# WHILE THE CLOCK TICKED

By RAFAEL SABATINI

Illustrated by NORMAN BORCHARDT

SO STEALTHILY did Duroc come down the Rue de la Harpe that his steps hardly made a sound. He moved like a shadow, and when at last he came to a halt before the house of the Citizen Representative Clairvaux it was as if he had totally effaced himself, as if he had become part of the general gloom. It was in the time of the French revolution.

There Duroc paused, considering, his chin in his hands, and perhaps because the ground-floor windows were equipped with bars, he moved on more stealthily than ever along the garden wall. Midway between two of the lanterns slung across the narrow street and shedding a feeble yellow light he paused again.

He stood now at a point where the shadows were deepest. He listened intently for a moment, peered this way and that into the night, and then went over the wall with the swift, silent activity of an ape. He found the summit of that wall guarded by a row of iron spikes and on one of these, for all his care, Duroc left a strip of his breeches.

The accident annoyed him. He berated all iron spikes, pronouncing them an execrable, aristocratic institution to which no true patrot could be guilty of having recourse. Indeed, from the manner in which the Citizen Representative Clairvaux guarded his house it was plain that the fellow was a bad republican. What with bars on its windows and spikes on its walls, the place might have been a prison rather than the house of a representative of the august people.

Of couge, as Duroc well knew, the citizen representative had something to guard. It was notorious that this modest dwelling of his in the Rue de la Harpe was something of a treasure house, stored with the lootings of many a cidevant nobleman's property, and it was being whispered that no true patriot—and a citizen representative into the bargain—could have suffered himself to amasss uch wealth in the hour of the nation's urgent need.

Duroc advanced furtively across the garden, scanning the silent, sleeping house. Emboldened by the fact that no light or faintest sign of vigilance showed anywhere, he proceeded so adroitly that within five minutes he had opened a window and entered a room that was used by the deputy as his study.

Within that room he stood quite still and listened. Save for the muffled ticking of the clock, no sound disturbed the silence. He turned, and softly drew the heavy curtains across the window. Then he sat down upon the floor, took a small lantern from his breast and a tinder box from his waistcoat pocket.

There was the sharp stroke of steel on flint, and presently his little lantern was shedding a yellow disk of light upon the parquetry floor.

He rose softly, placed the light on a console, and crossed the room to the door, which stood half open. He listened again a moment, then closed the door, and came back, his feet making no sound upon the thick and costly rugs that were flung here and there.

In the mid-chamber he paused, looking about him and taking stock of his luxurious surroundings. He considered the painted panels, the inlaid woods, the gilded chairs, and the ormolu-incrusted cabinets—all plundered from the palaces of cidevants who were either guillotined or in flight, and he asked himself if it was in this sybaritic fashion that it became a true republican to equip his home.

He was a short, slender man, this Duroc, whose shabby brown garments looked the worse for the rent in the breeches. He wore a fur bonnet, and his lank black hair hung in wisps about his cheeks and neck. His face was white and wolfish, the jaw thrust forward and ending in a lean, square chin; his vigilant, quick-moving eyes were close set and beady as a rat's; his thin lips were curled now in a sneer as he considered the luxury about him.

However, that attitude of his was momentary. Duroc had not come then to make philosophy, but to accomplish a purpose, and to this purpose he addressed himself forthwith. He took up his lantern and crossed to a tall secretaire that was a very gem of the court furnisher's art in the days of Louis XIV.

Setting the lantern on top of it, he drew from his pocket a bunch of skeleton keys, gripping them firmly so that they should not rattle. He stooped to examine the lock, and then on the instant came upright again, stiff and tense in his sudden alarm. A knock had fallen upon the street door, and the echo of it went reverberating through the silent house.

Duroc's lips writhed as he breathed an imprecation. The knock of a moment before was repeated, more insistent now. To the listening Duroc came the sound of a window being thrown up. He heard voices, one from above, the other replying from the street, and guessed that the awakened Clairvaux was challenging this midnight visitor before coming down to open.

Perhaps he would not come down. Perhaps he would dismiss the inopportune intruder. But that hope was soon quenched. The window went raspingly down, and a moment later the flip-flop of slippered feet came shuffling on the stairs and along the passage to the door.

