

The Imperfect Crime

A Peter Hames Story

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A PALE-FACED, slim and not undistinguished-looking young man emerged from the office of Monsieur Dumesnil, cashier and financier omnipotent of the Sporting Club, and closed the door softly behind him. His first rapid glance up and down the heavily-carpeted passage showed him that he was in luck. The official at the top of the stairs was talking to the elevator boy, and both had their backs turned towards him. The flunky in powdered hair and black satin knee breeches who stood at the corner near the entrance to the gambling room had temporarily disappeared altogether.

There was not a living soul who could have witnessed his exit.

With his hands in his pockets, he strolled along, turned sharp to the left on the other side of the staircase, passed the elevators, and opened the door of the small lavatory opposite. Here again fortune favoured him, as up to a point it usually does favour the criminal of courage. The place was empty.

The young man who had entered the lavatory divested himself of his dinner coat, hung it up, and carefully examined the sleeves. They were absolutely unstained. Then he paid meticulous attention to his shirt, and, looking in the mirror opposite, scrutinized closely the cuffs. These, too, were flawless. Only on the third finger of his right hand was a stain, and that very small.

He turned on the water, plunged in his hand, used the scrubbing brush fearlessly, and dried his fingers upon a towel, which he searched with anxious eyes for any incriminating mark before he threw it into the wire receptacle. Then he brushed his hair, more from habit than necessity, put on his dinner coat once more, and sallied out.

The elevator boy and his friend were still talking, but turned round and bowed as he passed. To have escaped attention altogether was more than he dared hope for, and he was fully prepared for their recognition. He even glanced into the bar, and nodded to the barman, but, instead of entering, he looked in at the gambling rooms, reserved a place at the high table, which did not commence play until midnight, stepped back again, and made his way along the passage towards the Nouvel Hotel. The man at the desk saluted him with a low bow. He addressed the liveried attendant who opened the door.

„Nothing doing here yet, Charles,“ he yawned. „I shall have a look at the Salles Privées.“

„They start later each evening, sir,“ the man observed. „There’s a big dinner party in the Paris, too, tonight. There won’t be much of a crowd here before midnight.“

In the lounge of the Nouvel Hotel the young man paused for a moment. His plan of action was definite, but things had gone so much better than he had dared hope for that he was inclined to modify it. He walked out of the swing doors, down the short drive, crossed the road, and entered the casino proper. Here he met with what was to him his first disappointment. The tables were sparsely occupied, and there was no crowd at any particular spot. He hesitated for a few seconds, then fell in line with the little queue at one of the cashiers’ desks, changed a 20,000-franc chip for some of a lower denomination, repeated the proceeding at another table where business was brisk, and gambled with another five thousand at a table where some high play was going on.

He won twice, and passed on towards the Salles Privées, with bulging pockets. Arrived at his destination, he turned sharp to the left, and entered the bar. Here, he seated himself upon a stool, carefully criticized his appearance in the looking-glass opposite, and somewhat astonished the barman, to whom he was well known, by drinking a double liqueur brandy at a single gulp.

„Bad indigestion, Charles,“ he explained, with a pleasant smile. „Give me another ordinary one.“

They chatted for a few minutes, after which the young man strolled on to the playing rooms. He marked a place at a gambling table which had not yet commenced, changed another ten thousand into chips at a crowded board, and relapsed into an easy-chair close to the table where he proposed to play. Then he drew out his cigarette case, lit a cigarette, and gave himself up to careful meditation. Step by step, he reviewed his evening.

He had dined at his usual table in the restaurant of the club, and had talked there with several acquaintances, and both maîtres d'hôtel, of his afternoon winnings at Nice, and of the fact that he had been repaid an old gambling debt by a man whom he had met there accidentally. That was quite in order. He had left his table early, frankly announcing his intention to gamble. He had mounted the stairs of the Sporting Club cheerfully, found the place almost deserted, as it was a few minutes before the formal opening time, and entered the office of Monsieur Dumesnil unnoticed.

Monsieur Dumesnil was alone, and had the good taste not to utter even a groan when the long, marvellously tempered blade sank inch by inch through his shirt front into his heart. Ever since then things had gone a little better than planned. The weapon—the only thing he had left behind—was a home-manufactured one—the blade of which had been in his possession for many years, the homemade handle riveted on by himself. No soul had seen him enter or leave that office. His booty was practically untraceable, for his first prize had been the long list on Dumesnil's desk containing the numbers of the notes and the identifying marks of the high-priced chips.

