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**A GUILTY CONSCIENCE**

A Story of Parisian Politics

By F. A. MITCHEL

Politics was running high in Paris. A candidate was speaking to an audience, inveighing against the demagogues who, he asserted, were corrupting the masses. "Money," he said, "is flowing like water. There is a man in this audience who I know has received 100 francs for his vote. Just think of it—100 francs for the surrender of the invaluable privilege he enjoys under the republic of expressing his wish in national affairs!"

After the meeting the speaker, Victor Daroux, was sitting in a restaurant on the Boulevard des Italiens with a couple of friends, partaking of a supper. He was just raising a glass of wine to his lips when a man stepped up to him and said:

"M. Daroux, I am the bearer of a message to you from my friend M. Charlier. He demands a retraction from you in tomorrow morning's journals of your accusation in your speech this evening that he has sold his vote. In case you refuse—"

Daroux, who was staring in wonder at the speaker, broke in:

"Why does M. Charlier assume that I referred to him in my remarks?"

"Because you looked directly at him when you made the accusation."

Daroux was deliberating what to do in the matter when a waiter approached and informed him that a gentleman in another part of the room desired to speak to him privately. Excusing himself, Daroux went to this newcomer.

"M. Daroux," said the man, "I represent M. Arnoux. He demands an immediate retraction of your accusation made this evening that he has sold his vote for 100 francs."

Daroux was tempted to laugh, but the speaker was so serious that he refrained.

"Why does M. Arnoux assume that I referred to him in my remarks?" he asked.

"Because you were looking directly at him."

Daroux was silent a few moments, then said:

"And if I refuse to retract?"

"In that case M. Arnoux expects that you will give him the satisfaction due from one gentleman who has wrongfully accused another."

"Let me have your address," said Daroux. "I will send an early reply."

Returning to his table, Daroux received the same announcement from M. Charlier's friend of what was expected in case of a refusal to retract and called also for his address. The man had scarcely gone when a third came and demanded a retraction for M. Blanc for the same offense and received the same answer as the others.

"It seems," said Daroux to his friends, "that if a guilty conscience counts for anything there has been a good deal of vote selling."

During the next half hour three more men demanded a retraction of M. Daroux for accusing them of selling their votes, and the accuser, after being informed that a refusal would be followed by a challenge, called for the party's address and promised to send an early reply.

"It does not seem so remarkable," said Daroux after the last man had been disposed of, "that so many men have sold their votes, but that the price in each case should have been a hundred francs. I had heard before rising to speak that 10,000 francs had been distributed among certain influential voters, but I did not know that a hundred francs was the current price paid. I fancied that some one of the persons bribed might be in the meeting, and it occurred to me to fire an effective shot by making a pointed accusation. It seems that I have killed half a dozen birds with a single stone."

These words were spoken to friends who were with Daroux when the avalanche of demands for retraction fell upon him. One of the party suggested that if the matter were properly handled sufficient capital might be made out of it to win the election.

Daroux was running for the corps legislatif, but his opponent was so lavish with money that he had no hope of being elected. However, those gentlemen now gathered about him at the restaurant were shrewd politicians, and they set themselves to find a method of procedure by which the incident at home might be used to turn the scale in his favor.

It was decided to stave off the matter till the day before the election, which was to take place in four days. The day after the demands for satisfaction were made no reply was sent. The second day each one of the conscience-stricken men received word that M. Daroux refused to retract. A reply to his refusal was returned by each one of the six men accused in the shape of a challenge to mortal combat.

Daroux chose six seconds to represent him and since, being the challenged party, he was entitled to choice of weapons, time and place of meeting he instructed each second in accepting the challenge to choose fols, to appoint the time at 10 o'clock on the morning before the election and the place the Place de la Concorde.

