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Excerpt

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## THE GUILLOTINE

## BOOK FIRST

## SEPTEMBER

## CHAPTER I

## THE IMPROVISED COMMUNE

YE have roused her, then, ye Emigrants and Despots of the world; France is roused! Long have ye been lecturing and tutoring this poor Nation, like cruel uncalled-for pedagogues, shaking over her your ferulas of fire and steel: it is long that ye have pricked and filliped and affrighted her, there as she sat helpless in her dead cerements of a Constitution, you gathering in on her from all lands, with your armaments and plots, your invadings and truculent bullyings;—and lo now, ye have pricked her to the quick, and she is up, and her blood is up. The dead cerements are rent into cobwebs, and she fronts you in that terrible strength of Nature, which no man has measured, which goes down to Madness and Tophet: see now how ye will deal with her.

This month of September 1792, which has become one of the memorable months of History, presents itself under two most diverse aspects; all of black on the one side, all of bright on the other. Whatsoever is cruel in the panic frenzy of Twenty-five million men, whatsoever is great in the simultaneous death-defiance of Twenty-five million men, stand here

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in abrupt contrast, near by one another. As indeed is usual when a man, how much more when a Nation of men, is hurled suddenly beyond the limits. For Nature, as green as she looks, rests everywhere on dread foundations, were we farther down; and Pan, to whose music the Nymphs dance, has a cry in him that can drive all men distracted.

Very frightful it is when a Nation, rending asunder its Constitutions and Regulations which were grown dead cements for it, becomes *transcendental*; and must now seek its wild way through the New, Chaotic,—where Force is not yet distinguished into Bidden and Forbidden, but Crime and Virtue welter unseparated,—in that domain of what is called the Passions; of what we call the Miracles and the Portents! It is thus that, for some three years to come, we are to contemplate France, in this final Third Part of our History. Sansculottism reigning in all its grandeur and in all its hideousness: the Gospel (God's-message) of Man's Rights, Man's *mights* or strengths, once more preached irrefragably abroad; along with this, and still louder for the time, the fearfulest Devil's-Message of Man's weaknesses and sins;—and all on such a scale, and under such aspect: cloudy 'death-birth of a world': huge smoke-cloud, streaked with rays as of heaven on one side; girt on the other as with hell-fire! History tells us many things: but for the last thousand years and more, what thing has she told us of a sort like this? Which therefore let us two, O Reader, dwell on willingly, for a little; and from its endless significance endeavour to extract what may, in present circumstances, be adapted for us.

It is unfortunate, though very natural, that the history of this Period has so generally been written in hysterics. Exaggeration abounds, execration, wailing; and, on the whole, darkness. But thus too, when foul old Rome had to be swept from the Earth, and those Northmen, and other horrid sons of Nature, came in, 'swallowing formulas,' as the French now do, foul old Rome screamed execratively her loudest; so that the true shape of many things is lost for us.

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Attila's Huns had arms of such length that they could lift a stone without stooping. Into the body of the poor Tatars execrative Roman History intercalated an alphabetic letter; and so they continue Tartars, of fell Tartarean nature, to this day. Here, in like manner, search as we will in these multi-form innumerable French Records, darkness too frequently covers, or sheer distraction bewilders. One finds it difficult to imagine that the Sun shone in this September month, as he does in others. Nevertheless it is an indisputable fact that the Sun did shine; and there was weather and work,—nay as to that, very bad weather for harvest-work! An unlucky Editor may do his utmost; and after all require allowances.

He had been a wise Frenchman, who, looking close at hand on this waste aspect of France all stirring and whirling, in ways new, untried, had been able to discern where the cardinal movement lay; which tendency it was that had the rule and primary direction of it then! But at forty-four years' distance, it is different. To all men now, two cardinal movements or grand tendencies, in the September whirl, have become discernible enough: that stormful effluence towards the Frontiers; that frantic crowding towards Town-houses and Council-halls in the interior. Wild France dashes, in desperate death-defiance, towards the Frontiers, to defend itself from foreign Despots; crowds towards Townhalls and Election Committee-rooms, to defend itself from domestic Aristocrats. Let the Reader conceive well these two cardinal movements; and what side-currents and endless vortexes might depend on these. He shall judge too, whether, in such sudden wreckage of all old Authorities, such a pair of cardinal movements, half-frantic in themselves, could be of soft nature? As in dry Sahara, when the winds waken, and lift and winnow the immensity of sand! The air itself (Travellers say) is a dim sand-air; and dim looming through it, the wonderfulest uncertain colonnades of Sand-Pillars rush whirling from this side and from that, like so many mad Spinning-Dervishes, of

