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*A Comedy about a Tragedy**

Dramatis Personae

Madame de Blinval

The Chevalier

Ergaste

An elegiac poet

A philosopher

A fat gentleman

A thin gentleman

Women

A footman

*The Last Day of
a Condemned Man*

1

Bicêtre

CONDEMNED TO DEATH!

I have been living with this thought for five weeks now, always alone with it, always chilled by its presence, always bent under its weight!

Once, because it seems years rather than weeks, I was a man like other men. Every day, every hour, every minute had its idea. My mind, young and fertile, was full of fancies. It liked to lay them out in front of me one by one, non-stop and at random, embellishing the crude and flimsy stuff of life with a never-ending stream of ornaments. There were young girls, bishops' magnificent copes, battles won, theatres full of noise and light, and then more young girls, walks in the dark of night beneath the spreading arms of the chestnut trees. There was always a party going on in my imagination. I could think about whatever I liked, I was free.

Now I'm a prisoner. My body is in irons in a dungeon, my mind imprisoned in an idea. A terrible, bloody, remorseless idea! I have only one thought now, one belief, one certainty: condemned to death!

Whatever I do this hellish thought is always there, like a leaden ghost beside me, alone and jealous, driving all other distractions away, face to face with wretched me, shaking me with its icy hands whenever I try and turn away or close my eyes. It creeps in everywhere my mind would like to escape to, mingles with every word that's spoken to me like an awful chorus, presses itself against the bars of my dungeon with me; haunts my waking, spies on my spasmodic sleep, appears in my dreams in the shape of a blade.

I have just woken with a start, hounded by it, thinking: "Oh, it's just a dream!" But no! Before my heavy eyelids have had time to open wide enough to see the deadly reality that surrounds me on the damp, dripping flagstones of my cell, in the pale glimmer of light from my lamp, in the coarse weave of my rough canvas clothes, on the stern face of the sentry whose cartridge pouch glints through the bars of

my dungeon, it seems as if a voice has already whispered in my ear: “Condemned to death!”

2

IT WAS ON A FINE MORNING IN AUGUST.

It was three days since my trial had begun, three days that my name and crime had been drawing hordes of onlookers who swept down onto the benches of the courtroom like crows round a corpse, three days that the fantastical band of judges, witnesses, lawyers, crown prosecutors had passed back and forth in front of me, now grotesque, now bloody, always grim and deadly. The first two nights I couldn't sleep from anxiety and dread; on the third I slept from boredom and fatigue. At midnight I left the jury deliberating. I was taken back to the straw in my dungeon and straight away fell into a deep sleep, a sleep of oblivion. It was the first rest I had had for many days.

I was still at the deepest point of that deep sleep when they came to wake me. This time the heavy tread and hobnailed boots of the deputy jailer, the jangling of his keys, the harsh grating of the bolts was not enough; it took his rough voice in my ear, his rough hand on my arm to drag me from listlessness – “Get up then!” I opened my eyes, sat up in alarm. At that instant, through the high narrow window of the cell I saw, on the ceiling of the corridor outside, the only sky it was given me to see, that yellowish play of light by which eyes grown accustomed to the gloom of prison immediately recognize the sun. I love the sun.

“Nice weather,” I said to the jailer.

For a moment he didn't reply, as if unsure whether it was worth the cost of a word; then with some effort he muttered curtly:

“Maybe.”

I didn't move, mind half-drowsy, mouth smiling, eyes fixed on the soft golden ripples that were mottling the ceiling.

“Looks like a nice day,” I repeated.

“Yes,” he replied. “They're waiting for you.”

Those few words, like the thread that stops a fly in mid-flight, hurled me back to reality. As if in a flash of lightning I suddenly saw the dark courtroom, the horseshoe of judges weighed down with their

blood-soaked rags, the three rows of witnesses with silly faces, the two policemen at each end of my bench, and the black gowns bustling about, the faces of the crowd thronging in the shadows at the back and, fastened on me, the fixed gaze of the twelve jurors who had stayed awake while I was asleep!

I got up; my teeth were chattering, my hands were shaking and couldn't find my clothes, my legs were weak. With my first step I stumbled like a porter with too much to carry. Yet I followed the jailer.

Two policemen were waiting outside the cell. They put the handcuffs back on me. They had a small, awkward little lock that they did up carefully. I let them: it was one machine working on another.

We went across an inner courtyard. The brisk morning air revived me. I looked up. The sky was blue and, interrupted by the tall chimneys, warm rays of sunlight traced patterns at the top of the tall dark walls of the prison. It was beautiful.

We went up a spiral staircase; we passed a corridor, then another, then a third; then a low door opened. A mixture of noise and warm air hit me in the face: it was the breath of the crowd in the courtroom. I went in.

