

IVAN TURGENEV

Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883) is in the pantheon of great nineteenth-century Russian writers, along with Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. He was the leader of the Westernizing, progressive wing of Russian letters, as opposed to the more isolationist, mystically inclined Slavophiles, such as Dostoevsky. Turgenev came early to an understanding of injustice, watching his cruel, domineering mother mistreat the peasants on her estate and everyone else around her. Indeed, his short story collection, A Sportsman's Sketches, is credited with helping to convince Alexander II to emancipate the serfs. Although Turgenev's fiction (Fathers and Sons, Virgin Soil, and others) grew out of a political analysis of the social conditions in Russia and an attempt to influence their direction, he was not a propagandist, preferring instead to practice the objective, observant, uninsistent storytelling associated with the French realist school. He spent a great deal of time in Paris, where he befriended many of the great writers of the day, such as Flaubert and George Sand; his career has come to embody cosmopolitanism and humaneness.

Turgenev was a powerful and accomplished essayist—not surprising for a writer who elevated the literary sketch to an art. "The Execution of Tropmann," included in his Literary Reminiscences, was one of his autobiographical sketches from Paris, written shortly after the event, when it was still fresh in his mind. Tropmann had been convicted of the murder of a man named Kink, his wife, and their six children, and was executed on January 19, 1870. Turgenev's essay—one of the strongest indictments of capital punishment ever written—is particularly effective because it implicates the writer in the barbarity of the deed, as a semi-unwilling voyeur to the carnival atmosphere of a public guillotining. The piece may thus be seen as a

forerunner of the New Journalism, in which the very notion of journalistic neutrality is questioned and writers include themselves in the tale, letting subjective feelings color the report. It is interesting that Dostoevsky, who detested Turgenev, mocked the writer's "squeamishness, about himself, about his own integrity and peace of mind, and that in the sight of a chopped off head!"—a willful misinterpretation of Turgenev's scruples as narcissism. The piece also belongs to the subgenre of description of an urban spectacle, to which Hazlitt and Lamb and many other nineteenth-century writers were attracted and which characterized the crowd as either benign or malevolent but in any case alive, with a will of its own.

The Execution of Tropmann

1

IN JANUARY OF THE CURRENT YEAR (1870), while dining in Paris at the house of an old friend of mine, I received from M. Du Camp, the well-known writer and expert on the statistics of Paris, quite an unexpected invitation to be present at the execution of Tropmann—and not only at his execution: it was proposed that I should be admitted to the prison itself together with a small number of other privileged persons. The terrible crime committed by Tropmann has not yet been forgotten, but at that time Paris was interested in him and his impending execution as much as, if not more than, the recent appointment of the pseudo-Parliamentarian ministry of Olivier or the murder of Victor Noir, who fell at the hand of the afterwards surprisingly acquitted Prince P[ierre] Bonaparte. In the windows of all the photographers' and stationers' shops were exhibited whole rows of photographs showing a young fellow with a large forehead, dark eyes and puffy lips, the "famous" Pantin murderer (*de l'illustre assassin de Pantin*), and already for some evenings running thousands of workmen had gathered in the environs of the Roquette prison in the vain expectation of the erection of the guillotine, and dispersed only after midnight. Taken by surprise by M. Du Camp's proposal, I accepted it without giving it much thought. And having promised to arrive at the place fixed for our meeting—at the statue of Prince Eugene, on the boulevard of the same name, at 11 o'clock in the evening—I did not want to go back on my word. False pride prevented my doing so. . . . And what if

they should think that I was a coward? As a punishment of myself—and as a lesson to others—I should now like to tell everything I saw. I intend to revive in my memory all the painful impressions of that night. It will not be only the reader's curiosity that will be satisfied: he may derive some benefit from my story.

2

A small crowd of people was already waiting for Du Camp and me at the statue of Prince Eugene. Among them was M. Claude, the police commissioner of Paris (*chef de la police de sûreté*), to whom Du Camp introduced me. The others were, like myself, privileged visitors, journalists, reporters, etc. Du Camp had warned me that we should probably have to spend a sleepless night in the office of the prison governor. The execution of condemned criminals takes place in winter at seven o'clock in the morning; but one has to be at the prison before midnight or one might not be able to push one's way through the crowd. There is only about half a mile from the statue of Prince Eugene to the Roquette prison, but so far I could see nothing in any way out of the ordinary. There were just a few more people on the boulevard than usual. One thing, though, one could not help noting: almost all the people were going—and some, especially women, running along—in the same direction: besides, all the cafés and pot-houses were ablaze with lights, which is very rare in the remote quarters of Paris, especially so late at night. The night was not foggy, but dull, damp without rain, and cold without frost, a typical French January night. M. Claude said that it was time to go, and off we went. He preserved the imperatible cheerfulness of a man of affairs in whom such events did not arouse any feelings, except perhaps the desire to have done with his sad duty as soon as possible. M. Claude was a man of about fifty, of medium height, thick-set, broad-shouldered, with a round, closely cropped head and small, almost minute, features. Only his forehead and chin, and the back of his head, were extraordinarily broad; his unflinching energy came out in his dry and even voice, his pale, grey eyes, his short, strong fingers, in his muscular legs, and in all his unhurried but firm movements. He was said to be an expert at his profession, who inspired mortal terror in all thieves and murderers. Political crimes were not part of his duties. His assistant, M. J. . . . , whom Du Camp also greatly admired, looked like a kindly, almost sentimental man and his manners were much more refined. With the exception of these two gentlemen and perhaps Du Camp, we all felt a little awkward—or did it only seem to me to be so?—and a little ashamed, too, though we walked along jauntily—as though on a shooting expedition.

