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A Nest of Spies

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THE FANTÔMAS DETECTIVE NOVELS

A NEST OF
SPIES

BY

PIERRE SOUVESTRE

AND

MARCEL ALLAIN

AUTHORS OF
"FANTÔMAS," "THE EXPLOITS OF JUVE,"
"MESSENGERS OF EVIL," ETC.



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A NEST OF SPIES

[1]

I

SUDDEN DEATH

She sought in vain!

The young woman, who was finishing her toilette, lost patience. With a look of annoyance she half turned round, crying, "Well, Captain, it is easy to see that you are not accustomed to women's ways!"

This pretty girl's lover, a man about forty, with an energetic countenance, and a broad forehead adorned with sparse locks, was smoking a Turkish cigarette, taking his ease on a divan at the far end of the room.

He jumped up as if moved by a spring.

For some time the captain had followed with his eyes the gestures of his graceful mistress; like a good and attentive lover he guessed what she required. He rushed into the adjoining dressing-room and returned with a little onyx cup in which was a complete assortment of pins.

"There, my pretty Bobinette!" he cried, coming up to the young woman. "This will put me into your good graces again."

She thanked him with a smile; took the needed pins from the cup, and quietly finished dressing.

Bobinette was a red-haired beauty.

The thick braids of her abundant tresses, with their natural waves and curls, fell to where the lines of neck and shoulders meet, their tawny hues enhancing the milky whiteness of her plump flesh. This young creature was of the true Rubens type.

It was half past three in the afternoon of a dull November day. A kind of twilight was darkening the ground floor flat in the quiet rue de Lille, where the two lovers were together.

For some months now Captain Brocq had been on intimate terms with this intoxicating young person, who [2] answered to the nickname "Bobinette." Her features, though irregular, were pleasing. Sprung from the people, Bobinette had tried to remedy this by becoming a past mistress of postures, of attitudes. Like others of her kind, from her very childhood she had learned to adapt herself to whatever company she was in, picking up almost intuitively those shades of taste, of tact, which can transform the most unconsidered daughter of the people into the most fastidious of Parisiennes.

It was the contrary as regards Captain Brocq, an artillery staff-officer and attached to the Ministry of War. Notwithstanding his intellectual capacities and his professional worth, so highly valued by his chiefs, he always remained the man of humble origin, somewhat gauche, timid, who was evidently better fitted to be at the head of a battery on the bastions of a fortress than frequenting the gossipy clubs of officials or society drawing-rooms. Brocq, who had passed out of the Military Academy exceedingly well, had been given an important post recently: a confidential appointment at the Ministry of War. During the first years of his military life Brocq had been entirely preoccupied by his profession. Of a truth, as pretty Bobinette had just told him, he was not at all "a man accustomed to women." This was why, when verging on forty, his heart, as young, as fresh as a student's, had suddenly caught fire when he happened to meet Bobinette.

Who was this woman?

Brocq could not place her with that mathematical exactitude dear to his scientific mind. She puzzled this honest man, who fell deeper and deeper in love with her. Whenever they met, and their first tender effusions were over, the lovers exchanged ideas, and always on the same subject.

Bobinette had completed her toilet. In leisurely fashion she came over to her lover and seated herself beside him. Brocq, who was thinking deeply, remained silent.

"What are you thinking about?" Bobinette suddenly asked, in a chaffing tone. "Have you solved a new problem, or are you thinking of a dark woman?"

Brocq smiled. Amorously he put his arm round the [3] girl's supple figure; drawing her to him, and burying his lips in her abundant and perfumed hair, he murmured tenderly:

"I am thinking of the future, of our future."

"Good gracious me!" replied Bobinette, withdrawing herself from his arms. "You are not going to bore me again with your ideas of marriage?"

The captain made a movement of protestation; but Bobinette went on:

"No, no, old dear, no chains for me! No gag, no muzzle for me! We are both independent, let us remain so! Free! Long live liberty!"

Brocq now got in a word: "In the first place," he said, "you know quite well you would do a very stupid thing if you married me; I have not the usual dowry, far from it! Then I am not of your world. Can you see me in a drawing-room, playing my tricks with the colonel's wife, the general's wife, with the whole blessed lot of them? Zut! I am just what I am, just Bobinette."...

Brocq now got in a word: "In the first place," he observed, "as regards the dowry, you know very well, my pretty Bobinette, that I have already taken steps about it, on your behalf—now don't protest! It gives me pleasure to make your future safe, as far as I can: a modest competence. On the other hand, I am not a society man, and if you wish it."...

