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A Fine French Scandal

over a Missing Moroccan

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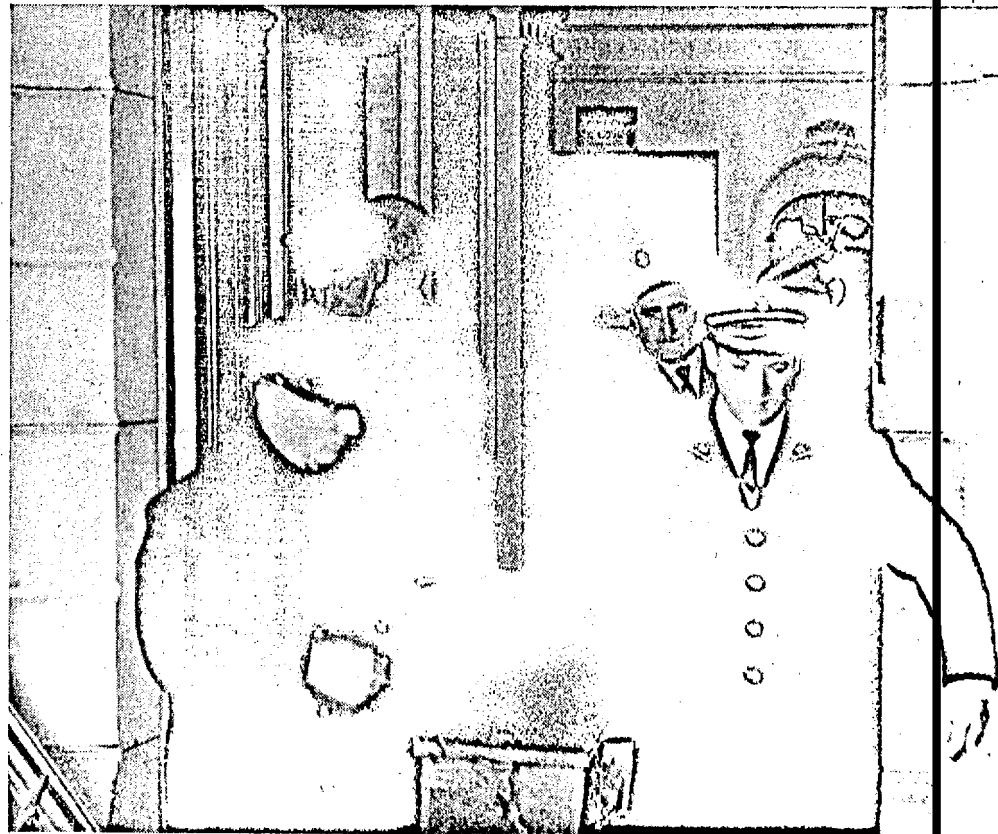
From king to cop they were all involved in what might blow up into the biggest, juiciest political scandal to hit France since the Dreyfus affair. Last October a Moroccan leftist leader named Mehdi ben Barka, twice sentenced to death *in absentia* for plotting to overthrow King Hassan II, was kidnaped in broad daylight in Paris' Latin Quarter. It turned out that the abduction had been carried out by French agents, presumably acting under the orders of Morocco's General Mohammed Oufkir and with the knowledge of French officials. The reverberations rocked even Charles de Gaulle. Furious at the first taint of real scandal on his government since he set up the Fifth Republic, he sacked his counterespionage chief, ordered a reorganization of all French police and security agencies and issued an "international warrant" for the arrest of Oufkir and two aides whom the French charge with having organized the plot. King Hassan, furious himself, refused to do anything about Oufkir and instead canceled a state visit to France. Meanwhile a titillated Paris, trying to figure out who did what to whom and why, was certain of only one thing: Ben Barka, still missing, can now be presumed dead.

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SCRATCH ONE WITNESS. An underworld character named Georges Figon (above) claimed he saw Oufkir torture Ben Barka, then leave him to die. French police said they tried to arrest Figon for months but couldn't



find him—though one day he was photographed parading past their headquarters (top). Finally they located him at his home. But when they went to arrest him he killed himself—they said. Then they watched as his coffin was hauled away (right)

