

# The Mystery of the Boule Cabinet

By BURTON E. STEVENSON  
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## SYNOPSIS

Apparently by mistake Philip Vantine receives an antique Boule cabinet from Paris. A strange Frenchman is mysteriously killed near it.

Poison inserted through two wounds on his hand is the cause of death. Vantine's friends, Lester and Godfrey, a reporter, are greatly interested.

Vantine himself is killed in the same mysterious manner while, or shortly after, examining the Boule cabinet.

Rogers, a servant, accuses a woman who visits Vantine of Vantine's murder. Rogers acts suspiciously.

With the aid of Parks, Vantine's valet, Lester makes plans to carefully guard the Boule cabinet from marauders.

Godfrey and Lester conclude that the cabinet has a secret drawer guarded by a mechanism which stabs and poisons.

While Godfrey vainly searches for the drawer with a steel gauntlet on his hand Lester sees two burning eyes watching them through a shutter.

Lawyer Hornblower, representing "Mme. X," asks Lester for a packet of her letters hidden in the Boule cabinet, which has been stolen from her.

She calls upon Lester, says there is no deadly mechanism in the cabinet and gets her letters from a secret drawer.

"Mme. X's" maid, Julie, showed Vantine how to open the secret drawer and knew Drouet, the dead Frenchman, who sought the letters for blackmail purposes.

"M. Felix Armand" claims the Boule cabinet for his Paris firm and takes it away, followed by Godfrey and Lester.

"Armand," captured by a giant Frenchman, kills the giant with a poison barb, but escapes from Godfrey and Lester.

The Boule cabinet is locked in a police station cell as a bait for "Armand," who is really Crochard, a great French criminal.

Crochard audaciously notifies Godfrey that he will claim his property, the Boule cabinet, at the police station the following Wednesday.

"M. Pigot," a French detective, arrives. He is met by a representative of the French consulate before Godfrey and Lester reach him.

"Pigot" shows Lester and Commissioner Grady another secret drawer in the cabinet guarded by steel fangs and poison.

He recovers the Michaelovitch diamonds, then steals them while on the way to a bank. Crochard has impersonated Pigot.

Godfrey produces the real Pigot, who was bound and gagged by Crochard, and the real Michaelovitch diamonds, which Godfrey previously had removed from the cabinet.

Crochard steals the real gems from a steamship's strong room while the real Pigot is taking them back to Paris.

## CHAPTER X.

Enter M. Armand.

**E**IGHT or ten years before the fair Julie—at least she was fairer then than now—had come to New York to enter the employ of a family whose mistress had decided that life without a French maid was undesirable. Rogers had met her, had been fascinated by her black eyes and red lips, had in the end proposed marriage, had been accepted and for some months had led an eventful existence as the husband of the siren. Then one morning he awakened to find her gone.

He had, of course, entrusted his savings to her, and the savings were gone also. Julie, it seems, had been overcome with longing for the Paris asphalt, and she had flown back to France. Rogers had thought of following; but, appalled at the difficulty of finding her in Paris, not knowing what he should do if he did find her, he had finally given it up and had settled gloomily down to live upon his memories. Some sort of affection for her had kept alive within him, and when he opened the door of Vantine's house and found her standing on the steps he was as wax in her hands.

When the story was finished Julie was quite herself again, even a little proud. I think, of holding the center of the stage in the role of siren.

"This is all true, I suppose?" asked the veiled lady.

"All quite true, madame," answered Julie, with a shrug. "I am older now and have more sense; besides, I am no longer sought after as I was."

"And so," said madame, with irony, "you are now no doubt willing to return to your husband?"

"I have been considering it, madame. One must have a harbor in one's old age."

I glanced at Rogers and was astonished to see that he was regarding the woman with affectionate admiration.

"I have hesitated," she added, "only because of madame. Where would madame get another maid such as I?"

"We will discuss it," said the veiled lady, "when we are alone. And now, perhaps, you will be so good as to tell us of your previous visit here."

"One day on the boat as I was looking down at the passengers of the third class that I perceived Georges—M. Drouet—strolling about. I was boulevardier—what you call upset with amazement, and then he looked up and our eyes met, and he came beneath me and commanded that I meet him that evening. It was then that I learned his plan. It was to secure those letters for himself and to dispose of them."

"To whom?" asked Godfrey.

"To the person that would pay the greatest price for them, most certainly. They were to be offered first to madame at 10,000 francs each. Should she refuse they were then to be offered to M. le Duc—he would surely desire to possess them?"

The veiled lady shivered a little.

"That night," continued Julie, "I decided that at the first moment I would hasten to this house; I would explain the matter to M. Vantine; I would persuade him to restore to me the letters with which I would fly to madame. I knew also that I could rely upon her gratitude."

