

CHAPTER ONE

History, Legends, and Songs of the Guillotine

The death penalty in France has been abolished, in practice if not in law. A jury, in its wisdom, has recently seen fit to grant a verdict of mitigating circumstances to Messieurs Gilles and Abadie, those two young thugs who marauded about the countryside killing and plundering as they went and had the audacity to laugh and brag about their exploits to anyone foolish enough to listen. Other juries have reached similar conclusions, sparing the lives of shameless murderers: that sniveling cretin Fallois, for example, who went to the Rue Fontaine-au-Roi in the eleventh arrondissement, robbed and killed his employer, and skipped off to Alsace where he thought he could safely lead a foppish life simply by crossing the border; or that monstrous, ungrateful student named Bistor who strangled his friend's grandmother with her dog's leash, even though the kindhearted woman had helped him out of numerous difficulties and had loved him like a son; or indeed that Monsieur Fenayrou, the sportsman and pharmacist who had invented both a patented hair tonic and also an unpatented, yet highly creative use for a lead-weighted rope.

After due consideration, one can only conclude that these juries have done their job all too well. Yet had they not been so clement, the President of the Republic would have commuted their sentences. Staunchly opposed to the death penalty, Monsieur Grévy¹ has recently granted clemency to a long list of some of the most despicable characters the earth has ever seen. One had stomped his father to death because the old man hadn't obliged him by dying sooner. Another was a highwayman who compounded theft with rampant murder. Another still had disemboweled a little girl. Their sentences were commuted, every one!

I have nothing more to add. I must yield to the most-worthy decisions of the first magistrate of the land. Nevertheless, the effect is obviously the abolition of capital punishment. Henceforth, the guillotine may as well be dismantled and placed in a museum as a curiosity of a bygone era.

What I can do, however, is to preserve the memory of its contribution to the history of France by presenting an eyewitness account of the most recent executions.

For those of you who say executions are all alike and of little interest, I beg to differ. For eleven years I was assigned to cover more than twenty of them as a matter of professional responsibility. I can assure you that on each occasion I observed a distinct, moving scene that left me with a wide range of impressions. Without fail, as it played out and for a variety of reasons, each lugubrious ceremony took on a special character all its own.

During all those years I noted one sole invariable: not once did it rain the night of an execution, a coincidence strange but true. Other than that common point, no two executions were alike. You will surely be convinced of it if you take the time to read the succeeding accounts which, whatever their merit, have the virtue of being absolutely accurate. I wrote each one the very morning following the execution upon returning either from the Place de la Roquette or from the provinces where the sentence was carried out. I did so with the emotions aroused by the drama still fresh in my mind and despite being exhausted from the rigors of a night spent out of doors. For the sake of accuracy, I hurriedly jotted down my impressions as they occurred to me without endeavoring to structure them and without rereading them for fear of reliving the gruesome spectacle of the victim's convulsing body and his grimacing head falling into the wicker basket.

It is at the request of my cohorts at *Le Figaro* that I have decided to publish these accounts on their own. They assure me that the interest they generated individually in the newspaper will be even greater when they appear together in a single volume. It is with that thought in mind that I have undertaken the project.

¹ Jules Grévy served as third president of the Third Republic from 1879 to 1887, following Adolphe Thiers (1871-73) and Patrice de Mac-Mahon (1873-79).

Before sharing with you the experience of the first execution I attended, it occurs to me that I should say a few words about the instrument used today by executioners and which has been completely modified over the years.

The *Guillotine*, to call it by its proper name, is not a proper noun as such. Contrary to legend, Doctor Guillotin—my compatriot whose granddaughters are presently school teachers near Saintes—was neither the inventor nor the first victim of the death-dealing device.²

The guillotine has a much lengthier history than commonly believed. The chronicler Jean d'Anton, who died in 1528, reports its use in his chronicles published for the first time in 1835 by Monsieur Paul Lacroix, also known as P. L. Jacob, Bibliophile. Recounting an execution that took place in Genoa the 13th of May 1507 (while Louis XII was visiting the city), he writes that Demetri Justin, who had induced the people to revolt, was condemned to death. Having arrived at the execution site, "he extended his neck onto the lunette. The executioner took hold of a rope that was attached to a heavy block fitted with a cutting blade and suspended between two poles. He pulled the rope. The blade fell and struck the Genoese between the head and the shoulders in such a way that his head ended up on one side and his body on the other side."

That device was none other than the *mannaja* described at length by Father Labat in his *Voyage en Italie* in 1730 and used to behead Beatrice Cenci in Rome in 1600.³ The decapitating device is also depicted in two copper engravings, one by Georges Penez (who died in 1550), the other by Henri Aldergrave (dated 1553), as well as in a painting that is reportedly still the property of the city hall in Augsburg, Germany. Jacob Cats, the very popular Dutch poet, devoted an entire chapter to it in his poem titled *Dootkiste (The Coffin)* published in Amsterdam in 1665.

