

The Secret of the Scaffold

To Monsieur Edmond Goncourt ¹¹

The recent executions ⁱⁱ reminded me of the following extraordinary story:

At seven o'clock on the evening of June 5, 1864, Doctor Edmond-Désiré Couty de la Pommerais, ⁱⁱⁱ recently transferred to the Conciergerie at la Roquette, was sitting in the dungeon allocated to those condemned to death, clad in a straitjacket. He leaned back in his chair, saying nothing, his eyes staring into space. A candle on the table illuminated the pallor of his frozen features. Two steps away, a guard stood watching him, arms crossed and back to the wall.

Prisoners were almost always required to do some daily labor, from whose wages the administration deducted in advance the price of the shrouds they would require if they were to die in custody, these not being furnished by public funds. Only those condemned to execution had no such work to do.

The prisoner was not one of those who play cards. His expression was devoid of the least trace of fear or hope. He was 34 years old, dark-haired, of medium height but very strongly built. His temples were greying a little; his eyes were half closed. He had the forehead of an intellectual; his voice was flat and curt, his hands saturnine and his features regular. His manners had the studied distinction of an eloquent specialist—or so it appeared.

You will remember the case at the Seine assizes. Messire Lachaud's ^{iv} plea for the defense, very constricted on this occasion, had not nullified in the minds of the jury, the triple effect produced by the proceedings themselves, the conclusions of Doctor Tardieu ^v and the indictment of Monsieur Oscar de Vallée. ^{vi} Monsieur de la Pommerais had been convicted of having administered, for covetous motives and with premeditation, fatal doses of digitalis to the wife of one of his friends, Madame de Pauw—and had heard pronounced against him, according to articles 301 and 302 of the Penal Code, the sentence of capital punishment.

On the evening of June 5, he had not yet been informed of the rejection of his appeal and the refusal of the mercy hearing for which his close relatives had asked. The distracted Emperor had hardly bothered to listen to his defenders. The venerable Abbé Crozes, ^{vii} who wore himself out in supplications to the Tuileries before every execution, had returned without any response. Would commuting a sentence of death, in such circumstances as these, not be equivalent to the abolition of the penalty? The case was exemplary. In the estimation of Parquet, the rejection of the appeal was no longer in doubt. Without any undue delay, Monsieur Hendreich ^{viii} was notified that he would be required to take delivery of the condemned man on the morning of June 9, at five o'clock.

Suddenly, the noise of rifle-butts sounded on the flagstones of the corridor. The lock creaked dully and the door opened. Bayonets glittered in the half-light. The governor of la Roquette, Monsieur Beauquesne, appeared on the threshold, accompanied by a visitor. Monsieur de la Pommerais, having raised his head, immediately recognized this visitor as the eminent surgeon Armand Velpeau. ^{ix}

The governor gestured to the guard, who went out. Monsieur Beauquesne, after a silent introduction, also retired. The two colleagues found themselves alone, staring at one another as they stood face to face.

La Pommerais silently offered the doctor his own chair, then went to sit down on the *couchette* whose sleepers were not often long delayed in awakening from life with a sudden jolt.

As if he were seeing symptoms of a sickness, the great clinician drew nearer to the *invalid*, in order to observe him more closely and to talk to him in a hushed tone.

At that time, Velpeau was just entering his sixties. He was at the height of his fame, the inheritor of Larrey's ^x chair at the Institute and the first professor of the surgical clinic of Paris. His work, whose logical rigor was so neat and so vivid, had made him one of the leading lights of practical pathological science. The retired practitioner was already established as one of the century's great men.

¹ See Notes p. 253.

After a moment of frosty silence, he said: "Monsieur, we are both physicians and we do not need to bother with useless condolences. In any case, an infection of the prostate—of which I shall surely perish within two years, or two and a half at the most—places me alongside you in the category of those condemned to death, with a date of execution set for a few months hence. So let's come straight to the point, without further preamble."

"Then, in your opinion, Doctor, my legal situation is... hopeless?" La Pommerais put in.

"So it is feared," Velpeau replied, straightforwardly.

"The hour of my death is fixed?"

"I don't know—but as nothing has interrupted the process of your case thus far, you may be sure that the blow will fall within a few days."

La Pommerais passed the sleeve of his straitjacket over his livid brow. "So that's it. Thanks. I'll be ready—I already was. The sooner the better, now."

