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*The Shadow of the Guillotine Hung
Over an American Courtroom*

BACK *from* DUST

By FRANK K. SHAW

THE clock was striking 3 as the patrol-wagon turned the corner and stopped before the door of the police station. The night sergeant, from his stool behind the desk, glanced out of the window.

"They've got 'em," he grunted.

"Got who?" idly inquired patrolman Russell, as he buckled his belt preparatory to "going on".

"Oh, those merry college bloods who've been trying to break the bank lately in Pete's plant over on the avenue."

"Pretty raw to pull the lads, I calls it," ruminated the policeman; "why don't you put Pete away and have done with it?"

"Never mind what you calls it," snapped the sergeant. "The chief said 'pull 'em'. What's more, it's none of your business."

As he finished speaking, the young men were jostled through the outer door and lined up on one side of the room to await their turn at the booking desk. All were in evening dress, somewhat soiled and disarranged as a result of the strenuous experience of the last hour. A few were grinning, others scowling or swearing softly. One by one they crossed the room and faced the sergeant, the latter still chafing under the implied rebuke of his subordinate. After a few crisp questions and sullen answers, duly recorded on the police blotter, each dropped back to his place in the line.

"That all of 'em?" finally growled the official, as he bent over his writing.

"One more."

At the words, uttered in a clear, indifferent tone, the sergeant glanced up quickly at the speaker, who was leisurely approaching him. He was reminded, he could not tell why, of a painting he had seen at the art gallery, entitled, "At the Court Reception." He had never acquired the vice of self-analysis, but for some reason he felt annoyed.

"And I suppose your name is Smith, or Jones, or Brown?" he sneered.

With serene grace, the prisoner drew from an inner pocket of his coat a gold-mounted card-case.

"Louis!" cried some one in the line behind him. "Don't make an ass of yourself!"

The warning was unheeded. Smilingly he withdrew from the case a card and tossed it upon the desk in front of the sergeant.

"My visiting card," he remarked blandly, "and see that you spell my name correctly: C-l-a-i-r. French, you observe."

Again came the insistent voice across the room: "But think, man—the newspapers!"

"That is my name and I have never been ashamed of it," was the cool reply. "Don't get nervous, my friend: it is beyond the power of dirty police spies to smirch it, or of the press either."

"He's gone stark crazy, officer; don't mind him!"

But apparently the sergeant did mind. His square jaws snapped together viciously.

"Here, Bill," he shouted; "conduct this 'gentleman of France' to the bridal chamber. 'Dirty police spics,' are we? We'll see about that in the morning, my young blue-blood."

The "bridal chamber" proved to be the foulest cell in the noisiest corridor of the building; but the prisoner entered it with easy dignity and seated himself on the bunk in the corner. When he was alone, he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

"What imp of the devil has taken possession of me tonight?" he muttered to himself. "Behind the bars! The first of my name, I'll warrant. —No!" (Just then he recalled the portrait hanging in his father's library.) "Ah, yes; he, too, had been a Louis Clair with a prison record! 'Le Clair', they used to write it in those days."

The tale had been an inspiration to him since his knickerbocker days, the story of that gay young ancestor, the chevalier of the Reign of Terror. As they dragged him before the "citizen" judge, to be condemned to death, he had coolly taken a pinch of snuff and passed the jeweled snuff-box to his companion in the dock, with the remark: "It will kill the odor of the *canaille*." When the enraged peasant on the bench shouted the stereotyped sentence: "Away with him to the guillotine!" Le Clair had laughed mockingly in his face.

Yes, that part of the tale had pleased him even better than the sequel: the dreary, sodden Paris streets of the early morning; the rough cart filled with the condemned on their way to die; the quick recognition, the significant look that shot between the faithful old servant in

the front rank of the jeering mob, and the master standing with pinioned wrists in the prison van; the sudden wrench of those arms of steel and the snapping of the cord; the quick leap into the crowd, the swift flight down the crooked alley; the escape to England and at last the new home in America. Ah, *that* was life; that was worth the tedium of living! But this—imprisoned for gambling! Yet, after all, it was a gentleman's crime, if crime it was. Small comfort, to be sure, but better than nothing. If he must hear the clang of bolts, why could it not be in a game worth the while, where his head might be the forfeit? Never mind; he would play the petty game well, and by and by, perhaps—perhaps. . . .

A FEW hours later that morning, in the big building across the way, Judge Henry Durette sat at his desk in chambers adjoining the courtroom. It was the day for his weekly letter to his father up among the New Hampshire hills, and, always methodical in his habits, he dutifully began to write; but the thoughts would not come. A blast of hot air entered the open window and scattered his papers about the desk.

"Whew!" he exclaimed; "another scorcher, and vacation at the old home a full month away."

