

A DRAMA IN THE METRO



I. At the Châtelet Metro

A terrible scraping of iron, a dull rumbling, a quavering whistle. A train came out of the tunnel and stopped at Châtelet Metro. A surge of the tightly packed crowd standing at the edge of the quay. At the same time an irresistible flow began in the overcrowded cars. People pushing, wanting to exit. Resistance of those going on and clinging together so as not to be drawn out of the car. And a confused brouhaha for a few seconds. Protests. Shouts. Obscenities. Then with the same whistle, the same dull rumbling, the same din of scraping iron, the metro train was again swallowed up into the tunnel.

Now in a long compact file, people were hurrying down the corridors to reach the connection to Line No. 4. The rush hour, 6:30 p.m. At that time, at the beginning of the war, the temporary disorganization of all methods of surface communication meant the number of metro travelers had multiplied. A whole nation of people worried, anxious, eyes made red by sad partings. Foreheads wrinkled with worry. Some of them, while automatically continuing their walk, tried to unfold an evening newspaper to find some hope in deliberately vague and imprecise information.

Suddenly there was a brusque halt which stopped short the progress of the crowd. A push backward. Some exclamations. Questions crossing each other. And a circle closed around a man stretched out on the ground.

“Get back a little. Give him some air!”

“He’s fainted!”

“It’s the heat!”

“He’s some guy who’s drunk too much...”

Contradictory guesses continued to circulate without anyone deciding to do anything helpful. A witness on the first row explained:

“I was walking behind him. There was pushing. A man passed by very fast. Then...I felt a shock, a body falling on me and sliding to the ground. And that was all...”

Suddenly a young man pushed aside the crowd with a quick, authoritative movement. A few protests very quickly quieted by the young man’s determined behavior.

“Don’t push!”

“What a savage!”

Paying no attention to the comments, the young man leaned over the unknown person. He kneeled down. They could see only a khaki raincoat, buckled at the waist, a soft hat pulled down over his forehead, hiding his eyes. And a silhouette, supple, svelte, young.

In the crowd which was continuing to grow, advice began to circulate again.

“He’s a doctor!”

“Is it serious?”

“He needs to be picked up. He can’t be left there!”

Indifferent, the young man methodically continued his examination.

With a rapid gesture he unbuttoned the overcoat and the jacket, placed his hand over the heart and massaged the unknown man. Now without waiting, he opened the vest. He quickly removed a large green leather portfolio bulging from the inside pocket. Then, seeming to have finished his examination, the young man stood up.

“So?”

The surprised witnesses began questioning again. With a new authoritative gesture, the young man stopped the murmurs. He declared firmly:

“The Station Master has to be told. I’ll take care of it.”

“Who is it?” a witness dared to ask. “The name of this unfortunate man is probably in the wallet with an address where he can be taken home.”

“Yes...I’m going to do what’s necessary.”

The young man pushed aside the crowd and went down the corridor as a new wave of commuters descended from the next train. A few minutes later, a station employee, drawn by the assembly which now obstructed all circulation, alerted the Station Master.

The sick man was still stretched out. Not a movement, not a reflex. His eyes remained closed and his face began to take on a wax tint. The Station Master’s arrival brought on another concert of exclamations, each person trying to explain the facts. Worried, he looked down at the man stretched out on the platform. Then, giving up trying to get the tidal wave of details, true, inexact, or contradictory, he grumbled:

“All right! All right! The main thing is to get a doctor first of all. Afterward we’ll see...”

“A doctor...but the one who came immediately after the man fell...And who went to get you...”

“To get me? I haven’t left my office during the last ten minutes and I haven’t seen anyone. Neither a doctor nor anyone else, except the employee who came to get me.”

Astonished murmurs rose. “Nevertheless, he said...” But a call came nearer and nearer: “A doctor! A doctor is needed! We’re calling for a doctor!”

A little dry, thin, gray-headed man pushed his way through a passage with difficulty.

“A doctor? Here I am. What’s wrong?”

