

Two Gentlemen from Paris

A Footnote to "Monsieur Verdoux"

WHEN THE soul of Charles Spencer Chaplin's creature *Monsieur Verdoux* descends at last for the eternal processing, the meeting between him and Monsieur Landru, a compatriot, will be no pink brimstone affair. Landru, who has already served twenty-five years of the forever of his redemption, is waiting for the newcomer with a hot grapnel.

I, who know about these things, having sold out to Asmodeus following three conferences in the Finnish Baths on Santa Monica Boulevard, so predict. For Henri Desire Landru, to give him the full name in which he rejoiced, was a man so unutterably vain in life as not to forgive, even in death, a resurrection in falseface.

Monsieur Verdoux, as he is led to the guillotine, is gravely concerned with the future of Man. M. Landru, under the identical stress, wept only for his beautiful red beard which the executioner was obliged to trim—"to make it easier for the knife, M'sieu."

Not gainsaying the taut, silken technique of Charles Chaplin in projecting "Monsieur Verdoux," he has failed entirely in restoring Henri Desire Landru, the Bluebeard of Paris. He gave us instead an embarrassingly complete portrait of a domesticated fellow ennobled somewhat by a human compassion that teeters between the universal benevolence of Francis of Assisi and Karl of Marx.

It must have been Landru, of course, who first intrigued Chaplin, to judge from the early announcements he issued long before the filming began. But somewhere in the creative maze, Landru was tossed aside. We must assume that Chaplin had made attempts to "adapt" Landru in the filmic sense—an undertaking which is patently thankless. It would be as crass to "adapt" Shylock so that Edward Arnold could play him as a Venetian shipping tycoon with white piping on his vest.

Landru himself—the living, historical character—must either be played as himself or rejected entirely. Chaplin eventually did the latter and fashioned (again filmically) an "original" character.

The life and times of Landru, particularly as he affected them, are yet to

be filmed—but as history, not intimate biography. Although his story began in 1919, it has not yet ended. History left him lying, face down, looking into a sawdust-filled basket, but the other players in the drama, the murderous fools and the titanic villains, are still abroad.

LANDRU'S story opens like a pageant, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, in 1919. Woodrow Wilson, Lloyd George, and the Italian premier Orlando are about to devise a peace treaty with Germany, beaten for the first time since Frederick the Great and whining in defeat.

Clemenceau breathes hate and vengeance. He has been quarreling with Wilson, who pleads for "a peace without victory; open covenants openly arrived at." The Tiger, as Clemenceau was called, picks up a copy of a Parisian newspaper and reads:

A 48-year-old man calling himself Henri Desire Landru was today apprehended on the charges of a saleswoman that he was the last companion of her sister who disappeared two months earlier.

Upon being apprehended, this Landru attempted to swallow a memorandum book which contained the names of nine other women who had been reported as missing by their families.

Questioned further, Landru denied knowledge of the missing women but admitted that since his discharge from the army a year ago he had been the lover of 283 women.

Clemenceau reads and digests this item. Frenchmen who savor a *bonne bouche* like this chuckled over it, but to the Tiger it was something far more significant. He knew instantly that here was the ideal distraction from the business of writing a peace treaty. There was something medieval about it: Ten women missing—tortured perhaps in some dungeon. Murdered, no doubt. And this Landru—he had been the lover of 283 women. *Drole, mais incroyable!*

Clemenceau conferred instantly with



the criminal authorities of France. "Messieurs," he said, "you must cherish the Landru case!"

The italics are Clemenceau's, not mine. That utterance was not invented, or even paraphrased. It appears, credited to him, in the court records of Henri Desire Landru's trial.

Normally French justice operates with reasonable speed. But with Landru it took its cue from Clemenceau: there was to be no haste. The French people were lapping up every word of the Landru story, which was written with a Gallic flair for romantic detail. They learned that M. Landru was musical and that he possessed a baritone voice of almost concert quality and that he used it, on the day of his arrest, to sing an aria from *Manon*—"adieu mon petit table" to the breakfast dishes in the little apartment where he lived with a nineteen-year-old poule—his 284th.

France read that he was not a stunted, wizened little man with a straggly black beard, as imaginative American correspondents described him, but a tall, well set-up man with handsome auburn whiskers. And why had he not been arrested earlier, before his ten alleged victims had been allegedly dispatched? Simple—he resembled, beard and all, hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen who had served during the war and had grown similar trench-beards.

Almost daily—for two years—Landru was brought before the *juge d'instruction*, an official similar to our district attorney, to be questioned. And

after each questioning the newspapers carried full accounts and fuller if vaguer speculations as to this blue-beard.

The French press convicted him long before he ever reached the courtroom.

In all this time, Clemenceau had his way. While Europe lapped up intelligence about Landru, Clemenceau wrote new and more stringent terms into the Treaty of Versailles. He had clear sailing against Wilson and Lloyd George.

