

Methode Americaine

The Smart Set

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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PIERRE DUMIAN SAT AT A TABLE in the Café Sigognac, sipping a glass of vichy and reading an article in *L'Avenir*. From time to time he gave an impatient grunt, which occasionally reached an audible ejaculation as his eye met a phrase particularly displeasing. Finally he tossed the paper onto the chair at his side and, placing his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands, gazed steadily at his empty glass with an air of deep disgust.

Pierre never felt very well in the morning. True to his calling, he was always more or less uneasy in the sunlight; besides, one must pay for one's indiscretions.

But on this particular morning he was more than uncomfortable: he was in genuine distress. He was pondering over a real misfortune. What an ass he had been! Surely he had been insane. Nothing less could account for it. He cast a glance at the newspaper, extended his hand toward it, then nervously resumed his former position. The thing was absurd—absolutely absurd. How could it have been taken seriously? He would write an apology—a correction. But no, that was no longer possible. Decidedly, he must see it through; there was his reputation. Well, for the future he would be careful—very careful. He would be more than circumspect: he would be absolutely polite. But—Bah! What a horrible thought! Perhaps there would be no future? Perhaps this would be his last? This was too much for Pierre's excited nerves. He straightened himself in his chair, muttered an oath half-aloud, and called to a waiter for another glass of vichy. It was at this moment that he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard a voice at his side. Turning, he beheld Bernstein, of *Le Matin*.

„Ah! I congratulate you, my friend,“ he was saying.

Pierre was on his guard instantly. So the story had already gotten around! Clearly, there was no way out of it. With an effort he forced an easy smile, glanced meaningly around the half-filled room, and with a gesture invited the newcomer to be seated.

Bernstein, noticing the glass which the waiter was placing before Pierre, elevated his brows and shrugged his shoulders. „Nerves?“ he inquired pleasantly.

Pierre resented the implication, mainly because it was true. He grunted a negative, lifted the glass and drained its contents, then spoke in a tone of indifference.

„It is necessary to take care of myself. I expect to need—but perhaps you don't know. Why did you congratulate me?“

Bernstein winked slyly. „Ah! But, my friend, it is useless. The whole world knows it. Over at Lampourde's they are already laying wagers, and at the office the talk is of nothing else. They all envy you. Or, at least, they would envy you if—“ Bernstein hesitated and looked at Pierre curiously.

„Well?“ said Pierre, with an attempt at lightness. „If—“

„Nothing,“ said the other quickly. „For, as to that, life itself is a gamble. We must take our chances. And what courage! What glory! What fame! Why, my friend, on the day after tomorrow you can go to old Lispenard and say to him: ‚Henceforth I shall expect a thousand francs each for my signed articles.‘ And what can he do? That is, of course, if you can go to him at all.“

Pierre laughed contemptuously. „I'm not so easily frightened, if that's what you mean. What of that?“ he picked up the newspaper on the chair at his side and tossed it across the table.

Bernstein glanced at it and nodded. „Of course,“ he agreed, „it is admirable, wonderful. All the same, you were a fool. You should not have allowed him to choose. This fellow Lamon is dangerous.“

To this Pierre replied with a contemptuous snap of the fingers. The other continued:

„No, but he is. You understand, my friend, it is only for your own good I tell you this. I had it from someone at Lampourde's, I don't remember whom. This Lamon is dangerous.“

There was something in the tone that caused Pierre's hand to tremble as he extended it toward his glass.

„You know,“ Bernstein went on, „he came here but a month ago from Munich. This play was written there. He was stationed there as an officer in a German regiment. And his reputation in affairs similar to yours was such that they called him *Lamon, le diable*. That is why I say you have made a mistake. For with the rapier you might get a scratch—no more.“

Pierre, during this recital, was doing his best to appear unconcerned. But the pallor of his face was painfully evident and his voice was husky as he said:

„Who told you this?“

„I have forgotten. But, after all, what does it signify? A little practice today and tomorrow, a little luck—and you will be the most talked-of man in Paris. I tell you, you are to be envied; always provided—I speak frankly, my friend—always provided that Lamon misses.“

Pierre shuddered. He began to hate Bernstein. What did he mean by this horrible calmness, this brutality? It was certainly a lie, this story about Lamon. Assuredly it was impossible; otherwise, he would have heard it before. Thus, with his brain whirling madly, he sat and pretended to listen to Bernstein, who rattled on endlessly about Lamon, the gossip of the boulevards, the latest news of the profession. Pierre heard not a word; and a half-hour later, when Bernstein was called away by an appointment, he breathed a sigh of relief and quickly made his way to the street.