A key grated and a chain clanked—this Clairvaux made a bastile of the dwelling—and then voices sounded in the passage. The door of the house closed with a soft thud. Steps and voices approached the room in which Duroc still stood, immovable, listening.

At last he stirred, realizing that he had not a moment to spare if he would escape detection. He turned, so that his back was to the door, snatched up his lantern, and pressed it against his breast, so that while it might still light him forward its rays should not strike backward to betray him. Then in three strides he gained the shelter of the heavy velvet curtains that masked the window. Behind them, his back to the casement, he at last extinguished the light.

The door opened an instant later. Indeed, had Clairvaux, who entered, candle in hand, in nightcap and quilted dressing gown, bestowed an attentive look upon the curtains he would have detected the quiver that still agitated them.

After Clairvaux, came a tall young man in a long black riding coat and a conical hat that was decorated by a round tricolor cockade to advertise his patriotic sentiments. Under his arm he carried a riding whip, whose formidable quality as a weapon of offense was proclaimed by its round head in plaited leather with silver embellishments. He placed it upon a table beside his hat, and the thud with which it dropped to the wood further announced its quality.

The citizen representative, a short stiffly built man whose aquiline face was not without some resemblance to that of his visitor, flung himself into a quilt armchair upholstered in blue silk, near the secretaire that but a moment ago had been the object of Duroc's attention. He threw one knee over the other, and drew his quilted dressing gown about his legs.

"Well" he demanded, his voice harsh. "What is this important communication that brings you here at such an hour as this

The man in the riding coat sauntered across to the fireplace. He set his back to the overmantel and the ormolu clock with its cupids by Debureau, and faced the deputy with a smile that was almost a sneer.

"Confess now," he said, "that but for your uneasy conscience, my cousin, you would have hesitated to admit me. But you live in the dread of your own misdeeds, with the blade of the guillotine like a sword of Damocles suspended above you, and you dare refuse no man—however unwelcome in himself—who may be the possible bearer of a warning." He laughed an irritating laugh of mockery.

"Name of a name," growled the deputy, "will you tell me what brings you without preamble?"

"You do not like preambles? And you a representative! Now that is odd! But there, Etienne, to put it shortly, I am thinking of emigrating."

It was the deputy's turn to become mocking: "It was worth while being roused at midnight to hear such excellent news. Emigrate by all means, my dear Gustave. France will be well rid of you."

"And you?" Gustave asked.

"And I no less." The deputy grinned sardonically.

"Ah!" said his cousin. "That is excellent. In such a case no doubt you will be disposed to pay for the privilege. To carry out this plan of mine I need your assistance, Etienne. I am practically penniless."

"Now that is a thousand pities." The deputy's voice became almost sympathetic, yet slurred by a certain rot of sarcasm. "If you are penniless, so am I. What else did you expect in a member of the national convention? Did you conceive that a representative of the sacred people—an apostile of liberty, equality, and fraternity—could possible have money at his disposal. Ah, my good cousin, I assure you that all that I possessed has been offered up on the sacred altar of the nation!"

Gustave looked at him, and pursed his lips. "You had better reserve that for the national assembly," he said. "It may sound convincing from the rostrum. Here"— he waved a hand about him at all the assembled splendors—"it sounds uncommonly like a barefaced lie."

The deputy rose with overwhelming dignity, his brows contracted. "This to me?" he asked in a shocked tone.

"Why not? Come, come Etienne, I am not a child, nor yet a fool. You are a man of wealth—all the world knows it, as you may discover to your cost one fine morning. These are days of fraternity; I am your cousin, and—"

"Out of my house," the deputy broke in angrily. "Out of my house this instant!"

Gustave looked at him with calm eyes. Shall I then go tell the national assembly what I know of you? Must I denounce you to the comm ttee of public safety as a danger to the nation? Must I tell them that in secret you are acting as an agent of the emigres, that you plot the overthrow of the august republic?"

Clairvaux's face was livid, his eyes were bulging. He mastered himself by an effort. "Denounce all you please," he answered in a suffocating voice. "You'll leave your own head in the basket. Sainte Guillotine! You fool, am I a man of straw to be overthrown by the denunc ation of such a thing as you? Lo you think to frighten me with threats of what you will do? Do you think that is the way to obtain assistance from me?"

"Seeing that no other way is possible," flashed Gustave.

