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# The Borgia Ring

By ARTHUR EDWARDS CHAPMAN

*A brief story of a murderous thief who stole the poison ring of Cesare Borgia*

**S**LIM JIM HANSARD crossed the floor of the small, barely-furnished room and peered cautiously out of the window. Around the flickering lamp opposite a crowd of uncared-for children were playing their noisy games, while a short distance away a dark, burly figure looked on good-humoredly.

Slim, as his keen eyes caught the glitter of metal buttons, drew quickly back and slowly pulled down the antiquated blind.

"Reckon if that fellow knew who was hangin' round here he wouldn't be propin' walls up so contented!" he muttered with a nervous laugh.

He turned to the plain wooden table that occupied the center of the room and lit the oil lamp. The yellow glare seemed to heighten the bareness of everything about him, while black, eery shadows flitted, ghost-like, in the distant corners.

"All the same," Slim complained. "I wish I hadn't had to plug the old guy!"

He sank into the single rickety chair

and opened a small leather hand-bag that was on the table. He emptied the contents before him, a glittering, rainbow pile of jewelled trinkets, taking up one here and another there, appraising them skilfully.

Then with a quick exclamation he pounced eagerly upon one of the jewels—a massive ring, thickly studded with glorious gems that flashed back at him dazlingly. Feasting his eyes on the ring, Slim slid it on his finger, only to withdraw it with a sharp cry of pain.

Examining it carefully, he could detect a tiny point that might have been caused by a slight abrasion of the metal. A file would soon put that right, he thought, absently wiping away the ruby globule that had welled up on his finger.

He sat contemplating the treasures greedily. A fortune . . . a fortune such as men had done murder to possess. . . .

Murder!

Slim shuddered and glanced apprehen-

sively around him. The shrill laughter of children at play outside floated to him reassuringly. He was safe enough here. It was three days now since—since it happened. He was safe enough, of course. He would stay here quietly until the affair had blown over, and then with the jewels . . . the finest haul he had ever made and the simplest . . .

If everyone were so careless as the eccentric old collector of rare and antique treasures, Bernard Hamerstein, life would be an easy proposition. It surely had seemed a simple thing . . . and so it would have been if old Hamerstein hadn't been so queer. Who'd have expected the old guy to come snooping round in the middle of the night just to see if his treasures were safe? Another five minutes and Slim would have been clear away and no harm done; but now . . .

Damn it all! Why must he keep thinking about it? He tried to calm himself; but as he slowly swept the jewels back into the bag he saw that his hand trembled. His mouth had become suddenly very dry; his throat was strangely constricted.

"You're safe, Slim . . . safe!" he told himself fiercely.

He hadn't wanted to kill the old man. The fellow had surprised him as he packed the jewels, and, levelling an ancient pistol, had ordered him in thin, quavering tones to throw up his hands. . . .

Slim instead had thrown his gun . . . and Hamerstein had fallen. . . .

Slim drew a shaking hand across his brow as he remembered; and his hand came away wet with perspiration. His heart was pounding frantically. His breathing was growing difficult and painful. He was afraid—deadly afraid of the results of his involuntary act. . . .

He could see it all again with unnerving vividness. Through the blue haze of smoke that rose from the muzzle of his gun he could see old Hamerstein as he

lay hunched up on the floor, clawing with weakening fingers at the ever-widening red stain on the left breast of his night-shirt. . . .

"You're a fool, Slim—a fool!" he admonished, striving to shut out the disturbing vision. "There's nothing to be scared of. You're safe enough!"

Mechanically he drew toward him the news-sheet that lay beside the lamp, and turned over the pages with fumbling hands. He would see what the latest news was . . . if the police were baffled. That would help. . . . Ah, here it was:

"Hamerstein Murder," he read haltingly. God! what a horrible sound that word had! "Arrest Expected Shortly."

*"Arrest Expected Shortly!"*

The words seemed to burn themselves into his brain. Then they knew. They were on his track. All his deadly fears overwhelmed him again; his temples throbbed heavily and his eyes swam mistily as he read on with growing agitation:

"Among the stolen treasures is the celebrated Borgia ring which was Mr. Hamerstein's greatest pride. The ring, which once belonged to the notorious cardinal, contains on its inner rim an infinitesimal needle point which is steeped in a deadly poison. The slightest scratch from this needle is said to have caused death in a few seconds. The ill-fated antiquarian is known always to have handled the ring with the utmost care, as the poison retains much of its evil power even after the lapse of centuries. . . ."

Slim stared at the paragraph with glaring eyes. Needle point . . . deadly poison . . . death! Giant letters danced before him jeeringly. The brown dried streak on his finger leaped into his distorted vision, grimly significant.

Needle point . . . deadly poison . . . death!

A harsh laugh, hysterical, fear-burdened, broke from Slim's parched lips as

he understood. So that was it . . . that was what was wrong with him! And he had thought it was just nerves . . . wind up! But it was poison! He was poisoned . . . and old Hamerstein had the laugh on him . . . damn him!

He staggered clumsily to his feet, clawing wildly at his collar, gasping for air. He laughed again, wildly, a mocking challenge to Death. He sank his teeth deep into his hand as though he would tear away the poisoned flesh. With a choking oath he swept the shabby bag from the table so that its glittering contents poured over the floor.

A massive bejewelled ring rolled to his feet and there rested, winking evilly, malignantly up at him. Cursing horribly, he brought his heel down on the jewel, stamping on it fiercely, madly. Incoherent words rattled in his gullet. His knees

failed him, and he plunged heavily forward on his face.

**T**HEY found him lying there next morning, his stiffened fingers clutching at the scattered jewels.

"Heart failure," announced the doctor after a cursory examination.

"Huh?" grunted the police sergeant uninterestedly.

He was gazing curiously at a plain gold ring, set with a single ruby, which he had picked out from the few trinkets that had not fallen from the bag. He handled it carefully, almost mistrustfully.

"Here's that Borgia ring they make such a fuss about," he said. "Poisoned, they say it is."

"Poisoned!" echoed the doctor incredulously. "Well, it looks harmless enough to me, I must say!"