The captain drew nearer his mistress and brushed her lips with his moustache.

Bobinette drew back, got up from the divan, stood in front of her lover, erect, arms crossed, her look sullen: "No, I tell you, I wish to be free, my own mistress." ...

Brocq grew impatient: "But in spite of your ideas of independence, my poor darling, you are always in a state of servitude! Why, only to give one example, for the last two years you have been content to occupy an inferior position in the house of this Bavarian diplomat—or Austrian—I don't know what he is?"

"Naarboveck?" asked Bobinette, surprised. "But don't imagine that I am the Baron de Naarboveck's servant: still, if it were other-

wise, I can't play proud. I can't [4] bring out the title-deeds and pedigree of my ancestors for inspection!"

"It's not a question of that," observed Brocq.

Bobinette had launched forth. She continued:

"But that is the question. You are always imagining that I have things given me to do which lower me. I have told you a hundred times how it was I went to the Naarboveck's. One day the poor man came to the hospital: he was almost beside himself. His daughter Wilhelmine, who is barely nineteen, had just been taken ill—it was typhoid fever—he was obliged to go away and leave her—not a soul in whose care he could leave the child with confidence. I was recommended to Naarboveck. I came, I nursed Wilhelmine. This went on for a month, then for two, then three—now we are the best friends in the world. Wilhelmine is a girl whom I love with all my heart; the baron is an amiable man, all kindness and attention.... It is true that I am now a kind of companion, in an 'inferior' position, as you choose to put it in your absurdly vain and jealous way of looking at things; but, my dear man, there are ways and ways, and I assure you I am treated as one of the family. And, besides, you ought to consider that it was precisely at the Naarboveck receptions we met."

With the utterance of these last words Bobinette glanced at Captain Brocq as if she would annihilate him: the remembrance of their first meeting seemed more odious to her than pleasing.

Brocq, whose eyes were obstinately lowered, saw nothing of this. He suggested: "I am not the only one you have met at M. de Naarboveck's. There is that handsome cuirassier, Henri de Loubersac."...

Bobinette crimsoned. She shrugged her shoulders. "How stupid you are! Lieutenant Henri does not give me a thought, if he comes to the house."...

Brocq interrupted: "Yes, I know he comes on account of the fair Wilhelmine." His tone was conciliatory. Once more he drew Bobinette to him; but she seemed to object more and more strongly to the captain's caresses. Glancing at a clock on the mantelpiece she cried: "Why, it is four o'clock! High time I should leave." [5]

Brocq, who had followed her glance, added, suddenly serious: "My faith! I must call at the Ministry!"

Both rose. Bobinette took up her hat and went to the looking-glass. Brocq exchanged his jacket for a black coat. He went into his study, separated from the other room by a heavy curtain.

"Bobinette!" he called.

That young person responded to his call, but with no show of haste. She found the captain seated before his bureau rummaging in an immense drawer crammed full of papers.

"You know, my little Bobinette, that I have made you my sole legatee," cried the captain, with an adoring look at the pretty girl who suddenly appeared in the doorway. He continued his search among his papers: they were in great disorder.

"I wished to show you—it's a question of spelling your name correctly. You are called Berthe, are you not?"

The girl had come forward. She quickly caught sight of a mauve sheet of paper on the blotting-pad. A few lines were traced on it.

"Ah! you wretch!" she cried, while she glanced through the words. She pretended to be angry. "I've caught you! You were writing to a woman! Ho, it starts well:

"My own darling adored one, how long the hours seem when I await."...

Captain Brocq shouted with laughter.

"Ah, here's a joke! Why, it is you who are jealous now!"

Bobinette questioned him with a look. He explained:

"But, you great idiot, don't you understand that I was writing to you, and that only a couple of hours ago! You know I am always afraid you will not come to our meeting-place, and you are always late!"

Bobinette, reassured, now helped Brocq to go through his drawer methodically.

There could be no doubt of it—the captain was a most untidy man. Family letters, papers covered with figures, handwritten mili-

tary documents, even some bank-notes, were jumbled together in great disorder. [6]

Bobinette noticed her own handwriting on some sheets of paper. How well she knew them!

She feigned anger. "It is abominable to compromise me like this!" she cried. "See! My letters! Love letters! Intimate letters lying about like this! No, decidedly!"...

Brocq put her right. "No, no, my pet! Your precious letters are most carefully preserved by me—put together—see—there they are—there are not many of them—but not one is missing!"

"You are sure of that?"

"I swear it."

