the tall tower neither case nor jewels were perceptibly damaged. The lock of the box had apparently been forced by Droulliard's hatchet, or perhaps by the clasp−knife found on his body. On reaching the ground the lid had flown open, and the necklace was thrown out.

I believe there was some discussion in the cabinet regarding the fate of this ill−omened trophy, one section wishing it to be placed in a museum on account of its historical interest, another advocating the breaking up of the necklace and the selling of the diamonds for what they would fetch. But a third party maintained that the method to get the most money into the coffers of the country was to sell the necklace as it stood, for as the world now contains so many rich amateurs who col− lect undoubted rarities, regardless of expense, the his− toric associations of the jeweled collar would enhance the intrinsic value of the stones; and, this view prevail− ing, it was announced that the necklace would be sold by auction a month later in the rooms of Meyer, Renault Co., in the Boulevard des Italiens, near the Bank of the Credit−Lyonnais.

This announcement elicited much comment from the newspapers of all countries, and it seemed that, from a financial point of view at least, the decision of the Gov− ernment had been wise, for it speedily became evident that a notable coterie of wealthy buyers would be con− gregated in Paris on the thirteenth (unlucky day for me!) when the sale was to take place. But we of the inner circle were made aware of another result some− what more disquieting, which was that the most expert criminals in the world were also gathering like vultures upon the fair city. The honor of France was at stake. Whoever bought that necklace must be assured of a safe conduct out of the country. We might view with equanimity whatever happened afterwards, but while he was a resident of France his life and property must not be endangered. Thus it came about that I was given full authority to insure that neither murder nor theft nor both combined should be committed while the pur− chaser of the necklace remained within our boundaries, and for this purpose the police resources of France were placed unreservedly at my disposal. If I failed there should be no one to blame but myself; consequently, as I have remarked before, I do not complain of my dis− missal by the Government.

The broken lock of the jewer case had been very deftly repaired by an expert locksmith, who in executing his task was so unfortunate as to scratch a finger on the broken metal, whereupon blood poisoning set in, and although his life was saved, he was dismissed from the hospital with his right arm gone and his usefulness destroyed.

When the jeweler Boehmer made the necklace he asked eight hundred thousand dollars for it, but after years of disappointment he was content to sell it to Cardinal de Rohan for three hundred and twenty thou− sand dollars, to be liquidated in three installments, not one of which was ever paid. This latter amount was probably somewhere near the value of the five hundred and sixteen separate stones, one of which was of tre− mendous size, a very monarch of diamonds, holding its court among seventeen brilliants each as large as a filbert. This iridescent concentration of wealth was, as one might say, placed in my care, and I had to see to it that no harm came to the necklace or to its prospective owner until they were safely across the boundaries of France.

The four weeks previous to the thirteenth proved a busy and anxious time for me. Thousands, most of whom were actuated by mere curiosity, wished to view the diamonds. We were compelled to discriminate, and sometimes discriminated against the wrong person, which caused unpleasantness. Three distinct attempts were made to rob the safe, but luckily these criminal efforts were frustrated, and so we came unscathed to the eventful thirteenth of the month.

The sale was to begin at two o'clock, and on the morning of that day I took the somewhat tyrannical precaution of having the more dangerous of our own malefactors, and as many of the foreign thieves as I could trump up charges against, laid by the heels. Yet I knew very well it was not these rascals I had most to fear, but the suave, well−groomed gentlemen, amply sup− plied with unimpeachable credentials, stopping at our fine hotels and living like princes. Many of these were foreigners against whom we could prove nothing, and whose arrest might land us into temporary international difficulties. Nevertheless, I had each of them shadowed, and on the morning of the thirteenth if one of them had even disputed a cab fare I should have had him in prison half an hour later, and taken the consequences; but these gentlemen are very shrewd and do not commit mistakes.

I made up a list of all the men in the world who were able or likely to purchase the necklace. Many of them would not be present in person at the auction rooms; their bidding would be done by agents. This simplified matters a good deal, for the agents kept me duly in− formed of their purposes, and, besides, an agent who handles treasure every week is an adept at the business, and does not need the protection which must surround an amateur, who in nine cases out of ten has but scant idea of the dangers that threaten him, beyond knowing that if he goes down a dark street in a dangerous quarter he is likely to be maltreated and robbed.

There were no less than sixteen clients all told, whom we learned were to attend personally on the day of the sale, any one of whom might well have made the pur− chase. The Marquis of Warlingham and Lord Oxtead from England were well−known jewel fanciers, while at least half a dozen millionaires were expected from the United States, with a smattering from Germany, Aus− tria, and Russia, and one each from Italy, Belgium, and Holland.

Admission to the auction rooms was allowed by ticket only, to be applied for at least a week in advance, ap− plications to be accompanied by satisfactory testimonials. It would possibly have surprised many of the rich men collected there to know that they sat cheek by jowl with some of the most noted thieves of England and America, but I allowed this for two reasons: first, I wished to keep these sharpers under my own eye until I knew who had bought the necklace; and, secondly, I was desirous that they should not know they were suspected.