Seeing the man on the ground, he didn’t waste any more time; he was already kneeling. The pulse, a hand over the heart. The examination didn’t take very long. The doctor soon stood up, making a face and in a few brief words to the Station Master he told him the results of his examination. There was a short discussion. Some orders were discreetly given for some employees to come quickly. The doctor again leaned over the man. He searched through his pockets. He removed several unusual objects that he gave to the Station Master: a microphone, a knife, but no identification, no address.

“As to the cause of death,” he murmured, “only an autopsy will be able to tell us.”

No exact information could be given to use as a basis for an official inquest. The facts remained mysterious. A man had died in the corridors of the Châtelet Metro. An unknown man, young, wearing a soft hat, and dressed in a raincoat, had stolen the identity papers of the cadaver.

“With such a situation, what can you do?” the Police Commissioner grumbled. How could the young man’s presence be explained? How could the theft be explained? Was it a murder? Was the man in the raincoat both the murderer and the thief? Was there no connection between the man’s death and the theft of the papers? And the objects found in the cadaver’s pockets also weren’t without surprises. And the audacity with which the theft had been committed, under the nose of numerous witnesses. The way the young man had disappeared. Many logical hypotheses were possible. But nothing permitted making a case for fear of going in a false direction.

II. The Contents of the Dead Man’s Papers

The air of the cute little office was perfumed with the smoke of numerous cigarettes. And three men, each one following his own thoughts, with anxious looks toward a little clock, which, indifferent, continued to grind out the time. And sighs, heavy with worry, punctuated the thoughts of Thérèse Arnaud's assistants.

"Two o'clock, Malabar!"

The Colossus shook off his reverie.

"Eight o'clock, Friquet. I know that. What do you want me to do about it? If I knew where she was, I would go...despite the strict instructions we've received. I don't understand anything and I'm like you, I'm waiting. Your opinion, Languille?"

Languille made a very high, very wide gesture. "I don't know!"

"First catch your hare, says the Boss!" Friquet threw out. Even in serious circumstances, he didn't drop his good humor.

"Well," Malabar continued, "we've strictly followed the orders we were given. We immediately left the Châtelet Metro. And each taking a different way, we came here to her house. She should have been here a long time ago!"

"Her lateness means there's been something 'bad'..."

"Yes, and she was alone..." Languille worried.

"Where can she be?" Malabar worried.

"Oh! With her, it could be anywhere!"

The bookcase slowly slid back along the wall, showing an elevator cage. A soft hat, a raincoat, a tall supple, svelte form, and a voice saying gaily:

"Ah! You're all here. So much the better! I'm going to need you."

While the heavy piece of furniture mechanically slid back in place, the young man rapidly removed his raincoat and threw it across the room.

"Catch, Languille! Take a look inside. Study that while I go change. I've had enough playing young men."

Languille caught the raincoat on the fly. From the inside pocket he took a thick green leather portfolio and methodically began to examine the contents. He lit another cigarette before placing the papers in three stacks. Occasionally a wide smile lit up his face. Sometimes he frowned, emitting a strange growl which could be interpreted as a mark of great satisfaction or, on the contrary, a manifestation of contained fury. Friquet and Malabar, reassured now, but silent, watched without interrupting the work.

In a short time, the young man had changed into an elegant young woman wearing a dark gray suit.

"So? Languille?"

"Oh! There's enough to eat and drink inside that. We'll have enough to keep us busy, enough time to understand everything...if we can."

"We must!" Thérèse Arnaud answered firmly.

Languille held out the first stack of documents.

"Good. Identity papers...a passport. Everything is all right. Next?"

Languille handed over to C.25 a letter with seals carrying a first and last name, but without any address.

As a person very practiced in this type of work, Thérèse unsealed the envelope and read the letter inside.

"This is perfect," she murmured.

After a quick glance at a new stack of documents, C.25 remarked:

"Obviously what follows goes less well. That would be too simple! A great deal too simple! There's enough work for everyone this evening."

"This comes at a bad time! I was just getting sleepy!" Friquet joked.