The nearer we came to the prison, the more crowded the streets be-

came, though there were no real crowds as yet. No shouts could be heard, nor even any too loud conversations; it was evident that the "performance" had not yet commenced. Only the street urchins were already weaving round us; with their hands thrust in the pockets of their trousers and the peaks of their caps pulled over their eyes, they sauntered along with that special lolling, flitting gait, which can only be seen in Paris and which in the twinkling of an eye can be changed into a most quick run and the leaps of a monkey.

"There he is—there he is—it's him!" a few voices shouted around us.

"Why," Du Camp said to me suddenly, "you have been mistaken for the executioner!"

"A lovely beginning!" I thought.

The Paris executioner, *Monsieur de Paris*, whose acquaintance I made during that same night, is as tall and as grey as I.

But soon we came to a long, not too wide, square, bounded on two sides by two barrack-like buildings of grimy aspect and crude architecture: that was Roquette Square. On the left was the prison for young criminals (*prison des jeunes détenus*) and on the right—the house of the condemned prisoners (*maison de dépôt pour les condamnés*), or Roquette Prison.

3

A squad of soldiers was drawn up four deep right across the square, and about two hundred feet from it, another squad was also drawn up four deep. As a rule, no soldiers are present at an execution, but this time, in view of Tropmann's "reputation" and the present state of public opinion, excited by Noir's murder, the government thought it necessary to take special measures and not to leave the preservation of law and order to the police alone. The main gates of Roquette prison were exactly in the centre of the empty space, closed in by the soldiers. A few police sergeants walked slowly up and down before the gates; a young, rather fat police officer in an unusually richly embroidered cap (as it appeared the chief inspector of that quarter of the city) rushed upon our group with such insolence that it reminded me of the good old days in my beloved country, but recognizing his superiors, he calmed down. They let us into the small guard-room beside the gates with immense precautions, hardly opening the gates, and—after a preliminary examination and interrogation, took us across two inner courtyards, one large and another small, to the governor's lodgings. The governor, a tall, stalwart man, with a grey moustache and imperial, had the typical face of a French infantry officer, an aquiline nose, immobile, rapacious eyes and a tiny skull. He received us very politely and benignly; but even without his being aware of it, every gesture of his, every

word of his, at once showed that he was "a reliable fellow" (*un gaillard solide*), an utterly loyal servant, who would not hesitate to carry out any order of his master. Indeed, he had proved his zeal in action: on the night of the *coup d'état* of December 2nd, he occupied with his battalion the printing works of the *Moniteur*. Like a real gentleman, he put the whole of his apartment at our disposal. It was on the second floor of the main building and consisted of four fairly well furnished rooms; in two of them a fire was lit in the fireplace. A small Italian greyhound with a dislocated leg and a mournful expression in her eyes, as though she, too, felt to be a prisoner, limped about, wagging her tail, from one rug to another. There were eight of us visitors; some of them I recognized from their photographs (Sardou, Albert Wolf), but I did not feel like talking to any of them. We all sat down on chairs in the drawing-room (Du Camp had gone out with M. Claude). It goes without saying that Tropmann became the subject of conversation and, as it were, the centre of all our thoughts. The prison governor told us that he had been asleep since nine o'clock in the evening and that he slept like a log; that he seemed to have guessed what had happened to his request for a reprieve; that he had implored him, the governor, to tell him the truth; that he kept insisting stubbornly that he had accomplices whom he refused to name; that he would probably lose his nerve at the decisive moment, but that he ate with appetite, did not read books, etc., etc. For our part, some of us wondered whether one ought to give credence to the words of a criminal who had proved himself to be an inveterate liar, went over the details of the murder, asked ourselves what the phrenologists would make of Tropmann's skull, raised the question of capital punishment—but all this was so lifeless, so dull, so platitudinous, that even those who spoke did not feel like carrying on. To talk of something else was rather embarrassing—impossible; impossible out of respect for death alone, for the man who was doomed to die. We were all overwhelmed by a feeling of irksome and wearisome—yes, wearisome-uneasiness: no one was really bored, but this dreary feeling was a hundred times worse than boredom! It seemed as though there would be no end to the night! As for me, there was one thing I was sure of, namely that I had no right to be where I was, that no psychological or philosophic considerations excused me. M. Claude came back and told us how the notorious Jude had slipped through his fingers and how he was still hoping to catch him if he was still alive. But suddenly we heard the heavy clatter of wheels and a few moments later we were informed that the guillotine had arrived. We all rushed out into the street—just as though we were glad of the news!

Before the prison gates stood a huge, closed van, drawn by three horses, harnessed one behind the other; another, two-wheeled van, a small and low one, which looked like an oblong box and was drawn by one horse, had stopped a little further off. (That one, as we learned later, was to convey the body of the executed man to the cemetery immediately after the execution.) A few workmen in short blouses were to be seen round the vans, and a tall man in a round hat, white necktie and a light overcoat thrown over his shoulders, was giving orders in an undertone. . . . That was the executioner. All the authorities—the prison governor, M. Claude, the district police inspector, and so on, were surrounding and greeting him. "*Ah, Monsieur Indric! bon soir, Monsieur Indric!*" (His real name is Heidenreich: he is an Alsatian.) Our group, too, walked up to him: *he* became for a moment the centre of our attention. There was a certain strained but respectful familiarity in the way he was treated by everybody. "We don't look down upon you for you are, after all, a person of importance!" Some of us, probably just to show off, even shook hands with him. (He had a pair of beautiful hands of remarkable whiteness.) I recalled a line from Pushkin's *Poltava*:—

*The executioner . . .
Playing with his white hands . . .*

M. Indric carried himself very simply, gently and courteously, but not without a touch of patriarchal gravity. It seemed that he felt that we regarded him that night as only second in importance after Tropmann, and, as it were, his first minister.