He began to feel marvellously cool and self-assured. A crime which no one could prove, was non-existent. He sauntered across, and took his place at the chemin-de-fer table, where play was just beginning. Luck followed him as it sometimes does the evildoer. His seat at the table was number two. He „bancoed“ the man who had opened number one for a thousand, and won. He started his own bank with five thousand, and ran it seven times.

His winnings now were considerable, and a curious species of excitement seized him. He had been wasting years of his life. Crime—cunningly devised crime—was the brave man's adjunct to success. He had been a fool ever to have walked in the shadow of poverty, ever to have neglected those gifts of which he certainly now found himself possessed.

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FOR the first time in his life Peter Hames, the American painter, whose villa at La Turbie had been the scene of several more or less well-known adventures, heard Sybil Christian's voice in his ear without that responsive throb of the senses which, as a rule, marched with her coming. He had been standing on the outskirts of a little group of acquaintances, all eagerly discussing the tragedy of the evening, but he followed her without protest to one of the quiet seats of the inner room of the bar. Then he saw that she was really perturbed, and forgot his first irritation.

„Mr. Hames,“ she said, „this is a terrible affair.“

He looked at her curiously.

„You were no special friend of Dumesnil's were you?“ he asked.

„I certainly was not,“ she admitted. „I disliked him very much, as I think most people did. It is of the living I am thinking; not of the dead.“

His little interrogative nod was an invitation to her to proceed.

„Dumesnil is finished with,“ she said. „One may be sorry for him, or not, but the fact remains that he can feel no more. Someone will have to suffer, of course. That is as it should be, but do you know what I think the most terrible thing in life? Let me tell you: it is to be wrongfully accused of a crime like that.“

„Is there any fear of anything of the sort happening?“

„I think that there is.“

She looked around. There was absolutely no one within hearing. A waiter was the nearest person. She summoned him, and Hames dispatched him with an order.

„One of the stupidest things in the world has happened,“ she confided. „Of course nearly everybody believes that the two croupiers who wanted instructions about opening the new table were the first people to enter the office and find Dumesnil dead. As a matter of fact they weren't.“

„How the mischief do you know that?“

„I know because I saw someone go in before them,“ she replied. „Not only did I see him, but three others did.“

„Are you going to tell me who it was?“

„It was Clive Densham. I saw him go in and I saw him come out, looking like death. Lady Hackett saw him too; so did Jack and Minnie Fulsford.“

„This was before the croupiers went in?“ Peter Hames questioned.

„Three or four minutes before.“

„Why didn't Clive give the alarm at once?“

Sybil groaned.

„Why does one sometimes lose one's nerve in a crisis?“ she rejoined bitterly. „I can only imagine that he was terrified. Everyone knows that he hasn't a penny, that he lost everything last night, and that Dumesnil had threatened not to advance him any more money. I suppose that he was simply too terrified to give the alarm. Anyhow he is sitting there at the corner of the bar, drinking, and, although I haven't said a word, I believe Minnie Fulsford has, for I saw some of the principal officials with the commissaire of police a few minutes ago, looking at him and talking to one another.“

„What do you want me to do?“ Peter inquired.

She looked at him gratefully.

„I have spoken to Jack Fulsford and Lady Hackett, and they have agreed for the moment not to open their mouths unless someone else is accused. In the meantime, I want you to talk to Clive. Ask him why he didn't give the alarm when he found out what had happened. He'd hate confessing to me that he lost his nerve. I'm sure he'd tell you the sober truth.“

„When do you want me to tackle him?“

„This instant. I am so afraid that they may get hold of him and ask him a lot of questions before he has pulled himself together. He has been drinking steadily ever since he came out of the room, and he is certain to contradict himself.“

„You don't think he did it?“ Peter Hames suggested curtly.

„I could as soon believe that I had done it myself,“ was the emphatic rejoinder.

THEY dealt with their drinks perfunctorily, and Peter Hames went on his mission. The young man Densham, as a rule surrounded by friends and acquaintances, was seated at the far end of the bar alone. His hair was unkempt, his eyes a little bloodshot. Hames drew a stool to his side.

