

THE DIARY OF A MADMAN

BY

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translated by Virginia Watson

WHEN he died he was the head of a high tribunal, an upright magistrate whose irreproachable life was cited in every court in France. Lawyers, young councilors, and judges bowed low to mark their profound respect when they looked at his large, pale, thin face lighted up by his flashing dark eyes.

He had spent his life in the pursuit of crime and in the protection of the weak. Swindlers and murderers had no more redoubtable enemy, for he seemed to read their secret thoughts in the depths of their souls, and with a glance of his eye to uncover all their hidden intentions.

So it was that he died at the age of

eighty-two, rich in honors, and was followed by the regrets of a nation. Soldiers in red trousers escorted him to his tomb, and men in white cravats voiced their sorrow over his coffin and shed tears that appeared genuine.

But glance at this strange document which the distracted notary discovered in the desk where the judge had been in the habit of keeping locked up the records of famous criminals.

Its title was: "Why?"

June 20, 1831.—I have just come from the court-room. I condemned Blondel to death! Why did this man kill his five children? Why? Often we come across men of this kind who revel in taking life. Yes, this must be a kind of voluptuousness. The greatest of all, perhaps, because does not killing resemble creation more than anything else? To make and to unmake. These two words contain in themselves the history of the universe, all the history of the worlds, everything that is, everything. Why is it so intoxicating to kill?

June 25.—To think that here is a being who lives, who walks, who runs . . . a being. What is a being? This animated thing that carries within it the principle of motion and a will governing that motion! It belongs to nothing, this thing. Its feet have no connection with the sod. It is a grain of life which moves on the earth; and this grain of life, come from I know not where, one can destroy as one wills. Then nothing, nothing more. It rots; it's all over with it.

June 26.—Why, then, is it a crime to kill? Yes, why? Contrariwise, in nature it is the law. Every being has a mission to kill; it kills to live and it kills to kill. The beast kills without ceasing, all day long, every instant of its existence. Man kills without ceasing in order to nourish himself; but as he feels the need, too, of killing for pleasure, he invented the chase. The child kills the insect he finds, little birds, all the little animals that come to his hand. But that does not satisfy the irresistible need of slaughter which is in us. It is not enough to

kill beasts; we feel the need, too, of killing man. Once upon a time they satisfied this need with human sacrifices. To-day the necessity of living in a society has made a crime of murder. We condemn and we punish the murderer. But as we cannot live without yielding to this natural and imperious instinct of death, we solace ourselves from time to time with wars in which an entire nation slays another nation. It is a debauch of blood, a debauch with which armies become infatuated and which intoxicates civilians also, women and children who read the highly colored accounts of massacres as they sit in the evening around the lamp.

One might imagine that those who are destined to take part in the butcheries of their fellow-men would be despised. No. They are overwhelmed with honors. They are dressed up in gold and brilliant clothes; they wear plumes on their heads, ornaments on their breasts, and they give them crosses, rewards, titles of all kinds. They are proud, respected, loved by the

women, acclaimed by the crowd, just because their mission is to shed human blood. They drag along the pavement their instruments of death which the black-clad passer-by looks at with envy, because to kill is the great law which nature has put into the heart of every being. There is nothing finer and more honorable than to kill!

June 30.—To kill is the law because Nature loves eternal youth. She seems to cry out through all her unconscious acts: "Quick! Quick! Quick!" The more she destroys the more she recreates.

July 2.—A being—what is a human being? Everything and nothing. By his thought he is the reflection of the universe. By his memory and his science he is a digest of the world whose history he carries within him. The mirror of things and the mirror of deeds, every human being becomes a little universe within the universe.

