

A Cast of Character

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“I’m a mystery buff,” Decamp said. “Mystery’s my hobby. My business is precious stones. If I hadn’t broken my damn leg I’d be sitting with a guy right this minute making the deal of a lifetime . . .”

J was lucky. Mother had reminded me to book my ticket in advance. She knew that at the height of the ski season in the Swiss Alps, first class – our class – is always fully booked. The compartment they assigned me was one of the old-fashioned kind still found on some European trains, the seats and arm rests covered with elegant blue velvet. Mother would have loved it. Her favorite color is blue.

I'd come to the station early to make sure I got a window seat, but had to give it up just before departure time to an American wearing a large plaster cast on his leg. He had to sit with his leg straight out, supported by a padded board the attendant put under it, with his foot on the seat opposite. With him next to the window, the rest of us in the compartment didn't have to step over his leg every time we came or went.

Henry Decamp, a man of middle age, paunchy and balding, wasn't comfortable in his cast. He turned and twisted and kept asking his pretty young English wife, who wore a short leather skirt, high fur boots, and a spiky blonde hairstyle, to remove his sock and tell him whether his toes had turned blue.

"The doctor told me if my toes turn blue I should come back and he'll cut off the cast." These were the first words he spoke to me. Later we introduced ourselves.

I sat opposite Mrs. Decamp – Betty, as her husband insisted we call her. Between Betty and the door sat a young Swiss man of athletic build, Karl Heintz Muehlendorfer. Opposite him and next to me was a small, elderly gentleman, either French or Swiss, who carried the stem of his unlit pipe upside down in his teeth. I didn't catch his name since he was holding his pipe in that manner when he told it to us.

The train was hardly out of the station before I'd forgotten about the plastered foot next to me. Decamp had kindly insisted on riding backward with his wife to give me a forward – if once removed – view out the window. In the station that morning, I'd bought a copy of the local newspaper. Being fluent in several European languages, I never have to wait to find a newspaper of my own country, in which the news would already be old.

When I unfolded the journal, which was hardly larger than an American newsletter but printed on inferior stock and several pages thicker, the headlines cried out:

CAT BURGLAR STRIKES AGAIN

ONE MILLION \$ IN GEMS STOLEN AT SWISS SKI RESORT

Noticing that Henry Decamp had no reading material and thinking that the story of the burglary might take his mind off his leg, I translated the headlines into English for him. My words had quite an effect.

"Read it again," he demanded.

"Oh, Henry," said his wife, "the gentleman's already read it once. You can't bother him to do it again. We'll get you a *Trib* or something in Paris."

“No bother,” I told them. “I’ll be happy to read it again.” And I did.

When I was finished, Decamp held out his hand. “Can I see that?” I handed him the paper and for a moment he stared at the page as if by sheer force of will he could decipher the words. Then he leafed quickly through all the pages. “No photographs,” he grunted and handed the paper back.

His reaction interested me. “Do you know anything about the robbery?” I couldn’t resist asking.

He seemed surprised by my question. “Who, me?” he asked. Then he frowned. “The burglary took place in the hotel where my wife and I were staying. In fact, it happened just about the time I was falling down its front steps and breaking my leg.

“Then you didn’t break it in a skiing accident.”

“Hell, no. I tripped on the stairs. That’s how we met Karl here. Karl happened to be walking by and helped them get me to a doctor. He even held my leg while the doctor wrapped the plaster bandage around it.”

“Well,” I said, “if you were at the hotel, even on the front steps of it, when the robbery was taking place, in a way you’re involved.”

“I am? How?”

“Without even realizing it, you might have seen something that would give the police a clue.”

“Henry see something?” laughed his wife. Just then I noticed a movement on the seat next to her – she and the young man beside her were holding hands!

“I see more than you give me credit for,” replied Decamp meaningfully.

“Like hell he does,” Betty murmured, but she took back her hand and laid it virtuously in her lap. Then her voice rose like that of a petulant child. “All Henry ever thinks about is murder and shooting and jewel robberies. It’s not surprising – “

“What my wife means,” Decamp interrupted, “is that I’m a mystery buff. Mystery’s my hobby. My business is precious stones. If I hadn’t broken my damn leg –” he looked at his watch “– I’d be sitting with a guy right this minute making the deal of a lifetime.”