Bobinette reflected. The captain, however, returned to the adjoining room, hoping to come across the deed of gift he had set his mind on finding. "Come with me, Bobe!" he called. He opened a little writing desk. He thought his mistress had followed him, but she had remained in the study.

"Bobinette!" he called again, astonished to find himself alone.

She lingered.

Brocq went back.

He collided with the girl who, with a furtive gesture, slipped something into her muff.

"Well," said he.

"Well, what now?" she retorted.

They gazed at each other for a moment in silence.

"What were you doing?" questioned Brocq suspiciously.

"Nothing," answered Bobinette coldly.

But the captain caught hold of her hands. He was uneasy, almost angry: "Tell me!"

The red-haired beauty jumped back with a defiant air: "Very well, then! I have taken my letters, they belong to me! I wish to have them! It disgusts me to think that they are left lying about your

rooms. Do you think it funny that your orderly should read them to his country-woman? That your concierge should know all about them? I declare men like you have not a scrap of tact, of nice feeling!"

"Bobinette!" the captain implored her. [7]

"No, no; and again, no!" cried the girl more and more angrily. "I have them. I keep them!"

The captain grew pale. She added, a little more gently:

"But, you great stupid, they are of no importance! I'll give them back to you later—when you are good. You are behaving like a schoolboy! Come, kiss me! Tell your little Bobe that you are not angry with her! If you don't I shall cry!"

Already she was beginning to sob, and great tears were dropping. Captain Brocq, struck dumb, gazed at her sorrowfully. And whilst he clasped her in his arms, anxiety strained at his heart, anguish convulsed his soul. Did she really love him, this woman with her whimsical ways, her independent attitude, this elusive woman who never gave herself entirely? Was he the dupe of a comedy? Did she consent to these meetings three times a week through pity, through sympathy only, or through habit, or, worse still, for some mercenary reason? And this when he himself would have given up everything so that he might not miss them! Ah, if that were the truth! The captain felt an immense void opening in the depths of his lonely soul. He apologised in a low voice, hurriedly, with bent head, humbly, and Bobinette listened with curled lip and haughty air: She bore no malice, she declared. Then, a few moments later, for she was really much upset and did not wish to show it, she hurried away, dropping a hasty kiss on her lover's forehead as a token of peace. How ardently he wished that this peace might last.

"I am very much behind time," she had murmured by way of farewell.

Directly his mistress had gone, Brocq went to the window, watched her turn the corner of the rue de Lille, enter the rue des Saints-Pères, and go towards the quays. While he watched her he was trembling. A roll of paper was sticking out of Bobinette's muff. Brocq knew this paper: its appearance and colour were familiar to

him. Nevertheless, his mind was so full of his love affair that he immediately forgot this detail. But, in a minute, the turn of events forced him to recall it. [8]

"In Heaven's Name!" shouted Captain Brocq, as a violent blow from his clenched fist made the scattered papers on his bureau tremble. "By Heaven! It is impossible!"

When he found himself alone, sadly alone in his little flat, Brocq saw it was five o'clock, and more than time to start for the Ministry of War. Hastily putting on overcoat and hat, he had hurried into his study to look for the big leather portfolio he always carried when taking his work from the office to his own home.

Owing to his special knowledge of fortress artillery Brocq had been requested to put the finishing touches to a confidential report on the defences of the eastern forts of Paris and the distribution of the effective forces of the companies of mechanics in time of mobilisation. He had searched feverishly in his drawers for this report, which was of no great bulk. For the last ten minutes he had anxiously searched, but in vain: he could not find a trace of it!

"It is impossible!" he cried. He swore aloud as if the better to convince himself. "The title is in big letters, '*Confidential*,' in red, and twice underlined. Oh, it is quite impossible that it should pass under my eyes unperceived!"

Again the distracted man ransacked his papers and shook his portfolio. Almost beside himself with exasperation, he cried: "My excellent Bobinette, by her rummaging, has put the finishing touch to this confusion. Heaven knows, it was bad enough before!"

He paused. Anguish seized him. He fell into an arm-chair, while drops of sweat broke out on his forehead. Suddenly he had remembered the roll of papers sticking out of Bobinette's muff. He uttered a cry: "My God! But supposing!" ... He did not put the rest of his thought into words. For an instant he had the idea that through thoughtlessness, by mistake, an involuntary one assuredly, his mistress had taken this document to wrap up her letters ... without suspecting. That was it! No doubt she had carried off with her this secret plan of mobilisation—but if the plan got lost? If it were dropped in the street! [9]

Brocq cursed his untidy ways once more. He would never forgive himself for having allowed that girl to ransack his drawers—but he must act, and at once! He must, without fail, find that mislaid document. Of one thing he was sure—the document was not on the premises. Brocq jumped up. "Good-day, Captain!"

