
THE GREAT PERIL OF SICARD

Author(s): LUZERNE RAY

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Though sad and heavy is the fate I bear,
 And I may sometimes wail my solitude,
 Yet oh, how precious the endowments He,
 T' alleviate, hath lavished, and shall I
 Thankless return his kindness by laments?
 O, Hope! How sweetly smileth Heavenly Hope
 On the sad, drooping soul and trembling heart!
 Bright as the morning star when night recedes,
 His genial smile this longing soul assures
 That when it leaves this sphere replete with woes,
 For Paradise replete with purest joys,
 My ears shall be unsealed, and I shall hear;
 My tongue shall be unbound, and I shall speak,
 And happy with the angels sing forever!

THE GREAT PERIL OF SICARD.

BY LUZERNE RAY.

[In the French Revolution of Carlyle, there is a chapter entitled, after the author's peculiar nomenclature, 'A Trilogy,' which contains a single extract from the Abbé Sicard's account of his arrest, imprisonment and narrow escape from massacre. This brief paragraph, at its first perusal, excited within us a strong desire to see the whole narrative from which it was taken; but without a special mission to Paris, we had little hope that this desire would ever be gratified. Lately looking however, somewhat carelessly, into a French tragedy, (*La Mort de Robespierre*,) we had the good fortune to discover among the copious notes of the volume, the identical tract in question, printed at full length, and occupying nearly fifty pages. The whole history of Sicard is intimately connected with that of the deaf and dumb, and we have thought it proper therefore to present in our periodical, not indeed a translation of his narrative, for it is much too long for that, but a simple condensation of the principal facts which it records.]

WHOEVER has read any one of the numerous histories of the French Revolution, will not fail to recollect the famous September Massacre; the most horrible scene perhaps that was enacted during the whole Reign of Terror. As a sufferer in that scene, the Abbé Sicard, the celebrated Director of the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb at Paris, bore a prominent part; although, by a series of happy accidents, or to speak more truly, of Providential interpositions, he finally escaped with his life. Sicard was a Roman Catholic priest, and in common with a multitude of his brethren, he was seized

and thrown into prison, because he had refused, through scruples of conscience, to take one of the oaths, required of the priesthood by the National Assembly.

On the twenty-sixth of August, 1792, while the Abbé was engaged in his benevolent labors among the deaf and dumb, a municipal officer, followed by sixty men armed with muskets, swords and pikes, entered his establishment and arrested him in the name of the Republic. He was first taken to the Committee of the Section to which he belonged, (that of the Arsenal,) and thence, after a brief delay, a guard of soldiers conducted him to the hotel *de la Mairie*, at which place the *Comité d' Exécution* was assembled. A large hall in this building was made his temporary prison, where he was compelled to pass the night in company with a crowd of men of all classes, who were shut up there, he says, without any knowledge of the crimes which had been charged upon them. In the meantime the deaf and dumb pupils of Sicard were filled with the deepest distress, by the sudden calamity which had overtaken their beloved teacher. Early in the morning of the next day, they went in a body to the place of his confinement, and besought him to allow them to appear at the bar of the National Assembly with a petition for his release. This petition, which was prepared by Massieu, the favorite pupil of Sicard, we will translate with literal exactness, endeavoring to preserve, as far as possible, the simplicity of expression by which it is characterized. It begins somewhat abruptly,

“MR. PRESIDENT,

They have taken from the deaf and dumb their instructor, their guardian and their father. They have shut him up in prison, like a thief, a murderer. But he has killed no one; he has stolen nothing. He is not a bad citizen. His whole time is spent in teaching us to love virtue and our country. He is good, just, pure. We ask of you his liberty. Restore him to his children, for we are his. He loves us with a father's fondness. He has taught us all we know. Without him, we should be like the beasts. Since he was taken away, we have been full of sorrow and distress. Return him to us, and you will make us happy.”

This paper, taken by Massieu to the Assembly, was read in the hearing of that body by one of its secretaries, and received

with loud applause. An order was immediately issued, directing the Minister of the Interior to render to the Assembly the reasons of Sicard's arrest ; but among the confusions of the time, this order was either forgotten or neglected, and the Abbé derived no benefit from the prompt and generous interference of his pupils. Days passed away, and he still remained shut up in the prison of *la Mairie*, with his doomed companions.

At last the second of September came, when the storm of wrath which had long been gathering, was just ready to burst. At two o'clock on that day, a band of soldiers suddenly rushed into the hall where Sicard and his fellow sufferers were confined, and roughly forced them into the court below, saying that they had received orders to transfer them all to the prison of the *Abbaye*. Six carriages were provided to convey the prisoners, who were twenty-four in number. In the first of these carriages Sicard took his place along with four others. The drivers were commanded upon pain of death to proceed slowly, and the miserable victims were told by the soldiers who surrounded them, that they would never reach the *Abbaye* alive ; that the people were determined to massacre them all on their way. It soon became evident that these threats and warnings had a meaning in them. A crowd of men, full of rage and fury, gathered around the carriages and prevented their progress, save at the slowest possible pace. As some protection against the insults that were hurled upon them, the prisoners attempted to close the doors of their vehicles, but this, the rabble would not suffer. They compelled their victims to remain exposed to the blows which now began to fall upon them. One of the companions of Sicard received the stroke of a sabre on his shoulder ; another was wounded on the cheek ; another beneath the nose, but his own position in the carriage happened to be such that he escaped without injury.

