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Surprise Witness

Who kidnaped Mehdi Ben Barka? It is almost exactly a year since the diminutive exiled Moroccan leftist leader vanished from a street in Saint-Germain-des-Prés. For the past several weeks the knotty mystery of his disappearance has been unraveling in a Paris court. All the evidence confirms the likelihood that he stepped willingly into a black Peugeot and was whisked to a villa in a Paris suburb because he



DLIMI UNDER ARREST  
*Brilliant ploy.*

believed that envoys of his old political enemy, Morocco's King Hassan II, were trying to contact him with an offer to return home for a reconciliation with the King. Ben Barka was later handed over to two Moroccans at the villa and was never seen again.

In the dock were five Frenchmen—a journalist, two policemen and two secret agents—and one small-time Moroccan police operative. All were charged with either participation or complicity in the kidnaping. The two most wanted men were out of reach of French law. They were Morocco's Interior Minister Brigadier General Mohamed Oufkir and his deputy for secret-police matters, Ahmed Dlimi. Witnesses named them as the Moroccans who had met Ben Barka at the villa. King Hassan flatly refused to hand them over for trial. In fact, he had been working feverishly behind the scenes to block the proceedings. Emissaries had approached Charles de Gaulle himself, pleading that the affair would put a blight on Franco-Moroccan relations. Hassan argued in vain, for De Gaulle declined to intervene.

Moroccan intervention. At last, Hassan himself decided to intervene, and he chose an ingenious way to do it. Last week Dlimi, his secret-police aide, boarded a Royal Air Maroc Caravelle in Casablanca and flew—suitably disguised and with a fake passport—to Paris. The next afternoon, just as the trial of the six defendants was drawing to a close, Dlimi calmly showed up at the court and surrendered to French authorities.

It was a brilliant ploy. The trial had progressed beyond the point where new testimony could conveniently be introduced; yet no court could ignore this surprise witness. Accepting the prosecution's motion, the judge ordered a new trial. This, of course, would need months to prepare—if it ever took place. Rumors spread that Charles de Gaulle might be less than happy to have the trial commence again, since Dlimi might name the anonymous high-ranking French officials who, according to trial witnesses, gave the go-ahead for French police and security agents to cooperate in catching Ben Barka for the Moroccans.

VIP Treatment. Nor was there any assurance that Dlimi himself would ever face a French judge. No sooner had he surrendered than a bevy of Hassan's hand-picked lawyers arrived in Paris to file a motion with France's Supreme Court invoking the Franco-Moroccan judicial convention of 1956. Under that agreement, French and Moroccan nationals must be tried in their national courts for offenses committed in the other country. It would also be months before the French court could rule on that motion. In the meantime, Dlimi was comfortably ensconced in a VIP cell at Paris' Santé Prison, and *l'affaire* Ben Barka was where King Hassan wanted it—hopelessly enmeshed in endless legal tangles.