

The Head of the Caesars

The Master Criminal, #1

by Fred Merrick White, 1859-1935

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Chapter I

The history of famous detectives, imaginary and otherwise, has frequently been written, but the history of a famous criminal—never.

This is a bold statement, but a true one all the same. The most notorious of rascals know that sooner or later they will be found out, and therefore they plan their lives accordingly. But they are always found out in the end. And yet there must be many colossal rascals who have lived and died apparently in the odour of sanctity. Such a character would be quite new to fiction, and herein I propose to attempt the history of the Sherlock Holmes of malefactors.

Given a rascal with the intellect of the famous creation in question, and detection would be reduced to a vanishing point. It is the intention of the writer to set down here some of the wonderful adventures that befell Felix Gryde in the course of his remarkable career.



EVERY schoolboy knows the history of the rise and progress of the Kingdom of Lystria. Forty years ago a clutch of small independent states in South-Eastern Europe, the lapse of less than half a century had produced one of the most powerful combinations on the face of the universe. As everybody also knows, this result was produced by the genius of a quartette who in their time made more history than falls to the lot of the most stormy century. For years they kept the makers of atlases busy keeping pace with the virile growth of Lystria.

But time brings everything in due course; the aged makers of Empire laid aside the pen and the sword, and death came at length to the greatest of the four, even unto Rudolph Caesar, whom men called Emperor of Lystria. Wires, red-hot with the burden of the message, flashed the news to the four corners of the earth; column after column of glowing obituary were thrown together by perspiring “comps”; Caesar’s virtues were trumpeted far and wide. It was the last sensation he was like to make.

Meanwhile Mantua, the capital of Lystria, had arranged for a month of extravagant funeral pomp and circumstance fitting the occasion. The papers teemed with the sombre details. The laying in state—a matter of eight days—was to be a kind of glorified Lyceum stage effect. The cold Caesarian clay was to be given over to no vile earthworm, but had been embalmed without delay.

All this pageant Felix Gryde had read of in the seclusion of his London lodgings, in Barton Street. The florid extravagance of the *Telegraph* awoke in him a vein of poetic heroism—daring with something Homeric in it. The slight, quiet-looking man with the pale features and mild blue eyes did not look unlike the popular conception of a minor poet, save for the fact that Gryde was clean of garb and kept his hair cut.

A smile trembled about the corners of his sensitive mouth.

Illustration:

Here is a chance

“Here is a chance,” he murmured, “for a really clever soldier of fortune like myself to distinguish himself. I can see in this the elements of the most remarkable and daring crime in the history of matters predatory. Here is a handful of glorified dust guarded night and day by the flower of an army. The stage is brilliantly lighted, passionate pilgrims are constantly coming and going. What a thing it would be to steal that body and hold it up to the ransom of a nation.”

Gryde sat thinking this over until the roar of London’s traffic sank to a sulky whisper. He might have been asleep, dead, in his chair. Then he rose briskly, lighted a cigarette, and turned up the lamp again. He rang the bell, and a servant entered. The man waited for his master’s orders.

“Lye,” said Gryde, “I am going away for a day or two. You will get everything ready for me to leave Charing Cross by the nine train in the morning. You will get a letter from Paris saying when I shall return.”

The man bowed silently and went out. Then Gryde retired to bed and slept like a child till the morning. Before nightfall he found himself speeding along in a certain continental express towards his destination. Through the blackness of the next night, looking out of the window of the carriage, he could see a faint saffron arc of flame beating down from the sky, the reflection of the countless points of fire in the city of mourning. Gryde’s destination was reached, for Mantua was at hand. The train drew into the station.

“One against half a million,” Gryde muttered: “a pin’s point to a square of bayonets. A good thing I speak the language perfectly.”

He took up his handbag, and plunged unheeded into the heart of the city.

Chapter II

NOTHING more sombre and at the hangings same time more magnificent in the way of a spectacle had ever been witnessed than the ceremonial daily taking place in the chancel of the cathedral at Mantua.