As I appeared there was a mumble of weapons and voices. Benches were shifted noisily. Partitions creaked, and as I crossed the long room between the two blocs of the public behind walls of soldiers, it was as if I was the central point to which the strings that made all these gaping, straining faces move were attached.

At that moment I noticed I wasn't in irons, but I couldn't remember when they had been taken off.

Then there was silence. I reached my seat. The moment the commotion stopped among the crowd, it stopped in my mind too. And suddenly I understood clearly what up till then I had only made out confusedly, that the critical moment had arrived, that I was here to hear my sentence.

It's hard to explain, but the way the idea came to me didn't frighten me at all. The windows were open; the noises and the air of the town came in from outside; the room was bright as if for a wedding; here and there cheerful sunbeams traced the brilliant outline of the casements along the floor, across the tables, sometimes broken up in the corners; and from the dazzling diamond shapes of the windows each ray carved out a great prism of golden dust in the air.

At the far end the judges seemed satisfied, presumably delighted that they would soon be finished. In the presiding judge's face, lit up softly by a reflection from a window pane, there was something peaceful and kind; a young assessor, carefully rearranging his bands, was chatting away almost merrily with a pretty lady in a pink hat who had been given a seat behind him as a special favour.

Only the jury looked pale and exhausted, but it must have been from being up all night. Some of them were yawning. Nothing in their expressions gave any sign that these were men who had just handed down a death sentence; all I could make out on the faces of these good citizens was the desire to get some sleep.

Opposite me a window was wide open. I could hear the laughter of the flower sellers on the embankment; and on the edge of the window a pretty little yellow flower, filled with sun, danced in the breeze through a crack in the stone.

How could any gruesome thought find its way in through so many friendly sensations? Bathed in fresh air and sunlight it was impossible to think of anything but freedom; hope shone inside me like the daylight all around, and I waited confidently for my sentence just as you wait for liberation and life.

In the meantime my lawyer arrived. They had been waiting for him. He had just breakfasted well and heartily. Once he sat down he leant towards me and smiled.

"I'm hopeful," he said.

"Are you?" I replied, flippant and smiling too.

"Yes," he went on. "I don't know what the verdict is yet, but I expect they will have ruled out malice aforethought, so it will only be hard labour for life."

"What do you mean, Monsieur?" I replied, indignantly. "I'd rather it was death, a thousand times."

Yes, death! "Besides," some voice inside me said, "what risk is there in saying that? Have they ever passed the death sentence except at midnight, by torchlight in a dark dismal courtroom on a cold wet winter night? But in August, at eight o'clock in the morning on such a lovely day, with this good, kind jury, it's impossible!" And I went back to staring at the pretty yellow flower in the sunlight.

Suddenly the presiding judge, who had just been waiting for my lawyer, asked me to stand up. The soldiers shouldered arms; as if

by electricity the whole room was on its feet at the same instant. An insignificant, almost non-existent figure sitting at a table below the bench – I think it was the clerk of the court – began to speak, and read out the verdict that the jury had given in my absence. A cold sweat broke out all over me; I leant on the wall so as not to fall over.

“Counsel for the defence, have you anything to say before I pass sentence?” the judge asked.

Personally I would have had a lot to say, but I couldn’t think of anything. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.

My lawyer stood up.

I realized he was trying to mitigate the jury’s verdict, and to submit, instead of the sentence that went with it, the other sentence, the one I had been so upset to see him hoping for.

My indignation must have been very great to show itself among the thousands of emotions that were competing for my thoughts. I wanted to repeat out loud what I’d already said: “I’d rather it was death, a thousand times.” But I couldn’t find the breath, all I could do was hold him back roughly by the arm and cry out uncontrollably: “No!”

The public prosecutor battled with my lawyer while I listened with bemused satisfaction. Then the judges went out, then came back in again, and the presiding judge read out my sentence.

“Condemned to death!” said the crowd, and as I was led away all the people came rushing after me with a sound like a building collapsing. I just walked, feeling drunk and dumbfounded. Revolution had broken out inside of me. Until the death sentence I could feel myself breathing, quivering, living in the same world as other men; now I could clearly make out something like a wall between the world and myself. Nothing seemed like before. The large light-filled windows, the beautiful sun, the clear sky, the pretty flower, they were all pale, white, the colour of a shroud. These men, these women, these children who crushed forwards as I went past, to me they were like ghosts.

At the bottom of the stairs a dirty black carriage with barred windows was waiting for me. As I climbed in I glanced round the square. “That one’s condemned to death!” shouted passers-by, running towards the carriage. Through the cloud that seemed to have come between me and everything else I made out two young girls watching me avidly. “Oh goody,” said the younger one, clapping her hands. “It’ll be in six weeks’ time!”

