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THE STANDARD, ST. JOHN, N. B., SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1919

VALENTINE WEST SECRET AGENT

BY PERCY JAMES BREBNER

THE NAKED MAN

The necessity of a conference with the French police had brought Valentine West to Paris. The information he had been able to give had proved even more valuable than he had expected, and a problem which had bid fair to monoplize the clever brains of the authorities for some considerable period had suddenly become easy, almost trivial in its solution.

West took no credit for this—honesty on his part, not modesty. He had supplied just one piece of the puzzle, which had proved to be the key piece. It was chance, and since chance had treated him so well he determined to remain for a few days on holiday. There was a singer at the Opera House he wanted to hear, and plays at the Gymnase and Port St. Martin theatres he wanted to see.

He went to the Hotel de l'Orient, a favorite with those travelers who do not mind paying well but object to senseless and lavish extravagance and in day or two had made one or two casual but pleasant acquaintances, not English people. Out of England, he preferred associating with foreigners; it made the change more complete. One of these acquaintances, a M. Houtin, appealed to him immensely. He was a man of fifty perhaps, a cosmopolitan who appeared to have spent his life traveling the world and gathering information wherever he went. His knowledge was solid, not merely skimmed from the surface; the result of experience not of wide reading, and his views and criticisms of men and manners were his own and often startling in the freshnes of their outlook. He was a stimulating companion.

"Do you write, monsieur?" West asked. They were dining together at a small table and had arranged to go to the opera afterward.

"No."

"You should. The world loses a valuable historian by your not putting your experiences on paper."

"Historian! Why historian?"

"Is not history, made up of the growth of men, of their manners and customs?" said West.

"I lack politics," Houtin answered, "and most histories are merely a record of politics. I never talk politics, never think them even, if I can help it. Isn't it a marvelous thought that if everyone were honest if every nation were bent on acting for the good of mankind at large, there would be no place in the world for politics as we know them. The first politician was the man who originally conceived a scheme for claiming that to which he had no right and defying his fellows to prove he was in the wrong."

He laughed at his own conceit dismissing the subject as unworthy of serious discussion.

It was a fine night and they walked the short distance to the Opera House. They were agreed that the new singer had been somewhat over praised, and returned to the hotel soon after midnight. M. Houtin was leaving for London the next day.

"I hope we may meet there," said West.

"I hope so. It is a troublesome business which takes me to London. Most of my time will not be my own, and my movements are uncertain. I must take my chance and let you know if such another pleasant evening as this can be arranged. It is au revoir now, for I leave early in the morning."

Valentine West was at breakfast next morning rather later than usual when a waiter came to him.

"Monsieur is wanted. A gentleman is waiting in the vestibule."

West went at once, wondering if it was M. Houtin; instead he found Leroux of the police, a ferret-faced individual recognized by every criminal as a most dangerous man to have on the trail. It was mainly to confer with Leroux that West had come to Paris.

"Hello! Something gone wrong at the last moment, eh?"

"Not with that case. There is another."

"Which concerns me?"

Leroux nodded.

"And I was enjoying a holiday," said West.

"Come with me," said Leroux. "Oh, it is not far, only up-stairs—Room 28. Do you happen to know the occupant of Room 28?"

"Not to my knowledge."

The room was in the hands of the police, but it was evident that care had been taken not to let the visitors in the hotel know that anything unusual had occurred. Leroux took West in.

"Found this morning," he said, pointing to the bed; "just like that. He has not been moved."

Used as he was to surprises of the tragic sort, West started back.

Lying diagonally across the bed, only half covered by the clothes, lay the naked body of Houtin. The thin discolored line round the neck showed the manner of his death—strangulation by a thin cord, slipped into its place possibly while the victim slept, or at any rate before he had aroused sufficiently either to struggle for life or cry for help. There was no sign of a struggle in the room, nor was there any suggestion that a hastay search for valuables had been made.

"Do you know him, West?" Leroux asked.

"We were at the opera together last night. He told me he was leaving for London early this morning. He was an hotel acquaintance, that is all."

"An interesting acquaintance! suppose or you would not have troubled with him?"

"Most interesting."

"It is a curious case altogether," said the Frenchman opening the portmanteau which was by the dressing-table. "All packed ready for departure you see. He meant to go early no doubt, as he told you, but perhaps not to London. He knew your name I presume?"