Every window in that immense structure had been darkened by crape the Corinthian columns were draped in the trappings of woe, dark cerements which only served to show up the genius of carver and architect.

The cathedral was faintly illuminated by thousands of candles. The body of the dead monarch lay upon a bare wood bier which made a vivid contrast to the velvet trappings, the piled-up pyramids of flowers, and the brilliant uniforms of the surrounding guards.

These latter, men picked for their fine physique, stood almost motionless around the bier. All down the nave a double line of them were drawn up, and every faithful subject had to pass between them on the way to pay a last tribute of respect to the dead monarch.

They came literally in their thousands, quiet, subdued, and tearful. It was easy for a stranger to mingle with the throng and notice everything: there were dusky corners and quaint, deep oaken stalls where those who cared could hide and watch the progress of the pageant.

Two men had crept behind the gorgeous line of guards into one of these. They had no fear of being detected, lost as they were in the gloom. An additional security was lent by the nebulous wreath of smoke rising from thousands of candles. The features of one of the men were pale, his build as slight; he had deep blue eyes and a sensitive mouth. As to his companion, it matters very little. He was merely the confederate necessary to the carrying out of Gryde's scheme. Gryde did not require his tools to think: that part of the business he always looked to himself. All he wanted was one to faithfully carry out his instructions, to act swiftly, and to possess indomitable courage. There was not a town in Europe where Gryde could not lay his hand upon a score such. For the rest this man passed under the name of Paul Fort.

"A devil of an undertaking," muttered the latter.

"Nothing of the kind," Gryde replied: "the thing is absurdly simple. I admit that on the face of it the stealing of an Emperor from under the eyes of his people is a difficult matter. You shall see. The easiest conjuring tricks always seem the most astounding. From our point of view, £100,000 lies waiting on those bare boards for us. Some people may call those the ashes of departed Caesar—they represent a carcase which, will prove a valuable market commodity."

"But you must get your carcase first."

"I am going to. How? By a conjuring trick. I shall spirit the departed Caesar right from under the eyes of his afflicted people. When? This very evening when the crowd will be at its thickest. Do you see that grating right behind the bier? Well, that communicates with the vaults. The custodian of the vaults will sleep very soundly when he retires this evening, and he will temporarily lose possession of his keys. Not that he will be any wiser for that. It was very thoughtful indeed for the architect who built this place to prepare and execute so minute a plan of the building. I have been studying it very carefully in the library here. This grating now supplies the chancel with hot air. You have already gathered that this evening I shall have the keys of the vaults. Now you hear what to do. Be good enough to repeat your instructions."

"I am to come here alone," Fort said, "about ten o'clock. Then I am to make my way up into the gallery, the key of which you have given me, and I am to remain

out of sight till you give a certain signal. Then one by one, at intervals of half a minute, I am to drop those big glass marbles you gave me into the chancel and amongst the congregation. Then I am to leave by the leads, climb down the lightning-conductor at the end of the Chapel of Our Lady, and join you at our lodgings without delay.”

“Good,” Gryde muttered. “There is no more to be said. Go.”

* * * * *

It was the sixth evening of the lying in state and the popular holiday in Mantua. The great cathedral was absolutely packed with people. So great was the crush that the police responsible for order looked grave and anxious. Still the occasion was one of gloom and seemliness, and the procession moved slowly. Even up to the bier the crowd was so thick that only here and there were the scarlet and gold uniforms of the guards picked out vividly against the dense black.

Over the tread of restless feet and the sound of smothered mourning rose the wail of the organ chanting dirges for the departed. The candles guttered and smoked, as the waves of hot air drifted over them. The very solemnity of the place carried awe into the hearts of the spectators. The sudden bang and jar of a falling chair came with a startling echo.

Illustration:

A glittering globe came swiftly

A second later and a glittering globe came swiftly towards the floor. It might have been one of the golden points of the great corona there. It came speeding down like an arrow from a bow, and then suddenly faded into nothingness.