3

CONDEMNED TO DEATH!

And why not? “All men,” I remember reading in some book or other, of which this was the only good part, “all men are condemned to death with their sentence suspended indefinitely”.* So what had actually changed for me?

Since the moment my death sentence was passed, how many people who had been planning to have a long life had died! How many of them, young and free and healthy, who had been intending to come and see my head roll on the Place de Grève had got there before me! Between now and then, how many people, walking around and breathing in the open air, coming and going as they liked, would still get there before me!

Besides, what was there about life that I would I actually miss? The dreary light, the black bread of the dungeon, my ration of thin soup squeezed from the convicts’ stewpot, being roughly treated – me, someone civilized by education – manhandled by jailers and warders, not seeing another human being who thought me worth talking to and who I felt the same about, constantly shuddering about what I had done as well as what they were going to do to me – to be honest, those were about the only possessions the headsman could take from me.

Oh what does it matter, it’s appalling!

4

THE BLACK CARRIAGE BROUGHT ME HERE, to monstrous Bicêtre.

From a distance the building looks quite stately. It appears on the brow of a hill on the horizon, and from a way off retains some of its former grandeur, the semblance of a royal château. But the closer you get the more dilapidated the palace turns out to be. The rotting gables are painful to behold. I don’t know what, but something disgraceful and degenerate sullies the regal façade; it’s as if the walls have leprosy. No more windows, no more window panes; just solid criss-crossed iron bars to which here and there the gaunt face of a convict or a lunatic is pressed.

Here you see life in the raw.

5

NO SOONER HAD I ARRIVED than firm hands seized hold of me. The precautions were stepped up: no knives, no forks for eating with; a straitjacket, a kind of sack made of sailcloth, gripped me tightly round the arms; they had my life to answer for. I had lodged an appeal. This costly business might go on for six or seven weeks and it was important to get me to the Place de Grève in one piece.

For the first few days I was treated with a gentleness that appalled me. Sympathy from a jailer smacks of the scaffold. Luckily, after a short while the usual routine took over; they mixed me up with the other prisoners in the collective brutality and stopped making unaccustomed kind exceptions that constantly reminded me of the executioner. It wasn't the only improvement. My youth, my submissiveness, the kind efforts of the prison chaplain and especially the few words of Latin I spoke to the prison supervisor, who didn't understand them, earned me a walk with the other prisoners once a week and rid me of the disabling straitjacket. After much hesitation I was also given ink, pen and paper and a small reading lamp.

Every Sunday after mass they let me out into the yard at exercise time. Here I can talk to the other prisoners; I really need that. They are good people, the poor wretches. They tell me about their dodges; it would horrify you, but I know they're bragging. They teach me the slang, to *rabbit the lingo* as they say. It's a whole language grafted onto everyday speech like a sort of hideous growth, a wart. Sometimes it has extraordinary force, an alarming and vivid irony: *there's strawberry jam on the frog* (blood on the road), *to marry the widow* (be hung) – as if the gallows rope was the widow of every hanged man. A thief's head has two names: *the sorbonne*, when it is contemplating, arguing about and encouraging a crime; *the crust* when the executioner cuts it off. Sometimes there is music-hall humour: *a wicker handkerchief* (a rag-and-bone man's pannier), *the liar* (the tongue); and everywhere, all the time, peculiar and mysterious words, ugly and squalid words that come from who knows where: *the stretch* (the executioner), *the cone* (death), *the shelf* (the place of execution). It makes you think of toads and spiders. When you hear people speak this language it's as if something dirty and dusty, a bundle of rags, is being shaken in your face.

At least these men pity me, but they're the only ones. The jailers, the deputy jailers, the turnkeys – I've nothing against them – laugh and gossip, talk about me, in front of me, as if I were just an object.

6*

I SAID TO MYSELF:

Since I have something to write with, why not do it? But what to write? Stuck between four cold, bare stone walls, with nowhere for my legs to take me, no horizon to look at, my only occupation being to spend all day mechanically watching the slow progress of the whitish square that the spyhole in my door projects onto the dark wall opposite and, as I was just saying, all alone with an idea, an idea of crime and punishment, of murder and death! Did I have anything to say, I who have nothing more to do in this world? And what is there in my empty withered brain worth writing about?

But why not? If everything around me is drab and colourless, isn't there a storm, a struggle, a tragedy going on inside me? Doesn't the obsession that has hold of me appear to me every hour, every second in a new form, more monstrous, more bloody the nearer the final day comes? Why don't I try and tell myself about all the violent, unfamiliar feelings I am having in this situation of abandonment? There is certainly no lack of material, and as short as my life may be there is still enough in the dread, the terror, the torments that are going to fill it from this moment till the last which can wear out a pen, run an inkwell dry. Besides, the only way not to suffer so much from this dread is to examine it; describing it will take my mind off it.