The workmen opened the big van and began taking out of it all the component parts of the guillotine, which they had to put up within fifteen feet of the prison gates.¹ Two lanterns began moving to and fro just above the ground, lighting up the polished cobblestones of the roadway with small, bright circles of light. I looked at my watch—it was only half past twelve! It had grown much duller and colder. There was already a great number of people about—and behind the lines of the soldiers, bordering the empty space in front of the prison, there rose the uninterrupted and confused din of human voices. I walked up to the soldiers: they stood motionless, drawing closer a little and breaking the original symmetry of

¹ The readers who wish to acquaint themselves not only with all the particulars of the "execution" but also with everything that comes before it, should consult M. Du Camp's excellent article: *La Prison de la Roquette* in the *Revue des deux Mondes*, No. 1, 1870.

their ranks. Their faces expressed nothing but cold and patiently submissive boredom; and even the faces I could discern behind the shakos and uniforms of the soldiers and behind the three-cornered hats and tunics of the policemen, the faces of the workmen and artisans, expressed almost the same thing, only with the addition of a sort of indefinable irony. In front, from behind the massively stirring and pressing crowd, one could hear exclamations, like: *Ohé Tropmann! Ohé Lambert! Fallait pas qu'y aille!* Shouts, shrill whistles. One could clearly make out some abusive argument about a place, a fragment of a cynical song came creeping along like a snake—and there was a sudden burst of loud laughter, instantly caught up in the crowd and ending with a roar of coarse guffaws. The "real business" had not yet begun; one could not hear the anti-dynastic shouts everyone expected, nor the all too familiar menacing reverberations of the Marseillaise.

I went back to the place near the slowly growing guillotine. A certain gentleman, curly-headed and dark-faced, in a soft, grey hat, probably a lawyer, was standing beside me haranguing two or three other gentlemen in tightly buttoned up overcoats, waving the forefinger of his right hand forcefully up and down, trying to prove that Tropmann was not a murderer, but a maniac. "*Un maniaque! Je vais vous le prouver! Suivez mon raisonnement!*" he kept saying. "*Son mobile n'était pas l'assassinat, mais un orgueil que je nommerais volontiers démesuré! Suivez mon raisonnement!*" The gentlemen in the overcoats "followed his reasoning," but, judging by their expressions, he scarcely convinced them; and the worker who sat on the platform of the guillotine looked at him with undisguised contempt. I returned to the prison governor's apartment.

A few of our "colleagues" had already gathered there. The courteous governor was regaling them with mulled wine. Again they started discussing whether Tropmann was still asleep, what he ought to be feeling and whether he could hear the noise of the people in spite of the distance of his cell from the street, and so on. The governor showed us a whole heap of letters addressed to Tropmann, who, as the governor assured us, refused to read them. Most of them seemed to be full of silly jokes, but there were also some that were serious, in which he was conjured to repent and confess everything; one Methodist clergyman sent a whole theological thesis on twenty pages; there were also small notes from ladies, who even enclosed flowers—marguerites and immortelles—in some of them. The prison governor told us that Tropmann had tried to get some poison from the prison pharmacist and wrote a letter asking for it, which the pharma-

cist, of course, at once forwarded to the authorities. I could not help feeling that our worthy host was rather at a loss to explain to himself the interest we took in a man like Tropmann who, in his opinion, was a savage and disgusting animal, and almost ascribed it to the idle curiosity of civilian men of the world, the "idle rich." After a little talk we just crawled off into different corners. During the whole of that night we wandered about like condemned souls, "*comme des âmes en peine*," as the French say; went into rooms, sat down side by side on chairs in the drawing room, inquired after Tropmann, glanced at the clock, yawned, went downstairs into the yard and into the street again, came back, again sat down. . . . Some told drawing room stories, exchanged trivial personal news, touched lightly on politics, the theatre, Noir's murder; others tried to crack jokes, to say something witty, but, somehow, it did not come off at all and—provoked a sort of unpleasant laughter, which was cut short immediately, and a sort of false approbation. I found a tiny sofa in the first room and, somehow or other, managed to lie down on it. I tried to sleep but, of course, did not sleep. I did not doze off for one moment.

The distant hollow noise of the crowd was getting louder, deeper and more and more unbroken. At three o'clock, according to M. Claude, who kept coming into the room, sitting down on a chair, falling asleep at once and disappearing again, summoned by one of his subordinates, there were already more than twenty-five thousand people gathered there. The noise struck me by its resemblance to the distant roar of the sea: the same sort of unending Wagnerian *crescendo*, not rising continuously, but with huge intervals between the ebb and flow; the shrill notes of women's and children's voices rose in the air like thin spray over this enormous rumbling noise; there was the brutal power of some elemental force discernible in it. It would grow quiet and die down for a moment, then the hubbub would start again, grow and swell, and in another moment it seemed about to strike, as though wishing to tear everything down, and then it would again retreat, grow quiet, and again swell—and there seemed to be no end to it. And what, I could not help asking myself, did this noise signify? Impatience, joy, malice? No! It did not serve as an echo of any separate, any human feeling. . . . It was simply the rumble and the roar of some elemental force.

