

ALIAS SANTA CLAUS

A Short Story
By PETER CHEYNEY

It was the 24th of December; also it was very cold and almost dark. A stinging breeze blew in from the sea and swept the longsea front from end to end. If you have experienced Ostende in December you will understand.

A few yards past the Majestic—standing in the shelter of a deep porch, and soliloquising to himself on life in general—stood Mr. John Duplessis. Mr. Duplessis was having a busman's holiday; what he was doing on the sea-front was his own business entirely. He seemed quite happy, as indeed, he should be, being fur coated and warm.

The church clock behind the market place struck 5 o'clock. Mr. Duplessis looked round the corner of the porch. Approaching him—and, evidently, struggling against the wind—was the lighted end of a cigarette. Behind the cigarette was the face of Jacques Dupont, who was a fisherman's agent—and other things.

Dupont slipped quietly into the porch.

Duplessis lit a cigar. "Well?" . . . he queried hopefully.

"M'sieu, it is like this," said Dupont. "I tell you that they are all mad with rage. The Austrian—you know, the fat one—says the girl has got—well, whatever it is everybody seems to be looking for. The other—the slim one—says that she has not. They argue—they almost fight. They . . ."

Duplessis stopped the exuberance of Dupont with a gesture. "Tell me," he said. "What do they say of me?"

"Nothing at all," replied Dupont. "They still think that you are a fool Englishman who loses money at Ostende at Christmas because he has lots more. You are all right—at least, for the moment."

The other smiled quietly in the darkness.

"Come, Dupont," he said. "It is cold here. We will go to Benoit's."

Five minutes later they drank warm wine at Pere Benoit's behind the Grande Place. Across the table Mr. Duplessis regarded Dupont quizzically. The face of Mr. Duplessis was pleasant and smiling, but there were mysterious depths in the grey eyes, which only looked but said nothing.

He knocked the white ash from his cigar.

"What do you think, Dupont?" he asked.

The other shrugged.

"For me, I say that the girl has it," he replied. "Although, M'sieu, she does not look like a member of our honored profession. Listen . . . the day the Revenue cutter arrived I was standing on the quay. She was there . . . I swear she was waiting for the cutter. Five minutes afterwards Lieutenant Vallas landed. He . . ."

He saw the portfolio under his arm. As he walked across the quay the girl deliberately turned and smiled. He touched his cap . . . she is pretty this girl . . . with the most charming form, and a blonde . . . and Vallas is partial to blondes, I understand . . . Well, I do not know what happened after this, but I do know that Vallas is at the Hotel de l'Etoile, and drunk all day, and that the girl is at the Grande, and that the Austrian says that she has the plan.

Mr. Duplessis considered. Eventually he spoke. "Vallas is no revenue officer," he said.

Dupont grinned. "Vallas is a spy," he said. "It was convenient for him to be a revenue officer. Why? Consider, M'sieu, his boat stops the fishing smack which carried Laroque who had the plan. As a revenue officer Vallas stops and searches the smack and takes the plan. What can Laroque do or say? Nothing! Believe me, Vallas had the plan but now, I am certain that the pretty lady has it."

"All right, Dupont," said Mr. Duplessis. He nodded a dismissal and the Frenchman rose to his feet. "Come and see me on Tuesday morning and see me on Tuesday evening, Dupont. In the meantime keep out of sight."

Dupont grinned. "I will, M'sieu—for my own sake. Good-night, M'sieu. Good-night, Dupont."

Mr. Duplessis ordered French vermouth. He poured himself out a generous glass and drank it slowly. Fifteen minutes passed, but Mr. Duplessis still gazed at the table in front of him, smilingly.

Eventually he got up and was about to go. In the doorway, leading to the private office, on the other side of the cafe, stood Pere Benoit. He looked at Mr. Duplessis and shuffled his left foot on the floor.

Casually, Mr. Duplessis strolled over, joined Benoit, and, as casually,

disappeared into the office.

Benoit shut the door behind him, and switched on the light. He was very pale.

"Well?" said Mr. Duplessis.

"M'sieu is well advised to be careful," said the old man—a little bead of sweat stood out on his forehead. "Five minutes ago, my son tells me they found the body of Dupont in the corner of the Gran' Place. A knife was sticking between his shoulder blades. He was just dead . . ."