I stationed trusty men outside on the Boulevard des Italiens, each of whom knew by sight most of the probable purchasers of the necklace. It was arranged that when the sale was over I should walk out to the boulevard alongside the man who was the new owner of the diamonds, and from that moment until he quitted France my men were not to lose sight of him if he took personal custody of the stones, instead of doing the sensible and proper thing of having them insured and forwarded to his residence by some responsible transit company, or depositing them in the bank. In fact, I took every pre− caution that occurred to me. All police Paris was on the

"qui vive," and felt itself pitted against the scoundrelism of the world.

For one reason or another it was nearly half past two before the sale began. There had been considerable delay because of forged tickets, and, indeed, each order for admittance was so closely scrutinized that this in itself took a good deal more time that we anticipated. Every chair was occupied, and still a number of the visi− tors were compelled to stand. I stationed myself by the swinging doors at the entrance end of the hall, where I could command a view of the entire assemblage. Some of my men were placed wlth backs against the wall, while others were distributed among the chairs, all in plain clothes. During the sale the diamonds themselves were not displayed, but the box containing them rested in front of the auctioneer, and three policemen in uniform stood guard on either side.

CHAPTER II. THE SCENE IN THE SALE ROOM

Very quietly the auctioneer began by saying that there was no need for him to expatiate on the noble character of the treasure he was privileged to offer for sale, and with this preliminary he requested those present to bid. Some one offered twenty thousand francs, which was received with much laughter; then the bidding went steadily on until it reached nine hundred thousand francs, which I knew to be less than half the reserve the Government had placed upon the necklace. The contest advanced more slowly until the million and a half was touched, and there it hung fire for a time, while the auctioneer remarked that this sum did not equal that which the maker of the necklace had finally been forced to accept for it. After another pause he added that, as the reserve was not exceeded, the neck− lace would be withdrawn and probably never again offered for sale. He therefore urged those who were holding back to make their bids now. At this the con− test livened until the sum of two million three hundred thousand francs had been offered, and now I knew the necklace would be sold. Nearing the three million mark the competition thinned down to a few dealers from Hamburg and the Marquis of Warlingham, from England, when a voice that had not yet been heard in the auction room was lifted in a tone of some impatience:

"One million dollars!"

There was an instant hush, followed by the scribbling of pencils, as each person present reduced the sum to its equivalent in his own currency pounds for the English, francs for the French, marks for the German, and so on. The aggressive tone and the clear−cut face of the bidder proclaimed him an American, not less than the financial denomination he had used. In a moment it was realized that his bid was a clear leap of more than two million francs, and a sigh went up from the audience as if this settled it, and the great sale was done. Nevertheless the auctioneer's hammer hovered over the lid of his desk, and he looked up and down the long line of faces turned toward him. He seemed reluctant to tap the board, but no one ventured to compete against this tremendous sum, and with a sharp click the mallet fell.

"What name?" he asked, bending over toward the customer.

"Cash," replied the American; "here's a cheque for the amount. I'll take the diamonds with me."

"Your request is somewhat unusual," protested the auctioneer mildly.

"I know what you mean," interrupted the American; "you think the cheque may not be cashed. You will notice it is drawn on the Credit−Lyonnais, which is practically next door. I must have the jewels with me. Send round your messenger with the cheque; it will take only a few minutes to find out whether or not the money is there to meet it. The necklace is mine, and I insist on having it."

The auctioneer with some demur handed the cheque to the representative of the French Government who was present, and this official himself went to the bank. There were some other things to be sold, and the auctioneer

endeavoured to go on through the list, but no one paid the slightest attention to him.

Meanwhile I was studying the countenance of the man who had made the astounding bid, when I should instead have adjusted my preparations to meet the new conditions now confronting me. Here was a man about whom we knew nothing whatever. I had come to the instant conclusion that he was a prince of criminals, and that a sinister design, not at that moment fathomed by me, was on foot to get possession of the jewels. The handing up of the cheque was clearly a trick of some sort, and I fully expected the official to return and say the draft was good. I determined to prevent this man from getting the jewel box until I knew more of his game. Quickly I removed from my place near the door to the auctioneer's desk, having two objects in view first, to warn the auctioneer not to part with the treasure too easily; and, second, to study the suspected man at closer range. Of all evil−doers the American is most to be feared; he uses more ingenuity in the planning of his projects, and will take greater risks in carrying them out than any other malefactor on earth.

From my new station I saw there were two men to deal with. The bidder's face was keen and intellectual; his hands refined, ladylike, clean, and white, showing they were long divorced from manual labour, if indeed they had ever done any useful work. Coolness and im− perturbability were his beyond a doubt. The companion who sat at his right was of an entirely different stamp. His hands were hairy and sun−tanned; his face bore the stamp of grim determination and unflinching bravery. I knew that these two types usually hunted in couples the one to scheme, the other to execute, and they always formed a combination dangerous to encounter and difficult to circumvent.