He visioned the dear old New England farm and the modest lord of the manor, Dad. What would the old chap be about today, he wondered, while his son was wrestling with the crimes and miseries of a great city? In the hay-field, of course; and he smiled at the mental picture of the short, plump figure in blue overalls, shirt open at the sinewy throat, pitchfork in hand, and shrewd, gray eyes twinkling beneath the broad-brimmed straw hat.

How bright and keen he was, too! But what an odd letter for the old fellow to write, that letter of con-

gratulation a year ago! He must look it up again. Stepping to the file he drew it out and read: "Well done, my boy; a judge at twenty-nine! We have been simple Yankee farmers for generations, but I knew it was in you. And you are not the first judge in the family, either. The first was a fine old fellow, that Judge Durette of the days of the French Revolution. No learning to speak of, but a *man*. At his word, they say, the heads of the nobility dropped from the guillotine into the basket like apples rolling into a barrel. And he was right, eternally right. The licentious, cruel, roistering aristocrats!"

"Bless the old fire-eater; he won't even kill a fowl for the table, and yet what a bloodthirsty letter! I never understood it."

He smiled as he replaced it in the file.

AN HOUR later Judge Durette entered the courtroom and took his place on the bench. His impassive features gave no sign of the weariness, the disgust, that oppressed his very soul. The same eager crowd apparently were in the spectators' seats that had graced—or disgraced—the courtroom for countless weeks and months. The same type of hopeless wretch was in the dock. But wait; the occupants of the prisoners' benches were not all of that type today. "Ah," he mused, "has some mischievous sprite been tightening the bandage about the eyes of Dame Justice?"

"Louis Clair, stand up!" called the court clerk from his station in front of the judge's bench.

"Louis Le Clair, did you say?" absently inquired the judge in a low tone.

"No, your honor; just 'Clair' without the 'Le'," was the reply.

"O, yes; I was not paying proper attention." As he spoke, he turned

toward the young man standing at his ease in the dock and looking straight at him. What an impudent, mocking smile! Where had he seen that identical picture before? The hot blood rushed through his brain. Suddenly the familiar walls of the courtroom vanished and he was sitting in a gorgeous palace of justice of the period of Louis XVI. The soiled evening suit of the respondent in the dock had become a scarlet coat, flowered waistcoat, and satin knee-breeches. He even noticed the gold snuff-box held in a white and shapely hand. A sudden fury seized him—

"Away with him to the guillotine!"

With a start he came to himself. Had he really spoken or was it a trick of his imagination? He glanced hastily about him. No, the expression in the scores of eyes looking up at him had not changed. He had said nothing, and the habitual judicial mask had screened his strange emotion. Thank God! But what had caused that vivid dream, if dream it was—his father's letter, the heat of the room, a touch of "nerves"? But the fierce anger without a cause! Was he becoming calloused so soon; was he losing all sympathy with wretched, suffering humanity? No, never would he permit that; better by far that a guilty man now and then should go unwhipped of justice. But his present duties! What was going on about him? With intense relief, he saw that the well-oiled machinery of the court was running without a jar. A police officer was just concluding a vivid description of the raid of the night before, not without certain professional embellishments.

"All these lads was gambling, your honor; I see 'em myself. And this one was the worst of the lot," he concluded.

For a moment the judge rested his head upon his hand. Could he look into those mocking eyes again? He

dared not. "The prisoner is discharged," he said shortly.

The chin of the police witness dropped ludicrously and he grasped the rail of the witness stand as if his little world of law and order were toppling into black eternity.

"Youth, first offense: a clear case for leniency," added the judge gruffly. "Let the next prisoner be arraigned, Mr. Clerk."

WITHOUT unnecessary delay, the late beneficiary of judicial favor was receiving the noisy congratulations of his fellows in a neighboring café. Sparkling, if harmless, fluids gurgled joyously from the necks of sundry bottles. Then came a chorus of questions:

"How did you manage to pull it off, Louis, old fox?"

"Has dad a pull in the Fifth ward?"

"Was it hypnotism?"

With glass in hand, Clair stood leaning against a table. The last question arrested his attention and seemed to puzzle him strangely.

"Hypnotism?" he repeated slowly.

"No, not that, I think."

He raised his hand to check the laughter.

"It was strange," he continued gently, raising his glass high and peering into its contents as if to recall the picture; "it was strange. I can't express it or explain it, but, as I stood facing that man on the bench, it was another self, not I, that stood there. It was another judge, not he, that faced me. His expression did not change, I swear, yet he seemed to glower down at me with the hate and malice of a thousand years—and we were total strangers! *Then I knew that he was about to sentence me to death.* Absurd? Of course: I know it now, and I knew it then, but I believed it."

"Odd freak of yours, that," said someone in the room. "He isn't a bad sort at all, Judge Durette."

"Judge Durette!" As he gasped the words, Louis Clair's face became as bloodless as the marble slab upon which he leaned. The glass slipped from his shaking fingers and crashed on the floor.

"What is it?" cried a startled voice. "You know him, you recall the name?"

"I never heard of him!"

"But why—?"

"God help me, I do not know," he whispered.