



With a howl of anguish, the man dropped the gun

# FRAGILE EVIDENCE

By LEE FREDERICKS

*Pierre Barodin proves he's a sleuth as well as a noted art authority when he gives his sword-cane a work-out that punctures a crime!*

**I**T WAS long past midnight when Pierre Barodin leaped out of the taxi and bounded up the steps of the somber, massive unlighted building on upper Fifth Avenue.

There wasn't a soul in Central Park except the homeless bums who slept there. The windows of the expensive apartments that faced the park from the other side of the street were also unlighted. Even the breeze, that usually is fresh in the fall months of the year, had died down and seemingly gone to bed for the night.

There was no bell on the outside of the stout doors, but Barodin had expected that. He lifted the handle of his French sword-cane and rapped on the door smartly. The raps echoed and reechoed through large vacant halls and seemed to grow in volume like the beat of a huge drum.

The door swung open silently, and a badged and uniformed figure looked him over suspiciously without a word.

"I am Pierre Barodin," he announced to the officer. "I was telephoned for by Detective Mike Corey."

The officer swung the door wider so Barodin could come in. It seemed that the atmosphere inside had even placed an awful silence on the arm of the law, for the officer pointed to where a single-glassed door gave a patch of light in the huge corridor.

"He's in there," was all he said.

There was no awe in Barodin as he walked smartly along the corridor toward the office. He had been here many times before, and the ghostliness of the night held no more terrors for him in the art museum than if he were home in his own apartment over his art store in the East Eighties. His leather heels resounded on the marble floor, while overhead the dark shapes of night-clothed canvases were each and every one an individual picture to him, known and imprinted on his memory from many examinations.

He opened the door without knocking and found Mike Corey and several guards in earnest conversation. Corey saw him without surprise and beckoned him over.

"Don't know whether this is in your line or not," he said without greeting, "but somebody's stole some glass."

Barodin's eyes opened and his fingers went to his Menjou mustache to pat it in place.

"Glass?"

One of the guards, recognizing Barodin, spoke up.

"Pharaoh glass, of the Vaux Collection," he said anxiously. "And that isn't all they did. They—"

"That part is up to the police," Corey put in hastily. "Besides stealing the stuff, the guy or guys that done this bumped off the lug that was hired to guard the stuff while it was away from the Vaux private museum."

"Did they speak English?" Pierre asked sarcastically, referring to the jargon used by Corey in describing the crime.

The sally went over Corey's head.

"I don't know what they spoke, for nobody heard 'em," he said naively. "The stuff is in the basement," he added, heading for the door leading out of the office. "Maybe you better come down there with me and look it over so you can know the kind of stuff it is, if you see it again."

**P**IERRE smiled. He had been over the Vaux Collection so many times that he knew every piece by heart. The glass pieces were works of art of the reign of Rameses II, every one of them the purest of Egyptian fine art of that period.

One piece in particular was priceless, a blue glass chariot complete with opaque glass driver and horse. It was a work so fine that, considering the tools they had to work with at that time, it must have taken a lifetime to construct. There were other pieces of importance, but nothing to compare with the workmanship of the chariot.

They filed down the steps that were lit at the present moment only by the small "watchman" bulbs. Shadows lay everywhere about the place and the walk through the Egyptian Room gave an eerie feeling, even to Barodin, as they passed the many art relics of a long dead race.

The division devoted to the Henry Vaux Collection was at the far end of the museum basement. Two uniformed policemen stood at the doorway guarding the room.

"The medical examiner ain't come yet," Corey explained as they passed through the portal, "so don't touch anything."

Inside, the exhibition was fully lit. As far as Pierre could see at first glance everything was in perfect order. Then, as he looked around, he saw

several vacancies in the glass cases that held the collection. He stepped closer to see what was missing—and stopped abruptly, his pointed French shoes almost in the widening pool of thick red blood. Then, he saw—the body on the floor with the head horribly crushed in as though it had been suddenly struck with a blunt instrument, such as a sash weight.

Quickly he stooped to look at the body. Several feet under the case he saw a small metal object. His fingers reached out and retrieved it, a small key, the kind that fitted the cases where the glass was placed on exhibition.

“You have examined for clues?” Pierre asked Corey casually, as he rose to his feet and put the key in his pocket.

“It’s an open and shut case on that,” Corey assured him, laughing. “The old guy here was a guard. He must have heard somebody making a noise of some kind down here and hot-footed it in to see what was happening. Before he had a chance to let out a yip the guy crowned him with some kind of a club or lead pipe and made his getaway with only a handful of the stuff on account of he ain’t got time to load up.”

