

The Confession

By Maurice Level

It stood still for a moment before the open door, hesitating, and it was only when the old woman who had been sent to bring me said for the second time, "It is here," that I went in.

At first I could see nothing but the lamp screened by a low-drawn shade; then I distinguished on the wall the motionless shadow of a recumbent body, long and thin, with sharp features. A vague odor of petrol and ether floated round me. But for the sound of the rain beating on the slates of the roof and the dull howling of the wind in the empty chimney, the silence was death-like. "Monsieur," said the old woman gently as she bent over what I now saw was a bed, "Monsieur! . . . the gentleman you asked for is here . . ."

The shadow raised itself, and a faint voice said:

"Very well . . . leave us, Madame . . . leave us . . ."

When she had, shut the door after her, the voice went on:

"Come nearer, Monsieur. I am almost blind, I have a buzzing in my ears, and I hear very badly . . . Here, quite close to me, there ought to be a chair. . . Pardon me for having sent for you, but I have something very grave to tell you . . ."

The eyes in the face that craned towards me were wide open in a sort of stare, and he trembled as he faltered:

"But first, are you Monsieur Gernou? Am I speaking to Monsieur Gernou, leader of the bar?"

"Yes."

He sighed as if with relief.

"Then at last I can make my confession. I signed my letter Perier, but that is not my real name. It is possible that if Death, so near me now, had not already changed my face, you might vaguely recognize me . . . But no matter . . ."

"Some years ago, many long years, I was Public Prosecutor for the Republic . . . I was one of the men of whom people say: 'He has a brilliant future before him,' and I had resolved to have one. I only needed a chance to prove my ability: a case at the assizes gave me that chance. It was in a small town. The crime was one that would not have attracted much attention in Paris, but there it aroused passionate interest, and as I listened to the reading of the accusation I saw there would be a big struggle. The evidence against the prisoner was of the gravest nature, but it lacked the determining factor that will frequently draw a confession from the criminal—or the equivalent of a confession. The man made a desperate defense. A feeling of doubt, almost of sympathy ran through the court, and you know how great the power of that feeling is.

"But such influences do not affect a magistrate. I answered all the denials by bringing forward facts that made a strong chain of circumstantial evidence. I turned the life of the man inside out and revealed all his weak points and wrong-doings. I gave the jury a vivid description of the crime, and as a hound leads the hunters to the quarry, I ended by pointing to the accused as the criminal. Counsel for the defense answered my arguments, did his best to fight me . . . but it was useless. I had asked for the head of the man: I got it.

"Any sympathy I might have felt for the prisoner was quickly stifled by pride in my own eloquence. The condemnation was both the victory of the law and a great personal triumph for me.

“I saw the man again on the morning of the execution. I went to watch them wake him and prepare him for the scaffold, and as I looked at his inscrutable face I was suddenly seized with an anguish of mind. Every detail of that sinister hour is still fresh in my memory. He showed no sign of revolt while they bound his arms and shackled his legs. I dared not look at him, for I felt his eyes were fixed on me with an expression of superhuman calm. As he came out of the prison door and faced the guillotine, he cried twice: ‘I am innocent!’ and the crowds that had been prepared to hiss him suddenly became silent. Then he turned to me and said: ‘Watch me die, it will be well worth while’ . . . He embraced the priest and his lawyer . . . It appears that he then placed himself unaided on the plank, that he never flinched during the eternal moment of waiting for the knife, and that I stood there with my head uncovered. It appears . . . for I, I did not see, having for the moment lost all consciousness of external things.

“During the days that followed my thoughts were too confused for me to understand clearly why I was full of some trouble that seemed to paralyze me. My mind had become obsessed by the death of this man. My colleagues said to me:

“‘It is always like that the first time.’

“I believed them, but gradually I became aware that there was a definite reason for my preoccupation: doubt. From the moment I realized this I had no peace of mind. Think of what a magistrate must feel when, after having caused a man to be beheaded, he begins asking himself:

“ ‘Suppose after all he were not guilty? . . .’

