

*Leaf the Thirteenth*

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*The Shadow of a Hand*

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by John Williams

It is a question that has often been debated, whether man or woman possess most moral courage. I shall not pretend to enter into a discussion of the matter here, but simply relate an incident which came to my knowledge some years since, proving, I think, incontestably, that some of the fairer portion of creation are endowed in an eminent degree with this virtue.

In the autumn of 1846, circumstances called me to Dieppe. To tell the truth I was by no means sorry to visit this fashionable watering place. I had been in Paris for several weeks in search of a cashier of one of the principal New York banks who had committed a heavy defalcation, and the change was a very pleasant one.

It was late in the evening of the 14th of August, when I arrived at the end of my journey, I proceeded at once to the Hotel des Bains (which, by the by, I can recommend to those of my readers who may happen to visit Dieppe), and after a light supper retired to rest.

I have always been an early riser. It makes no difference what time I go to bed at night, I am sure to get up early in the morning. I suppose this is habit, more than anything else.—However that may be, the morning after my arrival at Dieppe, I was up by cock-crow. I looked at my watch, and found it wanted a few minutes to four. I determined I would go and explore the town.

When I arrived in the street I was very much surprised to find it full of people. I gave the inhabitants of Dieppe credit for being very industrious, beating their Parisian brethren to nothing, in the exercise of the virtue of early rising, and expected to discover upon inquiry, a practical illustration of the truth of the adage, by finding the citizens of that pretty, but rather slow town, noted for their health, renowned for their wealth, and courted for their wisdom.

I was disturbed from these reflections by observing that the people were all going in one direction, and they hurried forward as if stimulated by some extraordinary curiosity. I addressed inquiries to some of them, but they were too breathless, and in too great a hurry to make any reply to me. All they did was to point before them and nod their heads.

Not being able to obtain any satisfaction from them, I determined to follow their foot-steps, as I was now convinced there must be something to be seen.

We advanced at a very quick pace down a handsome street, which I afterwards learned was the chief street in the town, called the Grand Rue; the crowd becoming more dense, so as to render it very difficult to proceed. We might have gone a mile perhaps, when the street suddenly opened into a large square; this square was densely packed with a great mob. The most distracting noise and confusion prevailed, but I saw something there, raised on a platform at the further end of the square, which engaged my whole attention, and made my blood feel as if it were turned into ice.

It was a guillotine!

Yes, there was the hideous framework painted black, which I had seen once before at the Place du Trone, in Paris. At the moment I turned my eyes on this instrument of death, a man was engaged oiling the grooves, and to enable him to do it more conveniently, the knife was lowered half way down between the two posts, and the morning sun made the blade glitter, rendering it quite distinct to the whole multitude.

Although I had before seen an execution, and was well aware of the painful effect it had upon my mind for months afterwards, morbid curiosity compelled me to remain, and see the conclusion of the tragedy. I had not to wait long, a neighboring bell began to toll, and a cart made its appearance, bearing the criminal. He appeared to take matters very easily, and when I saw him, he was conversing gaily with the two gendarmes who accompanied him. He was smoking a cigar, and glanced around at the multitude with the most perfect *nonchalance*. The populace, when they saw him, raised a yell of execration; a palpable sneer was the only reply he deigned to make.

He ascended the steps leading to the scaffold with an easy gait, and turning sharply around to the mob, stood for a minute or two with his arms folded, and a foot advanced as if defying them. He glanced at them a look of unutterable scorn, and muttered between his teeth the word "*Canaille*."

It was during this minute or two that I had time to make a note of his appearance. He seemed to be about thirty-five years of age. He was tall and powerfully built, but his features were the very epitome of villainy. His eyes were dark and large, surmounted by heavy eyebrows. He wore a long moustache which extended far beyond his cheeks. Every bad passion seemed to be expressed in his face; in fact, his countenance might be called perfectly devilish. An involuntary shudder ran through me as I gazed upon it.

He resigned himself into the hands of the executioner, and in a few minutes all was over. When the time came for the knife to descend, I had not the courage to look, but turned my head away, and it was only by a shout from the mob that I knew the tragedy was finished.

I inquired of a spectator near me, the name of the criminal and the crime for which he had suffered.

The man stared at me with astonishment, saying:

"Why, it's Jacques Reynaud!"