"Was he now . . ." said Mr. Duplessis, lighting another cigar. "That's very bad . . . I needed Dupont." He looked searchingly into the eyes of Pere Benoit. After a minute he spoke.

"Listen, Benoit," he said. "I am going to trust you, mainly because the death of Dupont has made it necessary that I trust someone. Just how much do you know?"

Benoit shrugged. "I am an intelligent man, M'sieu," he said. "I know that M'sieu has been often to Ostende, that he looks like one who has been an English officer; that he is plentifully supplied with money. I know, too, that Ostende has always been the centre, the meeting place, of what you call 'intelligence' men—spies, I know that M'sieu is very interested in what these people say and do. Also, I do not forget that it was an English soldier who saved the life of my son Jacques in the war."

"Very good," said Mr. Duplessis. "You shall do something for me, and you shall be well paid. Incidentally you will do something for your country. Three days ago a fishing smack left Ostende. Aboard her was a man named Laroque who carried the plan of a submarine—a new one, designed by a Belgian engineer. Five miles out the smack was stopped and searched by a Revenue cutter flying the Belgian flag. The lieutenant in charge of the cutter took the plan from Laroque, returned to Ostende, and went to the Hotel de l'Etoile. That night he was visited by a lady—an English girl—who, it is believed, has the plan. How, or why she has it, and whether she is in league with Vallas, the supposed Lieutenant, we do not know. It is necessary that we should know. Tell me, do you know a servant at the Hotel de l'Etoile?"

"M'sieu, my sister's son is the night porter," said Pere Benoit.

Mr. Duplessis smiled. "Excellent," he said. "You will see your sister's son, and you will tell him that my instructions he may receive from me must be obeyed promptly. Do you understand?"

Benoit nodded. "It shall be done, M'sieu," he said.

It was 7 o'clock when Mr. Duplessis entered the portals of the Grande Hotel. A woman's conversation with the manager permitted him to ascend the lift to the first floor to the suite of Miss Helen Grahame, unannounced. He tapped quietly on the door of the drawing-room, and, in response to the answer, entered. On the threshold he stood quite still, a little amazed.

The girl who faced him was not the type which he had expected to see. She was young and beautiful; also, it was obvious to Mr. Duplessis that she was not entirely at ease. Unbidden, the thought came to his mind that if he had ever considered the possibility of falling in love with a woman, that she would look like the one who stood before him.

"Miss Grahame," he said quietly, shutting the door behind him. "I have a matter of some importance to discuss with you. My name is John Duplessis."

"Won't you sit down?" she asked. "Incidentally, how did you manage to come up without your name being brought first. They don't usually do that."

Duplessis smiled. "I have a habit of arriving suddenly, Miss Grahame," he said.

She smiled a little uneasily. "I am afraid that you will have to be quick," she said, "as you see my trunks are already packed. I am leaving in fifteen minutes."

"I do not think so," said Mr. Duplessis, still smiling. "However, I will be very quick. My business is briefly this. Three nights ago you paid a visit to a Mr. Vallas at the Hotel de l'Etoile. You dined with him. When you left an hour afterwards you took away with you some papers which you either stole from Mr. Vallas or which he gave you. I want them, please, Miss Grahame."

The girl faced him indignantly. "I shall be glad if you will go, Mr. Duplessis," she said. "I do not know what right you have to speak to me in this manner. I know nothing of any Mr.

Vallas or of any papers."

The smile departed from the face of Mr. Duplessis. "Miss Grahame," he said quietly, "you are a countrywoman of mine, and I should hate to see you inconvenienced. I want the truth of this matter here and now. The alternative is this, if I do not get the information I require, in a few minutes, you will be visited by the Belgian police. They will find some discrepancy in your passport. You will be arrested. It is even possible that some entirely fabricated charge may be brought against you. The inside of a Belgian prison is not a very nice place, and I should be very sorry to see you there, in spite of the fact that I have no sympathy with Englishwomen who are prepared to sell their country."

The girl flushed. Then suddenly she burst into tears, burying her head in the cushions of her chair. Mr. Duplessis found himself very uncomfortable, but sat quietly waiting for the storm to subside.