There was a buzz of conversation up and down the hall as these two men talked together in low tones. I knew now that I was face to face with the most hazardous problem of my life.

I whispered to the auctioneer, who bent his head to listen. He knew very well who I was, of course.

"You must not give up the necklace," I began.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am under the orders of the official from the Ministry of the Interior. You must speak to him."

"I shall not fail to do so," I replied. "Nevertheless, do not give up the box too readily."

"I am helpless," he protested with another shrug. "I obey the orders of the Government."

Seeing it was useless to parley further with the auc− tioneer, I set my wits at work to meet the new emergency. I felt convinced that the cheque would prove to be genuine, and that the fraud, wherever it lay, might not be disclosed in time to aid the authorities. My duty, therefore, was to make sure we lost sight of neither the buyer nor the thing bought. Of course, I could not arrest the purchaser merely on suspicion; besides, it would make the Government the laughing−stock of the world if it sold a case of jewels and immediately placed the buyer in custody when it itself had handed over his goods to him. Ridicule kills in France. A breath of laughter may blow a government out of existence in Paris much more effectually than will a whiff of cannon smoke. My duty then was to give the Government full warning, and never lose sight of my man until he was clear of France; then my responsibility ended.

I took aside one of my own men in plain clothes and said to him:

"You have seen the American who has bought the necklace?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. Go outside quietly and station yourself there. He is likely to emerge presently with the jewels in his possession. You are not to lose sight of either the man or the casket. I shall follow him and be close behind him as he emerges, and you are to shadow us. If he parts with the case you must be ready at a sign from me to follow either the man or the jewels. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," he answered, and left the room.

It is ever the unforeseen that baffles us; it is easy to be wise after the event. I should have sent two men, and I have often thought since how admirable is the regulation of the Italian Government which sends out its policemen in pairs. Or I should have given my man power to call for help, but even as it was he did only half as well as I had a right to expect of him, and the blunder he committed by a moment's dull−witted hesitation ah, well! there is no use in scolding. After all the result might have been the same.

Just as my man disappeared between the two folding doors the official from the Ministry of the Interior entered. I intercepted him about halfway on his journey from the door to the auctioneer.

"Possibly the cheque appears to be genuine," I whis− pered to him.

"But certainly," he replied pompously. He was an individual greatly impressed with his own importance; a kind of character with which it is always difficult to deal. Afterwards the Government asserted that this official had warned me, and the utterances of an empty− headed ass dressed in a little brief authority, as the English poet says, were looked upon as the epitome of wisdom.

"I advise you strongly not to hand over the necklace as has been requested," I went on.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because I am convinced the bidder is a criminal."

"If you have proof of that, arrest him."

"I have no proof at the present moment, but I request you to delay the delivery of the goods."

"That is absurd," he cried impatiently. "The necklace is his, not ours. The money has already been transferred to the account of the Government; we cannot retain the five million francs, and refuse to hand over to him what he has bought with them," and so the man left me left me standing there, nonplussed and anxious. The eyes of everyone in the room had been turned on us during our brief conversation, and now the official pro− ceded ostentatiously up the room with a grand air of importance; then, with a bow and flourish of the hand, he said dramatically:

"The jewels belong to monsieur."

The two Americans rose simultaneously, the taller holding out his hand while the auctioneer passed to him the case he had apparently paid so highly for. The American nonchalantly opened the box and for the first time the electric radiance of the jewels burst upon that audience, each member of which craned his neck to behold it. It seemed to me a most reckless thing to do. He examined the jewels minutely for a few moments, then snapped the lid shut again, and calmly put the box in his outside pocket, and I could not help noticing that the light overcoat he wore possessed pockets made extraordinarily large, as if on purpose for this very case. And now this amazing man walked serenely down the room past miscreants who joyfully would have cut his throat for even the smallest diamond in that conglomeration; yet he did not take the trouble to put his hand on the pocket which contained the case, or in any way attempt to protect it. The assemblage seemed stricken dumb by his audacity. His friend

followed closely at his heels, and the tall man disappeared through the folding doors. Not so the other. He turned quickly, and whipped two revolvers out of his pockets, which he presented at the astonished crowd. There had been a movement on the part of everyone to leave the room, but the sight of these deadly weapons confronting them made each one shrink into his place again.

The man with his back to the door spoke in a loud and domineering voice, asking the auctioneer to trans− late what he had to say into French and German; he spoke in English.

"These here shiners are valuable; they belong to my friend who has just gone out. Casting no reflections on the generality of people in this room, there are, never− theless, half a dozen 'crooks' among us whom my friend wishes to avoid. Now, no honest man here will object to giving the buyer of that there trinket five clear minutes in which to get away. It's only the 'crooks' that can kick. I ask these five minutes as a favour, but if they are not granted I am going to take them as a right. Any man who moves will get shot."