„Clive, I want to talk to you,“ he said.

The young man glanced at him and scowled.

„Leave me alone, there's a good fellow,“ he begged. „I am trying to get drunk by myself.“

„That’s just what you mustn’t do,“ Peter Hames continued firmly. „You may have to face a little trouble at any time. It is better for you to keep your head clear, and be ready to deal with it.“

The young man swung around and faced him—a good-looking lad ordinarily, but almost repulsive now when the signs of incipient intoxication were apparent.

„What the hell do you mean?“ he demanded.

„It’s just as well you should know,“ Peter Hames told him. „Several people saw you come out of Dumesnil’s office before the croupiers went in. You did a damned silly thing, Clive—not giving the alarm—and you’ve got to decide now what’s best to be done.“

„Well, what is best to be done?“ the young man asked. „I know I’ve been a fool.“

„Will you put yourself in my charge for ten minutes?“ Peter Hames suggested.

„Of course I will,“ was the prompt acquiescence.

„Very well. You’re coming first to have a wash. Pull yourself together, and look quite as usual as you leave the bar, and afterwards we’ll come back, and we’ll have a drink together quietly.“

A few minutes later, a very different-looking young man walked boldly by his friend’s side back to the bar, and sank into an easy-chair in the annex.

„Now, Clive,“ Hames enjoined, „explain to me just why you went to Dumesnil’s office, found him dead there, and came out without giving the alarm. We are all your friends, and we want to get you out of this without any trouble.“

„I suppose,“ the young man groaned, „it seems to you like the act of a madman to have kept my mouth shut, but just consider this: Everyone knows I haven’t a bob, and that I’ve got one of my gambling crazes on.“

„Anyway, in I went to that office, and I honestly believe that I had some sort of an idea of taking old Dumesnil by the throat, and frightening him if he refused to let me have a few francs. However, when I got there, Dumesnil was crumpled up in his chair, drops of blood were falling from his shirt front onto the carpet, and his face—well, you’ve seen dead men before; I hadn’t. I stared at him and my first impulse was to rush out of the place shouting. I wish to God I had done so.“

„What really happened was that, with my hand on the door knob, I looked back. I seemed to take in the whole ghastly little scene. Dumesnil was dead, with a dagger sticking out of his shirt front. All those piles of notes and chips with which he is always surrounded were gone too.“

„For a second or so I seemed to see things quite coolly. I’ve actually been fool enough to talk about what I was going to do to Dumesnil if he wouldn’t advance me more money. I imagined the expression I would see on the faces of everyone I met if I rushed out and announced that Dumesnil had been murdered. I would have read the thoughts in their eyes. I was suddenly afraid, Hames, as I have been afraid of nothing else before in my life. I opened and closed the door, and I staggered down the passage. I wasn’t sure whether anyone had seen me or not. I struggled downstairs, and outside into the fresh air. I think I was half inclined to make a bolt for it. Then I realized how damnably foolish that was, so I came back, climbed onto that stool, and I’ve been there ever since, drinking.“

„You’ll come straight with me to Monsieur Perault, and the commissaire of police,“ Peter Hames insisted.

„I'm quite ready," the other assented, rising to his feet.

The two men passed out of the bar, and there were very few who did not guess their errand. An attendant outside, in response to Peter Hames' inquiry, ushered them into a room at the end of the corridor. Monsieur Perault, the manager, with two of his subordinates and an official of the police, were seated at a table.

„Monsieur Perault," Peter Hames announced, „our young friend here, Mr. Clive Densham, wishes to tell you what he knows of this affair. He was in the office before your croupiers."

„Ha!" Monsieur Perault ejaculated. „We have heard something of this. Sit down, Mr. Densham, if you please. Monsieur Cheval, the Chef de Sûreté, will doubtless like to ask you a few questions."

The latter, a short, military-looking man of middle age, with a heavy moustache and gold pince-nez, addressed himself at once to his task.

„You then, apparently, Monsieur Densham," he said, „were the first to discover that Monsieur Dumesnil had been murdered?"

„Apparently so," the young man admitted.

„Will you tell me why you did not at once give the alarm?" the Chef de Sûreté asked.

„I cannot answer that question even to myself," Densham replied. „I simply don't know. I was horrified at what I saw, in the first place, and in the second, it seemed to me that everyone knew I was poor and had gone to borrow money, and that I should be accused of the murder."