Pierre walked over to the other side of the case. There were no marks on the case to indicate that a jimmy had been used. He touched the door, experimentally. It was locked.

Further examination was held up by the entrance of the medical examiner and several assistants. Corey outlined his view of the case as the M.E. and his assistants went over the body.

The examiner nodded impatiently as Corey continued his monologue, his fingers moving with deft skill over the scalp of the dead man. Finally he looked up to one of the assistants who stood waiting, with notebook in hand.

“Death was caused by a sharp instrument that had a T-shape,” he said. “Make the report ‘Death at the hands of party or parties unknown.’” He straightened. “The ambulance men will be down for this.” He indicated the corpse. “In a moment you will be free to continue the investigation.”

**W**ITH a nod to Barodin he left the room as though anxious to get out of the place as soon as possible.

“You have made a list of the stuff stolen?” asked Corey, turning to the night man who had

spoken to Barodin in the office upstairs.

“I have made a list of the things while the medical examiner is here,” said the smiling Pierre. “Thees collection is notheeng new to me as I have see’ it many times before.”

He took the key from his pocket and showed it to Corey.

“Thees, *mon ami*, is possibly the key to the murder that I hold in my hand,” he said excitedly. “Eef we but try eet in the lock of the case.”

Corey grabbed the key and looked it over closely.

“Then this guy knew the place well enough to know where to grab the keys to the cases!” he yelled. “Where are these kept?” He turned to the watchman who stood by their side.

“In a safe upstairs,” the man told him. “I have been in the office all night up until the time I called you and no one has entered the office at all. As I explained to you before Mr. Barodin arrived, it was the fact that one of the roundsmen was missing which caused me to call you. There was no chance of any one getting into the office and”—he pointed to a narrow strip of silver around the edge of the glass—“this alarm system would go off downtown in the Police Headquarters as well as in the general office if cracked or broken. Our roundsmen make the tour of all rooms every half hour, and the last time he was through here everything was quite all right.”

“And this,” Pierre said, nodding toward the body on the floor, “of course, was the roundsman.”

The watchman nodded.

“He makes his report at the office every half hour after the rounds, but when he didn’t come in at”—he looked at his watch—“two-thirty was the time, I got in touch with Police Headquarters immediately, because the man in charge of the office isn’t allowed to leave.”

Barodin’s eyes brightened with excitement.

“Then of course you didn’t know of this until after the arrival of the police?” he asked.

“Not until this gentleman”—he pointed at Corey—“asked me to leave the office and come down here to identify the body.”

“There is, of course, a register of the employees in your office?”

“Yes. Would you like to see it, sir?”

“There ain’t a chance of an inside job,” said

Corey, laughing at Barodin's question. "I checked the force before you got here and nobody was near this room."

By way of explanation, Corey indicated a keylike protrusion on the wall.

"That thing there is to punch the watchman's clock. Each key is different and tells exactly where the time punch was made. I have checked every one of the clocks with the master in the office and all of the men were in their places when this occurred."

"Then perhaps, *mon ami*," Pierre said in a dry voice, "you will explain what this guard was doing in this room when he was supposed to be elsewhere?"

**T**HE guard alongside of them answered for Corey.

"At the time of his death he was supposed to be in the Egyptian Collection on the other side of this arch. Possibly it was a noise that attracted him. This place is so still at night that the least sound, like the scraping of a shoe on the floor, would echo like a cannon shot."

Corey looked at Barodin triumphantly.

"The city has taken every precaution with its art treasures," he said boastfully. "The way this guy got murdered is proof that nobody can get away with anything without discovery."

"So I see," Barodin observed dryly. "That, *mon ami*, is the reason that I am now here." And he asked the guard, ignoring Corey, "Perhaps you will be so kind that you let me see the register of employees?"

Back in the office on the floor above, Barodin pored over the huge ledger that gave the record of every employee of the gallery. One after another he checked the names, his eyes seeking out something that would give him some hint of the murderer and the thief.

As he called the names of the men the guard that had accompanied him gave the position of the man from the master clock. On a piece of paper Pierre checked off each name and position. Then, after one name was a silence.

"Patrick Ryan," Pierre had called.

"That's the stiff," Corey intercepted before the guard could answer.

Then Pierre called the last name on the list.

"Carson Wells?" he questioned.

The guard left the master clock and came to Barodin's side.

"That's me, sir," he said. "My position is here in the office where I receive these reports every ten minutes from all over the building."

Pierre cluck-clucked disappointedly as he closed the ledger with a bang and stuck the tally sheet in his pocket.