Someone has said, somewhere, that there are times when it is braver to run than to fight. Let us hope, for Pierre's sake, that the present instance was a case in point; for he had decided to run. He admitted this at once—to himself—without reservation or shame, standing in front of the Sigognac, staring with unseeing eyes at the passing throng of vehicles. Bernstein's story of Lamon's prowess had finished him utterly and instantly.

The question was: would it be possible to do the thing gracefully? For Pierre loved his skin only just a little better than his reputation, and he ardently desired to save both of them. His brow contracted in a worried frown; he shrugged his shoulders; he sighed. That devil of a Lamon! But now that he had finally decided in favor of his skin, Pierre felt much easier; and soon he devoted his mind entirely to devising a means of escape. An apology was clearly out of the question; he would be laughed at from one end of Paris to the other; and what was more to the point, that demon Lamon would most probably not accept it. A hundred schemes presented themselves and were in turn rejected, and Pierre was ready to give way to despair. There seemed to be nothing for it but ignominious flight. Then suddenly his eyes flashed with joy—an idea! He considered—it was perfect! He turned and started off down the street at a pace calculated to land him in the Seine within five minutes. Then, recollecting himself, he halted and waved his arms wildly at the driver of a cab across the street. A minute later he was rolling rapidly along in the direction of the Montparnasse Quarter.

It was in front of a shabby, dilapidated building in the Rue de Rennes that the cab finally stopped. Pierre instructed the driver to wait, glanced doubtfully around, looked again at the number over the door, and finally ventured within. At the end of a hall on the first floor he found a door bearing the inscription:

ALBERT PHILLIPS
Professeur d'Esgrime
Méthode Américaine

Pierre, entering in response to the „Come in,“ which greeted his knock, found himself in a long, low, bare apartment, only less dingy than the hall which led to it. On a chair near the door lay some fencing foils, two or three pairs of boxing gloves, and a dilapidated mesh mask. The only other chair in the room, placed in front of a table over near the single window, was occupied by a shabby-looking individual who turned his head at a slight angle as his visitor entered. Pierre, whose eyes were still unaccustomed to the dim light, stood blinking uncertainly. The man at the table turned slowly around and faced him.

„I have come,“ said Pierre, „to arrange a matter of business. But I believe you are not the right man.“

„Then why did you come?“

„Would you care to earn a thousand francs?“ asked Pierre after a moment's reflection.

Monsieur Phillips betrayed his first sign of interest. „My dear sir,“ he replied, „there are very few things in this world I would not undertake for a thousand francs.“

„That is well,“ said Pierre. „But before we proceed further, can you shoot—with the pistol?“

The other frowned and glanced up quickly. „Better than anyone else in Paris,“ he announced. „But I have said that there are a few—“

„It is an affair of honor,“ Pierre interrupted.

Phillips elevated his brows. „That's different. Go on.“

Still Pierre hesitated. Then, with a gesture of decision he crossed to the chair near the door, rolled off its encumbrances onto the floor, and placing it by Phillips's table, seated himself.

„Of course,“ he began, „you can keep a secret?“

„For a thousand francs—yes.“

„That is well. You shall be paid. What I want is easily told. I am challenged to a duel with pistols at twenty paces on Thursday morning at six o'clock. I want—I want you to take my place.“

Phillips gave a start of surprise and looked keenly at Pierre. „It is impossible,“ he said finally. „I should be detected.“

„That is my risk. Besides, I can arrange it perfectly. Do you accept or not?“

„Where is the duel to be fought?“

„On the bank of the Seine, just south of the Pont de Suresnes.“

„That's dangerous. For you must know the new prefect has issued an edict—“

„That also can be arranged,“ Pierre interrupted.

„Well—who is your man?“

„Lamon, the dramatist.“

„Ah!“ Phillips hesitated and appeared to be lost in thought, while his lips were compressed in a curious smile. „I accept,“ he said finally.

„Good!“ Pierre breathed a sigh of relief. „Then there remain only the details.“

„Which are somewhat important,“ the other observed dryly. „Proceed, monsieur.“

Pierre hitched his chair a little nearer and continued: „First, there is the matter of identity. Well, you are nearly of my size; you will wear my clothing, and you will go masked.“

„How can you arrange that?“

Pierre brushed aside the objection with a wave of the hand. „Very simple. You spoke of the edict of the new prefect of police. I shall insist that we wear masks in order to avoid recognition. I shall also arrange to go to the rendezvous alone—any pretext will serve. All you need do is to be there at the appointed hour, speak little and—shoot straight.“

„And who are you?“

„You do not know me?“ Pierre asked in a tone of surprise.

„I know no one.“

„Dramatic critic on *L’Avenir*,“ said Pierre, taking a card from his case and handing it to the other.