The name struck me as being somewhat familiar, and I endeavored to remember where I had heard it before. I suddenly recollected the Paris newspapers some months back had been filled with the history of several awful murders committed in Dieppe, and this man's name was in some way connected with them, but in what manner I could not remember. However, my curiosity was now thoroughly excited, I immediately made the most minute inquiries into the matter, and before I left Dieppe had learned the following particulars:

In the Rue des Armes, about four months previous to the time I write, lived a worthy haberdasher of the name of Maurice. His family consisted of himself, his wife, one child, and a servant. They were quiet, respectable people, and very much respected by all their neighbors.

M. Maurice did a good business, and frequently had a considerable sum of money in his house. He had an extraordinary run of custom one Saturday, and when the labors of the day were over he felt very much fatigued. He shut up his shop and proceeded to a small room, where his wife and servant were laying the cloth for supper.

“My dear,” said his wife, as soon as he entered the room, “I should very much like some oysters for supper tonight.”

“I am afraid it is too late,” replied the husband, looking at his watch. It was a quarter past eleven.

“Oh no, Justine says there is a shop open round the corner.”

“If that be the case, let Justine get some at once, for I am as hungry as a hunter.”

Thereupon Justine put on her bonnet and shawl, and went for the oysters; *leaving the door ajar*, that she might not disturb her master or mistress when she returned.

Now it so happened that the place where she expected to be able to obtain the oysters was closed; but not wishing to disappoint her employers, she determined she would go and seek them elsewhere. In pursuance of this object, she entered the Grande Rue, but had to walk a considerable distance before she could obtain what she sought. She hurried home again, and noticed when she arrived at the door of her master's house that the chimes of a neighboring church struck a quarter to twelve. She had, therefore, been absent just three quarters of an hour.

She was surprised to find the door shut, but supposing that the wind had blown it to, she raised the latch. The door was *fastened on the inside*. She thought this rather strange, but then again she reflected that it was doubtless only a necessary precaution on the part of her master. She rang the bell, and was very much concerned when, after waiting a few minutes, no reply was made. “They have gone to bed,” she said to herself, and felt rather angry with them for having locked her out. She again rung the bell, much more violently than before—still no answer! She now became alarmed, and rang long and violently—no answer! Her fears were thoroughly aroused, and she related the circumstances to some persons passing along the street. The presence of two or three gendarmes was soon procured, and they proceeded at once to break in the door.

The passage into which the door opened was perfectly dark; but one of the gendarmes stumbled over something, and putting out his hand to save himself, it came in contact with something wet on the ground. A light was immediately obtained, and a horrible sight presented itself.

Lying across the passage was the dead body of Monsieur Maurice, with his throat cut from ear to ear. The floor was swimming in blood. In the little room was the dead body of his wife, presenting the same ghastly wound. Even the little child in the cradle had not escaped, for the

merciless assassin had taken its life by the same horrible means. The house was ransacked from top to bottom, and everything of value stolen.

I shall not attempt to depict the horror of the persons who witnessed this shocking sight; it can be more easily imagined than described, and to tell the truth, I don't like dealing in the horrible; it is pandering to a morbid taste, and if I have transgressed my usual mode of narration in this sketch, my only excuse is—*it is true*.

The most strenuous exertions were made to detect the murderer, but without any success. All that could be learned was, that a man had been seen to look intently in the shop windows about the time M. Maurice was counting out his day's receipts. The whole town of Dieppe was horrified, and when night came many a heart trembled. After a few days the feelings of fear began to decrease, when they were again awakened in a ten-fold manner by another shocking murder.

About ten days after the catastrophe in Rue des Armes, some belated pedestrians were making the best of their way home about two o'clock in the morning. They were walking very rapidly down the Rue Grenard, when they were astounded by seeing a man on the roof of a house, with nothing on but his shirt, crying out with all his strength "murder!" "murder!" "murder!" He held a young child in his arms.

They immediately called to him, but all they could gather from him was that murder was committed in the house. They directly made for the door and found it *fastened on the inside*. They burst the door open with a few vigorous kicks and penetrated into the house. They rushed upstairs, and on the first landing they found the dead body of a man with his throat cut. He was dead. They entered a bedroom—hanging half out of bed was the body of a woman, mutilated in the same horrible manner—and stone dead. But they had not yet discovered all the horrors in that house of blood. In the kitchen was discovered the inanimate form of the servant girl, who had been killed by the same means. The assassin was evidently the same who had committed the murder in the Rue des Armes. The wounds inflicted were exactly of the same character, and it was evident the same instrument had been used.