"Your appeal has not been rejected—at least, not yet," Velpeau replied. "The proposition I have to put to you is only conditional. If your reprieve arrives, so much the better. If not..."

The great surgeon paused.

"If not...?" La Pommerais asked.

Velpeau, without replying, took a little case from his pocket, opened it and took out a lancet. He cut through the left wrist of the straitjacket and applied his middle finger to the pulse of the condemned man. "Monsieur de Pommerais," he said, "your pulse reveals a coolness and a rare firmness. The step that I have taken in coming to you—which will be kept secret—has as its object a kind of offer which might seem an extravagant and criminal mockery, even when addressed to a physician of your vitality: to a mind steeped in the positive convictions of Science and quite immune to all fantastic anxieties about Death. I think we know one another well enough, though; you will surely give your attentive consideration to something that might seem troubling to you at first glance."

"You have my attention, Monsieur," La Pommerais replied.

"As you know very well," Velpeau continued, "one of the most interesting questions of modern physiology is that of whether some glimmer of memory, thought or actual sensibility persists in the brain of a man after the severance of his head."

At this unexpected overture, the condemned man shivered. Then, collecting himself, he said: "When you came in, Doctor, I was preoccupied by that problem myself—quite justifiably, since it is doubly interesting for me."

"You are familiar with the works written on this subject, from those of Soemmering,^{xi} Sue,^{xii} Sédillot^{xiii} and Bichat^{xiv} to those of our contemporaries?"

"I have even assisted, at one time, in one of your dissections of the remains of an executed man."

"Really? Let's go on, then. Have you a precise opinion, from the surgical point-of-view, as to the effects of the guillotine?"

La Pommerais, having looked coldly at Velpeau, said: "No, Monsieur."

"I have made a scrupulous study of the apparatus, which is still ongoing," Doctor Velpeau continued, without any sign of emotion. "It is, in my estimation, a perfect instrument. The blade, acting at one and the same time as a wedge, a fulcrum and a mass, passes through the neck of the patient in a third of a second. The decapitated person, under the shock of that fulgurant passage, can no more feel pain thereafter than a soldier on the battlefield can when his arm is carried away by a cannonball. The sensation, lacking the time to make itself felt, is obscured and nullified."

"There might perhaps be an *afterpain*; its consequence is, after all, two wounds! Wasn't it Julia Fontenelle^{xv} who, giving her reasons, raised the question of whether that same swiftness might actually be more painful than execution by the rope or the axe?"

"Bérard^{xvi} has provided an adequate answer to that idea!" Velpeau replied. "For myself, I am firmly convinced—based on a hundred experiences and my particular observations—that the instantaneous ablation of the head instantaneously produces in the truncated individual the most absolute anaesthetic oblivion. The shock alone, provoked by the abrupt loss of four or five liters of blood—which erupts from the vessels with enough circulatory pressure to project it a meter and a half—would suffice to reassure the most timorous in that respect. As for the unconscious convulsions of the carnal machine, so suddenly arrested in its operation, they no more constitute an indication of suffering than... the palpitation of an amputated leg, for example, whose muscles and nerves contract but which cannot suffer any longer."

"In my opinion, the nervous fever of uncertainty, the solemnity of the preparations and the jolt of awakening on the fatal morning constitute the sum of the alleged suffering in this sort of case. Amputation

can only be imperceptible; the real pain is only imaginary. A violent blow on the head not only is not felt but leaves no trace of consciousness of its shock. A simple lesion of the vertebrae is followed by ataxic insensibility—and the lifting of the head, the bisection of the spine and the interruption of organic rapport between the heart and the brain would surely be sufficient to paralyze any sensation of death—however vague—in the most intimate depths of human being. Pain, in such circumstance, is impossible and inadmissible! You know that as well as I do.”

“I hope so, at least—rather more than you, Monsieur!” La Pommerais replied. “In reality, though, it isn’t some gross and rapid physical suffering—hardly conceived in the midst of sensory disarray, and very quickly choked by the invading ascendance of Death—that I dread. It’s something else.”

“Would you care to try to explain what you mean?” Velpeau said.

“Listen,” murmured La Pommerais, after a pause. “The organs of memory and the will—if they are located in man in the same lobes in which we have discovered them in, say, a dog—are spared by the passage of the blade! Too many equivocal precedents have been set, as disquieting as they are incomprehensible, to allow me to be easily persuaded of the immediate unconsciousness of a decapitated head. According to legend, how many severed heads, called upon to tell the truth, have turned their gaze upon their questioner? Neural memory? Reflexive movements? Empty words!