“If you’re in the jewelry business, maybe you know the person who was robbed.”

“The article didn’t give his name,” said Decamp.

“That’s surprising,” I said. “Reporters usually love digging up all the juicy details.”

“Some people like publicity, some don’t. For a guy in the trade, like me, it would have meant some free advertising. For some other guy it might tip off the I.R.S. There’s plenty of reasons for people to want their names kept out of the paper.”

“Henry gave me these,” said Betty, leaning across so that I could get a look at the diamonds on her ears and the solitaire on her finger. They were pretty, but skimpy. If ever I have a wife, Mother’ll help me choose the right jewelry for her, and the right clothes. I wondered rather cynically how long Decamp intended staying married to Betty.

“They’re very attractive,” I assured her.

“You don’t think they’re a bit small?”

Caught off guard by her candor, I was glad to come up with the right words. “Not at all,” I told her easily, “No one today goes about in flashy jewelry. It’d be tempting fate.”

“Henry’s had them insured. He’s very professional.” Turning her head to the left, she gave a wide smile to her Swiss neighbor.

“Are *you* a mystery buff, by any chance?” Decamp asked me, rattling off a list of his favorite authors.

“Not really. Not in your class. But now I see why the jewel robbery interests you so much. Have you any ideas on it?”

“Damn right I do,” said he. “I’m asking myself how the thief would get away with the loot. I mean, he sure doesn’t live in the resort, and they don’t allow cars up there, so he’d have to take this train out like everyone else. Right?”

“Right.”

“So he oughta be on this train.”

“Yes. Of course he could be. A very clever deduction.”

“Thank you.” After saying this, Decamp seemed to enter a personal world of deep concentration, as if the rest of us didn’t exist.

After a few minutes of total lack of conversation in the compartment, Betty got to her feet. “I’m going to the club car to see if there’s a buffet. You want anything, Henry?”

But her husband only shook his head silently.

As Betty went through the door, the Swiss man got up and followed her. Throwing a bemused glance at me, the old gentleman on my left got to his feet. Then, with his book clutched under his arm and the pipe clenched between his teeth, he, too, left the compartment.

Alone with Henry Decamp, I had the definite feeling that an interesting conversation was about to begin between me and this rather typical but by no means staid American. Any man able to appreciate stories of mystery and crime and make his living buying and selling precious stones is not to be underestimated. I continued reading my newspaper, feeling sure that sooner or later he’d speak to me.

“Mister,” he said after a few minutes, “I didn’t get your name.” I told him my name and waited to hear what he had to say. “I’m a betting man,” he confided, “What about you?”

His question took me by surprise. “I don’t mind a wager now and then,” I told him. “What do you have in mind?”

“Give me a minute to get it phrased right,” he said, and fell silent again, pondering.

“Are you still wondering about this jewel theft?” I asked after a few minutes.

“I am, and the more I think about it the surer I am that the thief and the jewels are on this train. The question is, where would the safest place be for him to hide them?”

“I can’t imagine,” I said. “I suppose he’d hide them in his luggage.”

“Then he’d risk inspection by Customs officers when we enter France.”

I shrugged. “People sometimes have false bottoms in their suitcases.”

“He wouldn’t be the type. No, he’d find a more interesting place. A tobacco pouch might be okay if the jewelry wasn’t too bulky. One diamond can be worth a million dollars, but so can a whole mess of less valuable stuff.”

“That’s true,” I nodded.

“There’s just one problem I haven’t been able to solve.” He frowned.

“What’s that?”

“How the hell am I gonna get to the john with this cast on my leg?”

I couldn’t help laughing. “I’ll ring for the attendant,” I told him. “I’m sure this won’t be the first time they’ve dealt with the problem.”

While my fellow passenger was being helped to the men’s room, I went for a walk through the cars to stretch my legs. At the bar in the club car stood two familiar individuals deep in conversation: Betty Decamp and Karl Heintz Muehlendorfer. It was hard to imagine they’d met for the first time only the evening before, but of course people these days do manage to melt the social ice pretty quickly.

I smiled to myself. What a stroke of luck for them that her husband broke his leg. I decided not to stay for a drink, and as I was turning to leave saw our elderly fellow passenger tucked up to a foaming draft of beer, his nose and unlit pipe buried in his book.