Secret agents, double agents, 'barbouzes' and brothel owners

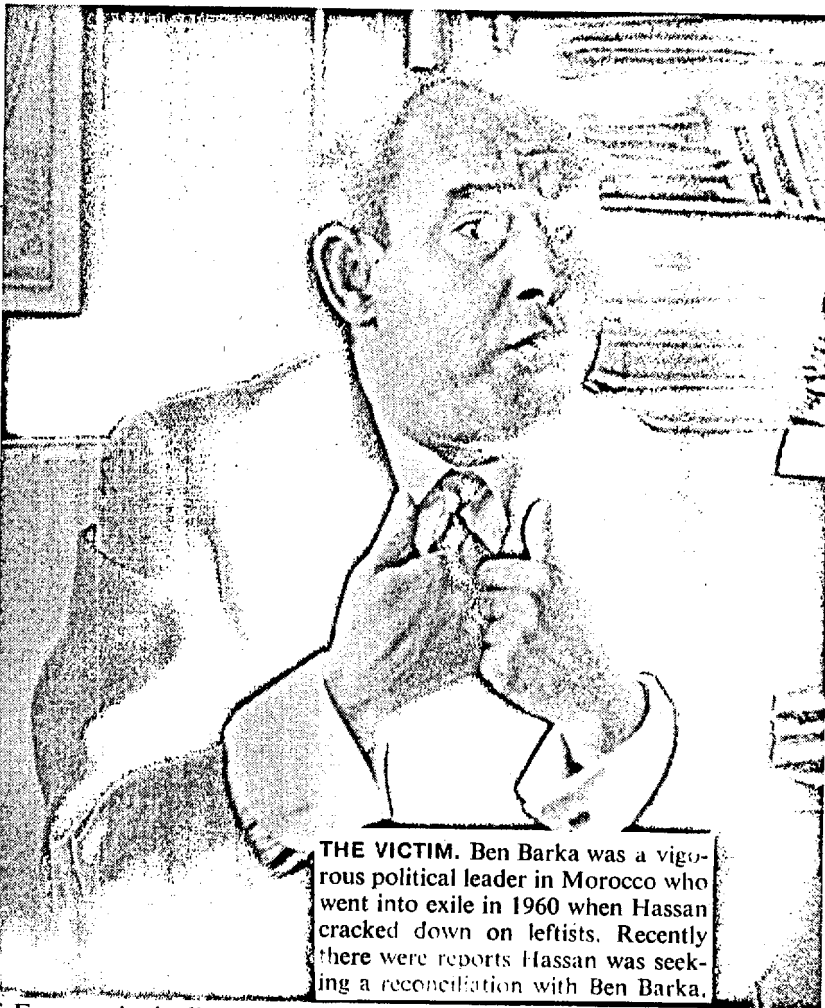
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In French, which is a very precise language, the kidnaping of Ben Barka was for months called only *une affaire*—intriguing, to be sure, and full of possibilities but still not quite ripe and smelly enough to be taken too seriously. But the death of Georges Figon (*opposite page*), who set up the kidnaping, blew off the lid, revealing a steamy bouillabaisse concocted of police officers, government spies, underworld thugs, adventurers, gangster flesh peddlers and maybe even an Interior Minister. Then *l'affaire* became *un vrai scandale*, a full-blown scandal.

A more varied and raffish cast of characters had not been assembled since *Irma La Douce*. Georges Figon was an ex-con who once spent three years in a mental institution, feigning insanity to avoid going to prison. A decade later he became a Left Bank literary type. He appeared on French TV as the "unrepentant bad guy," wrote underworld dialogue for gangster movies and once even did an article for Jean-Paul Sartre's very intellectual monthly.

Four of Figon's gangster friends were brought into the Ben Barka caper, including a brothel owner named Georges Boucheseiche. They all learned their trade at the feet of a man named "Pierrot le Fou" (Peter the Madman), who was France's Public Enemy No. One in the early postwar years. Pierrot won the admiration of gangsters and cops alike for the heroic, legendary devastation wrought on French banks by his outfit, called the "Gang des Tractions Avants" (the Front-Wheel-Drive Gang) because they always made their getaways in front-wheel-drive Citroëns.

Figon and his friends were not wholly unfamiliar with the theory and practice of kidnaping. Three of them had worked for the Gestapo during the German occupa-



THE VICTIM. Ben Barka was a vigorous political leader in Morocco who went into exile in 1960 when Hassan cracked down on leftists. Recently there were reports Hassan was seeking a reconciliation with Ben Barka.

tion of France. And all of them had been recruited as *barbouzes* (false beards), or undercover agents, by the Gaullists during the Algerian war to fight the anti-De Gaulle Secret Army Organization on its own terrorist terms. In 1963 Figon's men reportedly had handled the kidnaping in Munich of an exiled right-wing French Army colonel the Gaullists preferred not to have around loose.

The fingerman in the Ben Barka plot—the go-between for Morocco's General Oufkir and his French hired hands—was Antoine Lopez. Ostensibly an employe of Air France, he was really a double agent, working both for a French

counterintelligence outfit and for the Moroccans. And he had the reputation of being able to supply the Moroccan embassy in Paris with anything vegetable, mineral or animal, of any sex.

