

A Gentleman from Prague

By STEPHEN GRENDON

MR. SIMON DEKRUGH inserted the key into the lock, turned it, and entered his house. Ah, but it was good to get in out of the rain! And it was good to be home again after that long and fatiguing trip across the Continent. The channel had been so rough, too. Having turned up the light and shed his outer clothing, Dekrugh put one of his bags up against the wall of the hall and carried the other with him into his study. He lost no time in going to the telephone.

Though the hour was late, he was put through readily enough.

"Abel? This is Simon."

"Ah, you're back? When?"

"Just now. I've something to show you. I was in Prague."

"You don't mean—not Septimus Halos'!"

"Can you run over for a bit? I daresay I shall be able to intrigue you, Abel."

"I'll be over, unless I'm caught in the fog."

"Walk in. The door is unlocked."

Grave robbing has its own reward, even if payment is sometimes made by one centuries old!

Heading by
BORIS DOLGOV



He walked to the bathroom and looked at himself in the glass. A little tired. Perhaps a little nervous. He had had those unaccountable impressions just before getting on the boat, and once again on the boat train from Dover. Curious! Even now he looked involuntarily over his shoulder. He had shaved that morning, and did not need to shave again.

He came out of the bathroom and turned up the radio. The B. B. C. newscaster was on the air and he stood for a moment or two listening. "Failure of the Munich Pact was forecast today by no less a personage than Mr. David Lloyd-George. The former minister represented the Pact as but a temporary stay and expressed the hope that Britain's rearmament would have proceeded to such a point by the time war actually broke out, that . . ." He turned the dial to another station and got a re-broadcast of a symphony concert. Humming a Brahms theme, he returned to the hall, picked up the bag there, and was on his way to his room when his houseman appeared at the head of the stairs in a flood of light, having been disturbed by his coming.

"Welcome home, Mr. Dekrugh. Let me take your things, sir."

Dekrugh surrendered his bag, apologizing for having disturbed him. "How has everything been, Maxon?"

"Very good, sir. Mr. Abel Speers telephoned several times."

"I expect him."

"Shall I dress, sir?"

"No, no—go back to bed."

"Thank you, sir. I hope you had a good holiday."

"Very satisfactory, Maxon. *Very* satisfactory."

It had been, too. He returned to his study and began to open the little bag on the table; but no, not yet; let it wait until Speers got here. He sat down and drew over today's *Times*, turning, as was his invariable custom, to the letters column, which informed him perhaps as accurately as any other source just what down-countrymen were concerning themselves about.

IT WAS only half an hour before Mr. Abel Speers came. He had driven over himself, not trusting the Underground or the omnibuses. A fog of a sort coming up, he

said. Still raining somewhat, though. Beastly night.

He was a fat, jovial man, pink with well-being.

"Have you really got it, Simon?"

Dekrugh patted the little bag on the table, and smiled.

"How in the devil did you manage?"

"Oh, it was quite simple, really," answered Dekrugh deprecatingly. "I thought the blasted Germans would be having Prague and everything in it soon enough anyway; so there was no good reason why I should not have a go at doing a little—well, what do you call it?—despoiling?"

"Grave-robbing, to put it bluntly."

Dekrugh made a grimace of distaste. "Bluntness has its place, Abel, but spare me. Let us say I decided to get a share of the spoils Chamberlain ought to have assured for us if he had made up his mind to sign his name to that Munich deal."

"So then you got at Halos' grave?"

"Don't be so infernally impatient, Abel."

He turned to the bag and opened it, talking as he did so. "Anyway, it wasn't a grave—just a kind of stone coffin in that old church. Apart from the heavy lid, it did not offer too great a problem. The thing was right there in the dust and bones. I simply reached in and took it out. It's genuine twelfth century, I think, with a Latin inscription and a rather heavy gold chain."

He took out a rather heavy shaving kit, dumped out his razor, pried up the stiff lining, and revealed a surprisingly sizable opening, at the moment filled with a gold chain. Dekrugh took out the gold chain and laid it, together with the little square of jeweled gold to which it was attached, on the table under the light.

"Gad, Simon!"

"Interesting, eh?"

"The Latin inscription seems to be clear enough. What does it say?"

Dekrugh turned the molded plaque around. "Read it for yourself. I'm a little rusty on my Humanities."

"*'What is mine, belongs to me.'* Hm!"

"Quaint, isn't it?"

The fat man's face paled a little. "I don't know that I like it, exactly."

Dekrugh laughed. "My dear fellow, I got away scot free. Not a soul suspected

anything. I was quite alone in the church; the padre had gone out to get a light so that I could read the seal better. . . .

"What seal?"

