



Mystery of the BOULE CABINET

BY BURTON E. STEVENSON

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PROLOGUE.

If a literary miner were to appraise this story he would say of it: "It pans out a big percentage of thrills." There's "pay dirt" in this mystery story for every lover of an exciting tale and an interesting plot. It is one of the masterpieces of its author, who is a recognized leader in the field of the detective story. Round a beautifully inlaid cabinet dating from the days of Louis XIV. which stands in a Fifth avenue mansion weaves a story of plot and counterplot, mystery, suspense and surprise. Jim Godfrey, shrewdest of reporters, and the detective bureaus of New York and Paris are trying to unravel the intricately entangled clues. And the reader, too, will go along with them, breathless and absorbed, getting now a hint, again coming up against a blank wall, until, like them, he comes to the amazing explanation. And the one who baffles reporters, detectives and readers is Crochard, the invincible, a creation in detective fiction.

CHAPTER I. The First Tragedy.

"HELLO!" I said as I took down the receiver of my desk phone in answer to the call. "Is that you, Lester?" asked Philip Vantine's voice. "Yes. So you're back again!" "Got in yesterday. Can you come up to the house and lunch with me today?" "I'll be glad to," I said and meant it, for I liked Philip Vantine. "I'll look for you, then, about 1:30." And that is how it happened that an hour later I was walking over toward Washington square, just above which, on the avenue, the old Vantine mansion stood. It was almost the last survival of the old regime, for the tide of business had long since overflowed from the neighboring streets into the avenue. Philip Vantine had been born in the house where he still lived and declared that he would die there. He had no one but himself to please in the matter, since he was unmarried and lived alone, and he mitigated the increasing roar and dust of the neighborhood by long absences abroad. Vantine was about fifty years of age, the possessor of a comfortable fortune, something of a connoisseur in art matters, a collector of old furniture. His reasons for remaining single in no way concerned his lawyers, a position which our firm had held for many years, and the active work of which had come gradually into my hands. He came forward to meet me, and we shook hands heartily. "It's plain to see that the trip did you good," I said. "Yes," he agreed; "I never felt more fit. But come along; we can talk at table. There's a little difficulty I want you to untangle for me." I followed him upstairs to his study, where a table laid for two had been placed near a low window. "I had lunch served up here," Vantine explained, as we sat down, "because this is the only really pleasant room left in the house." He paused and glanced about the room. Every piece of furniture in it was the work of a master. "I suppose you found some new things while you were away?" I said. "Yes—and it's that I wanted to talk to you about. I brought back six or eight pieces. I'll show them to you presently. They are all pretty good, and one is a thing of beauty. It's more than that—it's an absolutely unique work of art. Only, unfortunately, it isn't mine." "It isn't yours?" "No, and I don't know whose it is.

If I did, I'd go buy it. That's what I want you to do for me. It's a Boule cabinet—the most exquisite I ever saw. It came from Paris, and it was addressed to me. The only explanation I can think of is that my shippers at Paris made a mistake, sent me a cabinet belonging to some one else and sent mine to the other person." "You had bought one, then?" "Yes, and it hasn't turned up. But beside this one it's a mere daub. My man Parks got it through the customs yesterday. As there was a Boule cabinet on my manifest, the mistake wasn't discovered until the whole lot was brought up here and uncared this morning." "Weren't they uncared in the customs?" "No. I've been bringing things in for a good many years, and the customs people know I'm not a thief. Come in," he added, answering a tap at the door. The door opened and Vantine's man came in. "A gentleman to see you, sir," he said and handed Vantine a card. Vantine looked at it a little blankly. "I don't know him," he said. "What does he want?" "He wants to see you, sir—very bad, I should say. I think he's a Frenchman, sir. Anyway, he don't know much English. Shall I show him out, sir?" "No," said Vantine, after an instant's hesitation. "Tell him to wait." "I tell you, Lester," he went on as Parks withdrew, "when I went downstairs this morning and saw that cabinet I could hardly believe my eyes. I thought I knew furniture, but I hadn't any idea such a cabinet existed. The most beautiful I had ever seen is at the Louvre. It stands in the Salle Louis XIV., to the left as you enter. It belonged to Louis himself. Of course I can't be certain without a careful examination, but I believe that cabinet, beautiful as it is, is merely the counterpart of this one." He paused and looked at me, his eyes bright with the enthusiasm of the connoisseur. "Boule furniture," he continued, "is usually of ebony inlaid with tortoise shell and incrustated with arabesques in metals of various kinds. The incrustation had to be very exact, and to get it so the artist clamped together two plates of equal size and thickness, one of metal, the other of tortoise shell, traced his design on the top one and then cut them both out together. The result was two combinations, the original, with a tortoise shell ground and metal applications, and the counterpart, applique metal with tortoise shell arabesques. The original was really the one which the artist designed and whose effects he studied. The counterpart was merely a resultant accident, with which he was not especially concerned. Understand?" "Yes, I think so," I said. "Well, it's the original which has the real artistic value. Of course the counterpart is often beautiful, too, but in a much lower degree." "I can understand that," I said. "And now, Lester," Vantine went on, his eyes shining more and more, "if my supposition is correct, if the Grand Louis was content with the counterpart of this cabinet for the long gallery at Versailles who do you suppose owned the original?" I saw what he was driving at. "I believe it belonged to Mme. de Montespan," he said. "Really, Vantine," I exclaimed, "I didn't know you were so romantic. You quite take my breath away!" He flushed a little at the words, and I saw how deeply in earnest he was. "The craze of the collector takes him a long way sometimes," he said. "What I want you to do is to cable my shippers, Armand & Son, Rue du Temple, find out who owns this cabinet and buy it for me." "Perhaps the owner won't sell." "Oh, yes, he will! Anything can be bought—for a price." "You mean you're going to have this cabinet, whatever the cost?" "I mean just that." "At least you'll tell me where to begin." "I said, 'I don't know anything of the value of such things.'" "Well," said Vantine, "suppose you