"There is no doubt that all the men have references that can be checked back almost to their birth," he said.

"Yes," agreed Wells, nodding his head in the affirmative. "Most of us have done this work in other institutions before coming here. In fact, I was in this work with the London Museum before coming to this country. It was my knowledge of Egyptology and its place in the world of art that caused this museum to send for me." A touch of pride was in his voice.

Corey's sarcasm was heavy to the point of being bludgeoning as they left the office and descended to the scene of the crime for the second time.

"The idea seems to be to stand around the place and let the thief get clean away," he said in disgust. "If I didn't know you better I would believe that you and this lug that grabbed off the stuff were working in cahoots, and that you was doing a cover-up job while he was making a getaway."

Pierre's reply was gently reproving, as though he were trying to make a child see the right path.

"Did you ever think, *mon vieux*, that there is no point of entry into the gallery? Or"—his voice rose with contempt until it echoed through the building—"that in all your investigation no place was shown by which the thief might have escaped?"

**C**OREY stopped and looked at Pierre with a new light in his eyes.

"Of course," Pierre continued, "a person who had a key to that cabinet might also have a key to any number of doors that would allow him to leave the museum. There are in my mind several things that are not, as the card players say, 'according to Hoyle.' These are the things that I now work on."

Corey digested these words for several

minutes before their purport sank in. Then he turned and started quickly up the steps. "Why didn't you say that before?" he asked belligerently. "It won't take us two seconds to get these babies together and put the rubber hose on 'em. Why I'll—"

He stopped as Pierre grabbed his arm and swung him around.

"I have tol' you before I do not work wiz the big fool," he said urgently, the excitement bringing back his broken French accent. "*Que desirez vous?*" he asked quickly. "You wish perhaps to scare the guilty one? *Bon*, I hav' no part of thees case with you!"

Corey subsided under the glaring eye of Barodin.

"If you got something on the noggin why don't you come out with it and let a guy know what's goin' on in the gray matter?" he asked petulantly. "I got my headaches, you know, with a two-hundred-pound corpse down there in the basement. I got a chief to report to and I called you up because this case is up your alley and you might be able to give me a hand on it."

"*Precisement!*" Pierre agreed. "Then like the lummoxy you are you get in the way. *Ce vin est bon*. Yes indeed, the wine is clear and the chase is good. Perhaps, my friend, with *bon fortune* we shall make this case clear quickly. But why the trail leads to Anubis I do not know."

"Anubis?" Corey scratched his head. "That ain't the name of any of them guys on the list, but lead me to him and I'll see that he makes the clink before the morning's editions."

"He should have been in jail many years ago," Pierre agreed, "but unfortunately, at the time he was supposed to have lived, he was worshiped. He was the god of crime of the Egyptians."

As they talked they moved gradually back into the room where the crime had been committed. Pierre led the way to the case and looked down on the body. The coroner had turned him over and the chalk line that Corey had made on the floor gave the exact position where the body had fallen. Barodin stood looking at the line for a moment, then turned to Corey.

"This position that the body was in does not look as if the murdered man had heard or seen someone," he said quietly. "It looks as though he had been peering into the case when the blow was

struck. Either that, or else he was at the time starting to open the case with the key we found on the floor.

"Does it not seem strange, *mon vieux*, that there is no sign of a struggle? Then, too, the weapon. How strange that a religious symbol should be used on one who is the guardian of material from desecrated tombs."

"Then you have seen the murder weapon?" asked the pop-eyed Corey.

"*Non*, I have not seen it, but I know that it is the sign of the cross that killed this man. Not the Christian cross nor the cross as we know it, but the Egyptian cross. The cross that is really the letter 'T' in the English alphabet now. It is a coincidence, though, that the letter 'T' also stands for time. I think that it will be in time that we will find our solution of this crime."

COREY looked his disgust.

"You talk more riddles in five minutes than I could understand in five years," he said. "If this is a period crime that has to do with Egyptians why not call in a specialist on Egypt?"

"Because the crime, though symbolic, only tells me that the person who committed it knows many things Egyptian. That, *mon vieux*, is the trouble with this crime. Many, including the corpse, know or knew things about Egypt."

"And there are a few thousand people in this city who are interested in ancient Egyptian art," Corey came back at him sourly. "Do you want that I should stick my neck in a noose by pinching the whole caboodle of them?"

"I am not interested in your 'pinching' any of them," Pierre told him. "I am interested in the mind pattern of the man who committed this crime. I think that I may have something. We had better go into the next room where the Egyptian art is stored. I seem to remember an especially fine specimen of Anubis there that may bear looking over."

