

A Matter of Accent

by David Keith

Dodd, Mead & Co., New York; 1943; 241 pages,
hardcover

Available from internet booksellers or via Inter-Library
Loan

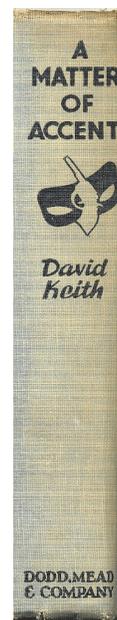
Reviewed by

Jerry Berg

38 Eastern Avenue

Lexington, MA 02421

jsberg@rcn.com



Who sent threatening letters to Ted Weaver, and who tried to kill him (twice)? Who shot Mademoiselle Maupoussin? And what was it about the American shortwave broadcasts that seemed to amuse the collaborationist employer of Mademoiselle Maupoussin's sister in France? These are the principal questions facing the reader of David Keith's 1943 mystery novel, "A Matter of Accent."

It should be noted at the outset that David Keith is not the author's real name, but a pseudonym of Francis Steegmuller, a fairly prolific writer who is best known as a scholar of the famous French novelist Gustave Flaubert. The French connection is evident in "A Matter of Accent," where practically all the characters spoke French or had some connection with the country.

The *dramatis personae* of "A Matter of Accent" are:

- Ted Weaver, wheelchair-bound polio victim, owner of a picture gallery in New York City. His wife and child died in a car crash while he was at the wheel.
- Gail Morris (Mrs. Dumont), an American, an old friend of Ted's, fashion editor at the French magazine *Mode*, now back in the United States following the German occupation of France.
- Roland Dumont, Gail's husband, a likeable, native-born Frenchman who had also had a gallery (in France). Roland and Gail were married in France. He was wounded in Germany, found himself a prisoner of war, escaped, and made his way to the U.S. where, following Gail's reconnection with Ted, he was befriended by Ted and permitted to sell some of his stock from

Ted's gallery. Technically he was the Comte du Mont d'Or, but, said Gail, "the title's so ridiculous over here and so unlike Roland anyway that we don't use it."

- Mrs. Belwood, Ted Weaver's unctuous and modestly skilled secretary, infatuated with all things French, particularly French nobility.

- Mademoiselle Claire Maupoussin, a French refugee woman with radio experience in France and a good radio voice.

- The Marquise de Verdurin, seemingly a "noble dame," living near Park Avenue, "a decidedly coarse-featured, dumpy woman of more than middle years, highly rouged and garishly dressed."

- Pierre, originally from Paris, now in New York; Ted's cook, valet, chauffeur, friend, and all around personal aid ("'body-servant' is the old word," said Ted).

- Other characters include Inspector Johnson, Detective Hacker, Prof. Haley, a German picture peddler, Pierre's friend André, and the waiter Hummel.

The story begins shortly before Pearl Harbor as Gail renewed her old friendship with Ted. She had moved from *Mode* in France to the magazine's American office. Roland's wounds and his alien status had hindered him in obtaining work in the United States, but he urged his wife to obtain employment that would get her "into the fight" against the Nazis, even if he could not do it himself. Soon Gail found herself in charge of the French section of "a new bureau being set up for the broadcasting of anti-Axis propaganda abroad." She worked at Short Wave House in New York City, "a confidential, secretive establishment" where non-employees (including Roland) could not get past the uniformed guard in the waiting room.

Roland helped Gail find Mademoiselle Maupoussin, whom he had met on the boat from Europe. Gail put her to work at the station, where the two of them wrote and read the scripts for the two weekly French-language shortwave news broadcasts. However, Mademoiselle Maupoussin was soon let go as a result of a new station policy requiring the discharge of all non-citizens because of a leak of certain government information which, it was suspected, had been accomplished by radio. Gail recruited Ted as Mademoiselle Maupoussin's replacement.

Soon after he started work, Ted received a typed letter on plain paper reading: "Mr. Weaver! Have you not had trouble *enough* in your life? Are you looking for more trouble? If you are, then broadcast on Monday as planned. If you wish to *avoid* trouble, do *not* broadcast." A second letter followed, saying simply: "Mr. Weaver! Last warning!" So began the Short Wave House mystery, the investigation of which would be led by Inspector Johnson.

The plot thickened when Mademoiselle Maupoussin was found shot to death in a chair in the rooming house where she lived. Earlier she had told Ted about a letter from her sister who

observed that the sister's collaborationist employer in Vichy had expressed amusement and satisfaction after hearing one of the station's French shortwave broadcasts. Mademoiselle Maupoussin's murder had been accomplished without a struggle, but the room had been turned upside down, and her purse was missing, along with her sister's letter, which she had promised to deliver to Inspector Johnson.

There had already been one attempt on Ted's life—he was almost hit in the head by a heavy bronze sculpture which fell from above the door to his office in his gallery. Its mounting had been intentionally loosened. Now there was a second attempt; his coffee, which was brought to him with his lunch from a restaurant downstairs in his building, had been poisoned. The perpetrator turned out to be Hummel, a waiter and a German alien, in whose room were found both the poison and the paper and typewriter that had been used to produce the threatening letters.

Although Ted had thought that the actions against him were meant to still his voice—a tribute, he believed, to the effectiveness of a strong voice speaking to the people of France, in French, with an authentically American accent—the truth would prove more complicated. And to what could the death of Mademoiselle Maupoussin be attributed?