Every challenger was struck with amazement that so public a place should have been chosen for the meet-

ing. "I cannot see," said M. Charlier, "how he expects to make capital out of so great publicity. He has made an accusation which is thrown back in his teeth, and he must answer for it under the code. Surely there is no advantage in this." M. Arnoux was much puzzled at the choice of place of meeting, and M. Blanc—who, by the bye, had distributed the money, used to buy votes—began to fear that some game was to be played. Nevertheless he did not see how he could do anything to prevent it.

At a quarter to 10 on the morning appointed for the fight M. Daroux, surrounded by his six seconds and a surgeon, appeared in the Place de la Concorde, near the base of the obelisk. Paris was quite alive at that hour, and many persons were passing and regarding. Seeing the party at the foot of the obelisk, the seconds with fols under their arms, the surgeons with their boxes of instruments, persons stopped to learn what it all meant. Gradually a crowd collected, and the word was passed from one to another that there was to be a duel.

"Can you tell me," asked one of another, "who that distinguished looking man is, with his arms folded, waiting?"

"That, monsieur, is M. Victor Daroux, candidate for election tomorrow for the corps legislatif."

"And why so many attendants?"

"That I do not know; I am waiting to find out."

At the moment a carriage drove up, and M. Arnoux, attended by his second and a surgeon, alighted. He seemed quite chagrined at seeing the crowd, but it had been not entirely unexpected. He supposed that Daroux was intending to make a display of his skill and bravery on the eve of the election. Arnoux, seeing that no one of the other party made any advance to begin the fight, said:

"Pardouze, gentlemen. If we are to fight so publicly it may be well to begin at once and have it over with."

"There is another ahead of you, monsieur," replied one of Daroux's seconds.

"Another? What other?"

"One who took M. Daroux's accusations to himself."

Arnoux winced.

Another carriage rolled up, and another challenger alighted. He, too, was delayed, and before the cause of the delay could be explained to him four other defenders of their honor arrived in quick succession. The crowd by this time had swelled and was in a fever heat of expectation. No one understood why so many men, each attended by a second bearing fols, should continue to pour in. It happened that M. Charlier, who was the first challenger, arrived last. As soon as he came M. Daroux's second begged the crowd to make room, since the duel was about to begin. The other five challengers protested, and the crowd began to hoot and yell, at the same time pressing the duelists so closely that there was no room for the fray.

Finally some one of the crowd yelled:

"What's it all about?"

"It's a put up job!" cried one of the bystanders.

"There's half a dozen of 'em picking on one!" shouted another.

"There's an advertising dodge in it somewhere. Wait and see," was a third person's explanation.

"Here comes a gendarme!"

Meanwhile Daroux stood silent with folded arms, the only person whose dignified appearance commanded respect. When the gendarme arrived Daroux said something to him in a low tone, to which the officer assented.

Then M. Daroux, raising his hand to impose silence, made an explanation. He began by telling of hearing on good authority that a large sum was being used to land his political opponent in office and of his having made a blind charge. Then he told how each of six different men in the audience had taken the accusation to himself and demanded a retraction or satisfaction.

"And now, my friends," continued the speaker, "I am here to back my words. I have accused none of these gentlemen. They have accused themselves. For we all know that a guilty conscience needs no accuser."

The men who had come to fight Daroux got away as fast as they could, amid the jeers of the crowd. Daroux entered his carriage with his attendants and drove across the Seine to the legislative building on the other bank, attended by an enormous crowd. There he alighted and made a political speech, in which he told the story to a multitude of voters.

Every evening paper in Paris had an account of the affair, and the cafes were filled with persons laughing at the way Daroux had exposed the corruption of his opponents. That night he spoke to an immense concourse, who demanded again and again to hear the story from his own lips.

The journals the next morning all published editorials upon the low grade to which Paris politics had sunk and the iniquity of using money at elections. During the day Daroux drove from one polling place to another and wherever he appeared was greeted with shouts of applause mixed with laughter at the way he had turned the tables on his opponents.