As it did so a hurricane blast seemed to fill the cathedral, a tremendous explosion followed, the vast audience reeled and rocked as if from the shock of a cavalry charge. Ere they could recover from the surprise, another explosion followed.

The piping scream from a woman’s throat rang into the roof. With one accord the audience turned a sea of grey faces towards the big west doors. It only wanted the pressure of a child’s hand now to set the avalanche in motion. Another and a louder roar followed, there came a roaring wind, the countless candles flared and hissed, and then came the new horror of darkness.

“For Heaven’s sake, the doors!” rang out a voice familiar enough to every soldier in Mantua. “Don’t rush there; the danger cannot be so very great.”

The stern command seemed to hold, the human sheep. As the doors rolled back, the points of flame from the street lamps twinkled through the opening. The black wave rolled steadily on, and a fearful disaster was averted. In a few moments, save for the guard, the cathedral was deserted. Meanwhile the explosions appeared to have ceased. The guard struggled up to the chancel, and after a time the candles were lighted again. Strange to say, not a single human form lay on the marble floor.

“What could it have been?” muttered an officer.

“Nihilists,” replied the colonel of the guard. “A foolish display, and intended for show alone. Still, the disaster might have been a terrible one.”

The young lieutenant said nothing. His limp hand fell from the waxed point of his moustache, his eyes were fixed upon the bier. The colonel had seen fright before, and, being a brave man, respected it.

“What is the matter?” he asked. The lieutenant found his voice at last.,

“Look there,” he said in a frozen whisper. “The Emperor! The scoundrels have been successful. The bier is empty. Why do such wretches live?”

An oath crept from under the colonel’s grizzled beard. The shaking of his hand alone betrayed the emotion that he felt.

“My God!” he murmured. “I had died rather than this had happened.”

Chapter III

IT would be idle to attempt to describe the sensation created by the disappearance of the late Emperor of Lyustria. Europe had not been so thrilled since the assassination of a one time Czar of Russia. The daily papers teemed with the latest news, and rumours current as to the reasons for the outrage.

Naturally the plot was laid at the door of the Nihilists, and countless arrests were made. But search high and low as they could, no trace of the body could be found. In vain a free pardon was offered to anyone connected with the crime who would come forward and make confession, in vain was a large reward offered.

Count Desartes, Chief Commissioner of Police, and his subordinates were puzzled. They had absolutely no proof whatever to go upon. Nothing came till the third day, when there arrived a letter bearing the Mantua postmark. It was unsigned, undated and unheaded, and written on a long slip torn from the margin of a newspaper. It was simply sealed and addressed and came minus an envelope. As for the letter itself, it was printed by hand in small capitals throughout. It ran thus:

“YOUR EMPEROR IS SAFE AND UNMOLESTED. REST ASSURED THAT THE BODY OF SO BRAVE AND GOOD A MAN IS NOT LIKELY TO RECEIVE ANY INDIGNITY AT OUR HANDS. THE RECOVERY OF THE REMAINS IS A MERE MATTER OF MONEY. ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND GOLD CROWNS IS THE RANSOM DEMANDED, AND NOTHING LESS WILL BE TAKEN. OTHERWISE RUDOLPH CAESAR IS NEVER LIKELY TO REST WITH HIS FATHERS. COMMUNICATIONS IN ANSWER TO THIS WILL ALONE BE ACCEPTED IN THE WAY OF AN ADVERTISEMENT IN THE COLUMNS OF THE ZEITUNG. THEY MUST BE HEADED TO ‘CORONET’ ONLY.”

For a long time did Desartes ponder over this strange letter. If the *bona fides* of the rascals could be assured, the money would have to be paid, provided always that strategy resulted in failure.

“In any case this letter must be answered,” the Count remarked to Wrangel, his next in command. “Let it be announced that we accept the terms, and shall be prepared to pay over the money if we are satisfied that the object we seek will be obtained. See to it at once.”

Illustration:

This letter must be answered

The result of this now brought another letter from the scoundrels. The money difficulty still barred the way. The possession of so large a sum of money in cash was extremely likely to lead to detection. The safeguards proposed by the writer of the letter were stringent. And unless these were complied with, no further communications, could be exchanged.

