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I was delighted, though not surprised, when things ended just as I had told Harry they would. The renown he secured through solving the case of the missing gold would have been capital enough to launch his own agency. But the two thousand dollars the insurers provided him—however indirectly—certainly helped.

In fact, I had done as much to solve the case as Harry. He had found the gold, but I identified the culprits. What's ironic is that I had a difficult time convincing Harry to take the case in the first place. We had arrived in Trouville just a few days before, having made the crossing on the steam yacht *Spoils of the Sovereign*. Harry, with a good deal of help from me, had solved a case of insurance fraud for a man named Koestler. In appreciation, we were invited to join his party for the trip to France.

On landing, Harry and I had expected to leave the Koestler party and go on to Paris. But before we could leave Trouville, I heard about a consignment of gold having been stolen on a French ship that had recently arrived from New York. As luck would have it, one evening at the casino I was introduced to a representative of the insurance company involved in the case. Monsieur Trepanier was quite loquacious on the matter and I wasted no time in suggesting that Harry might be willing to offer some assistance in locating the gold. You see, Harry had recently completed an important treatise on the subject of burglary insurance. However, he hadn't had much practical experience in the pursuit of thieves, so I took the liberty of embellishing his résumé.

M. Trepanier was impressed with my depiction of Harry's career and wasted no time in making an offer. Since Harry's grasp of French wasn't quite up to the task, I accepted on his behalf. It meant arriving back in New York five weeks earlier than we had planned, which of course was disappointing. But due to some unfortunate financial entanglements, our tour was unlikely to be as comfortable as we might have preferred. The fault for that lies with Mr. Koestler. The man was a common card cheat. I suppose I should have expected as much from a man who made his living manipulating share prices. But I should hardly think it naïve for a guest to expect a little honesty at the table of her host. Our troubles were compounded when we discovered that the French casinos are nothing more than shady schemes bent on swindling their patrons. So there was a certain fortuitousness in our learning of the case of the missing gold.

On the 15th of August, Harry, M. Trepanier, and I took the ferry from Trouville to Le Havre, where the steamship *L'Aquitaine* was docked. This was the summer of 1901, just two days before the boat was scheduled to leave on its return trip. On boarding, we were greeted by the first officer, M. Houyvet, a tall, dour man, who escorted us to the captain's stateroom. There we were introduced to Captain Veblynde, an older gentleman with a neatly trimmed grey beard; M. Rollin, the much younger second officer; M. Guenard, the purser; and Mr. Finn, who represented National City Bank, the New York firm that had shipped the gold on *L'Aquitaine's* previous voyage.

M. Trepanier began explaining the situation, but Harry had a difficult time following, so it was decided Mr. Finn would do so in English. He was a young man who had the assured manner that comes with money and position. He was actually quite handsome, and spoke French with a near-perfect accent. He told us about the precautions taken with the delivery and storage of the gold on *L'Aquitaine*. There had been five iron-bound oak kegs, each holding nine bars of gold. The total shipment was valued at more than \$350,000. The kegs were small, not even two feet tall, yet weighed more than 250 pounds each. A length of red tape was wrapped around each keg so that it crossed itself at both the top and the bottom. Then wax seals were applied at the top where the two ends met. The second officer, M. Rollin, had been sent with a representative of the bank to observe the packing of the gold and its subsequent transport from the Assay Office to *L'Aquitaine*. The kegs were then placed in the vault room, to which Captain Veblynde, First Officer Houyvet, and the purser, M. Guenard, each held a key. All this went without incident, as did the voyage to Le Havre.

Once the ship had docked, Mr. Finn came aboard to take control of the gold. He was led to the vault room, where he checked the seals at the top of the kegs, and all seemed in order. Then a most curious thing happened. M. Houyvet came to the room and reported that three gold bars had fallen through the bottom of the trunk of one of the disembarking passengers. Mr. Finn examined the five kegs again, this time checking the seals more closely. He determined that one had indeed been tampered with. A circular hole had been cut into the top, just big enough to allow a gold bar to pass through. Then the hole was blocked back up with a new piece of wood and the area covered by a wax seal nearly identical to that used by the Assay Office. He had that keg broken open and found that it was packed with lead ingots. He then had the other four kegs broken open. Two were likewise packed with lead, while two still held the gold.

“But even lead weighs appreciably less than gold,” Harry pointed out. “Wouldn’t the difference in weight be obvious to anyone moving the kegs?”

“The gold bars are well cushioned with sawdust, to prevent abrasions,” Mr. Finn told us. “By packing the lead tightly, the weight was nearly identical.”

“Who was the owner of the trunk?” I asked.

“Mme. Charlotte Yvard,” M. Trepanier answered. “She’s the wife of a minister in the current government.”

Then Mr. Finn added, “The French consider her above reproach.”