"It was not until evening that I found an opportunity to leave madame. I hastened here; I rang the bell, but I confess I should have failed. I should not have secured an entrance if it had not been that it was my husband who opened the door to me. M. Vantine himself came into the hall, and I ran to him and begged that he hear me. It was then that he invited me to enter this room."

She paused again, and a little shiver of expectancy ran through me. At last we were to learn how Philip Vantine had met his death!

"I sat down," continued Julie, "I told him the story from the very beginning. He listened with much interest, but when I proposed that he should restore to me the letters he hesitated. He walked up and down the room, trying to decide, then he took me through that door into the room beyond. The cabinet was standing in the center of the floor, and all the lights were blazing."

"I went to the cabinet and pressed on the three springs, as I had seen madame do. The little handle at the side fell out, but suddenly he stopped me."

"Those letters do not belong to you," he said. "They belong to your mistress. I cannot permit that you take them away, for, after all, I do not know you. You may intend to make some bad use of them."

"He brought me back into this room. I could have cried with rage!"

"Return to your mistress," he said, "and inform her that I shall be most happy to return the letters to her. But it must be in her own hands that I place them."

"I saw that it was of no use to argue further. He was of adamant. So I left the house, he himself opening the door for me. And that is all that I know, madame."

"Of course," Godfrey suggested gently, "as soon as you reached home you related to your mistress what had occurred?"

Julie grew a little crimson.

"No, monsieur," she said. "I told her nothing. I feared that without the letters she would misunderstand my motives."

"And then, of course, without the letters, there would be no reward," Godfrey supplemented.

The veiled lady rose. Julie resumed her veil, shooting at Godfrey a glance anything but friendly. The veiled lady turned to me and held out her hand.

"I thank you, Mr. Lester, for your

kindness," she said. "Come, Julie," and she moved toward the door, which Rogers hastened to open.

Mr. Hornblower nodded and passed out after them, and Godfrey and I were left alone together.

"Well," said Godfrey—"well, what a story it would make! And I can't use it. It's a little reflection, Lester."

"It would certainly shake the pillars of society," I agreed. "I'm rather shaken myself. I hadn't any idea this was the right cabinet. I didn't see how it could be."

"That's it exactly. How did it happen when the veiled lady went to Armand & Son in Paris that she was directed to Philip Vantine? According to his own story, he did not purchase this cabinet. He had never seen it before. It was presumably shipped him by mistake. Armand & Son cable you that it was a mistake, and yet they cite Vantine as the purchaser."

"There is no poisoned mechanism about that drawer, that's sure," I added.

"No, and never has been," Godfrey agreed.

"And that leaves us all at sea, doesn't it? But there is one thing sure. The killing, whatever its cause, was done out there in the anteroom, not in here."

"What makes you think that?"

"We believe that Drouet came here to get Vantine's permission to open this drawer and get the letters, saw the cabinet, tried to open the drawer and was killed in the attempt. But it is evident enough now that there is nothing about that drawer to hurt any one."

"Yes, that's evident, I think," Godfrey agreed.

"If he had opened the drawer, then, he would have taken the letters, since there was nothing to prevent him. Since they were not taken it follows, doesn't it, that he was killed before he had a chance at the drawer? Perhaps he never saw the cabinet. He must have been killed out there in the anteroom a few minutes after Parks left."

"And how about Vantine?" Godfrey asked.

"If he had opened the drawer," I pointed out, "and been killed in the act of opening it, it would have been found open. I had thought that perhaps it closed of itself, but you see that it does not. You have to push it shut and then snap the handle up into place."

"That's true," Godfrey assented. "Neither of them opened the drawer. But there is an alternative. The hand that killed Drouet and Vantine may also have closed the drawer."

"And left the letters in it?" I questioned. "Surely not!"

He glanced at the shuttered window.

"Besides," I protested, "how would he get in? How would he get away? What was he after if he left the letters behind?" Then I rose wearily. "I must be getting back to the office," I said. "This is Saturday, and we close at 2. Are you coming?"

"No," he answered. "If you don't mind I'll sit here awhile longer and think things over. Lester. Perhaps I'll blunder on to the truth yet!"

I got back to the office to find that M. Felix Armand of Armand & Son had called and, finding me out, had left his card, with the penciled memorandum that he would call again Monday morning.

Vantine's will was probated next morning. He directed that his collec-

said as he sat down. "If you speak French"—

"Not half so well as you speak English," I laughed. "I can tell that from your first sentence."

"In that event I will do the best that I can," he said, smiling, "and you must pardon my blunders. First, Mr. Lester, on behalf of Armand & Son, I must ask your pardon for this mistake, so inexcusable. We cannot find for it an explanation. The cabinet which was purchased by Mr. Vantine remained in our warehouse, and this other one was boxed and shipped to him. We are investigating most rigidly."