When I returned to the compartment a few moments later, I had hardly sat down when Henry Decamp was standing in the doorway wanting to get by. I jumped up and he squeezed past me, sinking into his seat with a sigh of relief. I lifted his leg and put his foot back onto the seat next to me. “Thanks,” he said.

I was very curious about many things concerning Henry Decamp, and glad the two of us were alone again. “Tell me,” I said, hoping to get our earlier conversation back on the rails, so to speak, “what was this bet you mentioned earlier?”

“Bet? Oh, the bet.” He seemed to ponder a moment, then told me there were some other things he wanted to sort out first.

“Such as?”

“A while ago,” he said, “I asked you where you thought a jewel thief might hide his loot on a train like this. You didn’t come up with the most *obvious* unobvious place.”

“Which is?”

“My cast, of course.”

I stared at him. “Your cast?”

“Why not?”

“What a fabulous idea!” I cried. “No one would think of looking there.”

“Of course they would,” said Henry, waving my words away with a brusque movement of his hand. “Of course they would.”

“But who would ever guess? You’d have to tell them yourself.”

“Not really,” he replied. “And that’s where the bet comes in. Are you game?”

“What is it, then?” I asked him straight out.

“I’ll wager you,” he said slowly, “that without my actually telling anyone – except, of course, you – of this matter, before this day is over the authorities will believe the stolen jewels are hidden in my cast and have it removed. I’ll bet you a hundred dollars.”

His words confused me. “You mean they’ll come to the conclusion that the jewels from the robbery are concealed in your cast without your telling them?”

“And have the cast removed. Is it a bet?”

“But what about your poor leg?”

“My leg will be fine. My leg will be happy to get out of this damn plaster for even a few minutes. What do you say?”

It sounded crazy, but somehow the bet appealed to me. I was extremely curious how he’d bring it off. Was it worth risking a hundred dollars just to find out? Of course it was.

“Agreed,” I said, holding out my hand.

It may sound odd, but I was actually hoping Decamp would win the bet. I was intrigued to see how he’d manage it. In fact, he seemed so sure of himself I was convinced he *would* win. It hardly seemed like a real wager at all – more an act of faith. His handshake was firm in mine.

“Now tell me,” I said, “how do you plan to do it?”

We were alone, but he leaned over and replied in a low voice: “By convincing *myself* that the jewels are in my cast. Once I believe they’re in there, the Customs guys’ll just take one look at my face and know I’m hiding something.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’ve never been able to hide anything from Customs inspectors,” he told me. “If I’m carrying a lousy two extra ounces of booze, they’ll read it in my face. So if I really know down in my guts that the jewels are in my cast, they’ll guess it in a minute.” He put one hand to his eyes. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to concentrate.”

Decamp then sank into a terrible silence, his brows knit, a darkness over his features. After a few minutes of concentration, he began to appear edgy and restless. I felt half mesmerized myself by the field of his concentration, so that both of us nearly jumped out of our seats as the door of the compartment suddenly shot open and Betty, looking herself a little like a surprised chicken in her spiky hairdo, stood in the doorway.

“Hi, ducks,” she said, sitting down next to Henry and pecking his cheek.

“Careful,” he snapped. “Don’t jiggle the cast.”

“I’m sorry, dear. Is it hurting?”

“Of course it is. What do you think?”

“Sorry to be alive,” she shrugged. But her husband’s bad mood didn’t really seem to bother her in the least. After all, didn’t she have a handsome new boy friend to give her all the attention and affection she needed?

Just then the young man in question returned to the compartment, too, and a moment later Monsieur Pipe & Book made his appearance. “We’re arriving at the French border,” he told us. “The Customs men are in the next car, so if you have anything you don’t wish to declare,” he chuckled conspiratorially, “now’s the time to conceal it.”

It was then that I saw the title of the book he was reading. *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. “It seems we have another mystery buff in the car,” I said, but before he could reply Decamp interrupted.

“ ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’!” he exclaimed. “A perfect psychological study.”