He told us the theory was that the thieves had randomly chosen her trunk to put some part of the gold in and had had a confederate dockside who would remove it before she reached customs. But wasn’t it more likely that her trunk was chosen deliberately? And for the obvious reason that no customs inspector could afford to offend the wife of a minister by rifling through her belongings. I was puzzled why there had been just three bars, as they were really rather small, just seven or eight inches long. But I hadn’t appreciated how much the gold weighed. One little bar, we were told, weighed twenty-seven pounds. And as it was, even three bars proved too much for the trunk. Since none of the passengers had gone through customs when the gold was discovered, instructions were given that all their baggage be searched thoroughly. Likewise the cargo, and any of the crew leaving the ship. But no more of the gold was found.

When the captain inquired how he had solved similar cases, Harry hesitated, either because he didn’t understand the question or, perhaps more likely, because none of his cases had been even remotely similar. So I took it upon myself to answer, in French. That way Harry wouldn’t be tempted to interrupt.

I had great fun inventing several intriguing episodes, and giving myself a prominent role in each. The first involved a similar theft of gold bullion and necessitated our navigating the catacombs beneath Manhattan. Mr. Finn made the unhelpful remark that he had lived most of his life in New York and was unaware of any catacombs. But I didn’t see any reason for his ignorance to inhibit me.

“Oh, it’s a closely held secret,” I told him. “They were created by red Indians, in the distant past, when the isle of Manhatta was ruled by Princess Wali-lanka. Each night she took a new lover, and in the morning slew him. Vultures were allowed to feast on the corpse, and then, when the bones had been picked clean, they were removed to the royal catacombs.”

“Did you see many bones?” M. Rollin asked.

“Easily ten thousand skulls,” I told him.

“What a bloodthirsty woman,” M. Trepanier observed.

“Not really,” I said. “She simply bored easily.”

“And you found the gold amongst the skeletons?” the captain asked.

“Yes, cleverly shaped to look like bones, femurs mostly, and painted a dull ivory. We had to pick up each one in turn and test its weight until we had recovered all the gold.”

I could see the gentlemen were impressed by my account—all but the cynical Mr. Finn. It was partly to assuage his skepticism that I chose a more pedestrian narrative for the second case. This one involved the theft of bonds from a rich man’s safe. The type of crime you read about every day. Unfortunately, in setting up the scenario I introduced far too many characters, and the sequence of events was rather serpentine. When I reached the climax, where I apprehended the jilted lover (Angie Yakeley) of the valet (Thomas Godkin) while pretending to be her cousin (Albert Brandt), I found I had left my audience more than a little confused.

“Wasn’t Thomas Godkin the fishmonger?” M. Guenard asked.

“No, no, he was the one-legged wheelwright,” Captain Veblynde insisted.

“I thought it was his arm that he was missing,” M. Trepanier protested.

“Then how would he manage as a wheelwright?”

“Oh, yes. A clever observation, M. Houyvet,” M. Trepanier conceded.

“But doesn’t that *prove* he was the fishmonger?” M. Guenard asked.

Happily, M. Rollin came to my rescue by noting that only a very shrewd detective could have sorted out such a bewildering set of facts. For the last story, which was also my favorite, I chose a nautical theme. I wanted to show that Harry and I were familiar with crimes at sea. It began in South Africa, where a gang had stolen a trainload of diamonds. They had dressed up as gorillas and disabled the locomotive by pelting it with papayas, thus causing it to slide completely off the tracks.

I explained that Harry and I happened to be passing through Pretoria on our way to an international conference of insurance investigators taking place the next week in Katmandu. Once the insurers of the diamonds learned who we were, they beseeched us to take the case. Reluctantly, we agreed. We set off on camelback in pursuit of the gang, who themselves were now disguised as pygmy headhunters. At Mombasa, they boarded a dhow they had lying in wait.

We chartered a similar boat and eventually caught up with them off a small island in the Bahamas. We ambushed them just as they were burying their loot on a deserted beach. The climax was a chaotic battle fought with scimitars and dirks, with both Harry and I doing a goodly amount of beheading. At last, the pirates were vanquished, the diamonds recovered, and the Maharini freed.

“Maharini?” M. Trepanier inquired.

“Yes, did I neglect to mention their abduction of the Maharini of Valparaíso? That occurred immediately after their sacking of Rhodes.”

My tales held the Frenchmen in thrall, while Mr. Finn wore a silly smirk throughout, several times grunting his disbelief. Then the captain insinuated his incredulity about my having actually helped Harry as much as I had reported. He used that belittling tone men take on these occasions, when they dress their derision in exaggerated politeness. Harry is very lucky he never makes use of it. I’ve always imagined that Mrs. Ertel’s husband had used the same tone just before she shot him dead. And as I often remind Harry, Mrs. Ertel was acquitted. Well, needless to say, I took offense at the captain’s remark and so offered him a wager: I would find the culprits on my own. Naturally, he was compelled to accept my challenge, but only for one hundred francs. I was cheered some when Mr. Finn said he would put up one thousand francs, but there were no other takers.