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a hundred feet in stature ; and dance their huge Desert-waltz there !—

Nevertheless, in all human movements, were they but a day old, there is order, or the beginning of order. Consider two things in this Sahara-waltz of the French Twenty-five millions ; or rather one thing, and one hope of a thing ; the *Commune* (Municipality) of Paris, which is already here ; the National Convention, which shall in a few weeks be here. The Insurrectionary Commune, which, improvising itself on the eve of the Tenth of August, worked this ever-memorable Deliverance by explosion, must needs rule over it,—till the Convention meet. This Commune, which they may well call a spontaneous or ‘improvised’ Commune, is, for the present, sovereign of France. The Legislative, deriving its authority from the Old, how can *it* now have authority when the Old is exploded by insurrection ? As a floating piece of wreck, certain things, persons, and interests may still cleave to it : volunteer defenders, riflemen or pikemen in green uniform, or red night-cap (of *bonnet rouge*), defile before it daily, just on the wing towards Brunswick ; with the brandishing of arms ; always with some touch of Leonidas-eloquence, often with a fire of daring that threatens to outherd Herod,—the Galleries, ‘especially the Ladies, never done with applauding.’<sup>1</sup> Addresses of this or the like sort can be received and answered, in the hearing of all France ; the Salle de Manège is still useful as a place of proclamation. For which use, indeed, it now chiefly serves. Vergniaud delivers spirit-stirring orations ; but always with a prophetic sense only, looking towards the coming Convention. ‘Let our memory perish,’ cries Vergniaud ; ‘but let France be free !’—whereupon they all start to their feet, shouting responsive : ‘Yes, yes, *périsse notre mémoire, pourvu que la France soit libre !*’<sup>2</sup> Disfrocked Chabot adjures Heaven that at least we may ‘have done with Kings’ ; and fast as powder under spark, we all blaze-up once more, and with waved hats shout and swear : ‘Yes, *nous le jurons ;*

<sup>1</sup> Moore’s *Journal*, i. 85.<sup>2</sup> *Hist. Parl.* xvii. 467.

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*plus de rois!*<sup>1</sup> All which, as a method of proclamation, is very convenient.

For the rest, that our busy Brissots, rigorous Rolands, men who once had authority, and now have less and less; men who love law, and will have even an Explosion explode itself as far as possible according to rule, do find this state of matters most unofficial-unsatisfactory,—is not to be denied. Complaints are made; attempts are made: but without effect. The attempts even recoil; and must be desisted from, for fear of worse: the sceptre has departed from this Legislative once and always. A poor Legislative, so hard was fate, had let itself be hand-gyved, nailed to the rock like an Andromeda, and could only wail there to the Earth and Heavens; miraculously a winged Perseus (or Improvised Commune) has dawned out of the void Blue, and cut her loose: but whether now is it she, with her softness and musical speech, or is it he, with his hardness and sharp falchion and ægis, that shall have casting-vote? Melodious *agreement* of vote; this were the rule! But if otherwise, and votes diverge, then surely Andromeda's part is to weep,—if possible, tears of gratitude alone.

Be content, O France, with this Improvised Commune, such as it is! It has the implements, and has the hands: the time is not long. On Sunday the twenty-sixth of August, our Primary Assemblies shall meet, begin electing of Electors; on Sunday the second of September (may the day prove lucky!) the Electors shall begin electing Deputies; and so an all-healing National Convention will come together. No *marc d'argent*, or distinction of Active and Passive, now insults the French Patriot: but there is universal suffrage, unlimited liberty to choose. Old-Constituents, Present-Legislators, all France is eligible. Nay it may be said, the flower of all the Universe (*de l'Univers*) is eligible; for in these very days we, by act of Assembly, 'naturalise' the chief Foreign Friends of Humanity: Priestley, burnt out for us in Birmingham; Klopstock, a genius of all countries; Jeremy Bentham,

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. Parl.* xvii. 437.

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useful Jurisconsult ; distinguished Paine, the rebellious Needleman ;—some of whom may be chosen. As is most fit ; for a Convention of this kind. In a word, Seven-hundred and Forty-five unshackled sovereigns, admired of the universe, shall replace this hapless impotency of a Legislative,—out of which, it is likely, the best Members, and the Mountain in mass, may be re-elected. Roland is getting ready the *Salle des Cent Suisses*, as preliminary rendezvous for them ; in that void Palace of the Tuileries, now void and National, and not a Palace, but a Caravansera.

