

Égalité in Equal Measures

by strannikov

The Faivre brothers were returning from lunch just ahead of the cart trundling slowly from the opposite direction. Guillaume, a head taller than anyone in the scant crowd milling about in the square, recognized Lorbert guiding the horse from that distance, even though the sky had grown overcast since morning. Marcel, who'd just dined amply on roast pig, was picking his available front teeth with one thumbnail, which inspired Guillaume to promptly swat his forearm. "We are again on duty!" he muttered to his younger and only slightly shorter brother. Marcel frowned at the swat, which caused him to scratch the inside of his upper lip, but, sensing Guillaume's officious mood, said nothing so as not to provoke him further.

Lorbert was escorting the four Girondist swine the Faivre brothers had been expecting. The crowd, such as it was, was squeezed with the tumbrel into the narrow alleyway leading to the square. A few cabbages and potatoes looked to be flying in wild arcs over the heads of the miserable Girondists, from one side and the other: either none of the rabble could aim or they were conserving their ammunition for lunch or supper. At least the women striding alongside the cart seemed to be landing their spittle generously on the Girondists, who each ducked or turned away rather than reply to the spitting. As the cart entered the square with its escort of sixty or eighty bedraggled women and children and a score or so of sans-culottes dressed in soiled revolutionary tricolors, Guillaume and Marcel completed their climb up the steps of the scaffold.

"I still wish we'd had one of these on the quay!" Marcel spoke admiringly of their red machine, slapping one of the sturdy support posts affectionately while it was still clean. "Would've made cleaning the halibut so much simpler." Guillaume snorted agreement almost silently as the crowd's jeers magnified in volume upon entry to the bricked square. Lorbert pulled the reins and the sans-culottes divided into two bunches, one to busily push the crowd back, the

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other to hustle the spit-soaked Girondists up the scaffold. A bell—Guillaume could never guess exactly where in the vicinity it was housed—chimed once, and moments later, Giteau with the Committee of Public Safety showed up briefly to read the charges against those about to die.

All the Girondists were quite pale, the appearance typical of those who'd been locked up for weeks and were now only moments from death. Once they stood bound atop the scaffold, some spitting resumed. Marcel almost stepped backwards off the platform after some spittle landed on one sleeve. "Hey! Watch it, you imbecile!" he shouted at Magnier, the stubby-legged chandler from the stall at the far end of the square, "I'm an officer of the Committee of Public Safety!" Magnier sneered before stamping off gruffly through the thickening crowd. Marcel wiped his sleeve on the back of his coat.

The Faivre brothers had come far since their days as fishmongers on the coast near Honfleur. The Revolution had brought them to Alençon, though more at Guillaume's vague urging than at the prospect of setting up shop anywhere in the city. "Easier than cutting the head off a halibut!" cousin Henri had exclaimed to Guillaume on a visit to the coast. Henri had served as an attendant to Marat until his murder and thus had the necessary connections to get them on, manning one of the provincial guillotines. As ridiculously simple to operate as it was, having two men on hand did add briskness to the proceedings.

The fourth Girondist had just been dispatched with a roar from the crowd, and a grimy grinning sans-culotte held the spattered head, shaking it rudely by its sparse long hair. Guillaume and Marcel rolled the headless body into its own wicker basket and were conferring with Lorbert about the disposition of the bodies and their heads, when Marcel noticed a short fellow with a grim sneer and a measuring rod striding towards them through the crowd. Guillaume spotted the short fellow only as he began his climb up the scaffold steps. "Ou—" Guillaume's voice broke off instantly as the short fellow flashed a paper first at the remaining sans-culottes and then

at Guillaume. Lorbert and his tumbrel pulled away slowly to exit from the other end of the square as the excited crowd dispersed.

"I am Darnier, a secretary for the Committee of Public Safety, as you see," Darnier began to explain. Guillaume's gaze turned from the red paper to Darnier's scowling face to the measuring rod in three successive blinks. "You have just dispatched the Girondist swine, no?"

"Well, as you see . . ." Marcel gestured broadly in a sweep from the spattered scaffold to the retreating cart laden with eight wicker baskets.

"Very good—for now," Darnier sighed. "The Committee, we have just learned from a courier, has adjourned from a special executive session, and henceforth, a slight change of procedure is being instituted that I am sure you will hasten to comply with."

"Oh certainly!" Marcel gushed, although Guillaume continued to eye uncertainly the measuring rod Darnier held and showed no sign of hearing anything.

"You are to remove the lunette currently in use," Darnier tapped with his measuring rod the top of the frame with its single red aperture, "and replace it with the new lunette being sent to you from Paris on orders from the Committee."

"What's wrong with this lunette?" Marcel expostulated. "We just dispatched four Girondists in less than ten minutes!"

"Marcel Faivre, do you dispute an express order of the Commit—?"

"No, he doesn't!" Guillaume instantly slapped a hand across Marcel's muttering mouth. "But do tell us, brother, what kind of lunette exactly are we to put in its place?" Guillaume politely inquired of Darnier.

"Guillaume Faivre, your rectitude is recognized," Darnier glared at Marcel while slightly softening his address to Guillaume. "A new lunette will arrive this afternoon with—two holes."

"Two holes, sir? What, so we can dispatch four Girondists in five minutes? But—"

“No, no! I see your misunderstanding!” Darnier now smiled, brutally, for the first time. “Oh no, this change is not to accommodate the necks of two vile swine at once! Why, for that, we'd need to manufacture longer blades, too! Uhhh, no, the Committee has decided—for the time being, mind you—to, ummm, slightly alter the function of your red machine.”

“Two holes?” Marcel mumbled.

“For the legs!” Darnier scowled again as he looked up into the faces of the bewildered Faivre brothers. He then laid the measuring rod along the edge of the guillotine, trying to decide how it should be placed for efficiency and utility. “Henceforth—at least for now—the purpose of the guillotine will be to make citizens all the same height!” Marcel burped without ceremony and squinted as his attention turned involuntarily to the wide hips of a woman standing on the edge of the square. Guillaume, for his part, had dined on roasted pheasant for lunch, and the bird was now somehow trying to wing its way up out of his belly.

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