“I like that one, too,” smiled the man with the pipe. “Who can ever forget that last scene? The happy, confident killer, with apparently nothing to fear, welcoming the police into his home, inviting them to stand on the very floorboards beneath which he’s hidden the body of his victim. Then, completely without warning, he gives his evil deed away by imagining the heartbeat of his victim booming loudly enough for all to hear.”

“Did you say the Customs officers are coming now?” asked Decamp.

“They’re in the next car.”

“Well, I’ve got nothing to hide,” said the American flatly. “Nothing at all.” His voice rose. “They can search to their hearts’ content, they won’t find an extra drop of booze, no dope, no wads of bank notes, and no stolen jewels.” He looked over at me. “Could I borrow your newspaper?”

I handed him the newspaper, which he held up in front of his face. “Let ‘em come,” he growled.

This apparent display of nerves had its effect on the others. Betty Decamp looked for reassurance at Karl Heintz, who squeezed her hand – which he happened to be holding. An uneasy silence filled the compartment. To pass the time, I turned to the man seated next to me and asked him what business he was in.

“I’m semi-retired now,” he told me, “but in fact I’m a detective.”

“A detective?” I exclaimed, so loud that the others looked our way. “Do *you* have any ideas on last night’s crime? Mr. Decamp thinks the jewel thief might be on this train.”

Smiling, he peered at us over his bifocals. “He or she might be anywhere at all, even in this very compartment.”

“Well, it isn’t me,” said Henry Decamp firmly. “Would you believe a cat burglar with twenty pounds of plaster on his leg? My wife can’t be the thief because she was with me the entire evening. Heintz there was walking by when I fell. So the three of us are in the clear.”

“Were you conscious while they put on the cast?” asked the detective. “Not that it

matters. From what you say, it's clear none of you is involved in this crime."

"Sure, I was conscious," said Decamp. "They attached a little nose mask to my palm. Whenever I wanted to, I just breathed in some gas.

Betty smiled. "Henry was a real laugh he was. You should have seen him. Eye-balls rolled back in his head. And every time they started coming down again, someone would tell him to put the mask on his face and breathe. Then up they'd go, out of sight again. Remember, ducks?" She paused to pinch her husband's double chin. "Remember how you heard a dog barking far, far away and you cried out, 'Where's that dog?' as if the silly thing was about to bite you?"

"I don't remember that at all," Henry pouted. "Anyway, you can see that my wife and me and the Swiss kid there have perfect alibis. And I'm sure you – " he nodded in my direction, again having forgotten my name "– have one, too."

"I'm afraid not," I told him. "Nothing that would satisfy a judge or jury. I had an early dinner after a long day skiing and went straight to my hotel room. I fell asleep reading, and the next thing I knew it was morning and time to pack."

"I believe you," said Henry Decamp generously, turning to the fifth passenger in our compartment. "Do you have an alibi for the evening?"

"None better than Monsieur's," he admitted. "I don't ski, but I had taken a great deal of fresh air and – if I may say it – wine, and also went to bed quite early."

"I believe you," said Decamp. "I believe we're all innocent of any crime and I'm the most innocent of all. But in spite of everything, if one of us is guilty, then the jewels would have to be on this train – and probably in this compartment. So if they're here, where do you think they are?" With this unexpected question, Decamp swept his arm to indicate the entire car and its occupants, from the row of suitcases and boxes we'd placed above us on the racks down to our shoes and socks.

"I have no idea whatsoever," said the detective, tapping his empty pipe against his hand.

As nobody else had one either, an awkward silence fell.

Suddenly Decamp seemed to get an idea. "Listen," he said. "Before the Customs men get here, will you all do me a favor?"

After an instant of hesitation, we all nodded more or less enthusiastically.

"Will you sign my cast? I've never broken any bones before, but I know it's a tradition to have your cast signed." He took a felt-tipped pen out of his pocket and handed it to me.

I have to admit I didn't find it at all pleasant signing my name to a plaster cast – but I did it to be sociable, as did the others. "Thank you," said Decamp when we were done. "I'll always remember this."

At that moment, the door of our compartment was jerked abruptly open and the face of a Customs inspector looked in. "Messieurs, dames, prepare yourselves for Customs inspection."

“Oh, we’re well prepared,” cried Henry Decamp jovially. “Tell me, Inspector, have they found the jewel thief yet?”