I should also add that the Scots had a similar instrument known as the Maiden that was used to execute the Marquis of Argyle (1651) and his son (1685). Finally, it was with such a device that the Duke of Montmorency was decapitated in Toulouse in 1632. "In that land," writes Paységur in his *Memoirs*,⁴ "executioners use a teardrop-shaped blade (*doloire*) supported by two pieces of wood. When the victim's head is placed on the block, the rope is released and the head is separated from the body."

However, although the device was known, it was used only rarely. The rope continued to be used for commoners; the sword or the axe was used for nobles.

It was Doctor Antoine Louis, Secretary of the College of Surgeons, who in 1792 composed the report calling for the adoption of the first guillotine. The first death machine was built by Tobias Schmitz, a piano maker, based on the design by a fellow named Laquiente, a court clerk from Strasbourg. (The first blade had a concave cutting edge. At the request of Louis XVI, a new triangular blade replaced it.)

The guillotine went into action April 25th, 1702. At that date the two immense uprights between which the blade was placed ("the arms of the guillotine," as they were called) rose high above a platform (accessible only by a stairway consisting of twenty-four steps) and were visible from a considerable distance. The entire lugubrious contraption was painted red, not a bright red capable of lifting one's spirits, but rather a dark, brooding red, the color of dried blood.

The horror of the device intensifies as the condemned person, already half dead from dread, is escorted to its base. It intensifies further as the prisoner is forced to mount the stairs and is physically prepared to receive the blade before being stretched out and tied to the bascule. Finally, it reaches its apex during the long, agonizing moments waiting for the blade to fall.

This awesome structure that turned executions into public spectacles featuring the executioner, the priest, and the convict was reduced little by little to the height of a man. The platform was reduced in size, as well. The "arms" were able to be lowered by increasing the blade's weight to compensate for the

² Joseph Ignace Guillotin (1738-1814). Grison had lived in Paris for many years, but he obviously kept in touch with friends and family in Saintes, the birthplace he and Guillotin shared.

³ Biographers list the date of her execution as September 11, 1599.

⁴ Le Seigneur de Paységur is more commonly known as le Seigneur de Puységur. Armand-Marie-Jacques de Chastenet gained a reputation as a mesmerist and as a proponent of the theory of animal magnetism. His *Memoirs* were published in 1747.

diminution of force and by replacing the original greased grooves that guided the blade's trajectory with a series of pulleys that eliminated friction. The result of these modifications was that the instrument of death could be practically hidden from view by the cordon of mounted gendarmes that surrounded the scaffold. As it exists today, the guillotine stands at ground level, the platform having been eliminated completely. Likewise, it is no longer the color of dried blood. That has been replaced either by a dull green or a dark brown.

At the same time modifications were made to the blade itself whose cutting edge was easily blunted. The idea of using a square blade had to be discarded because it would have required an extremely heavy weight. The instruments presently in use feature an oblique blade that slices angularly and with unflinching efficacy.

With the oblique blade, one need not worry about repeating the horrible scene that Victor Hugo describes in the preface of *Le dernier jour d'un condamné* (*The Last Day of a Condemned Man*, 1829). The executioner of a condemned woman, Hugo writes, so badly bungled the process that after five attempts the blade had still not put an end to her.⁵

One last yet important modification has been introduced. The condemned person is no longer lashed to the bascule. Instead, as the priest is uttering his final words, the victim is seized fiercely and forced headlong onto the plank without warning.

This apparent brutality is in reality an act of kindness, for there is no time for the prisoner to think about what is happening—as it should be, according to Monsieur Nicholas Roch, Chief Executioner of France.

I stated earlier that Doctor Guillotine's name has been wrongly attached to this instrument of death. That association stems from a now-famous utterance he pronounced before the entire Constituent Assembly. In demanding that the death penalty be clemently enacted by a mechanical apparatus rather than a person and in response to those raising objections, he asserted in mid-session: "With this machine I can cut your head off in the blink of an eye and you won't feel a thing!"

The result was a chorus of laughter. Those words reverberated far and wide; they were repeated endlessly and were even turned into song:

<i>Guillotin,</i>	Guillotin,
<i>Médecin</i>	Doctor,
<i>Politique</i>	Politician,
<i>Imagine un beau matin</i>	Imagines one fine morning
<i>Que pendre est inhumain</i>	That hanging is not humane
<i>Et peu patriotique.</i>	And not at all patriotic.
<i>Aussitôt</i>	Therefore
<i>Il lui faut</i>	We need
<i>Un supplice</i>	A penalty
<i>Qui, sans corde ni poteau,</i>	That, with neither rope nor post,
<i>Supprime du bourreau</i>	Eliminates the hangman's
<i>L'office.</i>	Office.
<i>C'est en vain que l'on</i>	It is in vain that it is said
<i>publie</i>	

⁵ The preface dates from 1832. Grison is mistaken in that the scene involves a man, not a woman. Moreover, as Hugo describes it, it is far more gruesome than Grison lets on. In the narrative, after five blood-spurting attempts, the triangular blade has not managed to completely sever the man's head. At that point the crowd forces the executioner from the scaffold, the man, still conscious, begs for mercy, and an executioner's aide finishes the job with a butcher knife.