Dekrugh shrugged. "I'm afraid I didn't pay much attention to the fellow when he came back and read it. I'd got what I came after, and the only reason I didn't clear out at once was to keep him from getting suspicious about my visit. The usual curse and so on—quite a few of those old religious seemed to put a lot of stock in curses. Well, I got out, nobody suspected anything wrong, luck was just with me, that's all. I got the thing hid, and not one of the customs officers guessed. And here it is."

Speers turned it over deliberately, examining it. "What the devil would Franz Verda want with it?"

"A curious piece, Abel. With a strange history."

"But the price he offered us. . . ."

"Very satisfactory, eh?"

"The piece isn't worth it."

"It is to Verda." He shrugged. "The man had some motive in getting hold of it, Abel. He read about it in a book. Very well. I got hold of the book. It's the usual sort of thing—all about the piece having some psychic power for its possessor, with the appropriate mumbo-jumbo said over it. Don't expect me to argue with one of our clients. We're here to deliver the goods, not quibble about what we're being paid unless the figure isn't high enough."

SPEERS shrugged. "That's not the trouble this time."

"Will you take it with you?"

"I'll call for it in the morning and take it down to him. Unless you'd rather. He's in Sussex just now."

"Then I'll put it away."

"Who was this fellow, anyway?"

"Septimus Halos? Oh, a priest, or something. Seventh son of a seventh son and said to have magic powers. People believed in a great deal of superstition in those days, of course. It's a wonder we've freed ourselves from most of it, even now. Verda is just one of those curious people who more than half believe a great deal of the stuff they read; only, he has money."

Speers looked around for a decanter, and Dekrugh took the hint. He went off to get

something to drink, and Speers looked at the jeweled plaque again. A heavy thing to wear around one's neck. Made up like some of the pieces worn by the clergy, though; so much seemed evident. He had the sudden impulse to look over his shoulder; it was unaccountable but he could not keep from doing it. Dekrugh was just coming in with a whiskey and soda.

Dekrugh laughed. "Now *you've* caught it, Abel. You've got a bad conscience—I've been catching myself doing that ever since I left Prague."

Speers laughed pointedly at the thought of Dekrugh's having a conscience.

"Good Scotch, Simon."

"The best. I can afford it—even if I have to rob graves."

"Funny thing to print on that piece, though. *What is mine, belongs to me.*"

"Rather obvious, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's double-talk."

"That far back in time they had a hard enough time just talking—let alone in double-talk. There's fog in your bones, Abel."

They made a little more small talk, and Abel Speers left.

Dekrugh put the treasure from Prague into a drawer of his library table, and went upstairs to bed:

AT ABOUT this hour, a gentleman got off the Underground in the vicinity of St. John's Wood. He was clad in a long ulster of inconceivably ancient design, and wore a curious cocked hat. A scarf was wound around most of his face, and his eyes were concealed behind square dark spectacles. He stood on the curb looking about him for a cab, unmindful of the rain falling around him.

"Rum go," said a fellow traveler in the compartment he had quitted. "Smelled like something been a long time in a closet, he did."

"Soap is what he needs," said another. "Soap and water. And good plenty of it."

The rain came down desultorily, dripping from his hat, running down the cane he carried. He stood quite still, nevertheless, and when at last a cab came driving along, he raised his cane, and, when it stopped opposite him, got in.

"Where to, sir?"

After an annoying interval, he gave an address. The driver had to ask him to repeat it; the 'old fellow apparently had trouble articulating; he spoke with a suspiciously foreign accent. When he heard it at last, the driver shook his head.

"Oh, he ain't home, Guv'nor. Cousin of my wife's works there. He's on the Continent. Holiday."

"Drive there," said his fare.

"If you say so, Guv'nor, there you'll go. But it won't do you no good—unless, he's come home tonight. I ain't seen Maxon for two, three days. Mucky night, sir."

No answer.

"Rain changing to fog, says the B. B. C. Channel fog rolling, too."

No answer.

Damned surly fare, thought the driver. He drove slowly, carefully; no use taking any risks. The distance was not great in any case. He thought of going round about by a circuitous way, but there was that about his passenger which decided him against trying any monkey business.

He got the smell of him presently and opened the side window a little, rain notwithstanding. The rain smelled like London; his fare smelled like something far away. Country man, he thought. Old fellow up in the city for perhaps the first time in his life.

"Ever been in London before?"

No answer.

The driver grew indignant. "I say, sir—ever been in London before?"

"Yes."

"Long ago?"

"Not long."

"Queen Victoria's time," muttered the driver.

"Not long," repeated his fare in his queer, cracked voice. "Four centuries ago."

Centuries, thought the driver to himself. Centuries!—why, that's hundreds of years! The bloke's balmly. Been drinking, probably.

He drove up before the house in St. John's wood.

"Here we are, sir."