"You'll be able to sleep," Thérèse said, sealing the envelope with the same cleverness. "You just have to take care of this letter."

"Take it to the Post Office?"

"No, it wouldn't arrive. There's no address. However, to be sure it reaches its destination, I'll take it myself."

"Where? Since..."

“Exactly, Friquet. That’s elementary. You’ll go find the address.”

Friquet took the missive. He looked at the name and joked:

“At least that’s clear. I like that Mr. Jean Durand! Just a simple glance at the telephone book and I’m certain to find the Jean Durand I’m looking for. I’ll only have too great a choice!”

“You’ll manage to verify it to find the Jean Durand I’m interested in.”

“Then I won’t catch sight of my bed in two weeks!”

“Oh! No, Friquet, the Jean Durand we’re looking for is a perfume merchant, fragrance and cosmetics, maybe a hairdresser. It’s a shop or a department store. So get going. Get to work and come back here immediately.”

Having finished copying some notes, she held them out to Languille.

“You, you’ll take this stack to Captain Ladoux. Urgently. And you come back here too.”

Without further delay, her auxiliaries left. Malabar settled himself into an armchair and continued his meditations, waiting for a mission to be given him.

Thérèse Arnaud went over the notes spread out in front of her for a long time. She examined various codes with a worried look on her face. Entirely absorbed in her work, hours passed without her lifting her head. She finally made a gesture of rage and said:

“There’s still a part of these texts that’s escaping us. Always that key, that unknown number without which we can’t do anything. We have the official German code. But what’s missing is the code they use to communicate *between themselves*. So long as we don’t have it, we risk going blindfolded into the simplest trap. Therefore, we have to have it!”

Languille had returned, mission accomplished.

“So...Boss. The briefcase?”

“The briefcase. Obviously the content is good, but, alas, the briefcase is too discreet. It’s given up only a part of its secret. This, I’ve deciphered easily. It’s confirmation of false information concerning the movements of armies that has been transmitted to the Deuxième Bureau from the Eastern region. As for the rest, the papers of the German spy murdered by the German espionage service in the metro, they’re clear. He had false papers and a passport from Spain. And he was sent to meet someone called on the envelope Jean Durand, but in reality Karl Himmelfeld, according to the text of the letter.”

“That Karl Himmelfeld would be...?”

“Chief of a German spy organization in Paris.”

“Yes, yes,” Languille, absorbed in his own thoughts, said, as C.25 once more, in vain, leaned over the indecipherable documents.

Friquet arrived, out of breath.

“Well?” C.25 asked.

Without a word he held out a list that Thérèse looked over rapidly. A smile appeared.

“Is that all right? Do you have enough Jean Durands to choose from?”

“Yes, but I’ve chosen the Jean Durand who is also Karl Himmelfeld. It would have been useless to give you that information. You wouldn’t have found anything in the phone book. But this Jean Durand, fragrance and cosmetics store owner, Avenue de l’Opéra, seems to answer exactly what we’re looking for. So much more so, since I’ve seen several times in the documents I’ve looked at, the word Opéra without at first knowing what it meant. So tomorrow I’m ready. I’ll go see.”

The three men stirred with the same movement. She noticed it, and just as calmly, she repeated:

“Yes, tomorrow I’ll carry the letter to Karl Himmelfeld.”

It was Languille who summed up his comrade’s opinions.

“That’s reckless folly! So long as we don’t have the key, who knows if there isn’t some sort of recognition signal or a secret word that the bearer of a letter must know to be identified. It’s to go into the mouth of the wolf.”

“Possible!” she replied. “I’ve thought the same things myself. Caution will have to be doubled. But to have this code that’s indispensable to us, we have to go get it. And that means we have to go to Karl Himmelfeld’s office. So...”

The silence of the three agents of C.25 approved this logic.

“Therefore, I’m going to explain your role to you and what I expect of you tomorrow. But, before that, Malabar, you must prepare the baggage. Be sure to put stickers from Swiss hotels on them. Then you’ll have them taken to the Grand Hotel, where you’ll rent a room for me. I’ll arrive from Geneva this evening on the eleven o’clock train.”