6

At about three o'clock in the morning I must have gone out for the tenth time into the street. The guillotine was ready. Its two beams, separated by about two feet, with the slanting line of the connecting blade, stood out dimly and strangely rather than terribly against the dark sky. For some

reason I imagined that those beams ought to be more distant from each other; their proximity lent the whole machine a sort of sinister shapeliness, the shapeliness of a long, carefully stretched out swan's neck. The large, dark-red wicker basket, looking like a suitcase, aroused a feeling of disgust in me. I knew that the executioners would throw the warm and still quivering dead body and the cut off head into that basket. . . . The mounted police (*garde municipale*), who had arrived a little earlier, took up their position in a large semi-circle before the façade of the prison; from time to time the horses neighed, gnawed at their bits and tossed their heads; large drops of froth showed up white on the road between their forelegs. The riders dozed sombrely beneath their bearskins, pulled over their eyes. The lines of the soldiers, cutting across the square and holding back the crowds, fell back further: now there were not two hundred but three hundred feet of empty space before the prison. I went up to one of those lines and gazed for a long time at the people crammed behind it; their shouting actually was elemental, that is, senseless. I still remember the face of a workman, a young fellow of about twenty: he stood there grinning, with his eyes fixed on the ground, just as though he were thinking of something amusing, then he would suddenly throw back his head, open his mouth wide and begin to shout in a drawn-out voice, without words, and then his head would again drop and he would start grinning again. What was going on inside that man? Why did he consign himself to such a painfully sleepless night, to an almost eight-hour long immobility? My ears did not catch any snatches of conversation; only occasionally there came through the unceasing uproar the piercing cry of a hawker selling a leaflet about Tropmann, about his life, his execution and even his "last words." . . . Or, again, an argument broke out somewhere far away, or there would be a hideous burst of laughter, or some women would start screaming. . . . This time I heard the Marseillaise, but it was sung only by five or six men, and that, too, with interruptions. The Marseillaise becomes significant only when thousands are singing it. *A bas Pierre Bonaparte!* someone shouted at the top of his voice. . . . Oo—oo—ah—ah! the crowd responded in an incoherent roar. In one place the shouts assumed the measured rhythm of a polka: one—two—three—four! one—two—three—four—to the well-known tune of *des champions!* A heavy, rank breath of alcoholic fumes came from the crowd: a great deal of wine had been drunk by all those bodies; there were a great many drunken men there. It was not for nothing that the pot-houses glowed with red lights in the general background of this scene. The night had grown pitch-dark; the sky had become totally overcast and turned black. There were small clumps on the sparse trees, looming indistinctly out of the darkness like phantoms: those were street urchins who had climbed up on the trees and were sitting among the branches, whistling and

screaming like birds. One of them had fallen down and, it is said, was fatally injured, having broken his spine, but he only aroused loud laughter, and that, too, for a short time.

On my way back to the prison governor's apartment, I passed the guillotine and saw on its platform the executioner surrounded by a small crowd of inquisitive people. He was carrying out a "rehearsal" for them; threw down the hinged plank, to which the criminal was fastened and which, as it fell, touched with its end the semi-circular slot between the beams; he let fall the knife, which ran down heavily and smoothly with a rapid, hollow roar, and so on. I did not stop to watch this "rehearsal," that is to say, I did not climb on to the platform: the feeling of some unknown transgression committed by myself, of some secret shame, was growing stronger and stronger inside me. . . . It is perhaps to this feeling that I must ascribe the fact that the horses, harnessed to the vans and calmly chewing the oats in their nosebags, seemed to me at that moment to be the only innocent creatures among us all.

Once more I went back to the solitude of my little sofa and once more I began to listen to the roar of the breakers on the sea-shore. . . .

7

Contrary to what is generally asserted, the *last* hour of waiting passes much more quickly than the first and, more especially, than the second or third. . . . So it happened this time. We were surprised at the news that it had struck six and that only one hour remained to the moment of execution. We had to go to Tropmann's cell in exactly half an hour: half past six. All traces of sleep at once disappeared from all the faces. I don't know what the others felt, but I felt terribly sick at heart. New figures appeared: a priest, a small, grey-haired little man with a thin little face flashed by in his long, black cassock with the ribbon of the Légion d'Honneur and a low, wide-brimmed hat. The prison governor prepared a sort of breakfast for us, *une collation*; huge cups of chocolate appeared on the round table in the drawing-room. . . . I did not even go near it, though our hospitable host advised me to fortify myself, "because the morning air might be harmful." To take food at that moment seemed—disgusting to me. Good Lord, a feast at such a time. "I have no right," I kept saying to myself for the hundredth time since the beginning of that night.

"Is he still asleep?" one of us asked, sipping his chocolate.

(They were all talking of Tropmann without referring to him by name: there could be no question of any other *him*.)

"Yes, he's asleep," replied the prison governor.

"In spite of this terrible racket?"

(The noise had, in fact, grown extraordinarily loud and turned into a kind of hoarse roar; the menacing chorus, no longer crescendo, rumbled on victoriously, gaily.)

"His cell is behind three walls," replied the prison governor.

M. Claude, whom the prison governor evidently treated as the most important person among us, looked at his watch and said: "Twenty past six."

We must, I expect, have all shuddered inwardly, but we just put on our hats and set off noisily after our guide.

"Where are you dining today?" a reporter asked in a loud voice.

But that struck us all as a little too unnatural.

8

We went out into the large prison courtyard; and there, in the corner on the right before a half-closed door, a sort of roll-call took place; then we were shown into a tall, narrow and entirely empty room with a leather stool in the centre.

"It is here that *la toilette du condamné* takes place," Du Camp whispered to me.