„I see. And did you murder him?" the Chef de Sûreté added sharply.

„Of course I didn't."

„Where did you go when you left the office?"

„To the bar."

„Nowhere else?"

Densham hesitated.

„Yes," he acknowledged. „Before I went to the bar, I went downstairs and out into the street."

Monsieur Cheval made a note.

„Out into the street? Why?"

„I don't know. My head was going round, and I wanted some air."

„Perhaps you don't know where you went either?" his questioner suggested.

„As a matter of fact I don't," Densham maintained. „I don't think I was quite conscious. I walked some distance up towards the casino, but how far I don't know. I realized suddenly how foolish I was to leave the place. I came straight back, and remained in the bar until Mr. Hames came and spoke to me. He advised me to come here with him, and I did."

„It seems rather a pity," the Chef de Sûreté remarked, peering through his pince-nez with narrowed eyes at the pallid young man, „that you did not come here before you took that little stroll outside."

„Have you any objection to being searched, Monsieur Densham?" Monsieur Perault asked.

„None whatever."

Monsieur Cheval shrugged his shoulders.

„That will probably come later," he pointed out, „but if my friend considers—"

HE WAVED an acquiescent hand. One of the gendarmes, standing at the door, took Densham into a corner. He returned in a few minutes with a miscellaneous lot of articles which he laid upon the table. The money amounted to less than five hundred francs. The other things were the usual bits which every man is supposed to carry with him.

„What was your object in going into the office?“ Monsieur Cheval inquired.

„To borrow money from Monsieur Dumesnil,“ was the frank acknowledgment.

„You were in need of money, then?“

„Desperately.“

There was further discussion and whispering between the Chef de Sûreté and Monsieur Perault. Finally the latter made an announcement.

„It is to be understood, of course,“ he said, "that proceedings in this room are entirely informal. If you, Mr. Hames, will undertake to remain with Mr. Densham for the next hour and make no attempt to leave the buildings, you are both at liberty to depart.“

The gendarme opened the door. Peter Hames and his companion made their way back to the bar.

Acting upon Peter Hames' advice, Densham decided to face it out amongst his friends, and he was very soon surrounded. The general opinion was that he would hear no more about the affair except that he might have to give his evidence before another court. Just as they were leaving for a stroll in the roulette rooms, however, Monsieur Perault himself entered. He was looking a little harassed.

„We shall have to ask Monsieur Densham to spare us one more minute,“ he regretted. „Monsieur Hames can accompany him if he wishes.“

In silence the three men returned to the room at the end of the corridor. The Chef de Sûreté waited until Densham had approached within a few feet of him. Then suddenly he flung upon the table before him a 10,000-franc chip, and pointed to it with a dramatic finger.

„Do you recognize that?“ he demanded.

„It's a 10,000-franc chip, obviously,“ Densham replied. „I don't recognize it particularly. Why should I? I don't play so high myself.“

„You say that you left this place immediately after the murder was committed, which must have been at about ten o'clock. That chip was picked up in the street between here and the casino. People don't throw those chips about, as a rule, if they are sane. Listen to me, young man: I suggest that you left this place, dazed with horror at the deed which you had committed, and that, in your excitement and natural nervousness, one of the chips which formed part of your booty slipped from your pocket. There it is. What have you to say?“

„Only that it's all rot,“ Densham insisted indignantly. „I've never handled such a big chip in my life.“

The Chef de Sûreté cleared his throat, and referred to some notes he had made.

„Clive Densham,“ he began, „you were the first person to be seen coming out of the office after the unfortunate Dumesnil had met with his death. With that terrible tragedy actually before your eyes, without warning to anyone, you crept from the place, and wandered aimlessly out into the street, where this chip from Dumesnil's office was later picked up. The law gives me no choice in this

matter. I am compelled to place you under arrest. You will be taken down to the gendarmerie now, and formally charged.“

The young man bore himself bravely enough this time, although the color seemed to have been sucked out of his cheeks.

„I never touched Dumesnil,“ he declared doggedly.

The Chef de Sûreté rose to his feet.