“Understood, Boss,” Malabar confirmed.

“Me, I have the idea that there’ll be a famous production before long, if not at the Opéra, but in the Avenue of the same name,” smiled Friquet.

And well into the night, C.25 and her three faithful agents worked on their campaign plan.

III. The Spy Visits the Spy

At 8 a.m., an old woman, bent over by age, left the Grand Hotel. With short, tired steps she walked along the great boulevards. Some moments later, the bookshelf slid along the wall of Thérèse Arnaud’s office and the old woman threw a morning newspaper on the table. Malabar, Friquet and Languille leaned over its pages. C.25 pointed out from among the many news items, the following:

At about 6 p.m. yesterday evening, an unknown man committed suicide with a strong dose of poison in the Châtelet Metro. The desperate man carried no documents that could identify his body.

“Case closed,” Languille muttered.

“Nevertheless...,” Malabar grumbled.

“Nevertheless,” Thérèse finished the sentence, “we know he was murdered.”

“And so?” Friquet asked.

“Yes, so?” Thérèse repeated.

“That’s really what proves that it’s dangerous to go like that, putting yourself at the mercy of Karl Himmelfeld,” Malabar objected.

Thérèse Arnaud shrugged her shoulders slightly. Then she said:

“Quick! We don’t have any time to lose.”

They rapidly got busy preparing what was needed for the journey. Diverse information gathered from the beginning confirmed the hypothesis that Jean Durand, Avenue de l’Opéra, was really the person to whom the envelope found in the papers of the “suicide” was meant.

The old woman, with the same feeble steps, got back to the Grand Hotel at about 10 a.m. An hour later Thérèse Arnaud left again without a disguise and started toward the Avenue de l’Opéra. When she entered the store two of the employees were preoccupied. One of them was listening to the explanations of a very large and imposing servant from a fashionable residence who was going on about ways to restore the wig of “the Marquis.” The other was in the hands of a salesman who, with the inimitable gift of the gab of the Parisian, was demonstrating the many advantages of a new palpably perfumed face powder. Thérèse Arnaud was attended by the owner himself.

She hesitated a few moments between two bottles of perfume before making her choice. Suddenly she decided. To pay, she opened a little purse stuffed with all kinds of small articles. She was looking for a 100 franc note. And to speed up the operation, she took out different objects from the purse, among them the letter carrying only the name of Jean Durand. Jean Durand gave his client a hard look that she took without flinching. Then he calmly picked up the letter.

“This way, please,” he said, opening a little door that led into a dark corridor.

As soon as the door closed, the servant no longer insisted on giving suggestions about restoring the Marquis’s wig and the powder salesman stopped promoting the advantages of his product.

Thérèse Arnaud followed Jean Durand. The corridor was dark and winding. It ended in a small dark courtyard which Jean Durand walked across silently. During the walk, she silently sized up the man she was going to confront: tall, big, heavy. About 40 years old. Dark complexion. High forehead, receding hairline. Quick and mobile eyes.

“This way,” Jean Durand repeated, opening the door to a large laboratory with a skylight in the roof.

Everything was white, clean, well arranged: distillation tubes, test tubes, pans, flasks, everything that made up the work material of an honest Chemist. Separated by a thin partition, part of the laboratory had been made into an office with a rug on the floor, ordinary furniture, a cheap commercial wardrobe, a model of a series, an imposing, inelegant minister’s desk, and three armchairs. This office was a small room lit by a narrow and high window. Jean Durand, who in this office became Karl Himmelfeld, pointed her to a large armchair, then sat down himself on the other side of the desk.

There was a short silence. She took advantage of this interval to commit to memory the smallest details. She instinctively envisioned methods of escape in case of necessity. There was only one way. The window was too high and too narrow to be reached. In addition, behind the glass the Sun cast the shadow of four solid bars, thick and close together. Therefore the only exit was the laboratory, the corridor and the small courtyard they crossed earlier. One other strange thing struck her. The laboratory and the office contained no safe or any heavy piece of furniture that could be used to hide documents of major importance. Even the arrangement of the laboratory might arouse some suspicion for it was too well arranged, too regular, suggesting that it was not used very often and was there for decoration only. The partition that separated the office and the laboratory was too thin to hide a secret safe or anything else. This examination, carried out by eyes habituated to seeing everything and discovering hidden things, hadn't taken but a few seconds.