Before 9 o'clock at night it was known all over Paris that Daroux had been elected, and when the papers came out the next morning they announced a landslide in his favor.

What became of the six self-accusers was never known. They got away from under the limelight as quickly as possible, and on the day after the election not one of them was to be found in Paris. Daroux was urged to proceed against them for bribery, but, since the only evidence against them was what they had themselves furnished, no action was ever taken in the matter.

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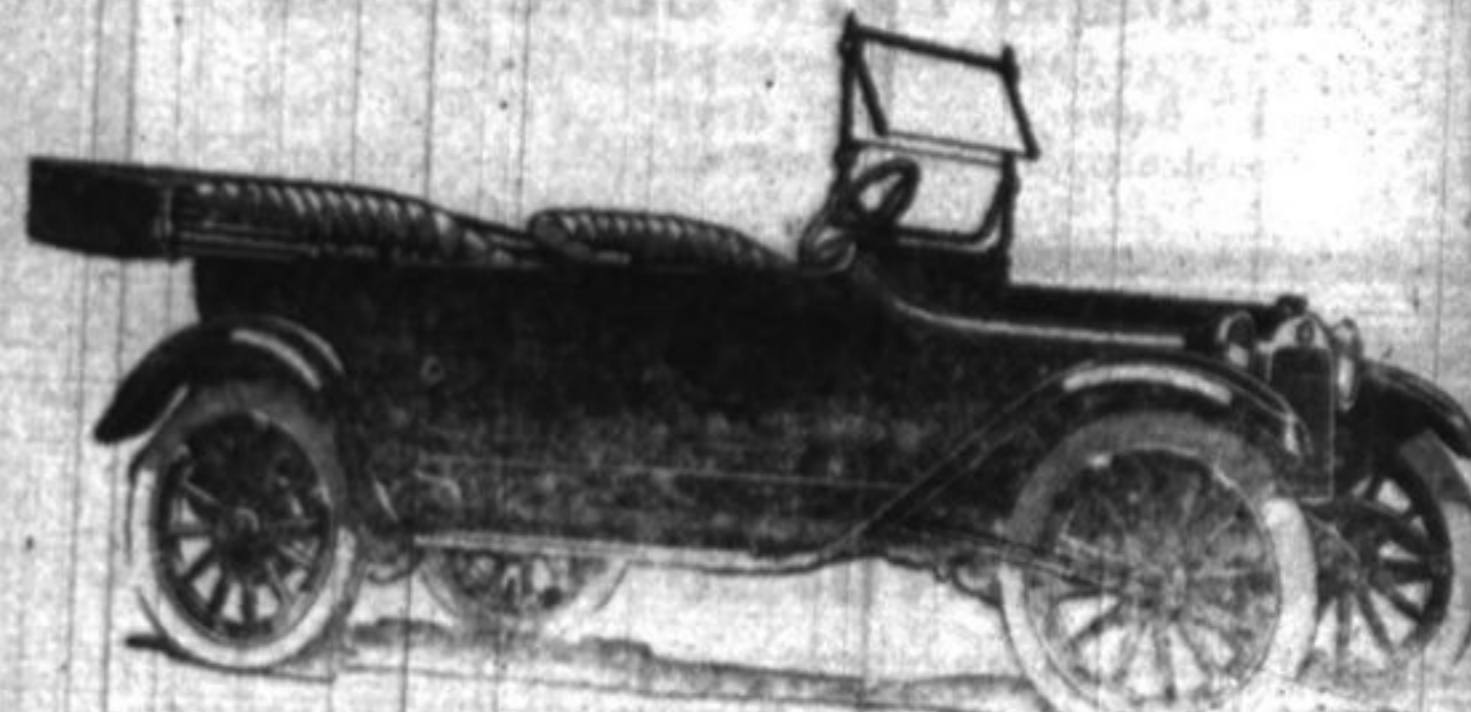
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