"Out of my house! Go denounce me. Go to the devil! But out of here with you."

"Reflect a moment, Etienne! The citizen representative dropped, crushed by the blow, and lay in a shudder-twitching heap, while the color of his nightcap changed slowly from white to crimson under the murderer's staring eyes.

Gustave stood there bending over the fallen man, motionless while one might count 10. His face was leaden, and his mouth foolishly open between surprise and horror at the thing he had done.

Not a sound disturbed the house; not a groan, not a movement from the fallen man. Nothing but the muffled ticking of the ormolu clock and the buzzing of a fly that had been disturbed. Still Gustave stood there in that half-crouching attitude, terror gaining upon him with every throb of his pulses.

And then suddenly a voice cut sharply upon the stillness. "Well?" it asked. "And what do you propose to do now?"

Gustave came erect, stifling a scream, to confront the white face and beady eyes of Duroc, who stood considering him from between the parted curtains.

In a long silence Gustave started, his wits working briskly the while. "Who are you?" he asked at last, his voice a hoarse whisper. "How come you here? What are you? Ah! A thief—a housebreaker!"

"At least," said Duroc dryly, "I am not a murderer!"

"Great Heaven!" said Gustave, and his wild eyes turned again upon that tragically grotesque mass that lay at his feet. "Is he—is he dead?"

"Unless his skull is made of iron," said Duroc. He same forward in that swift, noiseless fashion of his, and dropped on one knee beside the deputy. He made a brief examination. "The citizen representative represents a corpse," he said. "He is as dead as King Capet." He rose. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"To do?" said Gustave. "Mon Dieu! What is there to do? If he is dead—" He checked. His knavish wits were racing now. He looked into the other's round black eyes. "You'll not betray me," he cried. "You dare not. You are in no better case than I. And there is no one else in the house. He lived all alone. He was a miserly dog, and the old woman who serves him will not be here until morning."

Duroc was watching him intently, almost without appearing to observe him. He saw the man's fingers suddenly tighten upon the life preserver with which he had already launched one man across the tide of Styx that night.

"Put that thing down," Duroc commanded sharply. "Put it down at once, or I'll send you after your cousin."

And Gustave found himself covered by a pistol. Instantly he loosed his grip of his murderous weapon. It fell with a crash beside the body of the man it had slain.

"I meant you no harm," Gustave said, panting. "Do you know what the room and the house, his one anxiety to put as great a distance between himself and his crime as possible.

Duroc watched that sudden scared flight, still smiling. Then he coolly crossed the room, took up the dead man's candle, and placed it upon the secretaire. He pulled up a chair—there was no longer any need to proceed with caution—sat down, and, producing his keys and a chisel-like instrument, he went diligently to work to get at the contents of this secretaire.

Like a flash Gustave had gone the length of the Rue de la Harpe, driven ever by his terror of the consequences of his deed. But as he neared the corner of the Cordeliers, he was brought suddenly to a halt by the measured tread of approaching steps.

He knew it at once for the march of a patrol, and his consciousness of what he had done made him fearful of meeting these servants of the law, who might challenge him and demand to know whence he was and whither he went at such an hour—for the new reign of universal liberty had imposed stern limitations upon individual freedom.

He vanished into the darkness of a doorway, and crouched there to wait until these footsteps should have faded again into the distance. And it was in those moments as he leaned there, panting, that his fiendishly wicked notion first assailed him. He turned it over in his mind, and in the gleam of his teeth as he smiled evily to himself.

He was his cousin's heir. Could he but fasten the guilt of that murder upon the thief he had left so callously at work in the very room where the body lay then never again need he know want. And the thief, being a thief, deserved no less.

He had no doubt at all that the fellow would never have hesitated to do the murder had it been forced upon him by circumstances. He reflected further, and realized how aptly set was the stage for such a comedy as he had in mind. Had not that fool compelled him to drop the very weapon with which the deputy's skull had been smashed?

No single link was missing in the main chain of complete evidence against the thief. Gustave realized that here was a chance sent him by friendly fortune. Tomorrow it would be too late. In seeking his cousin's murderer, the authorities would ascertain that he was the one man who stood to profit by the citizen representative's death, and, having discovered that, they would compel him to render an account of his movements that night. They would cross-question and confound him, seeing that he could give no such account as they would demand.