"Yes."

"And more about you than your name. Here are two letters in his portmanteau warning him of Valentine West, vaguely as you will see, but unmistakably. The envelopes have been carefully destroyed. There is an old envelope here, however, addressed to Geneva. Look at it."

West took it. It was addressed to Herr Kratzner, Hotel Continental, Geneva. The postmark was three months old.

"Kratzner," he said slowly, searching his memory.

"He has not troubled you much in England, not directly at least," said Leroux. "Kratzner is one of the aliases used by the notorious spy Jean Boisset, a Swiss by birth, I believe, but that is not certain."

West glanced at the naked man on the bed.

"Jean Boisset!" And again he looked at the letters which had warned the dead man of him. He recalled in a kind of lightning survey their conversation last night, and tried to fix the character and mentality of the man, searching for clues to these letters.

"Some time ago we were warned that Boisset was becoming active again," Leroux went on, "and not for the first time he had succeeded in eluding us. I would not admit as much publicly, M. West, but with you I can be quite honest. The proprietor tells me he has been here some day masquerading as M. Houtin, giving no cause for suspicion of any kind. You had no suspicion yourself, M. West?"

"None."

"Ah, he was a curious personality, known to few, as elusive as a dream, clever as the devil."

"Yet not clever enough to escape that," said West, pointing to the bed.

"Even the devil makes mistakes," said Leroux, "and some one has saved us a lot of trouble. A man like Jean Boisset makes many enemies and in this instance some of them have been smarter than the police. When you were at the opera last night I imagine an enemy concealed himself in this room and waited until his victim was asleep. There could have been little difficulty, the state of the room proves that; no good for hurry, no fear of being disturbed. And there is a touch of grim humor about the murderer. He leaves his victim naked to the world. See while everything else is in the portmanteau is neatly packed, the pajamas have been thrust in hastily, crumpled together, just as they were pulled off the body."

West looked at them, and examined the neatly packed garments.

"You will find no name, M. West," Leroux said with a smile. "He would remain H. Houtin too short a time to have his clothes marked, besides, it would deceive no one whose suspicions were aroused."

"No, I suppose not," said West, looking round the room, glancing again at the bed, at the toilet table into every corner. On a chair neatly folded were the clothes he had evidently intended to wear this morning.

"He told you he was leaving early and going to London, but he had given no instructions to be called early," Leroux went on. "He had asked at the bureau that his bill might be prepared, saying he would probably be leaving today. It was only a probability, dependent on circumstances no doubt, and he did not mention anything about going to London. I should say, M. West, that you figured rather prominently in his calculations last night. You did not suspect him but he was afraid of you, and was prepared to alter his plans to deceive you. He was not going to London, you may be sure of that. It was a good excuse for saying farewell last night a quite natural one as several people from the hotel were leaving for England this morning."

"What business was he engaged upon that the French police were interested in him just now?" West asked.

"Could I give you a definite answer to that question our task would have been easier. We should have known what channels to watch. We have imagined his activities to be concerned either with French interests in Morocco, or with the changes which are contemplated in our army administration, but since our efforts in these directions have proved fruitless probably neither of these was his present game. We do not easily fail, as you know."

"That is true," said West. "As a detective you have far wider experience than I have, M. Leroux. Mine is entirely government work, and in the course of that work I have heard of Jean Boisset. He may have been at the back of some of the problems I have helped to solve but the solution has never reached to him. I have never had to pit my brains against his, as far as I know, and I cannot in any way account for the warning against me found in that portmanteau."

"That fact that you are here would be sufficient to make those who employ Boisset careful," Leroux answered. "M. West is so seldom at play that it is reasonable to suspect he may be more dangerous then than at any other time."

"I wish I were as dangerous as they seem to think," said West with a smile. "One thing is certain. They have brought my holiday to an abrupt conclusion and wasted a seat I had taken for tonight at the Port St. Martin theatre into the bargain."

"Is there any hurry, monsieur? The man is dead."

"Yes, but his enemies may be my enemies too. I shall go back to London."