Whatever was happening, Ted resigned his position. To his surprise, he was replaced by, of all people, Mrs. Belwood, who was “blissfully unaware that she spoke [French] with the rolling, sing-song accent of the city in which she had learned it,” Marseilles, a southern French city where her late husband, a “minor socialite,” had been American Consul. However, her accent was more appreciated by Gail than was Ted's, as more than 80% of the broadcaster's listeners were in southern France (which, however, Ted retorted, was now populated with refugees from the north who would laugh at a Marseilles accent). Mrs. Belwood resigned her job at Ted's gallery.

Many other small incidents populate the story. A German picture peddler shows up at Ted's gallery seeking to sell some pictures which Roland recognizes as having been stolen from him by the Nazis in France. Roland chases after him, and the pictures are later retrieved with the aid of a young detective named Hacker. And then there were the Friday-night “salons,” large, well-attended parties given by the Marquise de Verdurin (who had also bought one of Roland's pictures) at her residence. On other nights, the Marquise used the premises as a gambling house, where activities continued to 1:30 a.m., after which the Marquise would continue sojourning with her friends, seemingly listening to shortwave broadcasts from France. Ted had learned that Mademoiselle Maupoussin was often there, not for gambling but to promote contributions to the Food for French Children Committee with which she was affiliated.

On a late night visit to the Marquise, Ted could hear the radio. “[O]nly the distinctively Gallic cadence of the broadcaster's voice let me know the language he was using. There was the characteristically rapid delivery, the abrupt pause at the end of the sentence. French news. It was coming over, evidently, clear and well.” He informed the inspector, who would “get in touch

with the Short Wave House listeners”—presumably meaning official government monitors—“and check on the French radio program she had been tuned into.” Later the inspector reported that they couldn’t pick up the program on the night they tried.

Late in the story, Ted went to a French seamen’s club with Pierre, who was a regular visitor. There he found a shortwave radio, with the French-language American broadcast, and Mrs. Belwood’s voice, “coming through the spluttering and the crackling.” When she was done, “the place was a bedlam of catcalls” as seamen, used to hearing Ted’s voice, expressed themselves over the “ludicrous” accent of the new voice on the broadcast of which they were regular listeners. Pierre thought it was “a tragic mistake, to employ a voice like that to speak to France in the name of America. . . . To me . . . it seems like sabotage.” Ted later said to Gail: “Haven’t the people down there [in Washington] called you up yet? Doesn’t somebody with a little sense down there listen to the broadcasts? If somebody from Washington isn’t calling you up at this very minute, Gail, the country doesn’t deserve to exist another hour!”

It will interest shortwave listeners that Ted was completely surprised that the broadcast could be heard in the club in New York. “How could this be,” said he. “Short Wave, directed at great distances, heard here not two miles from the studio? . . . [H]ow is it possible for Short Wave broadcasts from New York to be heard here?” Pierre must have been a DXer. “The phenomenon is known as the ground beam, Monsieur. There are always occasional places near the point of origin where Short Wave can be heard. This [the club] happens to be one of them.”

The book concludes with a ship, the *Canebière*, scheduled to depart New York for Marseilles with a cargo of milk, food and vitamins for the people of France. The station was to broadcast the ceremony from on board the ship. Gail invited Ted to attend, but, still unhappy over Mrs. Belwood’s continued employment at the station, he declined. Then came Pearl Harbor, and mysterious doings aboard the *Canebière*, where sailors reported seeing officers dump part of its cargo into the river. On the inspector’s insistence, Ted changed his mind about attending the broadcast.

It was en route to, and aboard, the *Canebière* that the story reaches its climax. For those who might want to read the book I won’t reveal the ending, except to say that it has little to do with accents and everything to do with inserting hidden messages in scripts—and even a bit of clandestine broadcasting.

To the SWL, it is the shortwave connection that makes the book a novelty. Otherwise the story is not especially noteworthy, particularly given the promise of the “Red Badge” series (see figure below). The writing style, and the somewhat high-brow setting of the story, is of another era. Some of the plot’s twists and turns seem contrived. Soon after the book was published, *The New York Times* observed that “[t]he narrative moves rather more slowly than spy stories are wont to do, but it has its good points.” I was also a little disappointed at the lack of some hoped-for romance, the opportunity for which materialized at the story’s end.

One thing that surprised me is that the shortwave station that is at the center of the story is never named. It was described simply as “the official radio station of the United States government.” But the author must have been influenced by the existence of the Voice of America, which began broadcasting in February 1942 and was, until 1954, located in New York City.

The Semi-Annual Red Badge
\$1000 PRIZE CONTEST

Twice each year the Red Badge Editors conduct a new mystery story contest for a \$1000 prize and additional royalties, closing the first of April and the first of October each Spring and Fall. A complete prospectus will be mailed upon request.

FORMER PRIZE WINNERS

THE AFFAIR OF THE SCARLET CRAB
by CLIFFORD KNIGHT

FAST COMPANY *by* MARCO PAGE

CANCELLED IN RED *by* HUGH PENTECOST

A MATTER OF IODINE *by* DAVID KEITH

LADY IN LILAC *by* SUSANNAH SHANE

MURDER A LA MODE *by* ELEANORE KELLY SELLARS

HEADS YOU LOSE *by* CHRISTIANNA BRAND

THE RED BADGE BULLETIN

A Bulletin giving current and advance information about Red Badge books, publishing communications from authors and readers, discussing trends and conducting interesting puzzles and competitions, is issued quarterly and will be sent free of charge upon request.

THE EIGHT-POINT TEST

Each year, hundreds of detective-story manuscripts are submitted to Dodd, Mead and Company. From these only a very small number receive the coveted Red Badge imprint because every one must first pass a rigid eight-point test—so severe that all but absolutely first-class mysteries are eliminated. Copies of this eight-point test will be mailed without charge.

DODD, MEAD & CO., Inc., 432 Fourth Ave., N. Y.