In a few minutes the girl obtained control of her tears. She dried her eyes, rose quickly, and walked to the pile of trunks in the corner of the room. She unlocked the top one and after a few moments rumaging produced a packet of papers in an oilskin case. Without a word she handed them to Duplessis. He opened the case and looked carefully through the papers. Then he smiled again, but it was a peculiar smile which carried a trace of astonishment.

He rose to his feet and went over to where the girl stood.

"Why?" he asked gently.

She looked up at him. Duplessis found himself thinking that her tearful eyes made her appear even more beautiful, and she, looking into the quiet grey eyes looking down at her, thought that there was sympathy in them.



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"I arrived in Ostende a week ago," she said. "I had only a hundred pounds in the whole world. My brother died a few weeks ago, and it was only after his death that I discovered that he had gambled away the money which my mother had left to me. I was reckless, and gambled, hoping to make enough money to return to England and start some sort of business. But I lost. Eventually I had nothing at all. I did not even know how I was to pay my hotel bill here. Then a man who frequented the rooms at the Casino club spoke to me. He told me that I could earn some money very easily. He said that a Belgian naval officer Lieutenant Vallas was carrying some secret documents, but that an attempt might be made on him, and that it would be easy for me to take them to their destination in Austria without suspicion, being a woman. This man was to accompany me, and I was to meet him at the

station tonight. I had no idea that I was doing anything wrong. He told me that it was simply a matter of diplomacy. I think that I was very glad to believe him. You see, I was in a very tight corner." She smiled, a little wanly, through her tears.

Mr. Duplessis smiled, too. "Set your mind at rest, Miss Grahame," he said. "I understand. Incidentally, it may interest you to know that these plans are not the original documents. They are faked, and I am beginning to see daylight. Will you do something for me? It will be rather an unpleasant task. I want you to come with me to the mortuary and look for a moment at the face of a man who has just . . . died. I have an idea that you may recognize the individual who made you this too generous offer. Let us go."

As the cab drove rapidly in the direction of the mortuary, Mr. Duplessis found himself glancing from time to time as she sat looking straight in front of her. He found himself considering that it was an attractive face. The big blue eyes set squarely beneath a white forehead on which the blonde hair curled, were honest and fearless. A little sigh escaped his lips which he turned with some difficulty into a cough.

After a few minutes the cab pulled up before the police station to which the mortuary was attached. They passed through the outer office into the small whitewashed room beyond. On the long slab in the middle of the room, covered by a sheet, lay the body of Dupont. Duplessis turned back the sheet revealing the face. The girl placed her hand on her arm. She was trembling. He turned to her, the question in his eyes.

"Yes," she murmured. "That was the man!"

Half an hour afterwards, Mr. Duplessis, feeling quite satisfied, for the moment, faced his fair companion across the table in the restaurant of the Majestic.

"There is no need for you to reproach yourself any more," he said smilingly. "You are now on the side of the forces of the law and order, and I think that I may safely say that within twelve hours those plans will be back—the real plans I mean—in the place where they belong. Directly we have had coffee, I must be going."

He thought that her eyes were troubled as she looked at him.

"I believe that you are going to do something which is dangerous," she said. "I hope not. You see . . . I rather regard you as a friend . . . my only friend in Ostende."

Mr. Duplessis offered her his cigarette case. Then, as he struck a match and held it to the cigarette poised between the red lips, he looked straight into her eyes.

"I am mean enough to say that I am glad you are feeling a little worried about me," he said. "But there is no need to be alarmed. I do not think that there will be any danger. If there is, well, it is part of my somewhat peculiar profession. In the meantime, do you realize that tomorrow is Christmas Day?" he asked.

"Christmas Day," she repeated the words a little tremulously. "My last Christmas Day was so happy, and this one will be so . . ."

"Unhappy?" queried Mr. Duplessis. "Not necessarily, surely." He rose to his feet. "A private car will call for you in a few minutes," he said, "which will take you back to your hotel. Tomorrow, I hope that you will lunch with me, and I also hope that when I call for you I shall have excellent news for you about the missing plans."

He held out his hand. "Au revoir till then," he said.

"Good-night, Mr. Duplessis," she said, and looked away; but her eyes showed his figure as he left the restaurant.

Seated in the night porter's room at the Hotel de l'Etoile, Mr. Duplessis held solemn consultation with the son of the sister of Pere Benoit. The night porter was intelligent, also he was desirous of earning the 500 franc note which Mr. Duplessis had already showed to him.