<i>Que c'est pure jalousie</i>	To be due to the jealousy
<i>D'un suppôt</i>	Of a flunky
<i>Du tripot</i>	From the club
<i>D'Hippocrate</i>	Of Hippocrates
<i>Qui d'occire impunément,</i>	Who, able to kill guiltlessly
<i>Même exclusivement</i>	And even exclusively,
<i>Se flatte</i>	Flatters himself
<i>Et sa main</i>	And by his hand
<i>Fait soudain</i>	Suddenly appears
<i>La machine</i>	The machine
<i>Qui simplement nous tuera</i>	That purely and simply will kill us
<i>Et que l'on nommera</i>	And whose name shall be
<i>Guillotine.</i>	The Guillotine.

(*Actes des Apôtres*, no. 10)⁶

Another song explains the system:

<i>C'est un coup que l'on</i>	It's a blow that's
<i>reçoit,</i>	delivered,
<i>Avant qu'on s'en doute;</i>	Before you know it;
<i>A peine on s'en aperçoit</i>	It's hardly even noticed
<i>Car on n'y voit goutte.</i>	For nary a drop is seen.
<i>Tout à coup étant lâché</i>	All of a sudden is released
<i>Un couperet bien caché,</i>	A well-hidden blade that
<i>Fait tomber</i>	Slices away
<i>Ber, ber,</i>	Kachunk,
<i>Fait sauter</i>	Cuts away,
<i>Ter, ter</i>	Kaplunk
<i>Fait tomber, fait voler la</i>	And sends the severed
<i>tête</i>	head flying.
<i>C'est bien plus honnête!</i>	Now that's surely the better way!

For some time the guillotine was known as the Louison or the Louisette, but that designation failed to endure.⁷

Since I'm talking about songs and verses, I'd like to rectify an error or rather a literary prank that has gained credibility over time and that would otherwise become as legendary as the invention of the guillotine. A few years ago there appeared in *Le Figaro* an unpublished bit of poetry by Alfred de Musset and which, it was said, the author of *Rolla* and *Les Nuits* had never intended to publish. It was a sonnet titled *Paysage matinal (Morning Landscape)*:

Voici l'homme qu'un There's the man led by a

⁶ The reference is to a periodical listed by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France as appearing in 1790 and numbering fourteen volumes. I hope the reader will forgive me for not rendering rhymed versions of this and subsequent songs and poetry (FGH).

⁷ So called for Doctor Antoine Louis, Secretary of the College of Surgery, who had a hand in its design and approval.

<i>prêtre amène,</i>	priest,
<i>Crrrac! Il est déjà</i>	Zip! He's already laid out;
<i>"basculé";</i>	
<i>La lunette, assez large à</i>	The lunette is just large
<i>peine</i>	enough
<i>S'abat sur son col</i>	To squeeze in his pinched
<i>étranglé.</i>	neck.
<i>Poum!... C'est fait. La</i>	Zoom! It's over. Humane
<i>Justice humaine</i>	justice
<i>A son dû. Le chef décollé</i>	Has been served. The
	neckless head
<i>Tombe en la cuve demi-</i>	Falls into the tub now half
<i>pleine</i>	full
<i>De son très peu renouvelé,</i>	Of bran not entirely fresh,
<i>Pendant qu'en un long jet</i>	While in a long, warm
<i>tiède</i>	stream
<i>Jusque dans l'estomac de</i>	Against the stomach of the
<i>l'aide</i>	aide
<i>Le sang fumant jaillit du</i>	Steaming blood spurts
<i>col.</i>	from the neck.
<i>Puis, la tête au panier se</i>	Then, the head drains in
<i>verse...</i>	the basket...
<i>Satan, penché sur la</i>	Satan, on the cross-bar
<i>traverse,</i>	perched
<i>Guette l'âme, et la happe</i>	And on the watch,
<i>au vol.</i>	snatches the soul on the
	fly.

These lines have been reproduced numerous times and have always appeared under the name of Alfred de Musset. Now, here is the truth of the matter. They were composed in my presence by Gaston Vassy.⁸ We even debated for a quarter of an hour whether to attribute them to Musset or to Baudelaire.

⁸ Gaston Vassy is the pseudonym of Gaston Pérodeaud (1847-1885), a journalist who wrote for both *Le Figaro* and *L'Événement*.