"Good-day, Captain!"

The man in charge at the cabstand, on the quay des Saints-Pères, at the corner of the bridge, saluted Brocq cordially.

Brocq, ghastly pale, his face showing signs of intense anxiety, gasping for breath, asked: "Tell me! Just now, ten, five minutes ago—did you not see a lady—young—she had red hair—did she not pass this way? Come now!"

The cabstand than winked. "My faith, Captain, you are just in time. Only a moment ago a lady, such as you describe, but prettier than that, got into a taxi; she."...

"Ah!" interrupted the captain, "do you know what address she gave?"

"Why, yes I do. I was almost touching her when she spoke to the driver."...

"Well?"

"Faith, what she said was 'Take me to the Bois,' and the cab turned by the Saints-Pères bridge. Probably it went by the Tuileries quay after."

"The number? The number of this taxi?"

"Why, we will ask the policeman at the kiosque: he has certainly entered it, as usual."

Stamping with impatience inside a landaulet whose hood he had had lowered that he might more easily see around him, Brocq had rushed off in pursuit of Bobinette's taxi, 249—B.Z.

Shaking from head to foot, Brocq held in a tight grip his leather portfolio, which contained all the documents he wished to lay before the Ministry of War, less, alas! the mislaid plan of the eastern forts. He scrutinised the Place de la Concorde, the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. He was asking himself why Bobinette, after telling

him [10] she must hurry away, had driven to the Bois as if she were one of the leisured crowd? This troubled the lover in him as well as the soldier. Why had he rushed after his mistress in this fashion? What definite reason had he? After all, it was exceedingly improbable, surely, that she had carried away this document without noticing it, for it was composed of three or four large sheets of paper!... In that case, she must have lost it before getting into the taxi. As to supposing for an instant that she had taken it away intentionally – Brocq would not suppose it. Why should he? There was nothing to lead him to think.

But, all the same!...

All the same, the captain had a presentiment, a conviction, an instinctive certainty that, at all costs he must overtake Bobinette – he absolutely must.

Why?

Brocq could not have said why. He did not reason about it. He felt: a feeling as indefinable as it was irresistible drove him to pursue, to continue the chase at top speed.

Again and again he had shouted to the astonished chauffeur, who was driving his taxi as fast as the crowded street permitted: "Get on! In the devil's name, go faster – faster!"

Night was falling. The close of this November day was particularly beautiful. Behind the Arc de Triomphe a broad band of red on the horizon reflected the setting sun in its winter glory. The breeze was wafting the last red-brown leaves from the trees, turning them over and over before they fell on the autumnal greensward and the black earth of the empty flower-beds.

Rows of carriages were moving towards the Étoile. As they had cleared the Rond-Point of the Champs-Élysées Brocq uttered a cry of joy. Some fifty yards away his keen eye had caught sight of Bobinette's taxi: he had identified the number.

"There it is!"

He urged the chauffeur to follow it up closely, regardless of consequences.

"A moment more and we shall have caught up the [11] 249," said Brocq to himself. His landaulet was gaining ground.

The crowd of vehicles, the police holding them up where the roads intersected, impeded the advance. Brocq, wild with impatience, could not keep still. At last they reached the Place de l'Étoile. The carriages, conforming to rule, rounded the monument on the right, going more and more slowly owing to the increased crush. But the captain felt relieved; only one cab, drawn by a horse, now separated him from Bobinette's taxi, and assuredly her vehicle and his would be abreast, side by side at the entry to the avenue of the Bois de Boulogne.

Brocq loved Bobinette dearly, but frankly, if for a joke or inadvertently she had carried off the document, he would give her a piece of his mind. He would let her know that it would not do to play tricks with things of that sort. Nevertheless, his heart was wrung with anxiety.

Supposing Bobinette had noticed nothing—if the document had fallen in the street?

Suddenly the poor fellow saw Bobinette's taxi cut across the line of carriages to the right and turn into the Avenue de la Grand-Armée.

Brocq's chauffeur did not seem to have noticed this: he continued in the direction of the Bois de Boulogne.

"Oh, you idiot!" shouted the captain. And, in order to give his instructions as rapidly as possible, he leaned almost entirely out of the vehicle.

But a second or two had passed when the chauffeur stopped dead, that he might see what had happened to his fare. Something must have happened, for Brocq had abruptly stopped short in the midst of his directions. He had collapsed on the cushions of the taxi, and remained motionless.

