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# Memoirs of a Mystery Man

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

True-life drama recorded by one of the world's most famous writers of mystery tales

**YOU WRITERS,** a woman once said to me in my younger days, "must have such interesting lives."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because all the time you must be looking out for unusual people and travelling to unusual places."

"To get the material for your stories, of course."

A fallacy. Given a certain facility for writing and an aptitude for seeing life, the raw material for your work will find you wherever you may happen to be in the world. Fascinating stories have been and always will be written concerning the most ordinary people living in the most ordinary circumstances—clerks, farmers, workers and princes. So long as they are human beings and so long as the human touch is there, they are part of the turning wheel of life, material ready at any moment for the story writer.

I am a reader as well as a writer, and I have read more enthralling stories in which the scenes are laid in London or the country, New York, or the more well-known Far West, the busy streets or the market places of life, than in the more secret corners of the world. To quote only moderns, think of what Pett Ridge has made of the Cockneys, and Eden Philpotts of the men and women of Devon, and what glorious pictures the latter has drawn of the country he worshipped. If only Wells's brain had not made its urge felt, what marvelous successors we might have had to "Kipps."

I ask myself now, after the joyous labor of having produced some 120 stories, most concerned with ordinary men and women of my own and neighboring countries, how much I am indebted to this search for the unusual. Very little, I think. In my younger days I used to be fond of poking my nose into places where I did not belong, but I don't remember that I benefitted greatly from it.

A friend in New York gave me an introduction to the Police Commissioner, and I was more or less initiated into the mysteries of American criminal life. I saw nothing I wanted to remember, much less write about. It was all very ugly and repulsive. Haunts of the sexually vicious were more disgusting than inspiring. The few murderers to whom I was introduced might have been met with at any tea party. The only thrill I obtained, and that was a slight one, was in the morning call-over at police headquarters, when the captured criminals of the day before were made to stand upon a raised platform and the detectives of the city, sometimes a hundred or more, all looked them over to see if any of the new arrivals were on their wanted list. In those days Americans were so prosperous that I think crime, except in its cruder aspects, must have been at a discount, and the cruder aspects are not much use to the story teller.

## Eyewitness of Murder

**THE UNDERWORLD** of Marselles is more stimulating. There still exist, I believe, the original Seven Taverns which I duly visited year ago and which were supposed to be the hotbeds of every sort of vice. Here I have seen crime quite naked enough, but not crime one would care to write about. Beautiful women in plenty whom the police of the district tell you are responsible in their own persons for more of the desperate fights which are almost nightly occurrences than even the robberies. The French criminal is avaricious up to a point, but he is always lustful. He will fight more fiercely for the woman of his choice than for the snuff of an unvary traveler.

Each one of these taverns had, and probably still has, a

sort of queen who boasted of the number of men who have fought for her favors. I spent a brief portion of one evening with one of these ladies, listening to a succession of her adventures and wondering at the curious glances which were all the time directed at our table. There was not one of them worthy even an effort of the memory, and I was thankful for the timely hint from the proprietor which enabled me to make my escape just before the court of the admirers arrived. She pretended to part from me with reluctance. I believe she was only longing for the moment when she could be sitting in the window seat clapping and encouraging her cavaliers in their nightly game of depositing the adventurous stranger.

The only murder I actually witnessed in my life was outside this same place three nights later. I was walking down the steep descent from the crowded boulevard, with no intention of visiting the tavern itself, in company with a friend who was a civilian official in the *Sûreté*—a man whom I had met during the war—when we heard the usual creaking of glasses and what sounded like two shots from inside the café.

My friend dragged me into an alley. We were barely a dozen yards away, and we saw a man, hatless and with his coat half torn off his back, come staggering out from the place, evidently injured. A moment later the door was thrown open, and I saw the woman to whom I had been talking a few nights before standing in a blaze of light with her arm around the neck of another man who deliberately fired shot after shot into the crouching body of the fugitive. When his revolver was empty he jerked it into the river on the other side of the way and calmly retreated into the tavern.

The girl was laughing—a horrible sound. I can see her now, her pallid face ghastly in the dazzling illumination. Rouge is not affected by the women of the taverns. Her eyes were brilliant, her mouth wide open as she laughed, displaying her matchless teeth. Beautiful she certainly was in her way, and yet terrifying. My companion dragged me by the arm up the alley. I asked him whether we were not going to do anything. He thought I was mad.

"The gendarme at the corner of the street," he said, "has blown her whistle. As soon as there are half a dozen of them they will go down. Anyone who interfered from outside, or a single policeman even, would get what he deserved."

It was an ugly sight; enough to cure one of that class of sightseeing for a time. I decided that night that I preferred the murders of my own imagination, and for years I left sightseeing at Marselles alone.

## Drama in Paris

**IN PARIS** I did witness one odd little drama which made a great impression upon me. I wrote the story of it for an English magazine. I forget its name, but the story was called "The Man Who Lived the Most."

During a brief stay in Paris I became an occasional visitor at one of the night haunts in Montmartre which I have always thought one of the few which combined a certain



E. Phillips Oppenheim, now over 130 exciting novels, now reveals his most exciting real-life adventures.

amount of romance with the usual banalities of night life. It was run by Albert, who afterward became famous and was the proprietor of a magnificent restaurant at the top of the hill where, for anything I know, he may still be officiating. It was called *Le Rat Mort* and for some reason or other became the fashionable rendezvous of wealthy English, Americans and the Parisians themselves, who do not as a rule join in the night life of the city.