"I am an honest man," I cried, "and I object. I am chief detective of the French Government. Stand aside; the police will protect your friend."

"Hold on, my son," warned the American, turning one weapon directly upon me, while the other held a sort of roving commission, pointing all over the room. "My friend is from New York and he distrusts the police as much as he does the grafters. You may be twenty detectives, but if you move before that clock strikes three, I'll bring you down, and don't you forget it.

It is one thing to face death in a fierce struggle, but, quite another to advance coldly upon it toward the muzzle of a pistol held so steadily that there could be no chance of escape. The gleam of determination in the man's eye convinced me he meant what he said. I did not consider then, nor have I considered since, that the next five minutes, precious as they were, would be worth paying my life for. Apparently everyone else was of my opinion, for none moved hand or foot until the clock slowly struck three.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said the American, as he vanished between the spring−doors. When I say vanished, I mean that word and no other, because my men outside saw nothing of this individual then or later. He vanished as if he had never existed, and it was some hours before we found how this had been accomplished.

I rushed out almost on his heels, as one might say, and hurriedly questioned my waiting men. They had all seen the tall American come out with the greatest leisureliness and stroll toward the west. As he was not the man any of them were looking for they paid no further attention to him, as, indeed, is the custom with our Parisian force. They have eyes for nothing but what they are sent to look for, and this trait has its drawbacks for their superiors.

I ran up the boulevard, my whole thought intent on the diamonds and their owner. I knew my subordinate in command of the men inside the hall would look after the scoundrel with the pistols. A short distance up I found the stupid fellow I had sent out, standing in a dazed manner at the corner of the Rue Michodiere, gazing alternately down that short street and toward the Place de l'Opera. The very fact that he was there furnished proof that he had failed.

"Where is the American?" I demanded.

"He went down this street, sir."

"Then why are you standing here like a fool?"

"I followed him this far, when a man came up the Rue Michodiere, and without a word the American handed him the jewel box, turning instantly down the street up which the other had come. The other jumped into a cab, and

drove toward the Place de l'Opera. "

"And what did you do? Stood here like a post, I suppose?"

"I didn't know what to do, sir. It all happened in a moment."

"Why didn't you follow the cab?"

"I didn't know which to follow, sir, and the cab was gone instantly while I watched the American."

"What was its number?"

"I don't know, sir."

"You clod! Why didn't you call one of our men, whoever was nearest and leave him to shadow the American while you followed the cab?"

"I did shout to the nearest man, sir, but he said you told him to stay there and watch the English lord, and even before he had spoken both American and cabman were out of sight."

"Was the man to whom he gave the box an American also?"

"No, sir, he was French."

"How do you know?"

"By his appearance and the words he spoke."

"I thought you said he didn't speak?"

"He did not speak to the American, sir, but he said to the cabman, "Drive to the Madeleine as quickly as you can."

"Describe the man."

"He was a head shorter than the American, wore a black beard and mustache rather neatly trimmed, and seemed to be a superior sort of artisan."

"You did not take the number of the cab. Should you know the cabman if you saw him again?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

Taking this fellow with me I returned to the now nearly empty auction room and there gathered all my men about me. Each in his notebook took down particulars of the cabman and his passenger from the lips of my competent spy; next I dictated a full description of the two Americans, then scattered my men to the various railway stations of the lines leading out of Paris, with orders to make inquiries of the police on duty there, and to arrest one or more of the four persons described should they be so fortunate as to find any of them.

I now learned how the rogue with the pistols vanished so completely as he did. My subordinate in the auction room had speedily solved the mystery. To the left of the main entrance of the auction room was a door that gave private access to the rear of the premises. As the attendant in charge confessed when questioned, he had been bribed by the American earlier in the day to leave this side door open and to allow the man to escape by the goods

entrance. Thus the ruffian did not appear on the boulevard at all, and so had not been observed by any of my men.

Taking my futile spy with me I returned to my own office, and sent an order throughout the city that every cabman who had been in the Boulevard des Italiens between half past two and half past three that afternoon, should report immediately to me. The examination of these men proved a very tedious business indeed, but whatever other countries may say of us, we French are patient, and if the haystack is searched long enough the needle will be found. I did not discover the needle I was looking for, but I came upon one quite as important, if not more so.

It was nearly ten o'clock at night when a cabman answered my oft−repeated questions in the affirmative.

"Did you take up a passenger a few minutes past three o'clock on the Boulevard des Italiens, near the Credit−Lyonnais? Had he a short black beard? Did he carry a small box in his hand and order you to drive to the Madeleine?"

The cabman seemed puzzled.

"He wore a short black beard when he got out of the cab," he replied.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I drive a closed cab, sir. When he got in he was a smooth−faced gentleman; when he got out he wore a short black beard."

"Was he a Frenchman?"

"No, sir; he was a foreigner, either English or American."