As for the Spontaneous Commune, one may say that there never was on Earth a stranger Town-Council. Administration, not of a great City, but of a great Kingdom in a state of revolt and frenzy, this is the task that has fallen to it. Enrolling, provisioning, judging ; devising, deciding, doing, endeavouring to do : one wonders the human brain did not give way under all this, and reel. But happily human brains have such a talent of taking up simply what they can carry, and ignoring all the rest ; leaving all the rest, as if it were not there ! Whereby somewhat is verily shifted for ; and much shifts for itself. This Improvised Commune walks along, nothing doubting ; promptly making front, without fear or flurry, at what moment soever, to the wants of the moment. Were the world on fire, one improvised tricolor Municipal has but one life to lose. They are the elixir and chosen-men of Sansculottic Patriotism ; promoted to the forlorn-hope ; unspeakable victory or a high gallows, this is their meed. They sit there, in the Townhall, these astonishing tricolor Municipals ; in Council General ; in Committee of Watchfulness (*de Surveillance*, which will even become *de Salut Public*, of Public Salvation), or what other Committees and Sub-committees are needful ;—managing infinite Correspondence ; passing infinite Decrees : one hears of a Decree being ‘ the ninety-eighth of the day.’ Ready ! is the word. They carry loaded pistols in their pocket ; also some improvised luncheon by way of meal. Or indeed, by and by,

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*traiteurs* contract for the supply of repasts, to be eaten on the spot,—too lavishly, as it was afterwards grumbled. Thus they: girt in their tricolor sashes; Municipal note-paper in the one hand, fire-arms in the other. They have their Agents out all over France; speaking in townhouses, market-places, highways and byways; agitating, urging to arm; all hearts tingling to hear. Great is the fire of Anti-aristocrat eloquence: nay some, as Bibliopolic Momoro, seem to hint afar off at something which smells of Agrarian Law, and a surgery of the over-swoln dropsical strongbox itself;—whereat indeed the bold Bookseller runs risk of being hanged, and Ex-Constituent Buzot has to smuggle him off.<sup>1</sup>

Governing Persons, were they never so insignificant intrinsically, have for most part plenty of Memoir-writers; and the curious, in after-times, can learn minutely their goings out and comings in: which, as men always love to know their fellow-men in singular situations, is a comfort, of its kind. Not so with these Governing Persons, now in the Townhall! And yet what most original fellow-man, of the Governing sort, high-chancellor, king, kaiser, secretary of the home or the foreign department, ever showed such a phasis as Clerk Tallien, Procureur Manuel, future Procureur Chaumette, here in this Sand-waltz of the Twenty-five millions now do? O brother mortals,—thou Advocate Panis, friend of Danton, kinsman of Santerre; Engraver Sergent, since called *Agate* Sergent; thou Huguenin, with the tocsin in thy heart! But, as Horace says, they wanted the sacred memoir-writer (*sacro vate*); and we know them not. Men bragged of August and its doings, publishing them in high places: but of this September none now or afterwards would brag. The September world remains dark, fuliginous, as Lapland witch-midnight;—from which, indeed, very strange shapes will evolve themselves.

Understand this, however: that incorruptible Robespierre is not wanting, now when the brunt of battle is past; in a

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de Buzot* (Paris, 1823), p. 88.

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stealthy way the seagreen man sits there, his feline eyes excellent in the twilight. Also understand this other, a single fact worth many: that Marat is not only there, but has a seat of honour assigned him, a *tribune particulière*. How changed for Marat; lifted from his dark cellar into this luminous 'peculiar tribune'! All dogs have their day; even rabid dogs. Sorrowful, incurable Philoctetes Marat; without whom Troy cannot be taken! Hither, as a main element of the Governing Power, has Marat been raised. Royalist types, for we have 'suppressed' innumerable Durosoys, Royous, and even clapt them in prison,—Royalist types replace the worn types often snatched from a People's-Friend in old ill days. In our 'peculiar tribune' we write and redact: Placards, of due monitory terror; *Amis-du-Peuple* (now under the name of *Journal de la République*); and sit obeyed of men. 'Marat,' says one, 'is the conscience of the Hôtel-de-Ville.' *Keeper*, as some call it, of the Sovereign's Conscience; which surely in such hands will not lie hid in a napkin!