„Ah! This, then, is professional?“

„Yes. I have never even seen Lamon... Of course there are other details to be arranged, and it will be safest for you to wear one of my suits. I will bring it myself tomorrow morning.“ Pierre was moving toward the door.

Phillips rose from his chair. „But, monsieur! The thousand francs.“

„I will bring you five hundred tomorrow morning; the remainder after the duel.“

For that afternoon and evening and the following day, Pierre found much work to do. The arrangement of details proved to be not so simple as he had expected. The seconds of Monsieur Lamon fell in readily with his scheme of masking; but Pierre’s own friends were not so easily persuaded. They denounced it as childish and absurd, inasmuch as the projected duel was an open topic of discussion in every café in Paris; and they particularly objected to their principal’s determination to go to the rendezvous unattended. The thing was unprecedented, monstrously irregular; it would amount, on their part, to an absolute breach of duty. „Our honor, our very honor, will be compromised! It is impossible!“ But Pierre, who had much more than honor at stake, prevailed against all entreaties and protests.

On Wednesday morning he spent a full hour in Phillips’s room, coaching him against every possible mischance. Luckily Phillips was acquainted with the appearance of one of his seconds, and Pierre gave him a minute description of the other; and since Pierre himself had never seen Lamon, Phillips would of course not be expected to recognize him. As to any minor oddities of gesture or voice they would be easily accounted for as the result of the strain under which the duelist might be supposed to labor. Pierre finally rose from his chair with a gesture of approbation.

„Perfect!“ he declared, surveying Phillips from head to foot. „I wouldn’t know the difference myself.“ Opening a purse, he took from it five hundred-franc notes and laid them on the table. „There is half. And remember, this is the most important of all: after it is over, come at once to the Restaurant de la Tour d’Ivoire. There you will change your garments and become Monsieur Phillips again, and I will pay the

remainder. It will be difficult, for they will insist on accompanying you, but you must manage it somehow.“

Phillips picked up the banknotes, folded them and placed them in his pocket. Then, turning to Pierre, „There is one thing we have not considered,“ he said. „What if I am wounded? Then the fraud would be discovered.“

Pierre’s face paled. „I had thought of that. But we must take our chances. And you—for God’s sake, shoot first, and shoot straight.“

„Monsieur Dumain,“ said Phillips, „rest easy. When I aim at this Lamon, I shall hit him.“

But that night Pierre was unable to sleep. Whenever he closed his eyes he found himself looking into the muzzle of a revolver which, in size, bore a strong resemblance to a cannon. This was disquieting. Pierre sat up in bed and reached for a cigarette. „It’s absurd,“ he said aloud. „I’m as shaky as though I were going to do it myself.“

At half-past four he rose, dressed, and finding the cab he had ordered at the door, proceeded through the silent, dim streets toward the Pont de Suresnes.

The rear of the Restaurant de la Tour d’Ivoire, which Pierre had selected as his place of retreat during the duel, overlooked the Seine at a point about a hundred yards up the river from this bridge. It was dilapidated, shabby, and disrespectful; which was exactly what Pierre desired. What with a garrulous concierge and a prying neighborhood, to have remained in his own rooms would have been hazardous; and the Restaurant de la Tour D’Ivoire, besides the advantages already named, possessed the further and greatest one of an old window with broken panes which looked out directly upon the scene of the duel.

The clock was hard on five as Pierre entered the restaurant and accosted the proprietor, who was dozing in a lump behind the little wooden desk. He awoke with a start and looked angrily at the intruder.

„What do you want?“ he demanded.

„I desire a private dining room,“ said Pierre.

The greasy old man looked angrier still. „The devil you do!“ he shouted. „There isn’t any.“ He settled back into his chair and immediately fell asleep. Pierre shrugged his shoulders, glanced around, and noticing a door in the opposite corner, passed through it into the room beyond.

This room was cold, dirty and filled with that particularly disagreeable odor which is the effect of stale tobacco smoke and poisoned breaths in a close atmosphere. Tables and chairs were piled in confusion at one end; a row of them extended along the farther wall; and the only light was that which came in through the window with broken panes overlooking the Pont de Suresnes entrance, and its fellow directly opposite. Three or four men, sleeping with their heads nodding at various angles, were scattered here and there on the wooden chairs; another was seated at a table with a bottle before him reading a newspaper; and a drowsy and bedraggled waiter rose to his feet and stood blinking foolishly as Pierre entered.

Pierre, having seated himself and ordered a bottle of wine, looked up to meet the curious gaze of the man with the newspaper. It was sustained almost to the point of impertinence, and at once made Pierre uneasy. Was it possible he had been recognized? The fellow’s dress was very different from that of the ordinary habitué of holes such as the Restaurant de la Tour d’Ivoire; and though Pierre could find

nothing familiar in either the face or figure, he became every minute more restless and suspicious; until, finally, he accosted the stranger.