„The informal part of the proceedings is completed,“ he announced. „It is now an affair for the recognized authorities.“

Illustration

PETER HAMES began by changing a thousand-franc note into hundreds, and, with these in his pocket, he commenced a series of friendly and gossiping conversations with the attendants who had been on duty just before the opening of the club. At the end of half an hour, he had made slight but definite progress. He had ascertained, first, that from the time of Monsieur Dumesnil's opening his office and establishing himself there at about twenty past nine, no one else had been seen to enter or leave it except Clive Densham. Second, there were only about a dozen people in the club, most of whom were having a scratch meal in the bar and did not leave it until after the tragedy.

The exceptions consisted of two elderly ladies who made a nightly habit of standing out in the corridor or in the doorway of the bar, watching for the opening of the salles de jeux; an elderly gentleman of fabulous wealth, who could only walk with the help of crutches; and a young man known to most people—a great gambler, but a most agreeable player at chemin-de-fer, Prince Krotzky, a Hungarian Pole, whose family before the war had been socially famous in Paris and London. His presence there was accounted for by the fact that he had dined downstairs in the restaurant at his favourite corner table alone, and had come up before the club was open to drink a glass of brandy at the bar, and secure his place at chemin-de-fer. As soon as he had done this he had left the building for an hour, and was now established at the place he had reserved, and was apparently winning heavily.

PETER HAMES' next move was more difficult. He sought out Monsieur Perault, with a request. The manager was doubtful. He was as anxious to help the young man as anyone could be, but a gendarme stood outside the office; strict orders had been left by the Chef de Sûreté that nothing should be touched there until the arrival of a fingerprint expert and a detective from Marseilles. Nevertheless, Monsieur Perault compromised. He produced the key of the office, whispered a few words to the gendarme on guard, and himself accompanied Peter Hames inside.

„Don't let your hand rest anywhere,“ he begged. „I expect we shall get into trouble about this, but to me it is incredible, as it is to you, that that young man, beloved of everybody, could have committed a crime so horrible.“

He turned on the light with shaking fingers, and gave only one shuddering glance in the direction of the dead man.

„I beg that you will hurry, Mr. Hames,“ he whispered hoarsely.

Peter Hames wasted no time. He went down on his hands and knees upon the floor and searched every inch of the carpet. Then he stood up and made a thorough examination of the mahogany desk. Finally, setting his teeth and

struggling hard against a fit of revulsion, he bent over the crumpled form of the murdered man. He drew from his pocket a seldom-used magnifying glass, and made a close examination of the dead man's shirt front. Finally he turned to the manager.

„Monsieur Perault,“ he begged, „there is a small article, probably without the smallest significance, of which I wish to possess myself. It is resting at the present moment upon the waistcoat of Monsieur Dumesnil.“

„It would be better to touch nothing,“ Monsieur Perault faltered.

„On principle, I quite agree with you,“ Peter Hames acquiesced. „But for once, Monsieur Perault, I beg of you to grant a little latitude. The French law is a magnificent thing, but it has but one idea—the criminal. This trifle is probably not of the slightest importance, but I want to remove it myself. Will you be my witness?“

Monsieur Perault demurred, but stepped reluctantly forward. His companion leaned over and removed from its resting place, at the bottom of the dead man's waistcoat, a speck of something which seemed to have a blue tinge. He dropped it into an envelope, which he thrust into his pocket.

Monsieur Perault opened the door.

„You will come, now, please?“ he insisted.

The gendarme, who had disapproved of their entrance, saluted reluctantly as the two men passed down the corridor together. Peter Hames asked his companion one more question.

„Monsieur Perault,“ he said, „you report a large number of high-priced chips missing. I presume that if the thief held these for several days it would be possible by entering the casino in the morning, say a fortnight later, purchasing a chip and studying it carefully, to detach the gummed-on labels from the old ones, and bring them up to date?“

Monsieur Perault grudgingly admitted the fact.

„Now, will you do one thing more for me?“ Peter Hames begged. „It is for the good of us all—and myself included. Will you send across with me to the Salles Privées someone who shall authorize the various officials there to answer any questions I may put?“

„With the utmost pleasure,“ Monsieur Perault approved. „But from henceforth the office must be considered sealed.“

IT WAS barely one o'clock when Peter Hames, a little tired but filled with a queer, tremulous kind of exultation, returned to the Sporting Club and made his way to the baccarat table.