“Remember the head of the sailor which, at the clinic in Brest, an hour and a quarter after removal, by a possibly voluntary movement of the jaws, cut through a pencil placed between them! Having chosen that example alone from among a thousand, the real question at issue here becomes a matter of knowing whether or not that man’s self acted upon the muscles of its exsanguinated head after the cessation of blood flow.”

“The self is a property of the whole,” said Velpeau.

“The spinal cord is an extension of the cerebellum,” replied Monsieur de la Pommerais. “After that lapse of time, where would the sensitive whole be? How could it be reawakened? Before the week is out, I shall certainly have found that out... and forgotten it!”

“It may depend on you whether Humanity can obtain an answer to this question, once and for all,” Velpeau said, slowly, his eyes fixed on those of his interlocutor. “Speaking frankly, that’s why I’m here. I have been delegated to approach you by a committee of our most eminent colleagues of the Faculty of Paris, and here is my letter of permission from the Emperor. It contains powers sufficiently extensive even to obtain, if necessary, a stay of execution.”

“I’m not following you any longer,” La Pommerais said. “Explain yourself.”

“Monsieur de la Pommerais, I come in the name of Science—which is forever dear to men like us, who no longer count the number of her magnanimous martyrs—in the hope that some practical experiment, to be agreed between us, will confirm or deny this hypothesis, which I myself find more than doubtful. I come to claim from you the greatest sum of energy and intrepidity that can be expected of the human species. If your appeal for mercy is rejected, you will find yourself, as a physician, in a position to become the foremost authority on the supreme operation that you must undergo. Your co-operation in a tentative experiment in communication would therefore be invaluable. All the evidence seems to attest in advance that the result will be negative—but if you are willing to offer yourself as a test case, it might be finally settled. If we accept the hypothesis that continued experience is not absurd, in principle, we have a chance in ten thousand to enlighten modern physiology—miraculously, as it were. The opportunity must be seized this time—and in the case of a sign of intelligence victoriously exchanged after execution, you will leave a name whose scientific glory will efface forever the memory of your social lapse.”

“Ah,” murmured La Pommerais, becoming pale, but with a resolute smile. “Ah—I begin to understand. In fact, torture has already revealed the phenomena of digestion, Michelot ^{xvii} informs us. But... what will be the nature of your experiment? Galvanic convulsions? Ciliary incitements? Injections of arterial blood? All that is hardly conclusive!”

“It goes without saying that immediately after the sad ceremony, your remains will go to rest in peace in the earth, and that no scalpels will touch you,” Velpeau told him. “Definitely not! But as the blade falls I shall be standing there in person, facing you and the machine. As quickly as possible, your head will be passed from the hands of the executioner into mine. And then—the experiment is all the more serious and conclusive by reason of its simplicity—I will cry out to you, very distinctly, in your ear: ‘Monsieur Couty de la Pommerais, in memory of our conversations during life, can you, at this moment, lower your right eyelid three times in succession while keeping the other eye wide open?’ If, at that moment, whatever other contractions of the features there might be, you are able by means of that triple wink to notify me that you have heard and understood me, and thus prove to me, in producing that effect by the action of your memory

and permanent will, your facial nerves and your eyelids—overcoming all horror and the surge of all other impressions of your being—that will suffice for the illumination of Science and the revolutionizing of our convictions. And I would be able, without any doubt, to identify the manner in which you would be remembered in future: not as a criminal, but as a hero.”

As these strange words were spoken, Monsieur de la Pommerais appeared to be struck by a seizure so profound that he remained silent, as if petrified, for a full minute, his pupils dilated and fixed on the surgeon. Then, without saying a word, he got up and took a few steps, very pensively. Eventually, he shook his head sadly.

“The horrible violence of the blow would throw me out of myself,” he said. “To realize this appears to me beyond the power of any will or human effort. Besides, it’s said that the chances of vitality are not the same for us, the guillotined. However... come to me again, Monsieur, on the morning of the execution. I will tell you then whether or not I shall be a party to this tentative endeavor, which is frightful, revolting and illusory at the same time. If I say no, I shall count on your discretion to let my bloody head lie tranquilly in the tin bucket set to receive it, yielding up its last vitality.”

“So—until then, Monsieur de la Pommerais?” Velpeau said, as he also got up. “Think about it.”