"Then Mr. Vantine's cabinet is still in Paris?"

"No, Mr. Lester; the error was discovered some days ago, and the cabinet belonging to Mr. Vantine was shipped to me here. It should arrive next Wednesday on La Provence. I shall myself receive it and deliver it to Mr. Vantine."

"Mr. Vantine is dead," I said. "You did not know?"

He sat staring at me for a moment.

"Did I understand that you said Mr. Vantine is dead?" he stammered.

I told him briefly as much as I knew of the tragedy.

"It is curious you saw nothing of it in the papers," I added. "They were full of it."

"I have been visiting friends at Quebec," he explained. "It was there that the message from our house found me commanding me to hasten here. A blunder of this sort we feel as a disgrace. I have met Mr. Vantine many times. He was a real connoisseur. We have lost one of our most valued patrons. You say that he was found dead in a room at his house?"

"Yes, and death resulted from a small wound on the hand, into which some very powerful poison had been injected."

"That is most curious. In what manner was such a wound made?"

"That we don't know. I had a theory—"

"Yes?" he questioned, his eyes glancing with interest.

"A few hours previously another man had been found in the same room, killed in the same way."

"Another man?"

"A stranger who had called to see Mr. Vantine. My theory was that both this stranger and Mr. Vantine had been killed while trying to open a secret drawer in the Boule cabinet. Do you know anything of the history of that cabinet, M. Armand?"

"We believe it to have been made for Mme. de Montespan by M. Boule himself," he answered. "It is the original of one now in the Louvre which is known to have belonged to the Grand Louis."

"It was Mr. Vantine's correct guess at the history of the cabinet," I explained, "which gave me the basis for my theory. A cabinet belonging to Mme. de Montespan would, of course, have a secret drawer. What more natural than that it should be guarded by a poisoned mechanism?"

"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 Grand Louis to the Montespan, 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. Vantine 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 carelessly.

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

"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 can meet at the house of Mr. Vantine and exchange the cabinets."

"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.

(To be continued.)



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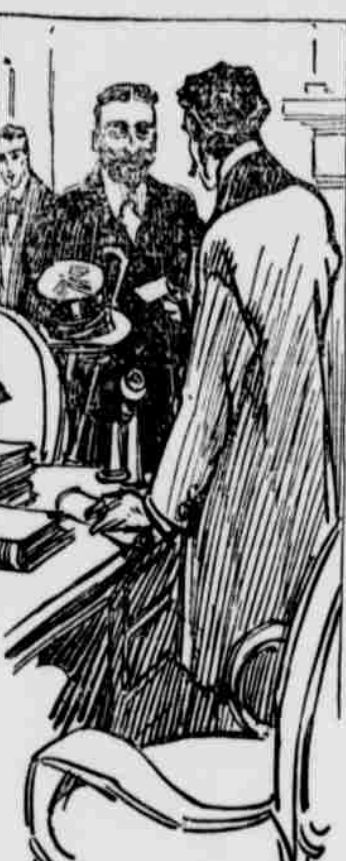
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M. Felix Armand Was Shown In to Me.

tion of art objects he removed to the museum and that the house and such portion of its contents as the museum did not care for be sold for the museum's benefit. I was requested to remain in charge of things for a week or two until arrangements for the removal could be made.

I acquiesced in all these arrangements, but I was feeling decidedly blue when I found myself back in the office.

"Gentleman to see you, sir," said the office boy as I sat down at my desk, and a moment later M. Felix Armand was shown in to me. Ruddy faced, bright eyed, with dark, full beard and waving hair almost jet black, he gave the impression of tremendous strength and virility. There was about him, too, an air of culture not to be mistaken. I was both impressed and charmed by him.

"I speak English very badly, sir," he

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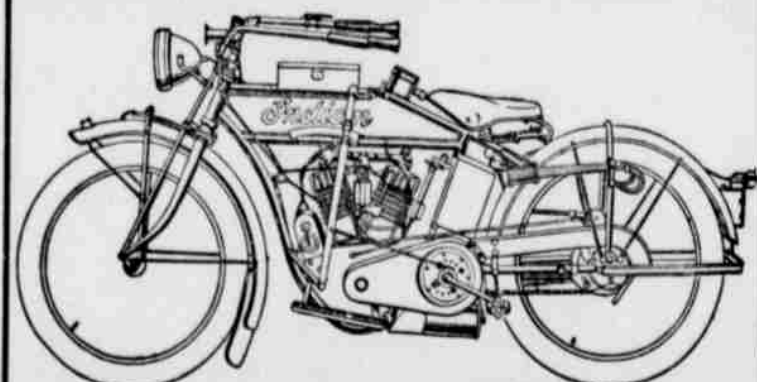
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