“I fought with all my strength against this idea, trying to convince myself that it was impossible, absurd. I appealed to all that is balanced and logical in my brain and mind, but my reasonings were always cut short by the question: ‘What real proof was there?’ Then I would think of the last moments of the criminal, would see his calm eyes, would hear his voice. This vision of the scaffold was in my mind one day when some one said to me:

“ ‘How well he defended himself; it is a wonder he did not get off . . . Upon my word, if I had not heard your address to the Court I should be inclined to think he was innocent.’

“And so the magic of words, the force of my will to succeed were what had quieted the hesitations of this man as they had probably triumphed over those of the jury. I alone had been the cause of his death, and if he were innocent I alone was responsible for the monstrous crime of his execution.

“A man does not accuse himself in this way without trying to put up some sort of a defense, without doing something to absolve his conscience, and in order to deliver myself from these paralyzing doubts I went over the case again. While I reread my notes and examined my documents, my conviction became the same as before; but they were *my* notes, *my* documents, the work of my probably prejudiced mind, of my will enslaved by my desire, my need to find him guilty. I studied the other point of view, the questions put to the accused and his answers, the evidence of the witnesses. To be quite sure about some points that had never been very clear, I examined carefully the place where the crime had been committed, the plan of the streets near the house. I took in my hands the weapon the murderer had used, I found new witnesses who had been left out or neglected, and by the time I had gone over all these details twenty times I had come to the definite conclusion, now not to be shaken, that the man was innocent . . . And as if to crown my remorse, a brilliant rise in position was offered me! It was the price of my infamy.

“I was very cowardly, Monsieur, for I believed I did enough in tendering my resignation without assigning any reason for it. I traveled. Alas! forgetfulness does not lie at the end of long roads . . . To do something to expiate the irreparable wrong I had caused became my only desire in life. But the man was a vagabond, without family, without friends . . . There was one thing I

could have done, the only worthy thing: I could have confessed my mistake. I had not the courage to do it. I was afraid of the anger, the scorn of my colleagues. Finally I decided that I would try to atone by using my fortune to relieve those who were in great trouble, above all, to help those who were guilty. Who had a better right than I to try to prevent men being condemned?—I turned my back on all the joys of life, renounced all comfort and ease, took no rest. Forgotten by every one, I have lived in solitude, and aged prematurely. I have reduced the needs of life to a minimum . . . For months I have lodged in this attic, and it is here I contracted the illness of which I am dying. I shall die here, I wish to die here . . . And now, Monsieur, I have come to what I want to ask you . . .”

His voice became so low I had to watch his trembling lips to help myself to understand his words.

“I do not wish this story to die with me. I want you to make it known as a lesson for those whose duty it is to punish with justice and not because they are there *to punish in any case*; I want it to help to bring the Specter of the Irreparable before the Public Prosecutor when it is his duty to ask for a condemnation.”

“I will do as you ask,” I assured him.

His face was livid, and his hand shook as he gasped:

“But that is not all . . . I still have some money . . . that I have not yet had time to distribute among those who have been unfortunate . . . It is there . . . in that chest of drawers . . . I want you to give it to them when I am gone . . . not in my name, but in that of the man who was executed because of my mistake thirty years ago . . . give it to them in the name of Ranaille.”

I started.

“Ranaille? But it was I who defended him . . . I was . . .”

He bowed his head.

“I know . . . that is why I asked you to come . . . it was to you I owed this confession. I am Deroux, the Public Prosecutor.” He tried to lift his arms towards the ceiling, murmuring:

“Ranaille . . . Ranaille . . .”

Did I betray a professional secret? Was I guilty of a breach of rules that ought to be binding? . . . the pitiful spectacle of this dying man drew the truth from me in spite of myself, and I cried:

“Monsieur Deroux! Monsieur Deroux! Ranaille was guilty . . . He confessed it as he went to the scaffold . . . He told me when he bid me good-bye there . . .”

But he had already fallen back on the pillow . . . I have always tried to believe that he heard me.