Valentine West had the very useful faculty of being able to put his worries and speculations aside, was able to pigeon-hole them in his brain as it were until some new fact or development made the particular problem active again. On this occasion his faculty altogether failed him. M. Houtin had proved such an agreeable companion it was rather a shock to find he was the notorious Jean Boisset. Of course it was not really remarkable that Jean Boisset should be a man of this kind; to achieve what he had done was only possible to a clever individual, but West's professional pride was touched. No wonder Boisset had smiled when asked if he wrote, when told that an historian was lost to the world by his not writing. He did not talk politics, he had said, nor think them if he could help it; it was natural that Boisset should say so, should pretend ignorance of those very things with which as a spy he was intimately concerned. Boisset the spy was a very pleasant companion. West concluded, with an effort to forget all about him, a vain effort. He could think of nothing but Jean Boisset and his personality, all the way to London. He could not forget Room 28 at the Hotel de l'Orient, the naked figure lying across the bed, victim of a death so sudden that no struggle for life had been possible. He could not to forget the packed portmanteau everything neat and orderly except the tumbled pyjamas.

So obsessed was he with the personality of Jean Boisset that on arriving in London he drove direct to the Foreign Office. The minister for foreign affairs was out of town, would be away for the week-end; only his private secretary was to be seen.

"Afraid you'll have to wait until Monday, West."

"Can I get him on the phone. Where is he?"

"Fact is, West, I have strict instructions not to give information to any one."

"Something important in the wind, eh?"

"I cannot answer that question," said the secretary. "You must draw your own conclusions."

"By jove, I do," said West, rather more excitedly than was usual with him. "You've got to get in touch with him by phone, wire or special messenger. I will write down the message, and you can put it into code."

For a few moments West was busy putting what he wanted to say in the fewest words possible.

"There, send that."

The secretary read it and looked up in astonishment.

"You think—"

"I'm not sure what I think," said West. "Only one thing is sure, the more important the business is which keeps the minister out of town the more necessary is it that he should receive that message promptly."

"Well, you are a privileged person, but I am running a risk in disobeying orders."

"You'd be running a greater one by not sending that message," answered West. "Telephone to me as soon as you get an answer I shall not stir out before I hear from you."

"Right."

"And burn that paper carefully when you have done with it."

Valentine West drove to Bruton street feeling horribly dirty after his hurried journey from Paris, and not at all sure he was not making an idiot of himself. If he were, he would certainly hear of it. In his case to have done anything for the best was no excuse if it chanced to be wrong. In the face of one blunder past successes would not count.

Five pair of eyes followed the servant as he crossed to the round table. "An answer is waited for," he said.

A bath worked wonders. He felt he could afford to risk being wrong, and when later the telephone bell rang he felt he was half way through another case successfully.

"Yes, I'm West—speaking, Eardley Manor. Yes, I understand—staying with Lord Belmont. On Sunday. Good-by."

He hung up the receiver.

"I wonder what the business is. Something big evident. If I am making an ass of myself there will be ructions."

Was he? The question bothered the foreign minister at Lord Belmont's house in Berkshire even more than it did Valentine West in his rooms in Bruton street.

The little village of Eardley was quite unconscious of its importance at this moment. There were in fact few people at the Manor this week-end. The foreign minister was not recognized as he drove from the station, and two or three other gentlemen who arrived during the afternoon did not strike the villagers as particularly interesting. Even at the Manor itself, the servants were only aware that their master was entertaining foreigners.

The foreign minister had arrived with a grave face, proof of delicate and serious business on hand, but his face was graver still after receiving the code message from his secretary. No one knew better than he did the gravity of the situation, and the message after all was ambiguous. It seemed impossible that anything could have gone wrong. To avoid any information leaking out, to avoid as far as possible any knowledge that an important conference was taking place, the meeting had been fixed at this country house. Lord Belmont was of small political importance. Even if it were known that the foreign minister was spending the week-end with him it would cause no comment. The other members of the conference had arrived singly, ordinary week-end visitors apparently. It seemed impossible that any information could have leaked out and absurd that any danger such as was suggested by the message could exist.

The conference was to take place in the library on Sunday afternoon. Until then, those who were to take part in it were merely guests of Lord Belmont, and for greater security had dropped for the time being the titles they had a right to. They had presented their credentials but posed as private individuals.