Two great movements, as we said, agitate this distracted National mind: a rushing against domestic Traitors, a rushing against foreign Despots. Mad movements both, restrainable by no known rule; strongest passions of human nature driving them on: love, hatred, vengeful sorrow, braggart Nationality also vengeful,—and pale Panic over all! Twelve-hundred slain Patriots, do they not, from their dark catacombs there, in Death's dumb-show, plead (O ye Legislators) for vengeance? Such was the destructive rage of these Aristocrats on the ever-memorable Tenth. Nay, apart from vengeance, and with an eye to Public Salvation only, are there not still, in this Paris (in round numbers) 'Thirty-thousand Aristocrats,' of the most malignant humour; driven now to their last trump-card?—Be patient, ye Patriots: our new High Court, 'Tribunal of the Seventeenth,' sits; each Section has sent Four Jurymen; and Danton, extinguishing improper judges, improper practices wheresoever found, is 'the same man you



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## AUG. 25, 1792] THE IMPROVISED COMMUNE 9

have known at the Cordeliers.' With such a Minister of Justice, shall not Justice be done?—Let it be swift, then, answers universal Patriotism; swift and sure!—

One would hope, this Tribunal of the Seventeenth is swifter than most. Already on the 21st, while our Court is but four days old, Collenot d'Angremont, 'the Royalist enlister' (crimp, *embaucheur*), dies by torchlight. For, lo, the great *Guillotine*, wondrous to behold, now stands there; the Doctor's *Idea* has become Oak and Iron; the huge cyclopean axe 'falls in its grooves like the ram of the Pile-engine,' swiftly snuffing-out the light of men! '*Mais vous, Gualches*, what have you invented?' *This?*—Poor old Laporte, Intendant of the Civil List, follows next; quietly, the mild old man. Then Durosoy, Royalist Placarder, 'cashier of all the Anti-revolutionists of the interior': he went rejoicing; said that a Royalist like him ought to die, of all days, on this day, the 25th or St. Louis's Day. All these have been tried, cast,—the Galleries shouting approval; and handed over to the Realised Idea, within a week. Besides those whom we have acquitted, the Galleries murmuring, and have dismissed; or even have personally guarded back to Prison, as the Galleries took to howling, and even to menacing and elbowing.<sup>1</sup> Languid this Tribunal is not.

Nor does the other movement slacken; the rushing against foreign Despots. Strong forces shall meet in death-grip; drilled Europe against mad undrilled France; and singular conclusions will be tried.—Conceive therefore, in some faint degree, the tumult that whirls in this France, in this Paris! Placards from Section, from Commune, from Legislative, from the individual Patriot, flame monitory on all walls. Flags of Danger to Fatherland wave at the Hôtel-de-Ville; on the Pont-Neuf—over the prostrate Statues of Kings. There is universal enlisting, urging to enlist; there is tearful-boastful leave-taking; irregular marching on the Great Northeastern Road. Marseillaise sing their wild *To arms*, in chorus; which now all men, all women and children have learnt, and

<sup>1</sup> Moore's *Journal*, i. 159-168.

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sing chorally, in Theatres, Boulevards, Streets; and the heart burns in every bosom: *Aux armes! Marchons!*—Or think how your Aristocrats are skulking into covert; how Bertrand-Moleville lies hidden in some garret ‘in Aubry-le-boucher Street, with a poor surgeon who had known me.’ Dame de Staël has secreted her Narbonne, not knowing what in the world to make of him. The Barriers are sometimes open, oftenest shut; no passports to be had; Townhall Emissaries, with the eyes and claws of falcons, flitting watchful on all points of your horizon! In two words: Tribunal of the Seventeenth, busy under howling Galleries; Prussian Brunswick, ‘over a space of forty miles,’ with his war-tumbrils, and sleeping thunders, and Briarean ‘sixty-six thousand’<sup>1</sup> right hands,—coming, coming!

O Heavens, in these latter days of August, he is come! Durosoy was not yet guillotined when news had come that the Prussians were harrying and ravaging about Metz; in some four days more, one hears that Longwi, our first stronghold on the borders, is fallen ‘in fifteen hours.’ Quick therefore, O ye improvised Municipals; quick, and ever quicker!—The improvised Municipals make front to this also. Enrolment urges itself; and clothing, and arming. Our very officers have now ‘wool epaulettes’; for it is the reign of Equality, and also of Necessity. Neither do men now *monsieur* and *sir* one another; *citoyen* (citizen) were suitabler; we even say *thou*, as ‘the free peoples of Antiquity did’: so have Journals and the Improvised Commune suggested; which shall be well.

Infinitely better, meantime, could we suggest, where arms are to be found. For the present, our *Citoyens* chant chorally *To arms*; and have no arms! Arms are searched for; passionately; there is joy over any musket. Moreover, entrenchments shall be made round Paris: on the slopes of Montmartre men dig and shovel; though even the simple suspect this to be desperate. They dig; Tricolor sashes

<sup>1</sup> See Toulangeon, *Hist. de France*, ii. c. 5.