"This joint is open from nine to five in the daytime," Corey grumbled. "You can come here and look at that stuff as much as you want to then."

The grumbling on his part had simmered down to a routine grouch, as Pierre went through into the next room. The detective followed, eagerly watching for any sign of the something

that Pierre had mentioned might show up.

From an artistic viewpoint the Anubis was a perfect specimen, and though it was hardly a thing to make a person exclaim at its beauty, it dominated the room. It had been sculptured from glistening black volcanic glass and shone like patent leather in the light that flooded the room when Pierre clicked the switch near the door.

The jackal-head had been carved by some long dead artist so that the lips were drawn in a snarl. The eyes were set deeply, so that they seemed to flash fire in their reflection of the electric lights. Supporting the head, the frail body in human form seemed horrified at the burden it bore.

Pierre approached it professionally, explaining the points of virtue to Corey, who looked incomprehendingly and seemed repulsed at the sight.

"You will notice, *mon ami*, that this also is of glass," Pierre told him. "Glass is missing. A cross-of-glass god is the symbol of the murder. *Oui*, there is much of a thought pattern, though where it leads—"

As he examined the base of the idol his voice trailed off. He crooked his finger to Corey who came and looked, too. At the base of the hideous god, between the feet and the pedestal, was a thin smear of blood.

Corey looked at the spot as though he couldn't believe his eyes. The blood seemed to be coming right from the bottom of the idol itself.

"The pattern begins to fit," Pierre said, nodding with satisfaction. "Now we have the murder weapon, and not far from here is the culprit, I believe."

Corey watched as Pierre put his arms around the obsidian statue and tipped it off balance. A second later he lifted what Corey thought to be a solid piece of work and deposited it on the floor. The interior had been hollowed out at some earlier date to serve as a speaking tube for the priest in some long-forgotten temple.

**I**N THIS niche was a watchman's long, iron, tee-shaped key that was covered with blood and the pulverized remains of some blue glass. Pierre gazed at them solemnly.

"Behold, the chariot, and the murder weapon!"

He brought himself up sharply and fidgeted with the handle of his sword cane as though about to unsheath the weapon then and there.

"The vandal who would murder art has no soul," he said in a fierce tone. "I have the interest to know who would steal the chariot. That can be forgiven, but the chariot, the original is smashed—which cannot be forgiven. So I know from where I work now, and why."

He strode from the room, his short legs working like pistons, and with Corey making rapid strides to catch up with him.

"We have here the library," he told Corey, "and now I bring the proof to the culprit."

He reached for the key that Corey had grabbed from under the idol and held it wrapped in his handkerchief.

"With this, *mon vieux*, and the other material that we have gather we will have no trouble in getting to the murderer."

He mounted the steps two at a time, so great was his hurry to reach the art library that was portioned off on the first floor. A moment later he burst into the office where the guard sat on duty.

"Mr. Wells, would you be so kind as to produce the keys to the library?" he said in a peremptory tone. "I have the matter of books to check here."

Wells went silently to a key board and handed a set of keys over to the keen-eyed art detective.

"Perhaps it is better if you were to call the policeman to watch your position and come help us in the search for the culprit," Pierre told Wells in a grim tone.

"That is the one thing that I am anxious to do," Wells said with alacrity. "Have you anything that may lead to the thief?"

"I don't believe that there was a thief," Barodin said inexorably. "A murderer, *mais oui*, a thief no." And he told the attendant, "I believe that you know the murderer quite well. You see, I am looking for a book on the 'System of Making Pharaoh Glass' by one Carson Eduard Wells."

He looked at the man keenly as he spoke and saw the color drain from his face. Then suddenly Wells bucked up as though a ramrod had been shoved down his back.

"It is an authoritative book," he said quietly, "written in the young man's studious days when

he believed that his studies were everything. He has since learned that there is such a thing as money in the crass world and has tried to take advantage of that knowledge."

"One can understand," Pierre said dryly. "But there is still the spirit of youthful braggadocio about a person that uses the god of the underworld to try to cover up the deed, don't you think? I am sure that god would approve of vandalism, too."

"That ain't gettin' us to the library," Corey put in impatiently. "If we are going to get this guy that did the murder we had better hump."

The guard looked at Corey in astonishment. Then suddenly he backed toward the window of the office and without a word made a dash and a leap that took him clear of the sill.

**T**HERE was a terrific crash of glass and somewhere in the hall a large burglar gong started beating out a brassy note. Before Corey could close his mouth, Barodin, tugging at the knob of his cane, had followed through the gaping hole in the window and dropped about five feet to a grass terrace below.