It was midnight when he led Mr. Duplessis up the service stairs of the hotel, and stationed him at the end of the corridor in which Vallas's room was situated. This done he approached the room and knocked loudly on the door.

"M'sieu Vallas!" he called. "You are urgently required downstairs. A gentleman must speak to you immediately!"

A few minutes afterwards Vallas appeared. He was a tall, thin specimen of humanity, and his shifty eyes peered up and down the corridor as he

prepared to enter the lift which the night porter had ready for him. Before entering the lift he carefully locked his bedroom door.

Immediately the pair had descended, Duplessis unlocked the door of Vallas's room with the key with which the night porter had supplied him. A quick glance round the room showed him that the large Flemish wardrobe in the corner of the bedroom would form an ideal hiding place. He opened the door and slipped inside the wardrobe with a muttered prayer that the Fates would stop him from sneezing.

A few minutes afterwards, with much cursing at having been disturbed unnecessarily, accompanied by profound apologies for the "mistake" from the night porter, Vallas returned and throwing off his dressing gown, snapped off the light and got into bed. Duplessis, ensconced in the wardrobe, waited as patiently as he could.

He had not long to wait. Five minutes had scarcely passed when a loud clanging broke the stillness of the night. It was the hotel fire alarm! Duplessis, opening the door of the wardrobe slightly, looked out as Vallas, springing from the bed, snapped on the electric light, flung on his dressing-gown, and seizing a penknife which lay on the table beside his bed, made for the fireplace, his back to the wardrobe. Duplessis, having opened the wardrobe door to the fullest extent, smiled as he saw Vallas busily removing one of the bricks from behind the grate. This done, he inserted his hand and from the cavity produced a packet covered with oiled silk. He straightened himself up and turned to find himself looking down the black barrel of an automatic pistol held by the smiling Mr. Duplessis.

"Just hand over that package, will you, Vallas?" said Mr. Duplessis, stretching out his hand and taking the package from the hand of the nervous Vallas. "So your little plot did not quite come off. Oh, you need not worry, this hotel is not on fire; that was just a little arrangement between myself and the night porter in order that you should give away where you had hidden the plans."

Your plot was a good one, Vallas, but it did not work. Having got the plans in your possession, you schemed to swindle the Austrian—who had paid you to steal them and hand them over—in order that you might sell them to a higher bidder. But in order to do this you had to pretend to lose the plans. Your accomplice, the traitor Dupont, secured the services of Miss Grahame, to whom you handed a faked packet, telling the Austrian that she had stolen the original plans from you. You knew that directly she left this country they would be after her like dogs after a hare, whilst you, left in peace, could dispose of the plans to the highest bidder.

"Not content with this, you arrange for the death of Dupont, thereby assuring yourself against him talking, and keeping for yourself his half of the profits. And you would have bought your safety at the price of that of a girl who was foolish enough to be taken in by Dupont's lies."

I might be angry with you, Vallas, except that there are a couple of Belgian Intelligence men waiting downstairs for you. I rather fancy that you will see what the inside of a prison looks like—even if you do get away with the murder of Dupont, who, I think, richly deserved his end. Well, that's that. Good-night, Vallas!"

Mr. Duplessis calmly walked out of the bedroom, leaving the amazed Vallas standing with his mouth open.

In the hotel hall, Duplessis signalled to the two Belgians, who went upstairs to secure Vallas. Then with a smile he handed the 500-franc note to Pere Benoit's nephew.

"This is Duplessis," he said. "I rang up to tell you that all is well. By the way you don't sound very sleepy."

"I'm not sleepy," she said. "I've been worrying rather. I wondered if you were quite safe . . ."

"I am—extremely safe," said Mr. Duplessis. "Incidentally, I want to ask you something. Have you ever considered getting married? You haven't? Well, don't you think you might . . . I feel that it might form the basis of a discussion at lunch tomorrow. I'll call for you at 12.30—and I'll send my name up this time, first—John Duplessis—alias Santa Claus. Good night, Helen!"

Two minutes later Mr. Duplessis was through to the sleepy concierge at the Grande Hotel, and two minutes after that he was listening to the voice of Helen Grahame as she answered the telephone.

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