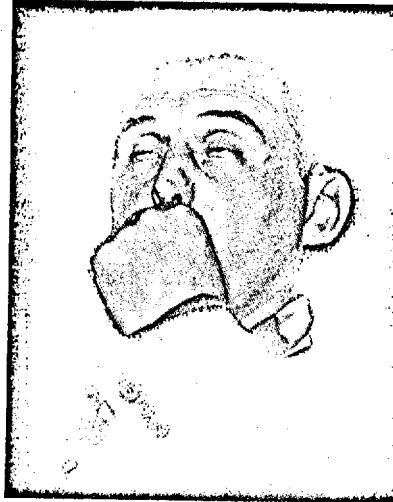
The trap that lured Ben Barka to his Latin Quarter rendezvous was set up largely by Figon, who, posing as a financial angel, had managed to get Ben Barka to believe he would put up money for a film on the problems of decolonization that the Moroccan wanted to produce. Ben Barka was en route to lunch with Figon to discuss the deal when he disappeared. As

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Lopez, the go-between



Boucheseiche, brothel owner



Jacquier (left), chief counterspy



Frey, minister of interior

he got out of the taxi, the trap was sprung—not by Figon but by two French policemen named Souchon and Voitot, members of the vice squad. They were old pals of Lopez, the go-between. He had helped them in the past by fingering drug peddlers and other unsavory types, and they were anxious to do a favor for an old pal. But Souchon was a little worried about helping unless he was politically covered upstairs. Lopez reportedly assured him: not only, he said, was Jacques Foccart, De Gaulle's personal deputy on police and intelligence matters, "au parfum" (in the perfume, or in on it) but also Souchon would get a call on an official line from the Ministry of Interior. Sure enough, the morning of the kidnaping Souchon got the call.

"You have a rendezvous today?" asked the caller.

"Yes," replied Souchon.

"Are you going?"

"Yes."

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"That's good," said the voice. Oufkir had said: "I know there are some among you who talk a lot. So reassured was Souchon that he was now on official government business that he and Voitot picked up Ben Barka in an official police car and flashed their tricolored police identifications when Ben Barka asked who they were. The snatch went off without a hitch. The two policemen drove Ben Barka to the villa of the brothel owner Bouchesciche just outside Paris, dropped him off and left.

Within a week, the story of the kidnaping had broken and word was all over town of the French police's complicity in it. Lopez had reported his role to his counterintelligence contact, Major Marcel Leroy, alias Finville, alias Donald, who had in turn reported it to his superior, General Paul Jacquier, director of French counterespionage. Souchon, too, had made a clean breast of it to his superior, who in turn passed the word to the Paris Prefect of Police, who in turn personally reported it to Interior Minister Roger Frey. Indeed, the only police official whom nobody seemed to have informed was the Chief of the Criminal Brigade, who had been charged with investigating Ben Barka's disappearance. In France, which has a bewildering array of police networks, that is perhaps not strange.

The kidnaping had taken place only a few days before De Gaulle announced he was a candidate for re-election as president. Naturally, the government did not want *l'affaire Ben Barka* to become *le scandale Ben Barka* at that point. De Gaulle wrote a letter to Ben Barka's widow in Morocco promising the investigation would be pursued "with the greatest vigor and the greatest dispatch." The government denied categorically that any French police agency had taken part in the kidnaping. And a dedicated young magistrate, Louis Zollinger, was given the job of investigating the case. His investigating of police and government witnesses went along at a snail's pace.

Then, two months later, Figon started to "sing" in public, almost to anyone who would listen. This was daring, since in an article published in a French weekly, under the title "I Saw Ben Barka Killed," Figon claimed that at a last briefing given the conspirators General

ing meaningfully at Figon, the general added: "The slightest mistake like that would be fatal." It was. For 59 days the police, armed with a warrant, tried to find Figon—at least, that's what they said. Somehow they never seemed able to—although everyone else did. One paper wrote that "Figon was seen so much around Paris that it was easier to meet him than avoid him." Finally one night the police—supported by roadblocks, crackling police radios and the press—moved in on Figon's apartment. The concierge was watching *The Untouchables* on TV. The police said, "We would like to see a Monsieur Le Normand (Figon's alias). When the police raced up the stairs to question "M. Le Normand," they found him dead, with a bullet through the temple. Suicide, the police said immediately. But the official coroner's report never mentioned the word suicide, did not fix the exact time of death and said the bullet was not fired point-blank but "from a very short distance"—a rather odd procedure for a suicide.

What the next act in this scenario will be no one can predict. Go-between Lopez, who said, "I was just doing my duty as a Frenchman," is in jail. So are the two cops, Voitot and Souchon. Bouchesciche and his pals, paid off, have fled to safer climes. Jacquier, the counterespionage chief, has been fired, and Finville, his agent, suspended. Opposition parties are now demanding that Interior Minister Frey and De Gaulle's aide, Foccart, be dismissed.

In France, scandal has a way of winding up swept under the *tapis*. Several Gaullist weeklies, for example, have already pointed the way to a political diversion. One headlined in big black type: "How France Got Diddled." By whom? The CIA—who else?

Still, at a recent cabinet meeting a very angry De Gaulle was reported to have said: "There are some smart alecks in this affair who take me for a sucker (*Il y a des zigotos dans cette affaire qui me prennent pour une bille*). The accounts will be settled."

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