But travel; look at the races as they swarm, and man becomes of no importance, is nothing now, nothing. Get

into a boat and put a distance between you and the shore crowded with people, and soon you see nothing but the coastline. The imperceptible creature disappears, so small and insignificant is he. Traverse Europe in an express train and look out of its window. Men, men, everywhere are men, innumerable, unknown, who swarm over the fields, who swarm in the streets—stupid peasants who have just enough intelligence to turn up the sod, hideous women who know just enough to make soup for the male and to bring forth children. Go to the Indies, go to China, and you will still see millions of creatures struggling, who are born and who die without leaving behind them more of a trace than an ant that has been crushed on the highway. Go to the country of the blacks sheltered in mud huts, to the land of white Arabs living under brown tents that flap in the wind, and you will come to understand that the individual human being is nothing, nothing—the race is all that counts. What is one being, one particular

being of a wandering desert tribe? And these people, who are sages in their way, do not worry themselves about death. The man does not count with them. One kills one's enemy—that is war. In olden times that was done from castle to castle, from province to province.

Yes, travel around the world and look at the innumerable and unknown humans swarm. Unknown? Ah! it is on that word that the problem hinges. To kill is a crime because we have numbered human beings. When they are born we inscribe their names, we baptize them. The law takes hold upon them. There it is! The being who has not been registered does not count; kill him in the fens or in the desert, kill him on the mountains or in the plain. What does it matter? Nature loves death; *She* does not punish!

What is sacred is the civil authority. There we have it. That's what looks after man. The human being is sacred because he is registered by the civil authority. Respect the civil authority, the legal god. Down on your knees!

The state may kill, since it has the right to modify the civil authority. When it has slaughtered two hundred thousand men in a war it wipes them off its register, it cancels them by the hand of its recorders. It is over. But we, who may not change by one iota the writings of the town clerk, we must respect life. Civil Authority, thou glorious Divinity which reignest in the temples of municipalities, I salute thee! Thou art stronger than nature. Hah! Hah!

July 3.—What a strange and savory pleasure it must be to kill, to have there before one a living, thinking creature and to make a little hole in it, only a little hole, to watch flow from it that red thing we call blood which makes life, and then to have before one nothing but flesh, pulpy, cold, inert, void of thought!

Aug. 5.—I, who have spent my life judging, condemning, killing by means of words which I enunciated, killing by the guillotine those who had killed with a knife, I, I, myself . . . suppose I

should do what all those murderers did whom I punished, I, I . . . Who would find it out?

Aug. 10.—Who would ever know it? Would any one suspect me, me, particularly if I chose a creature whom I had no interest in putting an end to?

Aug. 15.—Temptation. Temptation has entered into me like a crawling worm. It crawls; it advances; it wanders through my entire body, into my spirit which thinks of only one thing—killing; into my eyes that experience the urge of looking upon blood, of watching things die; into my ears filled all the time with something strange, horrible, rending, and maddening, like a creature's last cry; in my legs which twitch with the desire to be off, off to the spot where the thing will take place; in my hands that itch with the need to kill. How splendid it must be, how rare a delight, one worthy of a free man high above lesser men, who is master of his heart and who seeks strange, new sensations!

Aug. 22.—I could not resist any longer.

I killed a little bird to see how it was, to make a beginning.

John, my servant, had a goldfinch whose cage hung at the pantry window. I sent him off on an errand and I took the little bird in my hand . . . in my hand . . . and I felt its heart beat against it. It was warm to hold. I went up into my room. From moment to moment I squeezed it a little harder; its heart beat quicker—it was horrible and delicious. I almost suffocated it, but then I should not have seen any blood.

Then I took a pair of scissors, short nail-scissors, and slashed his throat in three cuts, quite gently. He opened his beak, tried to get away from me, but I held him fast, oh! I held him fast. I could have held on to a mad bulldog. And I saw his blood flow. How beautiful it was, red and bright and glistening—blood! I felt like drinking it. I wet the tip of my tongue with it. It was delicious. But he had so little of it, poor little bird! There was not time enough to enjoy the sight as I should have liked

to do. How splendid it must be to see a bull bled.