We did not all get in: there were only ten of us, including the prison governor, the priest, M. Claude and his assistant. During the next two or three minutes that we spent in that room (some kind of official documents were being signed there) the thought that we had no right to do what we were doing, that by being present with an air of hypocritical solemnity at the killing of a fellow human being, we were performing some odious, iniquitous farce—that thought flashed across my mind for the last time; as soon as we set off, again after M. Claude, along the wide stone corridor, dimly lit by two night-lights, I no longer felt anything except that now—now—this minute—this second. . . . We rapidly climbed two staircases into another corridor, walked through it, went down a narrow spiral staircase and found ourselves before an iron door. . . . Here!

The warder unlocked the door cautiously. It opened quietly—and we all went in quietly and in silence into a rather spacious room with yellow walls, a high barred window and a crumpled bed on which no one was lying. . . . The steady light of a large night lamp lit up all the objects in the room quite clearly.

I was standing a little behind the rest and, I remember, screwed up my eyes involuntarily; however, I saw at once, diagonally opposite me, a young, black-haired, black-eyed face, which, moving slowly from the left to right, gazed at us all with huge round eyes. That was Tropmann. He

had woken up before our arrival. He was standing before the table on which he had just written a farewell (though rather trivial) letter to his mother. M. Claude took off his hat and went up to him.

"Tropmann," he said in his dry, soft, but peremptory voice, "we have come to inform you that your appeal for a reprieve has been dismissed and that the hour of retribution has come for you."

Tropmann turned his eyes on him, but they were no longer "huge"; he looked calmly, almost somnolently, and did not utter a word.

"My child," the priest exclaimed dully, going up to him from the other side, "*du courage!*"

Tropmann looked at him exactly as he had looked at M. Claude.

"I knew he wouldn't be afraid," said M. Claude in a confident tone, addressing us all. "Now when he has got over the first shock (*le premier choc*), I can answer for him."

(So does a schoolmaster, wishing to cajole his pupil, tell him beforehand that he is "a clever fellow.")

"Oh, I'm not afraid (*Oh! je n'ai pas peur!*)," said Tropmann, addressing M. Claude again, "I'm not afraid!"

His voice, a pleasant, youthful baritone, was perfectly even.

The priest took a small bottle out of his pocket.

"Won't you have a drop of wine, my child?"

"Thank you, no," Tropmann replied politely, with a slight bow.

M. Claude addressed him again.

"Do you insist that you are not guilty of the crime for which you've been condemned?"

"I did not strike the blow! (*Je n'ai pas frappé!*)"

"But—? the prison governor interjected.

"I did not strike the blow!"

(For some time past Tropmann, as everyone knows, had asserted, contrary to his former depositions, that he did take the Kink family to the place where they had been butchered, but that they were murdered by his associates, and that even the injury on his hand was due to his attempt to save one of the small children. However, he had told as many lies during his trial as very few criminals have done before him.)

"And do you still assert that you had accomplices?"

"Yes."

"You can't name them, can you?"

"I can't and I won't. I won't," Tropmann raised his voice and his face flushed. It seemed as though he were going to be angry.

"Oh, all right, all right," M. Claude said hurriedly, as though implying that he had put his questions only as a formality and that there was something else that had to be done now. . . .

Tropmann had to undress.

Two warders went up to him and began taking off his prison strait-jacket (*camisole de force*), a kind of blouse of coarse bluish cloth, with belts and buckles behind, long sewn-up sleeves, to the ends of which strong pieces of tape were fastened near the thighs by the waist. Tropmann stood sideways, within two feet of me. Nothing prevented me from scrutinizing his face carefully. It could have been described as handsome but for the unpleasantly full lips, which made his mouth protrude a little too much and turn upwards funnel-like, just as with animals, and behind his lips were two rows of bad, sparse, fan-like teeth. He had thick, slightly wavy, dark hair, long eyebrows, expressive, protruding eyes, a wide clear forehead, a regular, slightly aquiline nose, little curls of black down on his chin. . . . If you happened to meet such a man outside prison and not in such surroundings, he would, no doubt, have made a good impression on you. Hundreds of such faces were to be seen among young factory workers, pupils of public institutions, etc. Tropmann was of medium height and of a youthfully thin and slender build. He looked to me like an overgrown boy, and, indeed, he was not yet twenty. He had a natural, healthy, slightly rosy complexion; he did not turn pale even at our entrance. . . . There could be no doubt that he really had slept all night. He did not raise his eyes and his breathing was regular and deep, like a man walking up a steep hill. Once or twice he shook his hair as though wishing to dismiss a troublesome thought, tossed back his head, threw a quick glance at the ceiling and heaved a hardly perceptible sigh. With the exception of those, almost momentary, movements, nothing in him disclosed, I won't say, fear, but even agitation or anxiety. We were all, I am sure, much paler and more agitated than he. When his hands were released from the sewn-up sleeves of the strait-jacket, he held up this strait-jacket in front of him, on his chest, with a pleased smile, while it was being undone at the back; little children behave like that when they are being undressed. Then he took off his shirt himself, put on another clean one, and carefully buttoned the neckband. . . . It was strange to see the free, sweeping movements of that naked body, those bare limbs against the yellowish background of the prison wall. . . .