Wit M. Michelet, the foreign minister had been in conference on many occasions, both in London and Paris. M. Carlieu was of paramount importance in Russia, was closely connected with the Czar and had his entire confidence. Signor Luzzia was of European reputation, his name a household world in Italy, and M. Blanc, a lesser personage than the others perhaps, had nevertheless spent his life in the service of Belgium. They had all traveled to England privately, yet behind one of them was danger, at least so the code message suggested. If the meeting took place exactly as arranged, the result of the conference would in all probability be secretly in the hands of those it was most important to keep in ignorance.

It was not remarkable that the foreign minister was exceedingly troubled.

At four o'clock the five men went to the library and quietly seated themselves at a circular table. A servant outside the door had been instructed to prevent any interruption. No one was to be allowed to enter the room unless accompanied by Lord Belmont himself.

A few set phrases served to welcome the members of the conference, and then the foreign minister spoke of the precautions which had been taken to preserve secrecy.

"As you are aware, gentlemen, the situation on the continent makes it imperative that steps should be taken to secure our positions, if not by actual and open treaties by a very distinct understanding what action is to be taken by us, individually and collectively, in the event of certain contingencies arising. Of the necessity for such understanding we are all aware; on the main points I believe and hope, we are all agreed, but on the other hand there are ceitain difficulties; it couold not be otherwise when the interests are so wide-spread and far reaching. These difficulties we are met to consider and overcome. As I have the honor to preside at this council it will be in order, I think, to lay down broadly the principles which this country wishes to maintain, the steps she is prepared to take to that end, and the power of enforcement she can bring to bear if necessary. In the main they are not new principles. They are——"

He stopped abruptly, closing his mouth like a trap as if he were afraid the words he was about to utter might escape to ears for which they were not intended. There was a knock at the door, and Lord Belmont entered, a servant with him.

"A messenger has arrived with a note to be given into your hands immediately," said Lord Belmont, and then he nodded to the man servant who slowly crossed the room to the round table, Lord Belmont remaining by the door.

Five pairs of eyes had been fixed upon Lord Belmont as he entered the room, five pairs of eyes followed the servant as he crossed to the round table. He went to the foreign minister and handed him the letter on a silver tray.

"An answer is waited for," he said.

"An answer!" and the foreign minister looked up into the man's face in astonishment. If he had expected the interruption, which seemed possible as he exhibited less surprise at it than his companions, it was quite evident he had not expected to have to give an answer. The servant moved aside to do away with any suspicion that he might overlook what was in the note.

"By your leave, gentemen. It may concern us."

The foreign minister was deliberate in his movements. He opened the envelope and took out a half sheet of note-paper, read what was written on it, looked at the waiting man servant, then at the paper again.

"It is a riddle, gentlemen," he said. "There is no address, no signature; just these words; 'A naked man and tumbled pajamas.' "

No one at the round table moved.

"I do not understand," said M. Michelet, taking up the paper which the foreign minister had put on the table after reading it out. "I do not understand. Is it conceivable that some one is attempting to jest with us?"

"That might mean some deep laid treachery," said M. Blanc.

The Russian nodded his approval of this idea.

"May I suggest that we interview the man who brought this message?" said Michelet.

"I was going to suggest the same thing," said the foreign minister.

"I brought it straight from Paris, from the Hotel de l'Orient," said the man servant, and the nert instant he had a revolver at the head of Signor Luzzia. "Hands from that pocket, Jean Boisset."

The threatened man leaned back in his chair, the others sprang to their feet. It was preposterous. Who was this servant? The seated man was the calmest person there, calmer even than the man who stood over him with a revolver.

"There is some mistake," he said, "not intentional, I am sure, still annoying for us all, especially for me. May I look at the written message? Perhaps I can throw some light on the affair."

He leaned forward to take up the paper but instead of doing so he flung out his arm to thrust the threatening revolver from his head. The man servant was probably the only armed person in the room beside himself. He had rapidly calculated his chances, realized how they were, but being in a desperate case, he elected to make the attempt. He had been in desperate positions before now and had lived to talk about them.

But the man who watched him was ready and alert. He caught his opponent's wrist before he could get to his weapon, and then three men came quickly across the room from the hall. There was short fierce struggle and then Signor Luzzia was hand-cuffed.

He laughed.

"Have I the honor to address Valentine West?"

"If it is an honor, you have," said the man servant.

"I congratulate you on having made a great mistake."