“What jewel thief, Monsieur?”

“You know – the one who robbed that hotel room last night and stole a million dollars’ worth.”

Now a second inspector appeared in the doorway. “Do you know something about this case, Monsieur?”

“Me?” asked Decamp in astonishment. “How would I know anything? At the time of the robbery I was tripping on the stairs outside my hotel and breaking my leg.”

“And what time was that?” asked the Customs inspector.

“Why – wasn’t it around ten, Betty? Betty was with me at the time. She’s my wife.”

“Madame is your wife?” asked the inspector in such astonishment that I wondered whether he’d noticed her earlier in the club car with Karl Heintz.

“I don’t remember the time exactly,” Betty said. “Is it important?”

“What time was the robbery?”

“But we’re not here to discuss the robbery,” cried the inspector impatiently, “we’re here to find out whether you have anything to declare.”

“Like what?” asked Decamp.

“Are you bringing anything of value into the country?”

Henry laughed. “I’ll say. I’m bringing in this cast. It’s worth plenty.”

“Is it? Why?”

“Do you want to see my medical bill?”

“Yes,” said the Customs inspector. “It would be interesting in case I break my leg to know what it costs for a cast.”

“Well, the hotel footed the bill,” Decamp said, “but whatever they paid, it was worth every cent.” He pointed to his cast. “Ever seen such a great job? This cast has real character.”

“An excellent job, Monsieur,” agreed the inspector. “Now we will have to ask some of you to open your luggage.” He looked up at the rows on the luggage racks. “Which bags are yours, Madame?” he asked Betty.

“That’s one of them,” she said, pointing to a brown suitcase squeezed between a leather briefcase and a plaid clothes bag. “I also have – ” But the inspector interrupted her.

“And yours, Monsieur?” he asked me. I pointed to a bag at the end of the row between a red hatbox and the door.

“These folks aren’t hiding anything,” Decamp said in a loud firm voice. “Save yourself some trouble. If we were a bunch of smugglers, or had stolen jewels in our luggage, you guys would know it. You’re no amateurs. You’d see it in our faces. You know the signs of smugglers – nervous, jumpy.”

“Some smugglers, Monsieur,” said the inspector, suddenly seeming to take an interest in Henry Decamp, like a candle being ignited by a match.

“So do any of us fit that description?” the American continued. “No, not one of us. We’re as innocent a bunch of tourists as you’ll ever see. Look, these nice people have even signed my cast. You know what?” He reached in his pocket for his pen. “I’d like you to sign it, too. Go ahead – don’t be afraid. It won’t bite. Ha ha ha.”

He held out the pen, then suddenly clutched his face in apparent terror. “My God!”

“Is something wrong, Monsieur?” asked the official.

“Something is – something is –” Decamp broke off and stared at his cast. “Don’t you see it?”

“See what?”

“My cast. There. That sparkle on my cast.”

“I don’t see anything special, Monsieur.” The puzzled official looked around at the rest of us, but we couldn’t help him. There was nothing where Decamp was looking but the white cast resting on the seat with our signatures on it.

“The glitter! My God! The dazzling brilliance of the cast! Don’t tell me you don’t see it – it’s blinding me. Blinding me!” Covering his eyes with both hands, Decamp rocked back and forth in his seat. “I can’t stand it, I can’t stand it!” he cried.

“Does your husband often have spells like this?” the Customs inspector asked Betty Decamp.

“I don’t know,” she said, as puzzled as he. “Maybe he’s in pain from his leg.”

The inspector looked out the window. “We’re coming into a station now. I think perhaps your husband should leave the train and see a doctor.”

“I think I know what’s bothering him,” I said suddenly, surprising myself by my boldness. “It’s his cast. The stolen jewels are concealed in it.”

My words were almost lost in the slow screeching of the train coming to a halt in the station. The inspectors looked at me in astonishment, then turned and looked with renewed interest at Henry Decamp. “Is this true, Monsieur? Do you have the jewels in your cast?” Even before Decamp had time to reply, one of the inspectors had disappeared from the doorway.

“Of course not.” Decamp leaned angrily toward me. “Why did you tell them that?” he demanded in a loud whisper. “You’ve ruined everything.”