After a delay of six days, and many fruitless letters, a way out of the difficulty was hit upon. The suggestion was so simple, not to say childish, that Desartes smiled as he perused the ultimatum. He might have known that with such men to deal with the simplest and most apparently straightforward plan could really conceal a profundity of cunning and prudence.

To all practical purposes Gryde placed himself unreservedly in Desartes' hands. He assumed that the latter would act honourably towards him: that a secret meeting would take place and the money handed over, when the hiding-place of the late head of the Caesars would be disclosed.

"THE PLACE OF MEETING," Gryde wrote, "WILL BE AN APPARENTLY DESERTED HOUSE IN THE UNTERSTRASSE NO 14. ON FRIDAY NEXT YOUR MESSENGER WILL GET FROM THE BANK IN THE SAME STREET THE NECESSARY MONEY IN GOLD. WE SHALL SEE THAT HE RECEIVES THIS, AND HE WILL PROCEED WITH THE SAME TO NO. 14 IN A CAB. HE WILL KNOCK AT THE DOOR, WHEN A MAN IN LIVERY WILL RECEIVE HIM AND HELP HIM TO CARRY THE GOLD TO A ROOM ON THE GROUND FLOOR. THIS SERVANT WILL BE AN INNOCENT DUPE PROCURED FOR THE OCCASION.

"ALL THIS MUST TAKE PLACE EXACTLY AT FOUR O'CLOCK. IF THE THING IS PROPERLY CARRIED OUT AND NO TREACHERY ATTEMPTED, THE FIVE O'CLOCK POST WILL CONVEY TO COUNT DESARTES THE HIDING-PLACE OF THE DECEASED MONARCH. TO GET AT THE BODY AND RESTORE IT TO ITS PLACE WILL TAKE SOME TIME. ALL THIS TIME THE MESSENGER WITH THE MONEY WILL REMAIN IN NO. 14, BUT AT SEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE EVENING HE WILL BE FREE TO DEPART. IF HE ATTEMPTS TO DO SO BEFORE, HIS HOURS ARE NUMBERED. THIS IS FINAL."

Desartes smiled as he read. He advertised in the *Zeitung* that all these matters should be carried out faithfully, and up to a certain point he meant all he said.

"We will do it, Wrangel," he said. "The gold shall be procured, and you shall convey the same to No. 14. It shall be the real red gold, and you shall remain there till seven as arranged. Meanwhile a perfect cordon of police shall surround the house, and when the time comes we will take the place and the miscreants as well. This will, of course, be subsequent to the discovery of the Emperor's body. As to the rest I will leave all the arrangements in your very capable hands."

“Your Excellency may be perfectly assured,” Wrangel murmured. Whereupon Desartes went tranquilly off to dinner.

* * * * *

It was one o'clock on the eventful Friday, and Gryde was seated in his room awaiting the arrival of Fort. On the table before which he was seated lay a large number of sealed and stamped letters, and a champagne bottle nearly full into which one of those patent screw taps had been inserted. There was a peculiar star on the side of the bottle, suggesting that the same had nearly perished by contact with another hard body, and on the top of the star a spot of wax. But as the champagne exported to Lystria is dipped in wax to the shoulder of the bottle, the fact was not likely to cause attention.

A minute or two later and Fort entered.

“I'm glad you've come,” said Gryde.

“All the same, there is nothing further to report. What you have to do is precisely as arranged. You will go to No. 14 at five o'clock precisely and there await the messenger from the bank. Make him open the box and show you the gold, so as to be certain of its being genuine. At a few minutes before seven I will come also—”

“And if the messenger does not arrive?” Fort suggested.

“In that case you will know that treachery is afloat. Therefore you will consult your own safety by staying where you are. Give me the agreed signal from the window and I will put my plan into execution for setting you at liberty. And mind, you are to remain *perdu* till a quarter to five.”

Fort nodded. He was a little puzzled, but at the same time he had a doglike faith in his leader. He would have faced anything for the latter.