They bowed to one another. Immediately afterwards, Doctor Velpeau left the cell. The guard came back in, and the condemned man stretched himself out resignedly on his meager bed, to sleep or to dream.

Four days later, at 5:30 in the morning, Monsieur Beauquesne, Abbé Crozes, Monsieur Claude and Monsieur Potier, the clerk of the Imperial Court, came into the cell. Monsieur de la Pommerais was already awake. At the news that the hour had come, he sat up in bed, very pale. He got dressed quickly, then spoke for ten minutes with Abbé Crozes, from whom he had already received several visits. The priest administered the extreme unction that makes the final hour more bearable. After that, seeing Doctor Velpeau arrive, the condemned man said: “I’ve been practicing—look!” And while the order of execution was being read out, he held his right eyelid shut, while fixing the surgeon with the gaze of his wide-open left eye.

Velpeau bowed deeply. Then, turning towards Hendreich, who had come in with his assistants, he made a brief gesture to the executioner, which was reciprocated.

The preparations were rapid. It was observed that the phenomenon of the hair becoming visibly whiter in the shadow of the blade did not occur. A letter of farewell from his wife, read in a low voice by the almoner, moistened Monsieur de la Pommerais’ eyes with tears, which the priest piously wiped away with piece of cloth gathered from the hem of his chemise.

Once he was standing up, with his frock coat thrown over his shoulders, the shackles were removed from the condemned man’s wrists. He refused the proffered glass of brandy, and the escort marched him into the corridor. As he went through the door, passing his colleague at the threshold, he said to him: “It’s time—goodbye!”

Soon the vast iron gates were opening before him.

The morning wind blew into the prison. Dawn was breaking. The great plaza extended into the distance, encircled by a double cordon of cavalry. Facing Monsieur de la Pommerais, at a distance of ten paces, the scaffold loomed over a semicircle of mounted police, who drew their sabers noisily as he appeared. His arrival caused a stir among the groups of newspaper reporters standing some distance away.

Further away, behind the trees, the murmurous swell of the enervated crowd could be heard. On the roofs of the pleasure-houses, in the attic windows, a few pale girls in crumpled silks were watching, some of them still holding bottles of champagne and leaning on the arms of sad black suits. Swallows were flying this way and that across the square, buoyed up by the early morning air.

The solitary guillotine, filling the empty space and marking out the boundary of the sky, seemed to throw the shadow of its two lifted arms all the way to the horizon. Between them, up there in the blueness of the dawn, one last star was twinkling in the distance.

The condemned man shivered before this funereal spectacle, then walked, resolutely, towards the foot of the steps. He climbed them without pausing. The triangular blade shone upon the black chassis now, veiling the star. As he stood before the fatal machine, he kissed a lock of his own hair that had been cut while he made his preparations by Abbé Crozes. In touching it to his lips, he said: “For *her!*”

Five people stood out in silhouette upon the scaffold. The silence, in that moment, was so profound that the noise of a distant branch breaking under the weight of a spectator carried as far the tragic group, accompanied by a cry of alarm and a few vague and hideous bursts of laughter. Then, as the clock chimed

the hour appointed for the administration of the last blow, Monsieur de la Pommerais saw his fellow experimenter, facing him on the far side of the scaffold. Velpeau was studying him, with one hand resting on the platform. He collected himself for a moment, and closed his eyes.

The apparatus was brusquely brought into play. The collar came down. The button was pressed. The gleaming blade fell.

A terrible shock shook the platform. The horses reared at the magnetic odor of blood, and the echoes reverberated. Already, the bloody head of the victim was palpitating between the impassive hands of the surgeon of the Pitié, sending waves of red across his fingers, cuffs and clothes.

It was a somber face, horribly white; the eyes rolling as if bewildered; the eyebrows twisted as if clenched by a rictus. The teeth chattered; the chin was indented at the extremity of the lower jaw.

Velpeau quickly bent over the head and pronounced the prearranged question in the right ear. As strong as the man's constitution was, the result made him shiver with a kind of cold fear.

The lid of the right eye lowered, while the distended left eye looked at him.

"In the name of God and humanity, give me the sign twice more!" Velpeau cried, in some distress.

The eyelashes came apart, as if by an internal effort—but the eyelid did not raise itself again. As the moments passed, the visage became rigid, frozen and immobile. It was over.