"I thank you for having made two or three," said West. "At least you should have left a brush and comb on the toilet table, and you would have been wiser to put the pajamas on the man instead of in the portmanteau."

For an instant Luzzia looked savage; then he laughed again as he was taken from the room.

"Is it a mistake?" said M. Michelet excitedly. "The Hotel de l'Orient you say? What happened there? It may be a mistake. The French police are clever but sometimes they make mistakes."

"They have made one now, monsieur," said West, and at the request of the foreign minister he related what had occurred at the Hotel de l'Orient.

"M. Leroux is so excellent a detective," West went on, "so seldom deceived that I was inclined to accept his conclusions. In M. Houtin I had found an agreeable companion, but as Leroux pointed out Jean Boisset was quite capable of playing the part of agreeable companion. Moreover, Leroux's explanation of the naked body as the murderer's grim humor of leaving the famous spy naked to the world, was feasible, and it seemed natural to thrust the tumbled pajamas into the portmanteau, there was nowhere else to put them. There was one small point, however, which M. Leroux overlooked. The toilet table furniture, hair brushes, comb and such like, were also packed. Why? The man would want to use them in the morning. I admit it was not until after I had left Leroux that the real significance of this fact impressed itself upon me, and I begun to build up another theory. Supposing Jean Boisset, for the purposes of spying, wished to take the place of M. Houtin, how would he go to work? He could prepare another portmanteau, he could place in it papers of warning against me, he could drop into it an envelope to mislead and delay identification of the dead. Then, having committed murder, probably with the help of an accomplice, he could take M. Houtin's portmanteau and all his belongings, including the things from the toilet table and even the pajamas worn by the victim. He would leave nothing behind. He knew the police would begin by looking for the pajamas, so he tumbled a pair in the portmanteau. Had he put them on the dead man and put a brush and comb on the table, the idea that he had stolen a personality would probably not have occurred to any one. My theory was that he had become M. Houtin. If any one doubted it he had the whole of Houtin's property to prove his identity. There was risk in such an impersonation of course, immense risk, but not more than Jean Boisset would take, if the enterprise were worth it. Was such an enterprise on foot? Houtin told me he was coming to England on business. I went straight to the Foreign Office and found that some business of great importance was on foot. How valuable some of Houtins' property was is apparent by the fact that Jean Boisset the spy, was in this room."

"But is he Jean Boisset?" said M. Blanc. "Is it possible? It seems too bold an enterprise even for so bold a man."

"I might be mistaken, I knew that," said West. "I communicated with the foreign minister and arranged to bring in that note. If I asked for an answer it would mean I had not made a mistake. I worded the message in that way to be a surprise to the guilty man in the hope that he would betray himself. You see, gentlemen, I was acting in the dark. My theory demanded that the man I knew as Houtin should be a person of importance. Houtin was not unlikely to be his real name, I did not expect to know which of you was the spy, but the moment I entered the room I recognized one man who had been at the Hotel de l'Orient. That is the man who has just been arrested, who I am confident is the notorious Jean Boisset."

"And this M. Houtin," said the foreign minister. "Good heavens! West, do you know who he is?"

"Was, sir. I saw him stretched dead and naked at the Hotel de l'Orient."

"Luzzia ,the Duke of Atrossi," said the foreign minister. "Surely there must be some mistake."

"I fear not, sir. I have already communicated with the French police."

Valentine West returned to town that evening.

"Wil you ring up Scotand Yard, sir?" said Amos. "You were to do so directly you come in. It is important."

West went to the telephone at once.

"Yes, just back. What? Good heavens! Yes—I'll be round in half an hour."

"Anything the matter, sir?" Amos asked.

"He's dead—jumped from the railway carriage on the way to town and was killed on the spot."

"Who, sir?"

"Jean Boisset, the spy."

MRS PANKHURST HERE.

There are ugly and dangerous times ahead before we supersede the forces of Bolshevism, with a constructive social policy is the prediction of Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, who arrived in Winnipeg recently to conduct a series of lectures throughout Western Canada, during which she hopes to rouse the women of Canada to a sense of their responsibility in combatting the evils of Bolshevism.

Figuring Up.

"My husband is always complaining of overhead charges," remarked Mrs. Flimgilt.

"Office expenses?"

"No. My hats."—Washington Star.

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