„Very high play tonight, monsieur,“ one of the chefs whispered. „Monsieur le Prince had won at one time ten millions. He loses now heavily.“

Hames found a place opposite Krotzky. He studied him with a fixed and curious expression for several minutes. He was a young man of medium height, absolutely pale, with hollow eyes and the long, nervous fingers of the gambler. He was taking a bank at baccarat, and Peter Hames watched him deal the cards. For a moment he felt a little catch in his throat. The night had been overfull of events. The atmosphere of the place itself seemed charged with emotion. He set his teeth, and moved with difficulty to where Sybil Christian was standing amongst the spectators.

„Your friend Krotzky seems to be losing,“ he remarked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

„I suppose he can afford it,“ she observed. „They say that he had an enormous win at Nice recently.“

„Do you know him well enough to ask him to have a drink with us?“

„I think so,“ she assented.

„I'll meet you at the door of the bar, or in the annex,“ Peter Hames suggested.

„I'll bring him along,“ she promised. „Any news?“ she added wistfully.

„There may be later on.“

PRINCE KROTSKY was at any rate a fine gambler. Notwithstanding an hour of tragic losses, he was bending over Sybil Christian as they emerged from the room, like a man who had no other thought in life than to win a smile from that very difficult young lady. She laid her hand upon Peter Hames' arm.

„Prince,“ she said, „I want to introduce a friend of mine. Mr. Peter Hames—Prince Krotzky.“

The Prince, who had apparently contemplated a tête-à-tête, responded courteously but without enthusiasm.

„We are going in to have a drink,“ Sybil continued. „Will you join us?“

„With great pleasure.“

„But first of all, Prince, have you noticed that you have lost one of those small but very beautiful turquoises in your ring?“

The Prince raised his shapely hand and glanced at the disaster which had befallen him.

„Bad setting,“ he murmured. „I bought the stones in Colombo last year, and was stupid enough to have them set there.“

Illustration

„Well, you're luckier than you deserve,“ Peter Hames remarked. „Come with me a yard or two and I'll show you the missing stone.“

The Prince agreed, apparently without demur. They walked down the corridor together. When they reached the room with the gendarme stationed outside, however, the Prince stopped suddenly.

„My God,“ he exclaimed, „that's the room in which poor Dumesnil was murdered!“

Peter Hames nodded.

„Yes,“ he said, with his hand upon the knob of the door. „We are going inside.“

An earthquake rumbled and swayed under the feet of the Prince. There was a throbbing in his ears. He took a quick step backwards. Somehow or other the gay throng of people ascending and descending the stairs, passing into the rooms or out into the bar, seemed to consist of gendarmes—a gendarme to his left, another on his right.

„Well, it's a queer place to bring me,“ he commented, smiling. „I've no fancy for horrors, and it would scarcely have been here, Mr. Hames, that you found my stone.“

He entered the room firmly enough, Peter Hames' hand in friendly fashion upon his shoulder, and with a click the door was closed. The Chef de Sûreté, his anger at being dragged out of bed suddenly dispersed, rose to his feet.

„This is Prince Krotzky,“ Peter Hames explained. „It seemed to Monsieur le Prince here that he might be able to help us in this matter of poor Densham.“

One finds over at the Salles Privées that a considerable number of chips which might have come from Monsieur Dumesnil's evening store were changed there, and, although they are, of course, almost impossible to trace, one of the officials of the place believes that it was the Prince who changed them. Furthermore—

Peter Hames paused. The Chef de Sûreté drew an envelope from his pocket, and shook a small object out on to the counter.

„Furthermore,“ the latter continued, „this fragment of stone, Prince, was found resting at the bottom of the waistcoat of the murdered man. Will you permit me to see whether it fits with the empty space in your ring?“

The Prince drew his ring from his finger and laid it upon the counter. A little exclamation broke from the lips of the onlookers. The stone fitted exactly.

„You are willing, Monsieur le Prince,“ the Chef de Sûreté asked, „to submit yourself to an interrogation?“

The Prince's long fingers were again busy. Peter Hames was within a yard of him, but he acted upon one of the principles of his life, and he moved neither hand nor foot. The gendarme stood with his back to the door, and the Chef de Sûreté was on the other side of the desk. So Prince Krotzky blew out his brains, and Clive Densham slept in his own bed after all.