"Was he carrying a box?"

"No, sir; he held in his hand a small leather bag."

"Where did he tell you to drive?"

"He told me to follow the cab in front, which had just driven off very rapidly toward the Madeleine. In fact, I heard the man, such as you describe, order the other cabman to drive to the Madeleine. I had come alongside the curb when this man held up his hand for a cab, but the open cab cut in ahead of me. Just then my passenger stepped up and said in French, but with a foreign accent: "Follow that cab wherever it goes."

I turned with some inclination to my inefficient spy.

"You told me," I said, "that the American had gone down a side street. Yet he evidently met a second man, obtained from him the handbag, turned back, and into the closed cab directly behind you."

"Well, sir," stammered the spy, "I could not look in two directions at the same time. The American certainly went down the side street, but of course I watched the cab which contained the jewels."

"And you saw nothing of the closed cab right at your elbow?"

"The boulevard was full of cabs, sir, and the pave− ment crowded with passers−by, as it always is at that hour of the day, and I have only two eyes in my head."

"I am glad to know you had that many, for I was beginning to think you were blind."

Although I said this, I knew in my heart it was useless to censure the poor wretch, for the fault was entirely my own in not sending two men, and in failing to guess the possibility of the jewels and their owner being separated. Besides, here was a clew to my hand at last, and no time must be lost in following it up. So I continued my interrogation of the cabman.

"The other cab was an open vehicle, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"You succeeded in following it?"

"Oh, yes, sir. At the Madeleine the man in front redirected the coachman, who turned to the left and drove to the Place de la Concorde, then up the Champs Elysees to the Arch and so down the Avenue de la Grande Armee, and the Avenue de Neuilly, to the Pont de Neuilly, where it came to a standstill. My fare got out, and I saw he now wore a short black beard, which he had evidently put on inside the cab. He gave me a ten−franc piece, which was very satisfactory."

"And the fare you were following? What did he do?"

"He also stepped out, paid the cabman, went down the bank of the river and got on board a steam launch that seemed to be waiting for him."

"Did he look behind, or appear to know that he was being followed?"

"No, sir."

"And your fare?"

"He ran after the first man, and also went aboard the steam launch, which instantly started down the river."

"And that was the last you saw of them?"

"Yes, sir."

"At what time did you reach the Pont de Neuilly?"

"I do not know, sir; I was compelled to drive rather fast, but the distance is seven or eight kilometres."

"You would do it under the hour?"

"But certainly, under the hour."

"Then you must have reached Neuilly bridge about four o'clock?"

"It is very likely, sir."

The plan of the tall American was now perfectly clear to me, and it comprised nothing that was contrary to law. He had evidently placed his luggage on board the steam launch in the morning. The handbag had contained various materials which would enable him to disguise himself, and this bag he had probably left in some shop

down the side street, or else some one was waiting with it for him. The giving of the treasure to another man was not so risky as it had at first appeared, because he instantly followed that man, who was probably his confidential servant. Despite the windings of the river there was ample time for the launch to reach Havre before the American steamer sailed on Saturday morning. I surmised it was his intention to come alongside the steamer before she left her berth in Havre harbour, and thus transfer himself and his belongings unperceived by anyone on watch at the land side of the liner.

All this, of course, was perfectly justifiable, and seemed, in truth, merely a well−laid scheme for escaping observation. His only danger of being tracked was when he got into the cab. Once away from the neigh− bourhood of the Boulevard des Italiens he was reasonably sure to evade pursuit, and the five minutes which his friend with the pistols had won for him afforded just the time he needed to get so far as the Place Made− leine , and after that everything was easy. Yet, if it had not been for those five minutes secured by coercion, I should not have found the slightest excuse for arresting him. But he was accessory after the act in that piece of illegality in fact, it was absolutely certain that he had been accessory before the act, and guilty of conspiracy with the man who had presented firearms to the auctioneer's audience, and who had interfered with an officer in the discharge of his duty by threatening me and my men. So I was now legally in the right if I arrested every person on board that steam launch.

CHAPTER III. THE MIDNIGHT RACE DOWN THE SEINE

With a map of the river before me I proceeded to make some calculations. It was now nearly ten o'clock at night. The launch had had six hours in which to travel at its utmost speed. It was doubtful if so small a vessel could make ten miles an hour, even with the current in its favour, which is rather sluggish because of the locks and the level country. Sixty miles would place her beyond Meulan, which is fifty−eight miles from the Pont Royal, and, of course, a lesser distance from the Pont de Kneel. But the navigation of the river is difficult at all times, and almost impossible after dark. There were chances of the boat running aground, and then there was the inevitable delay at the locks. So I estimated that the launch could not yet have reached Meulan, which was less than twenty−five miles from Paris by rail. Looking up the time table I saw there were still two trains to Meulan, the next at 11.40. I therefore had time to reach St. Lazaret station, and accomplish some telegraphing before the train left.