His passenger paid him; the light was dim, but it felt like good coin of the realm. He was not niggardly, by the feel of it. He touched his hat, though at the moment, as his fare passed him, he wished to hold his nose. He smelled like something from the

ground. Yes, that was it. Not clean. Like I always say; he said to himself as he got back into his cab, a man can't bet on what he can find on the streets of London these rainy nights.

THE gentleman in the ulster, meanwhile, stood on the sidewalk contemplating the dark mass of the house which was the object of his visit.

As he started his cab again, the driver leaned out and called to him. "He ain't home, just like I told yer." Then he drove away.

The gentleman in the ulster was momentarily alone. But not for long.

A bobby on his round came upon him within a few moments.

"Lost, sir?" he asked.

The black spectacles looked at him.

"I say—are you off your bearings, sir?"

"The house of Mr. Simon Dekrugh," said the gentleman in the ulster.

"Right here. You've got it. Mr. Dekrugh expecting you?"

No answer.

Uncivil chap, thought the bobby. "The walk's right there." He flashed his light, and in the reflected glow saw something odd—something white where nothing white should be—between the dark spectacles and the scarf. He was oddly startled, but dismissed it as the fellow turned his back as an illusion; rain and fog played queer tricks with the eyes.

The gentleman in the ulster went up the walk, climbed the steps, and rang the bell.

Upstairs, Maxon, who had not yet got back to sleep, stirred and awakened. He lay listening. The bell rang again. He got up wearily, put on his dressing-robe and slippers, and went downstairs.

He opened the door.

"Mr. Dekrugh?"

"I'm sorry. He's sleeping. He just got home from a long trip."

"I wish to see him."

"I'm sorry. I can't wake him."

"Wake him."

Something about the gentleman on the stoop chilled Maxon. He backed into the hall; the visitor walked in.

"Wake him," he said again, planting his cane firmly on the floor.

"Whom shall I say is calling?" asked

Maxon, suddenly overcome with an overpowering fright of he knew not what, a fright which, because he did not know its origin, was all the more terrifying.

"Say to him a gentleman from Prague wishes to see him."

Maxon closed the door and hurried up the stairs. He knocked on the door of Dekrugh's room. The gentleman in the hall below heard a colloquy above, and presently the door of the room was opened. There were further words.

Then Dekrugh came down the stairs, his face a-squint with anger.

"What the devil's up?" he demanded.

"I am," said the visitor.

"In this weather too, and at such an hour," growled Dekrugh.

"You should have thought of that."

"I didn't catch your name?"

"I didn't give it."

They stood facing each other, until the gentleman in the ulster shifted his cane to his left hand and extended his right.

"I have come for my property."

Dekrugh looked at the extended hand with the black glove fitting so loosely upon it; then his eyes caught sight of something that showed between the rim of the glove and the edge of the ulster, and at the same time he was aware of an overpowering charnel scent. What he saw between the glove and the ulster was bone. Nothing else.

He gasped and looked up.

The gentleman in the ulster had shaken down his scarf a little, so that Dekrugh got the full benefit of his face—what there was of it.

Dekrugh fainted.

AFTER the silence below became intolerable, Maxon descended rather hesitantly, thinking that perhaps Dekrugh had returned to bed. But no, the light was still up, and it was not like Dekrugh to forget.

Dekrugh lay in the study. He was dead. The drawer of the library table had been torn out.

Poor Maxon! What a time he had of it! The Inspector from Scotland Yard put him through such an interrogation that he was left badly shaken. But there was that inexplicable feature of Dekrugh's death no one could explain—how a piece of bone, the terminable bone of an index finger, could have become stuck into Dekrugh's flesh at his neck, embedded in one of the marks of strangulation. For Dekrugh had been strangled, and, while the marks left on his neck suggested a pair of hands, they must have been most peculiar hands indeed—not at all soft, but hard—hard as bone!

Scotland Yard picked up the trail of the gentleman in the ulster a block away from the house; but lost it at the Underground and did not find it again. Later on, there was a report from Dover, and eventually someone working in connection with another matter in Ostend made a routine reference to a traveler resembling the gentleman in the ulster whom Scotland Yard sought, on the Berlin train.

If a German agent, beyond apprehension, sorry.

Late that very night, well before any word of Dekrugh's death was broadcast, Maxon's cousin's husband, the taxi-driver, quite unaware of Maxon's plight, emptied his pockets and totted up his day's take. He found in his possession a very queer coin, of a type which he had never seen before, and his father-in-law, who was a numismatist, pounced upon it with great eagerness.

"I don't know where I got it," said the younger man. "Unless maybe it was from that stinking-old bloke I took around to St. John's Wood. Worth anything?"

"Worth! Coo! A small fortune! Rare as rune stones. It's a twelfth century coin from Bohemia!"