begin at 10,000 francs. We mustn't seem too eager. It's because I'm so eager that I want you to carry it through for me. I can't trust myself." "And the other end?" "There isn't any other end. Of course, strictly speaking, there is, because my money isn't unlimited, but I don't believe you will have to go over 500,000 francs." I gasped. "You mean you're willing to give \$100,000 for this cabinet?" Vantine nodded. "Maybe a little more. If the owner won't accept that you must let me know before you break off negotiations. But come and see it." He led the way out of the room and down the stairs, but when we reached the lower hall he paused. "Perhaps I'd better see my visitor first," he said. "You'll find a new picture or two over there in the music room. I'll be with you in a minute." I started on, and he turned through a doorway at the left. An instant later I heard a sharp exclamation; then his voice calling me. "Lester, come here!" he cried. I ran back along the hall, into the room which he had entered. He was standing just inside the door. "Look here," he said, with a queer catch in his voice and pointed with a trembling hand to a dark object on the floor. I moved aside to see it better. Then my heart gave a sickening throb, for the object on the floor was the body of a man. It needed but a glance to tell me that the man was dead. There could be no life in that livid face, in those glassy eyes. We stood for a moment shaken as one always is by sudden and unexpected contact with death. "Who is he?" I asked at last. "I don't know," answered Vantine hoarsely. "I never saw him before." Then he strode to the bell and rang it violently. "Parks," he went on sternly as that worthy appeared at the door, "what has been going on in here?" "Going on, sir?" repeated Parks, with a look of amazement. Then his glance fell upon the huddled body, and he stopped short, his eyes staring, his mouth open. "Why—why," he stammered, "that's the man who was waiting to see you, sir."



The Man Was Dead.

sergeant. Back of him was Coroner Goldberg, whom I had met in two previous cases, while the third countenance, looking at me with a quizzical smile, was that of Jim Godfrey, the Record's star reporter. The fourth man was a policeman in uniform, who at a word from Simmonds took his station at the door. "What is it?" asked Godfrey. "Just a suicide, I think," and I unlocked the door into the room where the dead man lay. Simmonds, Goldberg and Godfrey stepped inside. I followed and closed the door. "Nothing has been disturbed," I said. "No one has touched the body." Simmonds nodded and glanced inquiringly about the room, but Godfrey's eyes, I noticed, were on the face of the dead man. Goldberg dropped to his knees beside the body, looked into the eyes and touched his fingers to the left wrist. Then he stood erect again and looked down at the body, and as I followed his gaze I noted its