The young man, seen on the roof of the house, was named Pierre Dulon; he deposed before the Procureur du Rio, the next morning, as follows:

"My name is Pierre Dulon; I am twenty-two years of age, and a watchmaker by trade.

"For the last two years I have been living as assistant with the late Monsieur Mouton. He resided in the Rue Grenard. His family consisted of himself, wife and child, and servant girl. On the night of the 21st of April, 1864, we all of us retired to bed early. I was accustomed to sleep in one of the attics. In the room next to mine, the servant and child slept. About half past one o'clock in the morning I awoke. I felt very thirsty and rose to get some water—my pitcher was empty. I went downstairs to fill it. I had nearly reached the first landing when I saw a man stealthily ascending the stairs. I am a very nervous man, and the recent murder had preyed very much on my mind, I had been living in continual dread ever since. The sight of this man completely paralyzed me; and I stood looking, not able to move hand or foot. He had nearly reached master's door, when M. Mouton opened the door and came out on the landing. The

assassin immediately rushed upon him, and putting his hand over my master's mouth, prevented him from calling out. I noticed but one thing, that *the murderer had only three fingers on his left hand*. I could see no more, but ran upstairs again, and hurried into the servant's room; the child was lying on the bed asleep, but the servant girl was not in the room. I took up the child in my arms and got out on the roof. This is all I know about the matter.”

The excitement in Dieppe was now raised to the highest pitch. No trace of the assassin could be discovered. It was evident that these murders were the work of man—and that he must have been concealed in the houses before they were closed for the night.

Government offered a large reward for the discovery of the murderer, and the vigilance of the police was thoroughly aroused.

There lived on the outskirts of Dieppe a widow lady of the name of Beaumaurice.—She had no family; but, with one servant girl, lived in a very retired manner. The cottage in which she resided was situated about a half a mile from the city—a little off from the public road.

Madame Beaumaurice had been the wife of an old officer of the Guards. She was an extraordinary woman in every particular; but especially so in respect to a certain coolness of character she possessed, in the midst of danger—which, together with a large amount of moral courage—made her a very notable person. The recent murders had, perhaps, made less impression on her mind than upon anyone else in Dieppe,—although it was naturally supposed the retired situation in which she lived would have caused her to be more .fearful.

About ten o'clock on the night of the 30th of April, just ten days after the murders in the Rue Grenard, Madame Beaumaurice went up to her bed-room. She was suffering from a nervous head-ache. She felt very sleepy, and seated herself in a large arm-chair previous to undressing herself. The lamp was placed on a chest of drawers behind her. Opposite to her was a toilet-table, with a cloth on it reaching to the floor. She had already commenced taking off her clothes, when happening to look around her, she saw something which for a moment chilled her blood. It was the shadow of a man's hand on the floor. The hand had *only three fingers*.

She divined the truth in a moment—the assassin was there, in her house, under that toilet-table. She made not the least motion or sign, but reflected two or three minutes as to the best course to be pursued. She made up her mind what to do, and advancing to the door, called her servant maid.

“Oh Mary!” exclaimed she, when the girl entered the room. “Do you know where Monsieur Bernard lives?”

“Yes, Madame.”

“I have to pay 5,000 francs away very early in the morning. The fact slipped my memory till just now. You will have to run to his house and get the money for me.”

“Very well, Madame.”

“I will write you a note which you will deliver to him, and he will give you bank bills to the amount.”

She wrote as follows:

*“My dear Monsieur Bernard—*

“The assassin of the Rue des Armes and the Rue Grenard is now in my house. Come immediately with some gendarmes and take him before he escapes.

“HELENE BEAUMAURICE.”

And without entering into any explanation with her servant, she dispatched her on the errand. She then quietly re-seated herself and waited.

Yes, she sat in the room with that man under the table for a whole hour. She sat there cool, calm, and collected. She saw the shadow of the hand shift about several times; but the murderer did not attempt to escape from the place of his concealment.

In due time the gendarmes arrived, and Jaques Reynauld was arrested—not, however, without a violent struggle.

I need scarcely add that the most convincing proof of his guilt was found, and in due time he was guillotined, as I have shown in the former part of this sketch.

*Leaves from the Note-Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B.* Ed. John B. Williams, M.D. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1865.