Then he bent down and put on his boots, knocking loudly with his heels and soles against the floor and the wall to make sure his feet got into them properly. All this he did cheerfully and without any sign of constraint—almost gaily, just as though he had been invited to go for a walk. He was silent and—we were silent. We merely exchanged glances, shrugging our shoulders involuntarily with surprise. We were all struck by the simplicity of his movements, a simplicity which, like any other calm and natural manifestation of life, amounted almost to elegance. One of our colleagues, who met me by accident later during that day, told me that all during our stay in Tropmann's cell, he had kept imagining that it was not

1870 but 1794, that we were not ordinary citizens but Jacobins, and that we were taking to his execution not a common murderer but a marquis-legitimist, *un ci-devant, un talon rouge, monsieur!*

It has been observed that when people sentenced to death have their sentences read out to them, they either lapse into complete insensibility and, as it were, die and decompose beforehand, or show off and brazen it out; or else give themselves up to despair, weep, tremble and beg for mercy. . . . Tropmann did not belong to any of these categories—and that was why he puzzled even M. Claude himself. Let me say, by the way, that if Tropmann had begun to howl and weep, my nerves would certainly not have stood it and I should have run away. But at the sight of that composure, that simplicity and, as it were, modesty—all the feelings in me—the feelings of disgust for a pitiless murderer, a monster who cut the throats of little children while they were crying, *Maman! Maman!*, the feeling of compassion, finally, for a man whom death was about to swallow up, disappeared and dissolved in—a feeling of astonishment. What was sustaining Tropmann? Was it the fact that though he did not show off, he did “cut a figure” before *spectators*, gave us his last performance? Or was it innate fearlessness or vanity aroused by M. Claude’s words, the pride of the struggle that had to be kept up to the end—or something else, some still undivined feeling? . . . That was a secret he took to the grave with him. Some people are still convinced that Tropmann was not in his right mind. (I have mentioned earlier the lawyer in the white hat, whom, incidentally, I never saw again.) The aimlessness, one might almost say, the absurdity of the annihilation of the entire Kink family serves to a certain extent as a confirmation of that point of view.

9

But presently he finished with his boots and—straightened out, shook himself—ready! *Again* they put the prison jacket on him. M. Claude asked us to go out and—leave Tropmann alone with the priest. We did not have to wait even two minutes in the corridor before his small figure with his head held up fearlessly appeared among us. His religious feelings were not very strong and he probably carried out the last rite of confession before the priest, absolving his sins, just as a rite. All of our group with Tropmann in the centre at once went up the narrow spiral staircase, which we had descended a quarter of an hour before, and—disappeared in pitch darkness: the night lamp on the staircase had gone out. It was an awful moment. We were all rushing upstairs, we could hear the rapid and harsh clatter of our feet on the iron steps, we trod on each other’s heels, we knocked against each other’s shoulders, one of us had his hat knocked off,

someone behind me shouted angrily: “*Mais sacrédieu!* Light a candle! Let’s have some light!” And there among us, together with us, in the pitch darkness was our victim, our prey—that unhappy man—and who of those who were pushing and scrambling upstairs was he? Would it not occur to him to take advantage of the darkness and with all his agility and the determination of despair to escape—where? Anywhere, to some remote corner of the prison—and just knock his head against a wall there! At least, he’d have killed himself. . . .

I do not know whether these “apprehensions” occurred to anyone else. . . . But they appeared to be in vain. Our whole group with the small figure in the middle emerged from the inside recess of the staircase into the corridor. Tropmann evidently belonged to the guillotine—and the procession set off towards it.

10

This procession could be called a flight. Tropmann walked in front of us with quick, resilient, almost bounding steps; he was obviously in a hurry, and we all hurried after him. Some of us, anxious to have a look at his face once more, even ran ahead to the right and the left of him. So we rushed across the corridor and ran down the other staircase, Tropmann jumping two steps at a time, ran across another corridor, jumped over a few steps and, at last, found ourselves in the tall room with the stool which I have mentioned and on which “the toilet of the condemned man” was to be completed. We entered through one door, and from the other door there appeared, walking importantly, in a white necktie and a black “suit,” the executioner, looking for all the world like a diplomat or a protestant pastor. He was followed by a short, fat old man in a black coat, his first assistant, the hangman of Beauvais. The old man held a small leather bag in his hand. Tropmann stopped at the stool. Everyone took up a position round him. The executioner and his old assistant stood to the right of him, the prison governor and M. Claude to the left. The old man unlocked the key of the bag, took out a few white raw-hide straps, some of them long and some short, and kneeling with difficulty behind Tropmann, began hobbling his legs. Tropmann accidentally stepped on the end of one of those straps and the old man, trying to pull it out, muttered twice: “*Pardon, monsieur*” and, at last, touched Tropmann on the calf of the leg. Tropmann at once turned round and with his customary polite half-bow raised his foot and freed the strap. Meanwhile the priest was softly reading prayers in French out of a small book. Two other assistants came up, quickly removed the jacket from Tropmann, tied his hands behind him and began tying the straps round his whole body. The chief executioner

gave orders, pointing here and there with a finger. It seemed that there were not enough holes in the straps for the tongues to go through: no doubt, the man who made the holes had a fatter man in mind. The old man at first searched in his bag, then fumbled about in all his pockets and, having felt everything carefully, at last drew out from one of them a small, crooked awl with which he began painfully to bore holes in the straps; his unskilful fingers, swollen with gout, obeyed him badly, and, besides, the hide was new and thick. He would make a hole, try it out—the tongue would not go through: he had to bore a little more. The priest evidently realised that things were not as they should be, and glancing stealthily once or twice over his shoulder, began to draw out the words of the prayers, so as to give the old man time to get things right. At last the operation during which, I frankly confess, I was covered with cold sweat, was finished and all the tongues went in where required. But then another one started. Tropmann was asked to sit down on the stool, before which he was standing, and the same gouty old man began cutting his hair. He got out a pair of small scissors and, twisting his lips, carefully cut off at first the collar of Tropmann's shirt, the shirt he had only just put on and from which it would have been so easy to tear off the collar beforehand. But the cloth was coarse and all in pleats and it resisted the none too sharp blades. The chief executioner had a look and was dissatisfied: the space left by the cut off piece was not big enough. He indicated with his hand how much more he wanted cut off and the gouty old man set to work again and cut out another big piece of cloth. The top and the back was uncovered—the shoulder-blades became visible. Tropmann twitched them slightly: it was cold in the room. Then the old man started on the hair. Putting his puffy left hand on the head of Tropmann, who at once bent it down obediently, he began cutting the hair with his right. Thick strands of wiry, dark-brown hair slid over the shoulders and fell on the floor; one of them rolled up to my boot. Tropmann kept bending his head in the same obedient manner; the priest dragged out the words of the prayers even more slowly. I could not take my eyes off those hands, once stained with innocent blood, but now lying so helplessly one on top of the other—and particularly that slender, youthful neck. . . . In my imagination I could not help seeing a line cut straight across it. . . . There, I thought, a five-hundred-pound axe would in a few moments pass, smashing the vertebrae and cutting through the veins and muscles, and yet the body did not seem to expect anything of the kind: it was so smooth, so white, so healthy. . . .