A flash of flame and a deafening report made Pierre twist sideward like an eel. Wells had pulled his gun which had been issued him as a guard and pulled the trigger. As Pierre came to his feet the bright blade of his sword snaked from the cane sheath and he closed in on Wells.

Another report sounded in his ear as he made a lunge at the bush where he had seen the first flash. Pierre felt a burning sensation in his sword arm, and his hand dropped limply to his side. A bullet had entered the fleshy part of his arm and it felt as though it were on fire.

"One learns how to shoot when they are on archaeological expeditions," boasted the triumphant voice of Wells from the bushes. "To have shot at you in self-defense will be enough. That detective has no case."

He stepped out of the bushes and raised his arm. Before he had a chance to pull the trigger again, Pierre's other hand flicked out and the sword made a clean gash across the wrist of the man with the gun. With a howl of anguish the man dropped the weapon in the grass and grabbed his wrist.

Pierre's voice was calm even though the wound in his arm was bothering him.

"One forgets, *mon cher ami*, that Frenchmen learn how to duel with both hands," he said, as he thrust the startled guard back against the wall with his sword point. "Perhaps a good memory is indicated for all parties concerned, *non*?"

Further conversation was brought to an abrupt halt as Corey came dashing around the corner of the building, gun in hand. In the front of the building a policeman's whistle shrilled for assistance. Corey's mouth dropped open as he saw Pierre holding the man at sword's point against the wall. All the fight seemed to go out of the guard at the appearance of the detective, and the sound of approaching help. Pierre smiled.

"I am sorry, *mon ami*," he told the excited detective. "I have failed to bring you the Blue Glass Chariot. It is gone beyond redemption."

"Then what are you doing with this lug?" asked Corey, staring at Pierre as though he had gone crazy. "Ain't he the guy that stole it?"

"No, he didn't steal it," Pierre told him sadly. "More is the pity. He destroyed it!"

"You're nuts!" Corey told him succinctly. "A guy don't bump other guys off to go out and break a piece of china that ain't doin' any harm."

"One may do a number of things for profit, though," Pierre told him gently. "This gentleman is an authority on Pharaoh Glass and has written a book about it. He destroyed the Blue Glass Chariot because he has counterfeited some models—not one, but many. Once the original is stolen the resulting publicity would make many unscrupulous collectors want to get the stolen object. Maybe he has already contacted more than half a dozen collectors, telling them that he would deliver the Chariot when he had stolen it. Even if the collectors later discovered the fraud, they would not be able to go to the police."

**B**ARODIN reached out and grabbed Wells, spinning him around and into Corey's arms.

"I think you will have no trouble in getting a confession from him. He should have studied some books on crime as well as on art if he didn't want to get caught."

Corey snapped the bracelets on the man. He knew better than to question Barodin's judgment on matters dealing with art.

"Book this guy for murder," he told a policeman who had come around the corner of the

building, gun drawn for trouble. "I'll explain to the sergeant later."

Later, as he and Pierre grabbed a taxi and started downtown, Corey turned to Barodin, his eyes tortured with doubt as he surveyed the calm Frenchman.

"Well, spill it," he said. "I stuck my neck out on this, for I'll be an Egyptian banshee if I see what we can hold that guy on."

Pierre smiled and smoothed his Menjou mustache into place.

"But it is clear, *mon ami*, as clear as the glass that was destroyed. The guard, Ryan, was murdered with a watchman's key. One of those tee-shaped instruments that watchmen carry to check into the main office and the protection bureau. Did he have a key when you found him, *mon vieux?*"

Corey's eyes popped open.

"I never thought of that one. It was with his own key that he was murdered. He musta known the guy, so you looked around inside for the killer!"

Barodin's voice was gentle as though chiding a child.

"Much more than that, *mon ami*, the killer knew too much about the civilization of the Egyptians to suit me. That tee is the cross of the Egyptians, the scepter of all the gods of Egypt, Anubis included. Crime would be an offering to one god only, the god of crime. This man Wells couldn't make duplicate chariots unless he could study the model at close range. He and Ryan were in this together—which is why the guard trusted him so much he could be struck down with ease.

"You see," Pierre continued, "it was a mundane thing with a mysterious angle only. A man like Wells thought he was mysterious when he followed his thought suggestion and placed his offering at the feet of the god of crime."

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle!" Corey exclaimed. "You built up a theory like that on such a fragile bit of evidence?"

Barodin sighed.

"Fragile, yes. It is too bad the evidence was too fragile to be recovered for the world of art."