Doctor Velpeau gave the dead head to Monsieur Hendreich—who, reopening the basket, placed it between the legs of the already-stiffened trunk, as is the custom.

The great surgeon bathed his hands in one of the buckets designated for the washing of the machine, which had already begun. Around him, the crowd dispersed, anxiously, without quite knowing why. He wiped himself dry, still silent. Then, at a slow pace, his face pensive and grave, he went back to his carriage, which was parked at the corner of the prison. As he climbed into it, he noticed the cart of justice moving off at a fast trot towards Montparnasse.

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ⁱ Given that Edmond Goncourt disapproved strongly of Villiers, and that the two were not on speaking terms in 1883, the reason for this dedication is a trifle unclear. Perhaps Villiers was trying to repair the relationship—the alternative is, of course, that it is an ironically veiled insult.

ⁱⁱ The "recent executions" were those of Holtz, Hony and Gomachon, between October 1 and 10, 1883; they were the first for some considerable time, the government of the day having been reluctant to exact the supreme penalty until the force of public opinion became irresistible. Villiers seized the moment to get his story into print in *Le Figaro* on October 23. Villiers had certainly attended a number of public executions—some of his friends thought his fascination with them a trifle excessive—and his description of the scene surrounding the scaffold is based on experience.

ⁱⁱⁱ The trial of Doctor Couty de la Pommerais—a homeopathic physician accused of poisoning his grandmother, Madame Dubizy, and his mistress, Madame de Pauw (he was acquitted on the first charge but convicted on the second)—had attracted a great deal of publicity in 1864. Villiers had a personal connection with the case; the defending advocate, Robert du Pontavice de Heussey, was a friend of his family and Villiers' father provided a signed statement affirming that Couty de la Pommerais' title was genuine (which cannot have been worth a great deal, given the elder Villiers' reputation). Although the story is pure fiction, based on an urban legend that was well-known at the time—it had previously been associated with a notorious criminal named Lacenaire, executed in 1836—Villiers did his utmost to revitalize it by citing the names of many other actual individuals; further details of some of them follow below.

^{iv} Charles-Alexandre Lachaud (1818-1882) was one of the most famous advocates of the period.

^v Auguste Ambrose Tardieu (1818-1879) was the pathologist who pioneered forensic medicine in France.

^{vi} Oscar de la Vallée (1821-1892) was the chief prosecutor of the Paris court in 1864.

^{vii} Abraham Crozes was a prison chaplain in Paris for more than 40 years, that career having only just come to an end when the story was published.

^{viii} According to the annotators of the *Oeuvres Complètes*, the executioner's name was actually Heindreich.

^{ix} Louis (not Armand) Velpeau (1795-1867) was indeed a famous surgeon and physiologist.

^x Dominique, Baron Larrey (1766-1842) was an eminent surgeon.

^{xi} Samuel Thomas von Soemmering (1755-1830) was the German scientist whose highly influential textbook first made physiology an independent field of study.

^{xii} Villiers has “Süe.” The reference is to the surgeon and anatomist Jean-Joseph Sue (died 1831), the father of the feuilletonist Eugène Sue, who published his *Opinion sur le Supplice de la Guillotine et sur la Douleur qui Survit à la Décollation (Opinion on the Execution by Guillotine & the Pain That Lingers After Decapitation)* in 1796. The Sue in question should not be confused with his own father, also Jean-Joseph Sue (1710-1792), or Pierre Sue (1739-1816), an unrelated physician and surgeon, both of whom were considerably more famous and published more abundantly on other subjects.

^{xiii} Charles E. Sédillot (1804-1883) was a surgeon and gastronomist who is now remembered as the originator of the word *microbe*.

^{xiv} Marie-François-Xavier Bichat (1772-1802) was a famous anatomist and physiologist.

^{xv} Jean-Sébastien-Eugène Julia de Fontenelle (1790-1842), a prolific writer on chemistry, herbalism and many other subjects, was one of the earliest popularizer of science; his works included a *Manuel de Physique Amusante* (1826).

^{xvi} Probably Frédéric Bérard (1789-1828), a physician of the vitalist school, although there were other Bérards active as medical practitioners in 19th century Paris.

^{xvii} The annotators of the *Oeuvres Complètes* were unable to identify “Michelot.” It is conceivable that this is a misprint, and that the reference is to the famous historian Jules Michelet (1798-1874), but if so, it is odd that Villiers, always a meticulous proofreader, never corrected it.