I could not help asking myself what that so obediently bent head was thinking of at that moment. Was it holding on stubbornly and, as the saying is, with clenched teeth, to one and the same thought: "I won't break down!" Were all sorts of memories of the past, probably quite un-

important ones, flashing through it at that moment? Was the memory of the face of one of the members of the Kink family, twisted in the agony of death, passing through it? Or was it simply trying not to think—that head, and was merely repeating to itself: "That's nothing, that doesn't matter, we shall see, we shall see . . ." and would it go on repeating it till death came crashing down upon it—and there would be nowhere to recoil from it? . . .

And the little old man kept on cutting and cutting. . . . The hair crunched as it was caught up by the scissors. . . . At last this operation, too, was at an end. Tropmann got up quickly, shook his head. . . . Ordinarily, the condemned prisoners who are still able to speak at this moment address the governor of the prison with a last request, remind him of any money or debts they may leave behind, thank their warders, ask that a last note or a strand of hair should be sent to their relatives, send their regards for the last time—but Tropmann evidently was not an ordinary prisoner: he scorned such "sentimentalities" and did not utter a single word. He was silent. He waited. A short tunic was thrown over his shoulders. The executioner grasped his elbow. . . .

"Look here, Tropmann (*Voyons, Tropmann!*)," M. Claude's voice resounded in the death-like stillness, "soon, in another minute, everything will be at an end. Do you still persist in claiming that you had accomplices?"

"Yes, sir, I do persist (*Oui, monsieur, je persiste*)," answered Tropmann in the same pleasant, firm baritone voice, and he bent forward slightly, as though courteously apologising and even regretting that he could not answer otherwise.

"*Eh bien! Allons!*" said M. Claude, and we all set off; we went out into the large prison courtyard.

1 1

It was five to seven, but the sky hardly grew lighter and the same dull mist covered everything, concealing the contours of all objects. The roar of the crowd encompassed us by an unbroken, ear-splitting, thunderous wave as soon as we stepped over the threshold. Our small group, which had become thinner, for some of us had lagged behind, and I too, though walking with the others, kept myself a little apart, moved rapidly over the cobbled roadway of the courtyard straight to the gates. Tropmann minced along nimbly—his shackles interfered with his walk—and how small he suddenly appeared to me, almost a child! Suddenly the two halves of the gates, like some immense mouth of an animal, opened up slowly before us—and all at once, as though to the accompaniment of the great roar of the

overjoyed crowd which had at last caught sight of what it had been waiting for, the monster of the guillotine stared at us with its two narrow black beams and its suspended axe.

I suddenly felt cold, so cold that I almost felt sick; it seemed to me that this cold, too, rushed at us into the courtyard through those gates; my legs gave way under me. However, I cast another glance at Tropmann. He suddenly recoiled, tossing back his head and bending his knees, as though someone hit him in the chest. "He's going to faint," someone whispered in my ear. . . . But he recovered himself immediately and went forward with a firm step. Those of us who wanted to see how his head would roll off rushed past him into the street. . . . I had not enough courage for that; with a sinking heart I stopped at the gates. . . .

I saw the executioner rise suddenly like a black tower on the left side of the guillotine platform; I saw Tropmann, separated from the huddle of people below, scrambling up the steps (there were ten of them—as many as ten!); I saw him stopping and turning round; I heard him say: "*Dites à Monsieur Claude!*"¹ I saw him appear above and two men pouncing on him from the right and the left, like spiders on a fly; I saw him falling forward suddenly and his heels kicking. . . .

But here I turned away and began to wait, the ground slowly rising and falling under my feet. . . . And it seemed to me that I was waiting a terribly long time.² I managed to notice that at Tropmann's appearance the roar of the crowd seemed suddenly to roll up into a ball and—a breathless hush fell over everything. . . . Before me stood a sentry, a young red-cheeked fellow. . . . I just had time to see him looking intently at me with dull perplexity and horror. . . . I even had time to think that that soldier probably hailed from some god-forsaken village and came from a decent, law-abiding family and—and the things he had to see now! At last I heard a light knocking of wood on wood—that was the sound made by the top part of the yoke with the slit for the passage of the knife as it fell round the murderer's head and kept it immobile. . . . Then something suddenly descended with a hollow growl and stopped with an abrupt thud. . . . Just as though a huge animal had retched. . . . I cannot think of any better comparison. I felt dizzy. Everything swam before my eyes. . . .

Someone seized me by the arm. I looked up: it was M. Claude's assis-

¹ I did not hear the rest of the sentence. His last words were: *Dites à Monsieur Claude que je persiste*, that is to say, tell M. Claude that I persist in claiming that I had accomplices. Tropmann did not want to deprive himself of this last pleasure, this last satisfaction: to leave the sting of doubt and reproach in the minds of his judges and the public.