With three of my assistants I got into a cab and drove to the station. On arrival I sent one of my men to hold the train while I went into the telegraph office, cleared the wires, and got into communication with the lock master at Meulan. He replied that no steam launch had passed down since an hour before sunset. I then instructed him to allow the yacht to enter the lock, close the upper gate, let half of the water out, and hold the vessel there until I came. I also ordered the local Meulan police to send enough men to the lock to enforce this command. Lastly, I sent messages all along the river asking the police to report to me on the train the passage of the steam launch.

The 10.25 is a slow train, stopping at every station. However, every drawback has its compensation, and these stoppages enabled me to receive and to send tale− graphic messages. I was quite well aware that I might be on a fool's errand in going to Meulan. The yacht could have put about before it had steamed a mile, and so returned back to Paris. There had been no time to learn whether this was so or not if I was to catch the 10.25. Also, it might have landed its passengers anywhere along the river. I may say at once that neither of these two things happened, and my calculations regarding her movements were accurate to the letter. But a trap most carefully set may be prematurely sprung by inadvertence, or more often by the overzeal of some stupid ass who fails to understand his instructions, or oversteps them if they are understood. I received a most annoying telegram from Denouval, a lock about thirteen miles above that of Meulan. The local policeman, arriving at the lock, found that the yacht had just cleared. The fool shouted to the captain to return, threatening him with all the pains and penalties of the law if he refused. The captain did refuse, rang on full speed ahead, and disappeared in the darkness. Through this well−meant blunder of an understrapper those on board the launch had received warning that we were on their

track. I telegraphed to the lockkeeper at Denouval to allow no craft to pass toward Paris until further orders. We thus held the launch in a thirteen mile stretch of water, but the night was pitch dark, and passengers might be landed on either bank with all France before them, over which to effect their escape in any direction.

It was midnight when I reached the lock at Meulan, and, as was to be expected, nothing had been seen or heard of the launch. It gave me some satisfaction to telegraph to that dunderhead at Denouval to walk along the river bank to Meulan, and report if he learned the launch's whereabouts. We took up our quarters in the lodgekeeper's house and waited. There was little use in sending men to scour the country at this time of night, for the pursued were on the alert, and very unlikely to allow themselves to be caught if they had gone ashore. On the other hand, there was every chance that the captain would refuse to let them land, because he must know his vessel was in a trap from which it could not escape, and although the demand of the policeman at Denouval was quite unauthorized, nevertheless the captain could not know that, while he must be well aware of his danger in refusing to obey a command from the authorities. Even if he got away for the moment he must know that arrest was certain, and that his punishment would be severe. His only plea could be that he had not heard and understood the order to return. But this plea would be invalidated if he aided in the escape of two men, whom he must now know were wanted by the police. I was therefore very confident that if his passengers asked to be set ashore, the captain would refuse when he had had time to think about his own danger. My estimate proved accurate, for toward one o'clock the lockkeeper came in and said the green and red lights of an approaching craft were visible, and as he spoke the yacht whistled for the opening of the lock. I stood by the lockkeeper while he opened the gates; my men and the local police were concealed on each side of the lock. The launch came slowly in, and as soon as it had done so I asked the captain to step ashore, which he did.

"I wish a word with you," I said. "Follow me."

I took him into the lockkeeper's house and closed the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To Havre."

"Where did you come from?"

"Paris."

"From what quay!"

"From the Pont de Kneel."

"When did you leave there?"

"At five minutes to four o'clock this afternoon."

"Yesterday afternoon, you mean?"

"Yesterday afternoon."

"Who engaged you to make this voyage?"

"An American; I do not know his name."

"He paid you well, I suppose?"

"He paid me what I asked."

"Have you received the money?"

"Yes, sir."

"I may inform you, captain, that I am Eugene Valmont, chief detective of the French Government, and that all the police of France at this moment are under my control. I ask you, therefore, to be careful of your answers. You were ordered by a policeman at Denouval to return. Why did you not do so?"

"The lockkeeper ordered me to return, but as he had no right to order me, I went on."

"You know very well it was the police who ordered you, and you ignored the command. Again I ask you why you did so."

"I did not know it was the police."

"I thought you would say that. You knew very well, but were paid to take the risk, and it is likely to cost you dear. You had two passengers aboard?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you put them ashore between here and Denouval?"

"No, sir; but one of them went overboard, and we couldn't find him again."

"Which one?"

"The short man."

"Then the American is still aboard?"

"What American, sir?"

"Captain, you must not trifle with me. The man who engaged you is still aboard?"

"Oh, no, sir, he has never been aboard."

"Do you mean to tell me that the second man who came on your launch at the Pont de Kneel is not the American who engaged you?"

"No, sir; the American was a smooth−faced man; this man wore a black beard."

"Yes, a false beard."

"I did not know that, sir. I understood from the American that I was to take but one passenger. One came aboard with a small box in his hand; the other with a small bag. Each declared himself to be the passenger in question. I did not know what to do, so I left Paris with both of them on board."