„It is very cold,“ he said, in as indifferent a tone as possible, glancing up at the broken window through which the damp river air found its way.

The stranger started and glanced up quickly. „Were you speaking to me, monsieur?“

„I did myself that honor,“ said Pierre.

„And you said—“

„That it is very cold.“

„Yes. In fact, it is freezing.“ The stranger shivered slightly and drew his cloak closer around his shoulders. „Do you play?“ he asked.

„A little,“ said Pierre, who felt somehow reassured by the mere fact that the other had spoken to him.

The waiter brought cards and another bottle of wine, and Pierre moved over to the other’s table.

For a half-hour the game proceeded, for the most part in silence. Once or twice Pierre glanced at his watch, then up at the window, which from his viewpoint disclosed only a glimpse of dark, gloomy sky and the upper framework of the Pont de Suresnes. Gradually, as the waiter continued to replace empty bottles with full ones, the stranger’s tongue was loosened.

„You’re lucky,“ said he, eyeing the little heap of silver and small notes at Pierre’s elbow.

Pierre glanced again at his watch. „Let us hope so,“ he muttered.

„And yet you are uneasy and agitated. That is wrong. Learn, my friend, the value of philosophy—of stoicism.“ The stranger waved a hand in the air and grinned foolishly. „Learn to control your fate. For whatever happens today, or tomorrow, you are still a man.“

Pierre’s uneasiness returned. „You are drunk,“ he said calmly. „But what do you mean?“

The other pointed a wavering finger at Pierre’s hand. „That’s what I mean. You tremble, you glance about, you are afraid. No doubt you have a reason; but look at that!“ He held out his own hand, which shook like a leaf in the wind. „Observe my steadiness, my calm! And yet my whole future—my whole future is decided within the hour.“

„Come,“ said Pierre, „you talk too much, my friend.“

„You are mistaken,“ said the other with some dignity. „I do not talk too much. I never have talked too much.“ He laid his cards on the table, picked up his glass and drained it. „Monsieur, I like you. I think I shall tell you a great secret.“

„I advise you to keep it to yourself,“ said Pierre, who was beginning to be bored. He glanced again at his watch. It was a quarter to six.

„Right. Unquestionably right,“ said the stranger. „The greatest of all virtues is caution.“ He extended his arm as though to pluck a measure of that quality from the thick, damp air. „At the present moment I am a glowing example of the value of caution. It is the *sine qua non* of success. My motto is *In words bold, in action prudent*. Caution! Prudence! I thank you, my friend.“

This, being somewhat at variance with Pierre’s theory of life, slightly aroused him. „But one cannot be an absolute coward,“ he protested.

„*Eh, bien,*“ returned the other, raising his brows in scorn at the bare suggestion, „one is expected to be a man. But what would you have? There are times—there is always one’s safety. Preservation is the first law of existence. Now I, for instance“— he leaned forward and finished in a confidential whisper—„would never think of blaming a man for obtaining a substitute to fight a duel for him. A mere matter of caution. Would you?“

Pierre felt a choking lump rise to his throat, and when he tried to speak found himself unable to open his mouth. All was known! He was lost! This drunken fellow—who probably was not drunk at all—who was he? Undoubtedly, Phillips had betrayed him. And then, as he sat stunned by surprise, the other continued:

„The truth is—you see, my friend, I trust you, and I want your opinion—that is exactly what I have done myself. It was to be at six o’clock,“ he said. „And he—that fool of a Dumain—proposed for us to mask. That was what gave me the idea.“

A thought darted into Pierre’s brain like a leaping flame, and forced from him an unguarded exclamation: „Aha! Lamon!“

The other glanced up with quick suspicion. „How do you know that?“ he demanded thickly.

But Pierre had had a second in which to recover his wits. „A man as famous as you?“ he asked in a tone of surprise. „Everyone knows Lamon.“

The uneasiness on the other’s face gave way to a fatuous smile. „Perhaps,“ he admitted.

Pierre’s brain, always nimble in an emergency, was working rapidly. He glanced at his watch: there still remained ten minutes before Phillips could be expected to arrive. As for this drunken Lamon, there was nothing to be feared from him. Then a new fear assailed him.

„But what if your substitute is wounded?“

Lamon’s lips, tightly compressed in an effort at control, relaxed in a knowing grin. „Impossible.“ He fumbled in his vest pockets and finally drew forth a card, which he tossed on the table in front of Pierre. „You see, he’s an expert.“

Pierre, turning the card over, read it in a single glance:

ALBERT PHILLIPS
Professeur d’Escrime
Méthode Américaine