The document was finally completed and the tinder made ready for the second world holocaust.

CLEMENCEAU was through with Landru. He had served his purpose. But the public appetite for this *cause celebre* became more and more avid. Landru was tossed to the lesser politicians.

Every judge of a criminal court in the Paris district wanted to sit on the Landru case, and when the trial opened late in 1921 the jurist who finally presided was the one who had direct family connections with the Minister of Justice.

America had its Hauptmann-Lindbergh case, but it was nothing compared to the Landru trial. There were fist fights daily in the Paris courtroom. Duels were fought in the Bois over tickets of admission to the proceedings.

It was disclosed during the trial that Henri Desire Landru was irresistible to women over forty. One of the witnesses, who declared that she "escaped this monster's clutches," added, "There was something about M. Landru that was hypnotic. He had the quality of re-awakening love in the hearts of females who had despaired."

There were ten women—possibly fourteen—in whom Landru "re-awakened love," lulled suspicion, and robbed of their savings. But did he murder them as palpably as Chaplin's *Monsieur Verdoux* dispatched his women? An answer of a sort is that Landru lost his head on the guillotine, but hordes of Frenchmen who know the case intimately still discuss it as an



Henri Desire Landru

enigma. His defense counsel, the celebrated Moro-Giafferi (who as yet has made no comment on "Monsieur Verdoux"), still insists that his client, although a rogue and an unconscionable scoundrel, did not murder a single one of the ten missing women.

Landru's defense was based on the fact that no trace of any of his victims had ever been found. No object larger than an inch was introduced by the prosecution as physical evidence of his guilt. The prosecutor called them "bone fragments of his unfortunate mistresses." Landru said that they were collar-buttons.

"The case of Landru was gotten up to divert the French people from the Versailles Peace Treaty," Moro-Giafferi said outright during the final remarks at the trial. "The treaty-makers were afraid that if the French people observed what was going on in Versailles too carefully, the full bloody fruits of victory would not have been gathered."

Landru, unconcerned with his larger role—that of the Fifth man in the Big Four of the Peace Conference—pinned his faith on the failure of the prosecution to produce a *corpus delicti*. "Show me their bodies," he shouted from the prisoner's dock. "Show me the body of one of them!"

"But you have destroyed their bodies beyond hope of tracing them."

"Then you can prove nothing. I say they are not dead!" Landru snapped.





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Henri Desire Landru

"But," challenged the prosecutor, "after a person has been missing for a certain time the law presumes him dead."

"The law fixes that time as eighteen years," Landru answered. "I am willing to wait."

He continued to heckle the judges and the prosecution mercilessly. He must have sounded quite Chaplinesque when he said, "Ah, Messieurs, you keep asking me to disclose the whereabouts of those unfortunate women you say I destroyed. You, who represent the Army, the Navy and the glorious

"We must assume that Chaplin made attempts to 'adapt' Landru in the filmic sense ~ an undertaking which is patently thankless"

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-the last of four pages-

French Marines! You ask *me*—one little citizen of France to do what you cannot! It makes me sad to think of my country's future in your hands."

WHEN Clemenceau first ordered that the case shall be "cherished," Landru got a foretaste of his doom. Immediately after his arrest it was found that the only cell without an occupant in the Sante Prison was one reserved for condemned felons. He asked for a deck of cards, but this was refused on the grounds that the prison forbade cards to "condemned men."

"But I am not yet condemned," Landru protested. "Not yet tried!"

"That, Prisoner Landru, is immaterial."

So Landru made his own deck from fifty-two postal cards sent him by sympathetic women and cast his fortune with them.

"The cards tell me," he announced, "that French justice will triumph. It will recover from this madness of my persecution and I will go free."

The cards were wrong. On a murky dawn Henri Desire Landru was led out of his cell. Only a handful of official witnesses were allowed in the street outside the prison where French law says the guillotine must be erected. For once, people who lived in flats overlooking the street were ordered out the night before.

And that morning, too, he was spared a blow quite as cruel, to a man like Landru, as the lethal fall of the knife. He did not see the first installment of a new serial in one of the morning papers. It was a signed story by his nineteen-year-old *belle amie*, headed, "My Love Life with Landru, the Monster of La Sante."

The tears in his eyes, as he walked out of the prison courtyard to the machine were for his beard which, having been removed, unveiled quite a weak chin. He mounted the steps and was adjusted prone on the *bascule*.

Down the boulevard, just as these preparations were made, came a street car, carrying Parisian workmen to their jobs. The trolley tracks were within a few feet of the guillotine. At precisely the instant the knife fell the street car passed, shutting off the sight of death's stroke from the official witnesses. Only the workmen saw it—perhaps to recall twenty years later that this had something to do with the fall of the Third Republic.

—GORDON KAHN

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