"Then the tall man with the black beard is still with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, captain, is there anything else you have to tell me? I think you will find it better in the end to make a clean breast of it."

The captain hesitated, turning his cap about in his hands for a few moments, then he said:

"I am not sure that the first passenger went over− board of his own accord. When the police hailed us at Denouval "

"Ah! you knew it was the police, then?"

"I was afraid after I left it might have been. You see, when the bargain was made with me the American said that if I reached Havre at a certain time a thousand francs extra would be paid to me, so I was anxious to get along as quickly as I could. I told him it was dangerous to navigate the Seine at night, but he paid me well for attempting it. After the policeman called to us at Denouval the man with the small box became very much excited, and asked me to put him ashore, which I refused to do. The tall man appeared be watching him, never letting him get far away. When I heard the splash in the water I ran aft, and I saw the tall man putting the box which the other had held into his handbag, although I said nothing of it at the time. We cruised back and forth about the spot where the other man had gone overboard, but saw nothing more of him. Then I came on to Meulan, intending to give information about what I had seen. That is all I know of the matter, sir."

"Was the man who had the jewels a Frenchman?!"

"What jewels, sir?"

"The man with the small box."

"Oh, yes, sir; he was French."

"You have hinted that the foreigner threw him over− board. What grounds have you for such a belief if you did not see the struggle?"

"The night is very dark, sir, and I did not see what happened. I was at the wheel in the forward part of the launch, with my back turned to these two. I heard a scream, then a splash. If the man had jumped over− board as the other said he did, he would not have screamed. Besides, as I told you, when I ran aft I saw the foreigner put the little box in his handbag, which he shut up quickly as if he did not wish me to notice."

"Very good, captain. If you have told the truth it will go easy with you in the investigation that is to follow."

I now turned the captain over to one of my men, and ordered in the foreigner with his bag and bogus black whiskers. Before questioning him I ordered him to open the handbag, which he did with evident reluctance. It was filled with false whiskers, false mustaches, and various bottles, but on top of them all lay the jewel case. I raised the lid and displayed that accursed necklace. I looked up at the man, who stood there calmly enough, saying nothing in spite of the overwhelming evidence against him.

"Will you oblige me by removing your false beard?"

"He did so at once, throwing it into the open bag. I knew the moment I saw him that he was not the American, and thus my theory had broken down, in one very important part at least. Informing him who I was, and cautioning him to speak the truth, I asked how he came in possession of the jewels.

"Am I under arrest?" he asked.

"But certainly." I replied.

"Of what am I accused?"

"You are accused, in the first place, of being in possession of property which does not belong to you."

"I plead guilty to that. What in the second place?"

"In the second place, you may find yourself accused of murder."

"I am innocent of the second charge. The man jumped overboard."

"If that is true, why did he scream as he went over?"

"Because, too late to recover his balance, I seized this box and held it."

"He was in rightful possession of the box; the owner gave it to him."

"I admit that; I saw the owner give it to him."

"Then why should he jump overboard?"

"I do not know. He seemed to become panic−stricken when the police at the last lock ordered us to return. He implored the captain to put him ashore, and from that moment I watched him keenly, expecting that if we drew near to the land he would attempt to escape, as the captain had refused to beach the launch. He remained quiet for about half an hour seated on a camp chair by the rail, with his eyes turned toward the shore, trying, as I imagined, to penetrate the darkness and estimate the distance. Then suddenly he sprang up and made his dash. I was prepared for this and instantly caught the box from his hand. He gave a half−turn, trying either to save himself or to retain the box; then with a scream went down shoulders first into the water. It all happened within a second after he leaped from his chair."

"You admit yourself, then, indirectly at least, responsible for his drowning?"

"I see no reason to suppose that the man was drowned. If able to swim he could easily have reached the river bank. If unable to swim, why should he attempt it encumbered by the box?"

"You believe he escaped then?"

"I think so."

"It will be lucky for you should that prove to be the case."

"Certainly."

"How did you come to be in the yacht at all?"

"I shall give you a full account of the affair, concealing nothing. I am a private detective, with an office in London. I was certain that some attempt would be made, probably by the most expert criminals at large, to rob the possessor of this necklace. I came over to Paris, anticipating trouble, determined to keep an eye upon the jewel

case if this proved possible. If the jewels were stolen the crime was bound to be one of the most celebrated in legal annals. I was present during the sale, and saw the buyer of the necklace. I followed the official who went to the bank, and thus learned that the money was behind the cheque. I then stopped outside and waited for the buyer to appear. He held the case in his hand.

"In his pocket, you mean?" I interrupted.

"He had it in his hand when I saw him. Then the man who afterwards jumped overboard approached him, took the case without a word, held up his hand for a cab, and when an open vehicle approached the curb he stepped in, saying, 'The Madeleine.' I hailed a closed cab, instructed the cabman to follow the first, disguising myself with whiskers as near like those the man in front wore as I had in my collection."