"Then," Karl Himmelfeld asked, "you've come to enter my service?" Saying this, he opened the envelope given him. He read it rapidly, without stopping, taking down some numbers on a note pad which he later rolled into a ball and put in his vest pocket. Then he examined the packet of documents, a copy of which she had carried to Captain Ladoux. He opened a drawer of the desk and locked it again carefully. And very low to himself he murmured, "We'll look at that later."

A slight pause, and in the voice of a superior questioning an inferior, he continued.

"You've received no information about the mission I must confide to you?"

"None," she answered without hesitation. Almost repeating the text of the letter she had just handed over, she continued. "I was ordered to deliver this envelope to you. Here are my letters of introduction. That's all. I must learn the rest of my mission from you."

She held out to him the papers found in the briefcase of the man who committed suicide.

"Good. Here's what it's about. It's very simple, just another envelope to deliver."

She nodded that she understood.

"It's just child's play since you have there a passport perfectly in order to enter Spain. You'll make the delivery and nothing more."

With some insistence, Karl Himmelfeld concluded;

"The French mail functions rather badly. It's important that certain envelopes not go astray, and also that they arrive with the shortest delay...without raising any inopportune curiosity."

"Understood," Thérèse said.

"This envelope that I'm going to give you in a few minutes must be delivered as rapidly as possible to Von Krohn, our Naval Attaché in Madrid. In answer, he will give you a new envelope, addressed to me, probably."

"Excellent..."

There was another silence. Karl once more scrutinized Thérèse. The examination must have been favorable, since he finished with a gentler voice.

"When do you leave?"

"This very evening."

"Good."

Karl got up. He opened the door and gestured for her to enter the laboratory. "If you will please wait a few minutes, I'm going to prepare what's needed."

No sooner had Thérèse crossed the threshold when the door separating the office and the laboratory was closed. A moment of hesitation. Was this a trap closing on the Deuxième Bureau envoy? Had the fearless agent been unmasked because of some secret sign, because of some information contained in the correspondence that she hadn't been able to decipher? No, C.25 had managed without any trouble to deceive Karl Himmelfeld, who took her for a messenger of the German espionage service. But Karl was careful. And it's never helpful to let auxiliaries charged with more or less important missions know all the secrets. They need to know only what is strictly necessary for the success of the mission given them.

"There's something in that room that I'm not meant to see," she murmured to herself. "And that's just what I'm most interested in. Evidently the document safe is over there. But where? Fortunately, despite their care, these gentlemen don't think of everything and neglect the simplest things."

Looking through the keyhole, she followed all Karl Himmelfeld's movements. He had gone into a dark corner. He was probably searching for an electric button. The over-sized desk, slowly, noiselessly, pivoted around, using one of its small sides as an axis. In this way it uncovered in the floor

without a rug at that spot a large rectangular plate about the size of a bathtub. Now Karl Himmelfeld leaned down. In the center of the plate, he lifted a metallic insert which held four buttons exactly like those of a safe. Then, probably because the secret word had been inserted, the plate separated in the middle and went back into the floor. Gently, without bumping, the safe came up and took the place of the desk. She saw him take out a dispatch case stuffed with documents. He chose some of them. Then he opened the drawer where he had, a short time before, hidden the envelope she had given him. He placed it in the safe. Then, he methodically did the same movements in reverse. The safe went back down through the floor. The metallic insert lowered, hiding the four buttons. The huge desk took its former place.

“Not a bad find,” Thérèse said.

Jean Durand, alias Karl Himmelfeld, sat behind the desk. She saw him check the documents taken from the safe. He prepared an envelope. He took a big sheet of paper. He began to write rapidly.