And anyway, maybe what I write won't be pointless. Won't this hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute, torture-by-torture diary of my sufferings, if I am strong enough to carry on until it becomes *physically* impossible to do so, this story of my feelings, by necessity unfinished although also as complete as possible, bring with it a great, profound lesson? In this statement of dying thoughts, this ever-growing sorrow, this form of mental post-mortem of a condemned man, is there not something for those who pass sentence to learn? Perhaps reading this will make them less flippant the next time it comes to tossing a thinking head, a man's head, onto what they call the scales of justice? Perhaps these

poor devils have never stopped to think about the slow sequence of torment that the swift, efficient wording of the death sentence entails? Have they ever had a moment's pause at the heart-rending idea that inside the man whose head they are severing there is a mind; a mind that was expecting to live, a soul that wasn't the least prepared for death? No. All they see is the downwards motion of a triangular blade, and probably believe that for the condemned man there is nothing before or afterwards.

These sheets of paper will put them right. If they are perhaps published one day they will focus their attention on the sufferings of the mind for a moment; because these are the ones they are not aware of. They rejoice at being able to kill without causing the body almost any suffering. But that's just the problem! What is physical pain beside mental pain? For pity's sake, is that what laws are! The day will come, and maybe these memoirs, a wretch's last thoughts, will have played a part...

Unless the breeze bowls these muddy bits of paper around the prison yard after my death, or they get ruined in the rain and are used to paste over the cracks in a jailer's broken window.

7

WHY SHOULD WHAT I WRITE HERE be of use to others, stop judges from judging, spare unfortunates, innocent or guilty, the agony to which I have been condemned? What's the point? What does it matter? After my head has been cut off, what is it to me if they cut off other people's? Was I really stupid enough to think that? To tear down the scaffold after I've mounted it? What do I get out of it, I ask you?

What! The sun, the springtime, fields of flowers, birds singing in the morning, the clouds, the trees, nature, liberty, life – none of that is for me now!

Oh! It's me who needs saving! Can it really be true that it's not possible, that I have to die tomorrow, maybe today, that that's how it is? O God! The terrible thought of smashing your head against the cell wall!

8

I MUST COUNT UP what I have left:

Allow three days after the sentence was passed for my appeal to be lodged.

A week's delay at the public prosecutor's department of the Crown Court, after which the *papers*, as they call them, are sent to the minister.

Two weeks at the minister's office, who doesn't even know they exist, and yet who supposedly, after going through them, passes them on to the Court of Appeal. There they are filed, indexed, recorded – because there is a long queue for the guillotine and everyone has to wait his turn.

Two weeks to make sure you don't get preferential treatment.

Finally the court sits, usually on a Thursday, rejects twenty appeals at a stroke and sends them all back to the minister, who sends them back to the public prosecutor, who sends them back to the executioner. Three days.

On the morning of the fourth day, as he is tying his cravat, the deputy public prosecutor says to himself: "There's still that business to be settled." And so if the assistant clerk of the court doesn't have a luncheon with friends which will get in the way, the order for the execution is drafted, drawn up, a fair copy made, dispatched, and at dawn the next day the sound of a structure being hammered together is heard on the Place de Grève, while at every crossroads the town criers are yelling hoarsely at the top of their voices.

Six weeks in all. The young girl was right.

So it's at least five weeks now – maybe six, I daren't count – that I've been in this country cottage called Bicêtre, and I think Thursday was three days ago.

9

I HAVE JUST WRITTEN MY WILL.

What's the point? My sentence includes costs, and everything I own will barely cover it. The guillotine is expensive.

I leave a mother, I leave a wife, I leave a child.

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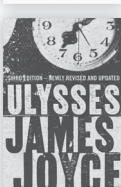
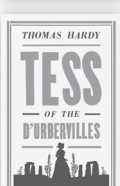
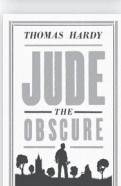
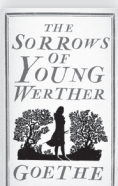
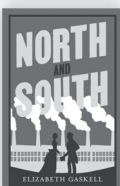
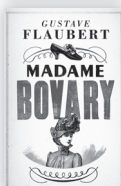
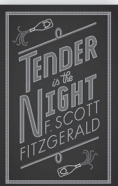
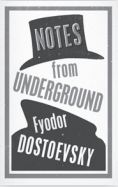
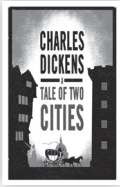
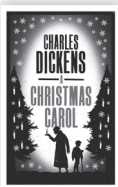


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