"Why did you do that?"

"As a detective you should know why I did it. I wished as nearly as possible to resemble the man in front, so that if necessity arose I could pretend that I was the person commissioned to carry the jewel case. As a matter of fact, the crisis arose when we came to the end of our cab journey. The captain did not know which was his true passenger, and so let us both remain aboard the launch. And now you have the whole story."

"An extremely improbable one, sir. Even by your own account you had no right to interfere in this busi− ness at all."

"I quite agree with you there," he replied, with great nonchalance, taking a card from his pocketbook, which he handed to me.

"That is my London address; you may make inquiries, and you will find I am exactly what I represent myself to be."

The first train for Paris left Meulan at eleven minutes past four in the morning. It was now a quarter of two. I left the captain, crew, and launch in charge of two of my men, with orders to proceed to Paris as soon as it was daylight. I, supported by the third man, waited at the station with our English prisoner, and reached Paris at half past five in the morning.

The English prisoner, though severely interrogated by the judge, stood by his story., Inquiry by the police in London proved that what he said of himself was true. His case, however, began to look very serious when two of the men from the launch asserted that they had seen him push the Frenchman overboard, and their statements could not be shaken. All our energies were bent for the next two weeks on trying to find something of the identity of the missing man, or to get any trace of the two Americans. If the tall American were alive, it seemed incredible that he should not have made application for the valuable property he had lost. All attempts to trace him by means of the cheque on the Credit−Lyonnais proved futile. The bank pretended to give me every assistance, but I sometimes doubt if it actually did so. It had evidently been well paid for its services, and evinced no impetuous desire to betray so good a customer.

We made inquiries about every missing man in Paris, but also without result.

The case had excited much attention throughout the world, and doubtless was published in full in the American papers. The Englishman had been in custody three weeks when the Chief of Police in Paris received the following letter:

DEAR SIR: On my arrival in New York by the English steamer Lucania, I was much amused to read in the papers accounts of the exploits of detectives, French and English. I am sorry that only one of them seems to be in prison;

I think his French confrere ought to be there also. I regret exceedingly, however, that there is rumour of the death by drowning of my friend Martin Dubois, of 375, Rue aux Juifs, Rouen. If this is indeed the case, he has met his death through the blunders of the police. Nevertheless, I wish you would communicate with his family at the address I have given, and assure them that I will make arrangements for their future support. I beg to inform you that I am a manufacturer of imitation diamonds, and through extensive advertising succeeded in accumulating a fortune of many millions. I was in Europe when the necklace was found, and had in my possession over a thousand imitation diamonds of my own manufacture. It occurred to me that here was the opportunity of the most magnificent advertisement in the world. I saw the necklace, received its measurements, and also obtained photographs of it taken by the French Government. Then I set my expert friend Martin Dubois at work, and with the artificial stones I gave him he made an imitation necklace so closely resembling the original that you apparently do not know it is the unreal have in your possession. I did not fear the villainy of the crooks as much as the blundering of the police, who would have protected me with brass−band vehemence if I could not elude them. I knew that the detectives would overlook the obvious, but would at once follow a clew if I provided one for them. Consequently, I laid my plans, just as you have discovered, and got Martin Dubois up from Rouen to carry the case I gave him down to Havre. I had had another box prepared and wrapped in brown paper, with my address in New York written thereon. The moment I emerged from the auction room, while my friend the cowboy was holding up the audience, I turned my face to the door, took out the genuine diamonds from the case and slipped it into the box I had prepared for mailing. Into the genuine case I put the bogus diamonds. After handing the box to Dubois, I turned down a side street, and then into another whose name I do not know, and there in a shop with sealing wax and string did up the real diamonds for posting. I labeled the package "Books," went to the nearest post office, paid letter postage, and handed it over unregistered, as if it were of no particular value. After this I went to my rooms in the Grand Hotel, where I had been staying under my own name for more than a month. Next morning I took train for London, and the day after sailed from Liverpool on the Lucania. I arrived before the Gascogne, which sailed Havre on Saturday, met my box at the Customshouse, paid duty, and it now reposes in my safe. I intend to construct an imitation necklace which will be so like the genuine one that nobody can tell the two apart; then I shall come to Europe and exhibit the pair, for the publication of the truth of this matter will give me the greatest advertisement that ever was.

Yours truly, JOHN P. HAZARD.

I at once communicated with Rouen and found Martin Dubois alive and well. His first words were:

"I swear I did not steal the jewels."

He had swum ashore, tramped to Rouen, and kept quiet in great fear while I was fruitlessly searching Paris for him.

It took Mr. Hazard longer to make his imitation necklace than he supposed, and several years later he booked his passage with the two necklaces on the ill− fated steamer Bourgogne, and now rests beside them at the bottom of the Atlantic.

As the English poet says:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene,

The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear.