

Master of Sinister House

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

The Story Thus Far:

JOSEPH, a mysterious criminal and disguise genius, carries on enormous operations in London.

He is the greatest enemy of Martin Hews, an avid though not overscrupulous collector of art treasures, who lives in a huge mansion on the Breezeley marshes with his beautiful niece, Beatrice Essiter.

To fight Joseph, Hews has many aides, one of whom is a gang leader, Jim Donkin, who steals Joseph's girl, Rachel, and leaves her at Breezeley. Major Owston is another aide, who is detailed to hunt Joseph in the West End.

He goes with Beatrice Essiter to Claridge's before Lady Bonofar's reception, and a Mr. X at another table stares at Beatrice unpleasantly. Both instinctively feel that this is Joseph.

After the reception they go to the Blue Skies night club in company with Lady Bonofar's brother, Mr. Leopold. Owston is drugged and spends the night in jail

accused of intoxication. Beatrice is stolen and held by Joseph. Leopold, of course, is an accomplice of Joseph's, but Owston could not possibly prove it.

Joseph writes Owston a malicious note about the beauty of Beatrice, and Hews cunningly shows it to Rachel. She is furiously jealous and threatens to betray Joseph and his gang. But Joseph gets her first. Owston and Inspector Bloor of Scotland Yard find her in Owston's apartment with her hair shaved off and her legs mutilated.

Inspector Bloor plans to close in on the East End haunts of Joseph's gang.

On the same night that this is planned Owston goes to the Milan Hotel to buy a famous Buddha for Martin Hews, from a certain Tul-kak. He secures the Buddha but has a heated battle afterward with some of Joseph's men and barely escapes. Downstairs in the hotel he finds a terrific raid in progress. Depositing the treasure in a secret safe he joins the fight, and is amazed to see the mysterious Mr. X in the thick of it.

XII

I LOOKED again and saw that on the outskirts of the fighting, also presenting a bold front, was Mr. Leopold.

I watched them both closely for several moments; then suddenly a wave of inspiration flashed into my brain. I understood the whole business. Mr. X was going from table to table, wherever the women were wearing the most wonderful jewelry, missing out the little girls with their bead necklaces and cheap engagement rings, and followed always by a thin stream of marauders.

The plan was amazingly simple. He had looked through the list of tables. He knew exactly the character of the jewelry the women would be wearing, and his men followed his lead. When he used his gun, as often as not the man at whom he had fired went rolling to the ground, but in less than a minute he was up again. I watched Leopold.

He was playing the same game—always seeming to be encouraging the defenders, always seeming to be facing with a bold front the marauders.

STILL blood-stained, and apparently limping badly, Mr. X stumbled to a table where a woman was struggling to conceal a diamond necklace. He was followed, as usual, by one or two threatening figures, from the foremost of whom he received a blow which wouldn't have hurt a fly, but which was sufficient to send him to the floor until the necklace was secured. It was the same performance all the time—sheer bluff, made possible by his bogus automatic and a featherweight blackjack.

Every now and then there was what appeared to be a real struggle, in which Mr. X was always the victor, but it never once resulted in the salvation of the jewelry. I began to move now

slowly toward the portion of the room where he was engaged.

Then I braced myself for what seemed to me might be the adventure of the evening. I slipped fresh cartridges into my gun, and I crossed the floor until I faced Mr. X. He had grown more audacious, I think, in the darkened room, for half the lamps seemed to have been overturned and pandemonium reigned everywhere. I saw him point to a table where a woman and two elderly men were seated. I even heard him whisper in the ear of one of the raiders, who lurked around him:

"Down the front of her dress—glint-ers. Make sure of them."

Then, as usual, he flung himself into the fray with apparent fury. The woman, shrieking, fell back in her chair. The man who had attacked her—a long, lithe, young street Arab of scarcely nineteen or twenty—held her for a moment by the throat, while he ripped her dress down to her waist and drew out a handful of magnificent diamonds.

Mr. X plunged heroically in, but a push of the shoulder, which could scarcely have hurt a chicken, sent him staggering. He fired his gun at short range, and the man with the diamonds in his hand reeled over and lay for a moment quite still, while his companion snatched at the gems and darted off with them, the woman's shrieks ringing out almost to the ceiling.

I went up to the shot man and kicked him. He opened his eyes in surprise, and I swung around to find myself face to face with Mr. X.

"Well met, my young friend," he mocked. "And now?"

"And now this," I answered, and let

fly for his face, only to find myself almost overbalanced as he slipped nimbly on one side with all the agility of a lightweight prize fighter.

He laughed derisively. "Clumsy as usual, my dear Major!" he exclaimed. "Why beat the air trying for me?"

I HAD recovered my balance without falling, and I kept my temper. We were facing the other way now, and I saw distinctly the man whom Mr. X had shot crawling blatantly away.

"You are doing marvelous work, aren't you, Joseph," I mocked him, "with your sham cartridges and your sham heroism?"

He was ever so slightly disturbed—the faintest of frowns only!

"A fool with one eye open!" he murmured. "And, talking about one eye, Major, what about the Buddha?"

"Safe," I told him. "Why didn't you come up to seize it? We might have settled this matter between us once and for all."

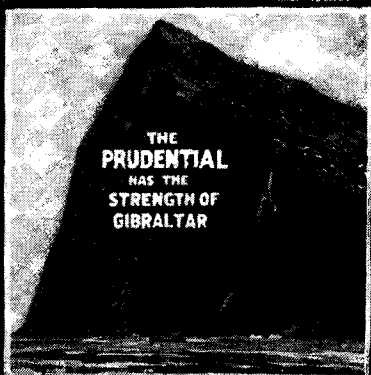
The thought of Rachel's pathetic face, of Beatrice still in his power, maddened me, and this time I made no mistake. I struck his wrist with the side of my hand such a blow that the gun he had been holding fell to the floor. I snatched it up, and, while he was hesitating, I slipped the cartridges into my pocket.

"We'll see tomorrow," I threatened, "what the hero of tonight was playing at. I have a gun too, Joseph, and my cartridges bite."

"And I have another," he countered, his hand going round to his back like lightning. "Shall we call it quits?"

He was panting a little now, his weapon half (Continued on page 34)

"Endowment Insurance?
Good! I'm living
now on mine"



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A Little Lie or Two

A SHORT SHORT STORY

By Howard Vincent O'Brien

MY FRIEND Padeloup of the Sureté looked regretfully at his empty glass. "If you unearthed a traitor—a spy . . . what would you do?"

"Jug him, I trust."

"No—any wielder of pistol and club can drag a man to jail. How much more delicate is the touch of a Padeloup! He does not suppress the spy—he uses him. Generous, he provides the information and facilitates its transmission. If, for example, the High Command means to base the army of Mangin on Soissons, the report goes to Berlin that Mangin is sailing for Saloniki."

"And then what?"

Padeloup sighed. "All things end—like this good wine. The spy's employers act on the news that Mangin is in Asia, and, pouf! Mangin attacks on the Marne. They lose faith in their spy. They cast him off. Then the great heart of Padeloup opens. He is given a home. Not such a home as small minds would think of—a trifle like a château on the Loire. No—an altogether permanent home!"

He rose from the table. "It is time for one of my workers to rest," he said softly. "Tonight Padeloup makes what you call—the pinch!"

As we made our way down the rue de la Vierge, a narrow, odorous little street, Padeloup added fragmentary details about his "worker."

"A good lad, to start. Ambitious—and resentful when promotion did not come. Then a quarrel with an officer—punishment—and desertion. Such material is always useful—to the enemy."

We entered a dingy, smoke-filled café. At one of the tables a stout woman was filling the glass of a young man who sat alone, his chin on his hands. His close-set eyes were small and furtive, and his mouth was weak, with drooping corners. He looked up, frowning, when Padeloup stood beside him.

"So, Lampier," said my friend, "we meet at last."

"Who the devil are you?" demanded the young man, between hostility and alarm. "Why do you call me Lampier? My name is . . ."

Padeloup yawned elaborately. "I know—Pedro Gomez, born in Pampe-lune, and so forth. Curious that I should confuse you with one Gaston Lampier, late of the 187th Artillery, and very much sought after by a vindictive French Government."

"I am a Spanish citizen," said the youth stubbornly, though his lip quivered.

"Strange!" murmured Padeloup. "You resemble Lampier so much." With a feline gesture he ripped open the young man's shirt. "Stranger still that you should bear Lampier's scar. What a coincidence!"

THE young man, clutching at his breast, fell back, his face drained of color.

"It had to come, I suppose. Well—may I have another hour of liberty?"

"An hour? What for?"

"Listen. The train from Paris arrives at eleven. My mother comes on it. I was to meet her—go with her to Bordeaux, where my sister lives. She thinks I am on leave. She is old, m'sieu, feeble—and she is blind. I should like to meet her and bid her—adieu."

"Does your mother know your—present occupation?" asked Padeloup.

The young man hung his head, and a little sigh of anguish came from his dry lips. "She thinks I have done well



"Even if you do not come back to me, François, I shall not weep. One does not weep when one is proud"

Illustrated by
Louis
Hidenmeister

in my regiment—that I am adjutant. She—she is proud of me, m'sieu."

"I do not like to change my plans," mused Padeloup, his slender finger-tips together. "And I do not like scenes."

"A little lie or two, m'sieu," pleaded the young man desperately. "It is for her sake. I ask nothing for myself. For the love you bear your own mother, m'sieu—grant me this."

Padeloup was silent, twirling the ends of his mustache. Then he nodded toward the door. "Let us go to the station."

Padeloup had given his instructions. "You will introduce me as your colonel. You have been promoted again. Well, why not? One lie's no worse than another. Beyond that, you will be respectfully silent. And if there is but the shadow of a trick. . . ."

It was after midnight when the train drew in to the dimly-lighted station. One of the carriage doors opened, and we saw a little old lady, dressed in stiff, shiny black, with a prim little black bonnet over her white hair, a shawl around her thin shoulders, a stick in her hand.

Lampier sprang forward. "Mother!" I heard him exclaim as he put his arms around the frail black figure: and at the response, in a thin, quavering little echo—"Ah, François, *mon petit*—I had to turn my head away."

In a voice that shook a little with his effort to control it, I heard him say: "Maman, allow me to present my colonel."

Very gently, Padeloup took the old lady's hand. I could see the perspiration on his forehead. "I wish we might

meet under pleasanter circumstances. But these are hard days. We must put everything to hazard—everything that is precious."

"My André sleeps in Picardy," said the old lady with quiet dignity.

I could see Padeloup swallow hard. "The mothers of France are her glory, madame. And you are honored in the service of your sons. See—put your fingers here." He laid the old trunk strap he had taken from the baggage truck across the young man's breast. "The badge of his promotion, madame. Salute your son, Lieutenant Lampier."

The seamed old face broke into a smile, and the frail white hands stroked the masquerading strap. "An officer, François? Oh, I am proud!"

Padeloup bit his lip. "Madame, I have something to say—"

"Have no fear, Monsieur le Colonel." The smile faded, and the old lips quivered. "Say what you must. A soldier's mother has courage."

PASDELOUP looked at me, and there was anguish in his eyes. "I had hoped, madame, that you might enjoy a longer visit with your son than now appears possible. He has served too well, and duty lives on service. She is an insatiable mistress. Those whom she has tried and tested, she would use again."

"Go on, monsieur," faltered the old lady. "He—he is ordered to the front?"

"More than that, madame. To the front—yes: but on a duty of special distinction, for which his general has called him."

"Immediately?" I shall never forget the desolation in that word.

"Alas, yes. The order was telegraphed. It is urgent. I am so sorry."

"It is an honor," breathed the old lady. "But ah, I know what these orders mean—and he is all I have left. Oh, François, where are you?" She put out her arms, and the white hands played gently over his hair. "God demands much of us these days," she whispered. "All that we have. And it is not easy to understand the meaning of it." She raised her sightless eyes. "But there must be a meaning, monsieur?"

"I am sure of it, madame. Courage is never wasted."

From her reticule, she took out a tiny handkerchief. "I shall not weep, monsieur. One weeps only for disgrace. If my sons were traitors to France, I should weep—most bitterly. But even if it be God's will that you do not come back to me, François, I shall not weep. One does not weep when one is proud."

Slowly, the train began to move. Padeloup watched it until its lights were mere spots of red. Then he turned to the young man, who had sunk on a bench, his head in his arms. "The play is done," he said harshly. "There remains but the epilogue."

"I thank you, m'sieu," muttered the young man without looking up. "You have been very kind."

"I have been a very great liar," said Padeloup softly. "And I am not done. Padeloup never does things by halves. In due course, a certain Pedro Gomez, a spy, must settle his account in accordance with the rules of war. I shall see to that—"

The young man shuddered.

"—and simultaneously your mother will be notified that her son, Lieutenant François Lampier, has fallen gloriously on the field of honor. I shall see to that, also."