Other vehicles surrounded the automobile. Some ladies passing in a victoria noticed the captain.

"Look, my dear," exclaimed one of them, "do you see how pale that man is? He seems to be ill!"...

At the same moment, the pedestrians were struck by the officer's strange attitude. Brocq had suddenly subsided [12] in a heap on the cushion, his head had fallen to one side, his mouth was open, his eyes were closed: he seemed to have fainted.

A crowd gathered at once.

The chauffeur got down, shook his fare by the arm, and the arm was inert.

The crowd increased.

"A doctor!" cried a voice. "It is plain that this man is ill!"

A man stepped out from the crowd. His hair was white, he wore a decoration ribbon, and he had descended from a private brougham. With an air of authority he made his way through the curious onlookers, and when a constable came forward he said: "Kindly make these people stand away. I am Professor Barrell of the School of Medicine."

There was a murmur of respectful sympathy among the onlookers, for the professor was famous.

This master of medicine with a sure hand had undone the collar, the cravat of the mysterious sufferer, half opened his overcoat, put his ear to the patient's heart, then, straightening himself, considered the face attentively, not without a certain amount of stupefaction.

The constable made a suggestion: "Had we not better take this individual to a chemist's?"

Professor Barrell replied in a low voice: "To a chemist's? Do so if you wish ... but it is useless ... you would do better to go to the police-station: this unfortunate man is dead—it is a case of sudden death." The medical man added some technical words which this guardian of the peace did not understand.

[13]

II

DOCUMENT NUMBER SIX

"Hullo!... Am I speaking to Headquarters of Police?"

"Yes?"

"To the sergeant?... Good!... It is the superintendent of the Wagram Quarter who is telephoning.... They have just brought here the body of an officer who has died suddenly, Place de l'Étoile, and I want you to send me one of your inspectors.... This officer was the bearer of important documents.... I must send them direct to the military authorities.... Hullo!... Good.... You will send me someone immediately?... An inspector will be here in ten minutes?... Splendid!... Very good!"

The superintendent hung up the telephone receiver and turned to the policeman, who stood motionless awaiting orders. He was visibly embarrassed.

The police superintendent of the Wagram Quarter was a man of decisive action. He possessed in the highest degree the quality, the most precious of all for those of the police force, whose functions call them to intervene continually in the most surprising adventures – presence of mind.

A few minutes before this the taxi with its tragic burden had stopped at his police-station, and the men on duty had carried in the body of the unfortunate captain.

Called in all haste, the sergeant had immediately made a rapid investigation. He examined the documents in the victim's portfolio.

"Here's a go!" he muttered – "State of munition supplies! 'Orders for the eastern fortresses!' I do not want to keep such important documents longer than I can help." [14]

He had immediately telephoned to Headquarters. Reassured by the sergeant's reply, the superintendent turned to the policeman.

"You have made out your report?" he asked curtly.

The honest guardian of the peace touched his cap, looked perplexed, and scratched his head.

"Not yet, Monsieur. No time, Monsieur. But I will write it out at once."

The superintendent smiled at his embarrassed subordinate. "Suppose we do it together!"

"Let us see now! The deceased was a captain—isn't that so? The papers found in his portfolio and the name written on it let us know that he was called Brocq, and that he was attached to the Ministry. So much for his identity. We will not trouble about his domicile, the Place will tell us that! Now let us go into the details of the accident—tell me, my man, exactly how his death occurred!"

Again the worthy guardian of the peace scratched his head with an anxious look.

"I saw nothing of it, Monsieur," he replied.

"And the taxi-driver? You have his deposition?"

"He did not see anything either, Monsieur."

"Call this chauffeur."

A few minutes after, the superintendent dismissed the chauffeur. A short interrogation revealed that the taxi-driver had not only seen nothing, but that he could do nothing to help the enquiry.

The superintendent recalled the honest policeman.

"Come now! You are certain that the victim died immediately?"

"Well, you see, Monsieur, while I was dispersing the crowd, a doctor came up, and it was he who told me how the dead man died!"

"This doctor did not point out to you the cause of death?"

"No, Monsieur. But he gave me his card."

The policeman drew from the pocket of his tunic a dirty notebook. He took a card from it and handed it to his chief. "There, Monsieur!"

The magistrate looked at the name. *Professor Barrell, [15] of the School of Medicine.* Turning the card, he read aloud a few words in pencil:

"*Sudden death, which seems due to a phenomenon of inhibition.*"...

"This professor did not explain what he meant by 'death due to inhibition'?"

"No, Monsieur."