He was resolved. He would act at once. Not three minutes had sped since he had left that house, and it was impossible that in the meantime the thief could have done his work and taken his departure.

And so upon that fell resolve he flung out of his concealment, and ran on up the street toward the Cordeliers to meet the advancing patrol, shouting as he went: "Stop, thief! Stop, thief!"

He heard the patrol quickening their steps in response to his cry, and presently he found himself face to face with four men of the National guard, who, as it chanced, were accompanied by an agent of the section in civilian dress and a scarf of office.

"Down there," he criew, pointing back down the street, "a thief has broken into the house of my cousin—my cousin, the Citizen Representative Clairvaux." He gathered importance, he knew, from this proclamation of his relationship with one of the great ones of the convention.

However, the agent of the section paused to question him. "Why did you not follow him, citizen?"

"I am without weapons, and I bethought me he would probably be armed. Besides, I heard you approaching in the distance, and I thought it best to run to summon you, and thus we may make sure of taking him."

The agent considered him, his white face—seen in the light of the lantern carried by the patrol—his shaking limbs and grasping speech, and concluded that he had to deal with an arrant coward, nor troubled to conceal his contempt.

"In the name of Jove!" he growled. "And meantime the citizen representative may have been murdered in his bed."

"Oh pray not! Oh, I pray not!" Gustave cried pantingly. "Quick, citizens, quickly! Terrible things may happen while we stand here."

They went down the street at a run to the house of Clairvaux, whose door they found open as Gustave had left it when he departed.

"Where did he break in?" asked one of the guards.

"By the door," said Gustave. "He had keys, I think. Oh, quick!"

In the passage he perceived a faint gleam of light to assure him that the thief was still at work. He swung round to them, and raised a hand. "Quietly!" he whispered. "Quietly, so that we do not disturb him."

The patrol thrust forward, and entered the house in his wake. He led them straight toward the half-open door of the study, from which the light was issuing, as if to guide them. He flung wide the door, and entered, while the men crowding after him came to a sudden halt upon the what they beheld.

At their feet lay the body of the Citizen Representative Clairvaux in a raiment that in itself seemed to proclaim how hastily he had risen from his bed to deal with this midnight intruder; and there at the secretaire, now open, its drawers broken and their contents scattered all about the floor, sat Duroc, white-faced, his beady rat's eyes considering them.

Gustave broke into lamentations at sight of his cousin's body. "We are too late! Mon Dieu, we are too late! He is dead—dead. And look; here is the weapon with whichc he was slain! And there sits the murdered—caught in the very act. Seize him! Ah scoundrel!" he raged, shaking his fist in the thief's white, startled face. "You shall be made to pay for this!"

"Comedian!" said Duroc.

"Seize him; seize him!" cried Gustave in a frensy.

The guards sprang across the room, and laid hands upon Duroc to prevent his having recourse to any weapons.

Duroc looked up at them, blinking. Then his eyes shifted to Gustave, and suddenly he laughed. "Now see what a fool a man is who will not seize the chances that are offered him," he said. "After that villain had bludegoned his cousin to death, I bade him go. He might have made good his escape, and I should have said no word to betray him. Instead, he thinks to make me his scapegoat."

Duroc shrugged and rose under the hands of his captors. Then he pulled his coat open, and displayed a round, leaden disc the size of a five-franc piece, bearing in relief the arms of the republic.

At sight of it the hands that had been holding him instantly fell away.

The agent of the section stepped forward, frowning. "What does this mean?" he asked, but in a tone that was almost of respect, realizing he stood in the presence of an officer of the secret service of the republic whom no man might detain save at his peril.

"I am Duroc of the committee of public safety," was the quiet answer. "The executive had cause to think that the Citizen Representative Clairvaux was in correspondence with the enemies of France. I came secretly to examine his papers and to discover who are his correspondents. Here is what I sought." And he held up a sheaf of documents, which he had separated from the rest. "I will wish you good night, citizens. I must report at once to the Citizen Deputy Robespierre. Since that fellow has come back, take him to the Luxembourg. Let the committee of the section deal with him tomorrow. I shall forward my report."

Gustave shook himself out of his sudden paralysis to make a dash for the door. But the guards closed with him, and held him fast, while Duroc of the committee of public safety passed out with dignity in spite of his torn breeches.