Later, when Harry and I reached our cabin, neither of us could hide our disappointment. Our quarters on *Spoils of the Sovereign* were both spacious and beautifully outfitted. It was only reasonable that we expected something similar, having been told ours would be a first-class cabin. What we found was more like a storeroom stuffed with some antiquated furniture. But I felt I needed to make the best of the situation, so as not to make Harry feel guilty for my forgoing our tour of Europe.

Due to his rudimentary grasp of French, Harry had missed much of the conversation in the captain’s stateroom. I related the few portions I thought it necessary for him to be made aware of, including the terms of my wager—specifically, that I had pledged that we would work independently. He seemed unconcerned, telling me he already had formulated a plan and had every confidence in its success. I was a little miffed at his indifference. It’s true that our methods are very different. But, in the end, they usually complement each other nicely. In this case, I don’t think Harry appreciated how gullible it was to believe Mme. Yvard was completely

innocent. I suspected he was trying to imagine where the gold was hidden, a course I considered all but impossible. The gold would take up only a very small space in what was a very large ship. Besides, it had already been searched thoroughly. I spent the rest of the afternoon recording the fictional cases I had enumerated earlier. They were really quite good and I thought I could make use of them in my writing.

That evening, Harry and I had dinner in Le Havre with M. Trepanier and Mr. Finn. During the meal, Mr. Finn told us he'd be on the upcoming voyage of *L'Aquitaine* as well, as the bank was transferring him to its Buenos Aires office. Afterwards, while we were strolling along the quay, I took M. Trepanier aside and inquired about Mme. Yvard. He told me that her husband was a minor minister in the government, but he knew nothing else about her. If that was the case, I asked, why were they sure she wasn't involved? It would simply be out of the question, he said. It was only after a good deal of persistence on my part that he confided that M. Yvard's ministry had something to do with chartering insurance companies.

Before we left him, M. Trepanier presented Harry with a one-hundred-franc note. This payment was part of our agreement. You see, I had told M. Trepanier that Harry would take the case for the intellectual challenge alone. It was he who insisted on a token consideration. What I didn't realize, but which Harry wasted no time in apprising me of, was that by accepting this payment, neither he nor I, as his wife, would be eligible for the fifteen-thousand-dollar reward the insurer was offering for the gold's return. Harry's enthusiasm for the endeavor diminished a good deal that evening.

The next morning, I went back into town and found a library, where I was able to learn more about Mme. Yvard and her husband. She had been born Courtois, to a family of some small amount of aristocratic blood. When she married the middle-aged M. Yvard, about eight years before, she was still quite young—a strikingly attractive blonde renowned for her arresting hazel eyes.

That evening we sat at Captain Veblynde's table, where he introduced us to his wife. Mme. Veblynde was making the trip to New York to visit a daughter who'd married an American. It was the eve of our sailing and there were few others on board. After dinner, Mme. Veblynde and Mr. Finn remained in the saloon with Harry and myself, and I suggested some cards. We played several games of whist and when Mr. Finn went off to the smoking room, he was replaced by an American named Smallby. He told us he was a professor of zoology and an

authority on shrews. It soon became obvious that Mr. Smallby understood French even less well than Harry, so I took advantage of the privacy their common ignorance afforded and confided in Mme. Veblynde. I told her about my wager with her husband, much to her amusement. She wished me well and offered to help in any way she could. I asked her if she knew anything about Mme. Yvard, from whose trunk the three bars of gold had fallen. She told me she only knew what she'd read in the newspapers and magazines, and all that amounted to was that the Yvards entertained in the grand style and that Mme. Yvard was a very beautiful woman.

After the card game broke up, and both Smallby and Harry went off, I asked Mme. Veblynde about the officers we had met the previous afternoon. She had been acquainted with M. Houyvet, the gaunt first officer, for a number of years, but knew very little about him beyond that he was unmarried. He was always cordial, and got on very well with the captain, but otherwise was an enigma, even to the other officers. M. Rollin, the second officer, she hadn't known as long, but he was just the opposite, very charming and friendly. Also unmarried, he saw himself as a bit of a Lothario. M. Guenard, the purser, was another middle-aged bachelor who'd been with the company a number of years. An efficient man, but something of a dullard.

That night, when I met up with him again in our cabin, Harry informed me that Mr. Smallby was an impostor.

"How do you know he's an impostor?"

"That nonsense he was spewing about shrews being rodents. He knows less about the Soricidae than you know about geography."

"Soricidae?"

"Shrews, Emmie. The shrew family, Soricidae, is within the order Insectivora, not Rodentia. Didn't you learn anything in school?"

Harry is a font of this sort of arcana, most of it as useless as you might suspect. But this bit of trivia would prove helpful to me later.

~~ *end of sample* ~~

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