attitude more accurately than I had done in the first shock of discovering it. It was lying on its right side, half on its stomach with its right arm doubled under it and its left hand clutching at the floor above its head. The knees were drawn up as though in a convulsion, and the face was horribly convulsed, with a sort of purple tinge under the skin, as though the blood had been suddenly congealed. The eyes were wide open, and their glassy stare added not a little to the apparent terror and suffering of the face. The coroner glanced at Simmonds. "Not much question as to the cause," he said. "Poison, of course." "Of course," nodded Simmonds. "But what kind?" asked Godfrey. "It will take a postmortem to tell that," and Goldberg bent for another close look at the distorted face. "I'm free to admit the symptoms aren't the usual ones." I told all I knew—how Parks had announced a man's arrival, how Vantine and I had come downstairs together, how Vantine had called me and finally how Parks had identified the body as that of the strange caller. "How long a time elapsed after Parks announced the man before you and Mr. Vantine came downstairs?" asked Goldberg. "Half an hour perhaps," Goldberg nodded. "Let's have Parks in," he said. I opened the door and called to Parks, who was sitting on the bottom step of the stair. Goldberg looked him over carefully as he stepped into the room, but there could be no two opinions about Parks. He had been with Vantine for eight or ten years, and the earmarks of the competent and faithful servant were apparent all over him. "Do you know this man?" Goldberg asked, with a gesture toward the body. "No, sir," said Parks; "I never saw him till about an hour ago, when Rogers called me downstairs and said there was a man to see Mr. Vantine." "Who is Rogers?" "He's the footman, sir. He answered the door when the man rang." "Well, and then what happened?" "I took his card up to Mr. Vantine, sir." "Did Mr. Vantine know him?" "No, sir; he wanted to know what he wanted." "What did he want?" "I don't know, sir. He couldn't speak English hardly at all. He was French, I think. He was so excited that he couldn't remember what little English he did know." "What made you think he was excited?" "The way he stuttered and the way his eyes glinted. After Mr. Vantine said he would see him presently Rogers and me went back to our lunch." "Do you mean to say that you and Rogers went away and left this stranger here by himself?" "The servants' dining room is right at the end of the hall, sir. We left the door open. If he'd come out into the hall we'd have seen him." "And he didn't come out into the hall while you were there?" "No, sir." "Did anybody come in?" "Oh, no, sir; the front door has a snap lock. It can't be opened from the outside without a key." "So you are perfectly sure that no one either entered or left the house by the front door while you and Rogers were sitting there?" "Not by the back door either, sir; to get out the back way, you have to pass through the room where we were." "Where were the other servants?" "The cook was in the kitchen, sir. This is the housemaid's afternoon out." The coroner paused. Godfrey and Simmonds had both listened to this interrogation. "What is the room yonder used for?" asked Godfrey, pointing to the connecting door. "It's a sort of storeroom just now, sir," said Parks. "Mr. Vantine is just back from Europe, and we've been unpacking in there some of the things he bought while abroad." "Send in Mr. Vantine, please," said Goldberg. Parks went out, and Vantine came in a moment later. He corroborated exactly the story told by Parks and myself, but he added one detail. "Here is the man's card," he said, and held out a square of pasteboard. It contained a single engraved line: "M. Theophile D'Aurelle." "He's French, as Parks suggested," said Godfrey. "That's evident, too, from the cut of his clothes." "Yes, and from the cut of his hair," added Goldberg. "You say you didn't know him, Mr. Vantine?" "I never before saw him, to my knowledge," answered Vantine. "The name is wholly unknown to me." "Well," said Goldberg, taking possession of the card and slipping it into his pocket, "suppose we lift him on to that couch by the window and take a look through his clothes." The man was slightly built, so that Simmonds and Goldberg raised the body between them without difficulty and placed it on the couch. I saw Godfrey's eyes searching the carpet. "What I should like to know," he said after a moment, "is this: If this fellow took poison what did he take it out of? Where's the paper or bottle or whatever it was?" "Maybe it's in his hand," suggested Simmonds, and lifted the right hand, which hung trailing over the side of the couch. Then as he raised it into the light a sharp cry burst from him. "Look here!" he said, and held the hand so that we all could see.

(To be continued.)

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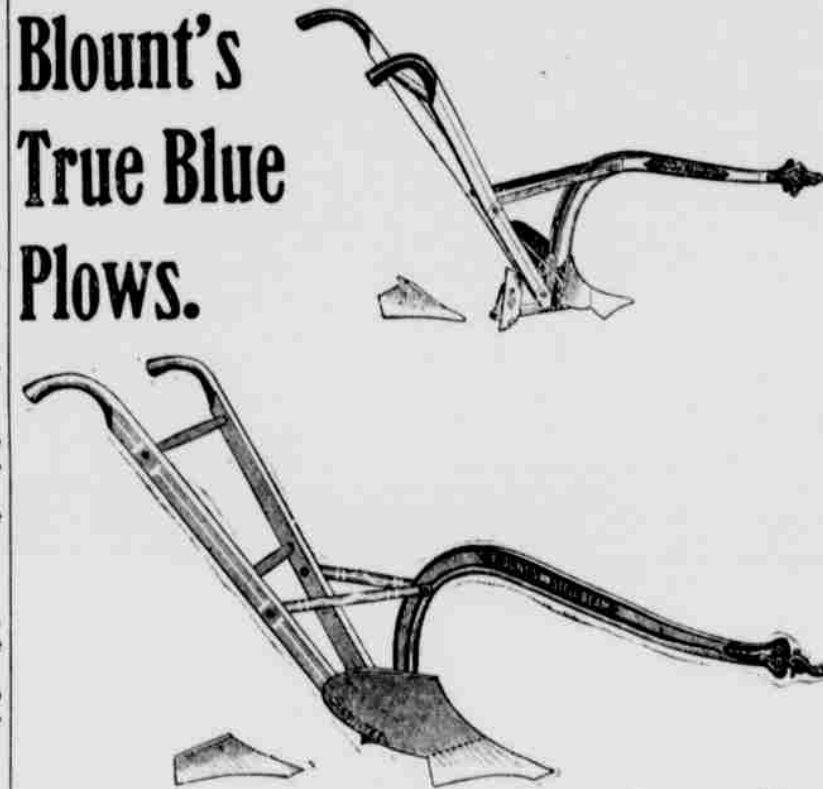
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