One night I saw seated opposite to me at a table alone a girl, obviously not of the same class as the usual frequenter. I noticed that Albert paid her particular attentions and permitted no one to share her table. Now and then she produced a sketch book and pencil and worked for a few minutes. I was there three or four times a week, and I suppose she got used to seeing me alone and decided that I was harmless. I found that she was an American student and I heard afterward that she had made rapid progress in Paris and had already had a picture in the *Salon*. We took supper together and several times afterward she allowed me to join her; always bravely, insisting upon paying her share of the bill. I was curious as to the reason for her visits, and one day she gratified my curiosity.

She took me to her studio and showed me a startling picture of *Le Rat Mort* in the early morning. A man was holding up the blind which sheltered the great east window, and the effect of the light upon the faces of the scattered crowd, the fading flowers, the disordered tables and tired waiters, was marvellous. There was one curious thing: The man who had lifted the blind had no head. She herself pointed to the omission.

"That is why I visit the café every night," she confided. "I want someone to come in to give me an inspiration for the





The tavern had a sort of queen who boasted of the number of men who had fought for her favors.

Illustrated by John F. Clymer

"It is not our affair," I pointed out. "Mademoiselle seems well able to take care of herself."

"Others have thought so," he murmured sorrowfully.

I had to go back to England for some time, but by chance I saw the end of the little drama. The night of my return to Paris I wound up as usual at *Le Roi Mort*. With a start of pleasure I realized that Mademoiselle was seated in her usual place. I walked up with the intention of accosting her, but stopped short perhaps a yard or so away. It was the living ghost of Mademoiselle at which I gazed. She saw in my face what I was feeling.

"You must not come here," she said. "I wish to be alone. I am still waiting."

I made some foolish rejoinder and chose a table a short distance away. Albert came presently to me. There was no need for questions between us.

"I warned her, Monsieur," he lamented. "I have daughters of my own. I warned her—but it was useless."

It was barely half an hour later when the climax came. The Comte de C— appeared with some companions. He bowed half mockingly to the girl as he passed. She looked at him with stony face, but there was something terrible in her eyes. An hour must have passed. She did not move. She drank one or two glasses of wine and smoked furiously. Then de C—, who had apparently been telling his companions the story of his adventure, rose laughing to his feet.

"I'll show you," he said, and moved toward the curtain.

He stood there and deliberately drew up the blind. Some portion of the effect of the early sunrise followed his movement. He turned to face the room and for a moment his expression was the expression which she had sought—almost Christianlike, yet stern. Then, even as he stood with his finger on the spring, he laughed—a drunken, satyr-like laugh—at his friends across the way. One saw the evil line of his mouth.

I was the first to see what was going to happen and I sprang to my feet. I think that my cry probably saved the young man's life. The girl was standing up in her place. Almost as that first shot sounded, Albert, who had been watching, flashed down the room. She hesitated. In a second she would be in his grasp. She had time for one last look. She turned the pistol upon herself. It was an old-fashioned, two-barrelled affair, but the second bullet did its work.

#### Gaity Has Receded

WHEN I LOOK back at the period of which I have been writing—some thirty or forty years ago—I realize that the night life, anyhow of Europe and Asia, with its undercurrents of crime and all manner of intrigues, has almost ceased to exist. In London it never flourished. We English have a touch of the hypocrite in our blood, and while we threw ourselves madly into any diversion we can find in foreign countries, we preserve our respectability at home. The natural joyousness of the pleasure-seeking Frenchman seems never to have recovered since the war. Montmartre is dead. At the few other places that remain there is a tired, almost a jaded, spirit about the merry-making. On the Riviera there is still spasmodic gaiety, but after all the Riviera is only a picnic ground for holiday makers.

Berlin has its flashes of insanity, but Hitler's hand is tightening and the night clubs are losing their hold upon the reveller.

Farther East, night life, as we understand it, has never flourished, not in the last 2,000 years at any rate. The Oriental takes too good care of his women, and without women there can be no gaiety. At Saigon I have fiddled till the early hours of the morning, but it was all very correct; one might almost say staid. One was tempted almost to regret the absence of those figures of the past, suggestive and evil though they were. No race in the world are more careful of their womanhood than the Chinese, and the facile love-making and temperate habits of the Japanese have always been fatal to that spirit of adventure—criminal, amorous or merely gay—which has filled the morgue and emptied the pockets of the Western pleasure-seeker.

The night life of the great cities was more interesting when beautiful and intriguing sirens whispered during the dance of secret loaves where a fortune was to be made by easy gambling or trade to excite our curiosity concerning some mysterious personage behind the curtain, a personage of great power who was willing to purchase secrets at fabulous prices.

face of the man who lifted the blind. As soon as I find him I shall say *au revoir* to Monsieur Albert."

A few nights afterward the expected thing happened. I entered to find her as usual alone, but she waved me away. Presently I saw the reason. Exactly opposite her was a young man, almost the best looking man I have ever seen in my life, with fair to golden hair, almost perfect features, a very attractive *tout ensemble*. Then I saw her do what she had never done before—lean forward and beckon him to her table. When I rose to leave they were supping together. She touched my arm as I passed.

"I have found what I wanted," she whispered eagerly. "I could only congratulate her and pass on. At the door I saw Albert and Albert's face wore an unusual look of trouble.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

He indicated the table where the girl was seated.

"Mademoiselle has been waiting for a type for her picture," he growled. "Face of a Christ in the garb of a man. You see what has happened."

"Well?"

"Monsieur knows her companion?"

"Never saw him before."

"That is the Comte Michael de C—," he said. "There are many who come to my restaurant, I fear, with bad characters, but none so evil as he. I have tried to warn her, and she will not listen."

I sighed.