Outside on the platform a police whistle blew shrilly. “I’m sorry,” I told him. “I got carried away. I was afraid – I mean you really had me convinced.” I looked out the window. Men were running.

A gendarme appeared at the door of our compartment.

“Please come with me, Monsieur,” he said to Henry Decamp.

“You’re not going to take me off this train!” Decamp exclaimed in disbelief.

“You’re not going to monkey around with my cast!”

“I don’t think they will touch your cast, Monsieur, unless an X-ray shows some

problem. But we are certainly going to take you and your wife off the train. We have some questions to ask you both.”

“But the jewels aren’t in my cast, I swear to you.”

“We will also ask *you*, Monsieur, to detrain at this time,” the inspector said to Karl Heintz Muehlendorfer. “Please, all of you, take your luggage. Someone is coming aboard to assist Monsieur.”

I leaned across and whispered to Decamp, “You’ve done brilliantly. You’ve won the bet. Even if they only X-ray the cast, you’ve won.”

“But you spoiled everything! You *told* them the jewels were in the cast!”

“But *you* didn’t, and that was the bet. Your emotion was so real, your acting so brilliant, you had me utterly convinced. Even if I’d said nothing, the inspectors would have reached the same conclusion in a minute or two.

“Are you sure?” asked Decamp, doubtful. “Was I that good?”

“*Good?* Poe himself couldn’t have done better.”

Decamp looked down modestly. “If they’d signed my cast, it might have been something of a plus.” He sighed. “Well, you can’t win ‘em all.”

“But sometimes you can.” I took out my wallet and removed some bills. “Before you go, here’s the money I owe you for our bet. I hope Swiss francs will be all right. Perhaps this will make up for any inconvenience I’ve caused you by my stupidity.”

“Hey, you’re all right,” said Decamp. “Only I wish you’d come with us. I’d like you to see their faces when they find out they got the wrong guy.”

“I’d love to come,” I assured him, “but my wife is meeting me in Paris.”

He winked at me broadly. “So’s mine.”

I stared at him in astonishment.

A few minutes later a stretcher was brought to carry the American from the train. From our suddenly depleted compartment I watched the three of them – Henry, his mistress Betty, and the Swiss – make their way down the platform, surrounded by gendarmes.

“Oh, look,” said the elderly detective behind me. “Madame has forgotten her hatbox.”

I glanced up and saw the red hatbox on the luggage rack. “I’ll take it to her,” I told him. “They haven’t gone far.”

“I wonder what kind of hat she can wear with that hair style,” he wondered aloud.

“I wouldn’t know.”

I took the hatbox down and was starting out the door when suddenly a gendarme stood blocking my way.

“Don’t worry,” said the old detective, “this fellow will take it to her. You don’t want to miss the train.”

“Oh, no,” I stammered, “I insist. It’s my duty as a gentleman.”

“But doesn’t it seem like a rather strange hatbox to you?” asked the detective.
“Shake it. Does it feel like there are only hats inside?”

“What else would there be?”

“Jewels, perhaps? In a false bottom?”

“You mean –” I gasped “– you mean that that young lady is the jewel thief?”

“No, Monsieur,” he said. “It isn’t her hatbox. I guessed that as soon as I realized she could not wear any hat over that style of hair.”

“Then it’s his, Decamp’s. Or it belongs to Mr. Muehlendorfer.”

“No, the air-ticket stub on the hatbox is the number consecutive to the one on your suitcase. The hatbox is yours.”

I sank back down in my seat. They had me. They had me. But had he actually deduced my guilt from such a stupid clue as that girl’s hairstyle?

“That and one other detail,” he told me. “A detail I knew but the gendarmes are learning only now.”

“Which is?”

“The reason I was sure Henry Decamp would not have the gems concealed in his cast, in spite of what you said, is because he was the victim of the robbery, not its perpetrator.”

As he said this, a dozen pieces of a puzzle I’d not even known existed suddenly came together in my brain. I stood up. “I salute you, Monsieur,” I said in French.

“Thank you,” he nodded. “However, I do have one question, if I may.”

“Please.”

“Why did you, a man, use a lady’s red hatbox to conceal the stolen jewels?”

His words took me by surprise. “No choice,” I shrugged. “Mother wanted the blue.”