² As a matter of fact, only *twenty* seconds passed between the time Tropmann put his foot on the first step of the guillotine and the moment when his dead body was flung into the prepared basket.

tant, M. J. . . . , whom my friend Du Camp, as I learnt afterwards, had asked to keep an eye on me.

"You are very pale," he said with a smile. "Would you like a drink of water?"

But I thanked him and went back to the prison courtyard, which seemed to me like a place of refuge from the horrors on the other side of the gates.

1 2

Our group assembled in the guard-house by the gates to take leave of the prison governor and wait for the crowds to disperse. I, too, went in there and learnt that, while lying on the plank, Tropmann suddenly threw his head sideways convulsively so that it did not fit into the semicircular hole. The executioners were forced to drag it there by the hair, and while they were doing it, Tropmann bit the finger of one of them—the chief one. I also heard that immediately after the execution, at the time when the body, thrown into the van, was being driven rapidly away, two men took advantage of the first moments of unavoidable confusion to force their way through the lines of the soldiers and, crawling under the guillotine, began wetting their handkerchiefs in the blood that had dripped through the chinks of the planks. . . .

But I listened to all that talk as though in a dream. I felt very tired—and I was not the only one to feel like that. They all looked tired, though they all obviously felt relieved, just as if a load had been removed from their backs. But not one of us, *absolutely no one looked like a man who realized that he had been present at the performance of an act of social justice*: everyone tried to turn away in spirit and, as it were, shake off the responsibility for this murder.

Du Camp and I said goodbye to the prison governor and went home. A whole stream of human beings, men, women and children, rolled past us in disorderly and untidy waves. Almost all of them were silent; only the labourers occasionally shouted to one another: "Where are you off to? And you?" and the street urchins greeted with whistling the "cocottes" who drove past. And what drunken, glum, sleepy faces! What an expression of boredom, fatigue, dissatisfaction, disappointment, dull, purposeless disappointment! I did not see many drunks, though: they had either been picked up already or quieted down themselves. The workaday life was receiving all these people once more into its bosom—and why, for the sake of what sensations, had they left its rut for a few hours? It is awful to think what is hidden there. . . .

About fifty yards from the prison we hailed a cab, got into it, and drove off.

On the way Du Camp and I discussed what we had seen and about which he had shortly before (in the January issue of *Revue des deux Mondes* already quoted by me) said so many weighty, sensible things. We talked of the unnecessary, senseless barbarism of all that medieval procedure, thanks to which the criminal's agony went on for half an hour (from twenty-eight minutes past six to seven o'clock), of the hideousness of all those undressings, dressings, hair-cutting, those journeys along corridors and up and down staircases. . . . By what right was all that done? How could such a shocking routine be allowed? And capital punishment itself—could it possibly be justified? We had seen the impression such a spectacle made on the common people: and, indeed, there was no trace of the so-called instructive spectacle at all. Scarcely one thousandth part of the crowd, no more than fifty or sixty people, could have seen anything in the semi-darkness of early morning at a distance of 150 feet and through the lines of soldiers and the cruppers of the horses. And the rest? What benefit, however small, could they have derived from that drunken, sleepless, idle, depraved night? I remembered the young labourer, who had been shouting senselessly and whose face I had studied for several minutes. Would he start work today as a man who hated vice and idleness more than before? And what about me? What did I get from it? A feeling of involuntary astonishment at a murderer, a moral monster, who could show his contempt for death. Can the law-giver desire such impressions? What "moral purpose" can one possibly talk about after so many refutations, confirmed by experience?

But I am not going to indulge in arguments: they would lead me too far. And, anyway, who is not aware of the fact that the question of capital punishment is one of the most urgent questions that humanity has to solve at this moment? I will be content and excuse my own misplaced curiosity if my account supplies a few arguments to those who are in favour of the abolition of capital punishment or, at least, the abolition of public executions.

Weimar, 1870.

—Translated by David Magarshack

LU HSUN

Lu Hsun (1881–1936) is considered by many to be the greatest modern Chinese writer. He once observed, speaking from experience, "I believe those who sink from prosperity to poverty probably come, in the process, to understand what the world is like." His first collection of short stories, Call to Arms, and his volume of tender autobiographical sketches, Dawn Blossoms Plucked at Dusk, support this observation. Lu Hsun often wrote about his childhood in heartbreaking stories that he was, as he put it, "unable to erase from my memory." When his father became ill, he went almost daily to the pawnbroker's and then to the medicine shop. After his father died, he wanted to become a doctor and studied medicine in Japan, but he gave up that goal to pursue literature. His writings, which portray the poverty and suffering of common people and unemployed intellectuals, got him in trouble with the authorities while winning him the admiration of left-wing revolutionaries under Mao.

Though Lu Hsun never actually joined the Communist party, being too protective of his aesthetic independence to submit to cadre discipline, he was celebrated after his death as a sort of exemplary cultural hero by the Maoists. With the communists' conquest of the mainland in 1948, his books were reprinted by the hundreds of thousands and became a standard part of the school curriculum. The irony is that his work is irreconcilably individual rather than collective in feeling, tinged as it is with loneliness and sadness, regret for selfish mistakes, and self-deprecating humor.

In the pieces printed below, written during Lu Hsun's final illness, we get a sense of his essay style, which is rooted in classical Chinese technique (see Ou-yang Hsiu) but adapted to modern times. With a nonchalance bordering on formlessness, the author records his thoughts, seemingly not caring