“Nothing more to learn there,” Thérèse thought, leaving her observation post. But in getting up, she held back a movement of surprise.

“The secrets must be important to be so well guarded.”

She had just discovered, hidden in the door molding, two electric wires that ended at the copper button. It was obvious that after the store closed, a high voltage electric wire was activated that would inevitably kill the indiscreet person trying to open the office door.

“Good,” she murmured. “We’ll remember that when we have occasion to come back. And that will be soon.”

Then she calmly sat down in a chair near the table loaded with flasks and test tubes.

“Yes, dust everywhere. No one works here very often.”

She looked at the walls, trying to discover the presence of a cupboard, of a trapdoor. Nothing. Nothing but empty walls with no hiding places. And above, the narrow window.

“A good spy hideout,” she thought.

Along a wall, the experienced eye of the intrepid Deuxième Bureau agent discovered in a corner a small pipe similar to a gas pipe. It went from the ceiling to the floor of the laboratory. At the top the glass window and the courtyard of the building; at the bottom a cellar actually transformed into a radio transmission post.

“We have to see that!”

The office door opened. Karl Himmelfeld held out to her a carefully sealed envelope.

“Addressed to: Von Krohn, Madrid,” he repeated.

“Understood!”

His look, a glance unusually hard and cold, rested on Thérèse. Then the same look automatically made the rounds of the laboratory walls, as if trying to call to mind what Thérèse, seated in her chair, might have noticed, seen, discovered.

In reverse order, Karl and Thérèse made their way across the path previously used. She noticed that all the door handles were made of copper. No doubt that if she had leaned over a little, she would have discovered in the molding the two electric wires where the current, deadly to the indiscreet, circulated.

They went across the courtyard. She automatically was going to turn right.

“No, no reason to go through the shop,” and he opened a door that led directly into the building’s hallway. Then in a strange tone, without addressing Thérèse directly, he remarked:

“Curiosity is a vile fault...that’s always punished.”

He smiled a ferocious smile and repeated in the same tone: “*Always!*”

With a rapid step, C.25 went back down the Rue de l’Opéra.

“It’s lucky I took the precaution of reserving a room at the Grand Hotel,” she thought, noticing she was being followed. But she smiled when thinking that Languille’s supple form was tacking along behind the person following her.

The old lady again left the Grand Hotel shortly after Thérèse herself had entered it, probably to pack her bags and prepare for her departure.

Arriving at her house, she found Friquet and Malabar waiting for her. They had taken off their disguises, one the flunkey of a fashionable house, the other of a powder salesman.

“What’s new?” both agents asked at the same time.

“We’ll have the code we’re looking for in a few days. But until then, we won’t be short of work. First of all, get word to Marcel. Tell him to come immediately. He has to photograph the documents contained in this envelope and get them to Captain Ladoux. Next we have to intercept the radio messages sent via Karl’s post. And I have an idea that won’t be easy.”

“Well, I’m not ready to sleep,” Friquet said.

“Oh, but you’ll sleep very well tonight,” Thérèse assured him.

“Oh, so much the better. My bed...”

“Don’t worry about your bed. You’ll sleep on the train. There’s nothing like the rocking of an Express to give you good dreams.”

“The train?”

“Yes. You’ll have enough time. We aren’t yet in Madrid. And from Paris to the border you’ll have time to take a nice nap.”

“Great! Spain! That’s my dream! I used to know a woman there named Carmen. This will be a wonderful opportunity to get to know her again.”

“That would be more difficult than to find the real Durand in Paris. He, by the way, is named Karl Himmelfeld,” Malabar objected.

Just then, Languille arrived. He had stopped surveillance on the Avenue de l’Opéra when he saw Thérèse Arnaud leave Jean Durand’s building.

“Boss! The guy’s still waiting for you in front of the Grand Hotel.”

“Perfect! He can go with me to the Orsay train station.”

Then she distributed jobs to Malabar and Languille to accomplish whilst she traveled to Madrid. The documents she was to deliver to Von Krohn were photographed. Unfortunately, still because of the missing key, they could decipher only a part of them.