“I'll do exactly as you say,” he said.

“Good. Now we will have one glass of champagne together, and then I shall turn you out, as I have much to do.”

Gryde pressed the lever and a glass of champagne foamed out. As he filled a second glass his forefinger rested on the star on the bottle. The second glass he handed to Fort, and took down the first at one pull.

“Enough for the present,” he said. “Now go.”

Punctually at four o'clock—exactly an hour before the time arranged for Fort's arrival, strange to say—Wrangel drove up to No. 14 with his burden. As he rang the bell a man replied, and assisted Wrangel to convey his heavy load to a room at the back, then bowed and disappeared.

In the hall Gryde awaited him. None could have recognised him in his disguise.

“You may go now,” he said; “my friend has arrived. Here is a gold piece for you.”

Scarcely had the door closed behind the dupe when Gryde crept to the room where Wrangel awaited somebody. His back was to Gryde. The latter carried in his hand the weapon somewhat humorously termed a life-preserver. One blow straight and swift under the lobe of the right ear and Wrangel dropped in his tracks like a bullock. In less time than it takes to tell he was gagged and bound and literally rolled into the cellar.

Illustration:

He was gagged and bound

For the next three-quarters of an hour Gryde was busy. He had to transfer the gold to a number of small cases marked "Cycle Bearings" and consigned to a certain house in the neighbourhood of Fenchurch Street, London. The back of the house opened upon a narrow, dingy lane faced by a blank wall of a factory. As Gryde got the last of his cases into the lane a waggon lumbered along.

"Here," Gryde cried, "you're late, you know. Get these boxes aboard. As I'm going the same way I'll ride with you to the station."

The driver made no objection to a fellow working man accompanying him. And thus it came about that Gryde personally superintended the dispatch of his treasure per passenger train, and a few minutes after Fort's arrival at No. 14 was on his way to the frontier in the same train as the precious metal. A workman lounged in the corner of a third-class carriage. Who would have identified him as being the author of the most sensational crime known in modern Europe?

Meanwhile Fort waited and waited doggedly. A clock somewhere struck seven. At the same moment the front door opened and heavy feet tramped in. Fort was on the alert in an instant. That he had been betrayed never occurred to the brave ruffian for a moment.

He knew that he would have to fight for his life. He set his teeth hard and faced the ring of police who had sprung upon him. He had no weapon. He sprang forward with the courage and force of despair. An instant later he was struggling and fighting with the strength of a tiger.

Then his strength seemed suddenly to relax, he fell back helplessly into the arms of one of his captors. A blue tinge came over his face; the side of his mouth drew up in a horribly grotesque manner. A shudder and shiver, and Fort had escaped. He was dead.

Almost before the police could realise what had happened, Desartes came, hurrying in. His air was elated. His eyes sparkled with triumph.

"The rascals told the truth," he exclaimed. "The Emperor has been found concealed in a stone coffin in the vaults below the cathedral. We had a long search for the body. The miscreants removed it by the way of the grating behind the bier. You have the man, and you have recovered the money as well."

One of the police explained the new feature of the drama. A search was made, but no gold could be found, nothing but Wrangel in the cellar groaning pitifully and anathematising what had happened. But gold there was none, and to this day the hiding-place of the same is wrapped in mystery. That they had obtained possession of the leading villain in the cast, Desartes never doubted. And he had escaped them.

* * * * *

And in the fulness of time Gryde read the "solution" of the mystery comfortably in London. He had his money, he had come out of the danger unscathed. He had coolly and in cold blood betrayed his colleague to save himself, for the champagne had been poisoned to make assurance doubly sure.

"And how ridiculously easy it was after all," the master scoundrel muttered as he flung his paper aside. "What a success, too, were those gelatine bombs,

exploded by the force of their fall. Neat and not destructive. Police! I could rob the Bank of England itself, and trace the crime to Scotland Yard. Maybe I will some day, before I settle down to growing orchids and courting the gods of the bourgeoisie.”