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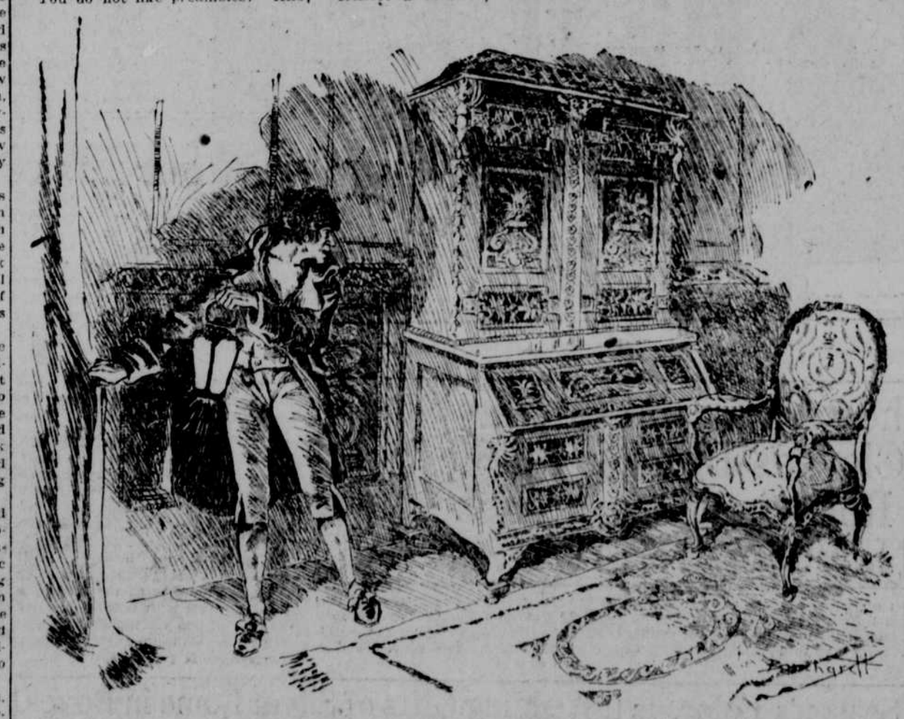
However, the agent paused to question him.



He took up his lantern and crossed to the tall secretaire.

## Nine Allen Students Have Perfect Attendance Record

Allen, Jan. 24.—According to the report of the Allen high school, nine students came up to the standard set for being neither tardy nor absent during the first semester and having an average grade of 90 per cent or above in all subjects, which released them from examinations. They are Genevieve Lindhal, Genevieve Kingston, Ruby Wheeler, Gertrude Knoell, Ralph Malcom, Beryl Dixon, Marvin Burgess, Emery Livers and Duane Kneeland.

Due to a demand for elective and practical subjects, mechanical drawing, agriculture and domestic science have been added to the curriculum the second semester.

## Farm Mortgages Reduced in Holt County Last Year

O'Neill, Jan. 24. — Holt county mortgage record for 1924 shows 351 farm mortgages, totalling $1,426,974, filed; 54 town and city mortgages totalling $80,337; and 2,734 chattel mortgages, totalling $3,012,961. Releases for the same period were 479 farm mortgages, totalling $1,860,301; city and town mortgages 39, totalling $57,021, and 2,084 chattel mortgages, totalling $2,124,947. Sheriff and other deeds totalling 142 were in process of foreclosure during 1924.

## Franklin Girls' Club Plans Extension of Its Service

Franklin, Jan. 24.—Plans for the coming year discussed at the annual meeting of the Franklin Girls' Community club include a dramatic club, an art and craft club, an Arbor day celebration fun festival, a chautauqua and special programs for the monthly suppers and meetings. Mrs. Florence Hutchinson has been president since May, 1923.

The club was organized in October, 1921, for the purpose of building a community house and has a membership of 142. At present the club has $1,200 on interest and a checking account of over $100. The club has sponsored the Wesleyan Glee club, Mrs. Slaker, the parliamentarian, two good moving picture shows, the Chautauqua, featuring a stunt nightly by local talent, and a community picnic.

The Girls Glee club, which is a branch of the Community club, has given several concerts and an operette, "The Gypsy Rover."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"I prescribed Adlerika with highly satisfactory results." (Signed) Dr. A. C. C. (Name given on request.)

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