And then I did as real murderers do. I washed the scissors. I washed my hands. I threw out the water and I carried the body, the corpse, into the garden to bury it. I hid it under a strawberry-plant. It will never be found. Every day I shall eat a strawberry from that plant. Truly, how one can enjoy life when one knows how.

My servant wept; he thought his bird had flown away. How should any one ever suspect me? Hah! Hah!

Aug. 25.—I must kill a man! I must!

Aug. 29.—It is done. How simple a thing it is. I went to walk in the Vernes woods. I wasn't thinking of anything, of anything at all. Then I caught sight of a child in the road, a boy who was eating a piece of bread-and-butter. He stopped to watch me go by and said:

"How do you do, M'sieu le President?"

And the thought came into my head, suppose I kill him.

I replied, "Thou art alone, my boy?"

"Yes, M'sieu."

"Quite alone in the woods?"

"Yes, M'sieu."

The idea of killing him intoxicated me as if it were alcohol. I approached him quite quietly, certain that he would run away. And then I grabbed him by the throat. I choked it. I choked it with all my strength. He looked at me with frightened eyes. What eyes! Round, dark, limpid, terrified. I have never experienced an emotion so brutal—but so short. He held my wrists in his little hands and his body shook like a feather thrown upon a flame. Then he ceased to move.

My heart beat! Oh, the heart of the bird! I threw the body in the ditch, then grass on top of it.

I went home again and dined well. How simple a thing it was! That evening I was very gay, light-hearted, rejuvenated, and I spent the evening with the prefect. Every one found me witty.

But I did not see the blood. I am tranquil.

Aug. 30.—They have discovered the corpse and are looking for the murderer. Hah! Hah!

Sept. 1.—They have arrested two tramps, but there is no proof.

Sept. 2.—The parents have been to see me. They wept. Hah! Hah!

Oct. 6.—Nothing has been discovered. Some straggling vagabond must have done the deed. Hah! Hah! If I had seen the blood flow I believe I should now be tranquil!

Oct. 18.—The desire to kill penetrates my very marrow. It can be compared to the rages of love which torture you when you are twenty.

Oct. 22.—Another one. I was walking along the river-bank after breakfast, and I caught sight of a sleeping fisherman under a willow-tree. It was noon. A spade sticking up in a potato-field near by seemed to have been left there for the express purpose.

I took it; I came back; I raised it like a club, and in one blow I cut open with its edges the fisherman's head. Oh, he

bled, he did! Red blood, full of his brains. It ran down into the water quite gently. And I walked off slowly. If any one had seen me. . . . Hah! Hah! I should have made a fine assassin.

Oct. 25.—The case of the fisherman has made a great stir. They accuse his nephew, his nephew who was fishing with him, of the murder.

Oct. 26.—The examining magistrate declares the nephew is guilty. Everybody in the city believes it. Hah! Hah!

Oct. 27.—The nephew defends himself very badly. He declares that he had been to the village to buy bread and cheese. He swears that his uncle was killed during his absence. Who will believe him?

Oct. 28.—The nephew had to confess; they confused him so that he lost his head. Hah! Hah! There's justice for you.

Nov. 15.—They have overwhelming proofs against the nephew, who was his uncle's heir. I am to preside at the assizes.

Jan. 25.—To death! To death! I condemned him to death! Hah! Hah! The advocate-general spoke like an angel. Hah! Hah! Still another. I am going to see him executed.

March 18.—It is done. They guillotined him this morning. He died beautifully! Oh, beautifully! It gave me pleasure. How fine it was to see a man's head cut off. The blood spurted over like a jet, like a jet. Oh, if I could have bathed myself in it! What an intoxication to lie down under it, to let it drip on my hair, on to my face, and to get up all red, all red! Ah, if they knew!

Now I shall wait; I can wait. It would take so little for them to find me out.

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The manuscript contained several more pages but did not disclose any other crime.

The alienists to whom it was confided declared that there are many unknown insane just as adroit and as dangerous as this monstrous madman.