At last, the carriages reached the court of the *Abbaye*, where a dense crowd of murderers, with passions raised to the pitch of madness, was waiting to receive them. One of Sicard's companions, hoping to escape their fury, sprang from the door of the vehicle, but he fell dead at once, pierced through and through by the pikes of the assassins. A second made the attempt with no better success, and a third followed, only to fall in the same way. The carriage now moved on toward the

Hall of the Committee, when the fourth of its occupants darted out and with better fortune than his companions, escaped into the building, with only one wound from a sabre. The mob, now supposing that the first carriage was empty, turned to the others to carry on among them their bloody work. Seizing the favorable moment, Sicard sprang from his hiding-place, and rushing into the Hall of the Committee, appealed for succor to the members who were gathered there. At first his prayer was rejected, but as soon as he had made known his name and occupation, they promised to shield him as long as they were able. He had scarcely time to congratulate himself upon his temporary escape, before the assassins, who had slain all the other prisoners, began to thunder at the door of the Hall. It soon yielded to their fury, and the room was filled in a moment with bloody hands and savage faces. Sicard was recognized, as he stood among the members of the Committee. The crowd sprang upon him, and already their murderous pikes were within a foot of his breast, when a clock-maker, named Monnot, threw himself before them, exclaiming, "It is the Abbé Sicard, one of the most useful men in the country, and the father of the deaf and dumb. Your weapons shall pass through my body before they reach him." The fury of the mob was checked for a moment, and availing himself of the opportunity thus afforded, the Abbé sprang into an open window and besought permission to be heard. His speech was short, but displayed much presence of mind, as well as knowledge of human nature. Said he, "I am the Abbé Sicard. I teach the deaf and dumb, and since the number of these unfortunates is always greater among the poor than among the rich, I am of more use to you than to them." He was interrupted by a voice from the crowd, "We must spare Sicard. He is too valuable a man to die. His whole life is filled with benevolent labors. He has no time to be a conspirator," and with a mercy almost as wild as their wrath had been, the whole mass of murderers shouted, "He must be saved, he must be saved." In a moment he was seized and drawn into the midst of the rabble, who embraced him with the utmost ardor, and insisted upon carrying him away in triumph. But with something of the spirit of the Apostles in the prison of Philippi, Sicard refused to receive his liberty, unless it came to him in a legal way. Finding him not to be moved from

this position, the rabble left him in the Hall of the Committee, to prosecute their murderous work without the walls of the *Abbaye* and in other quarters of the city. The members of the Committee now reassembled and proceeded with the ordinary routine of official business with the utmost coolness and unconcern, in the midst of the horrid scenes which were enacting all around them. The night was considerably advanced, and Sicard besought permission to retire. They were at some loss to know what disposition to make of him, as none of the prisons were considered secure from the assaults of the mob. At last it was decided to place him in a small room, called *le Violon*, which was close by the side of the Hall of the Committee. We will now begin to translate in full from Sicard's own account of his experiences in that eventful time, for the narrative is of too intense an interest to suffer condensation.

“What a night was that which I spent in that prison ! What murders were committed beneath my window ! The cries of the victims—the sabre-blows which fell upon innocent heads—the yells of the assassins—the shouts of the spectators of this horrible scene—all are even yet ringing in my ears. I could distinguish the voices of my companions in confinement at *la Mairie*. I could hear the questions that were put to them, and also their replies. They were asked if they had taken the oath ; no one had done so ; they could all escape death by a single falsehood, but they all chose rather to die. They said, ‘We submit to your laws ; we die faithful to your constitution ; we make no exceptions save those which conscience commands.’ They were immediately struck down with a thousand blows, in the midst of the most horrible cries and shouts of *Vive la Nation*.

About three o'clock in the morning, when no one was left to be slaughtered, the murderers, recollecting that there were a few prisoners in *le Violon* ; rushed to the gate which opened into the court and set themselves at work to break it down. Every blow was like the signal of death to us. We regarded ourselves as inevitably lost. I knocked gently at the door which communicated with the Hall of the Committee, but in doing so, I trembled lest I should be heard by the assassins. The only reply of the brutal commissioners to my supplications for aid, was, that they had lost the key of the door at which I was knocking.

There were three of us in this prison. My two companions thought that they perceived over our heads a platform, which might possibly afford us the means of escape. But we soon found that only one of us could reach it by climbing upon the shoulders of the two others. Which should it be? My fellow-prisoners said to me, 'You are a more useful man than we are. It is you who must be saved. With our bodies we will make a ladder for you, upon which you can climb to the platform.' 'Not so,' I replied, 'I will not avail myself of any means of escape in which you cannot share. If you cannot be saved along with myself, we will all die together.' This generous strife continued for some moments. They reminded me of the poor deaf and dumb who, by my death, would be rendered orphans. They magnified the benefits which these unfortunates received from my hands, and forced me, as it were, to profit by the innocent stratagem which their noble hearts had devised. At length, I yielded to their earnest solicitations, and consented to owe them my life, without having it in my power to do anything for them in return. I threw myself into the arms of my two saviors; never was there a scene more touching. They were about to meet inevitable death, and they compelled me to survive them. After this farewell, I climbed upon the shoulders of the first; then upon those of the second, and finally upon the platform; giving utterance all the time to the emotions of a soul burdened with grief, affection and gratitude.

But Heaven was unwilling that my life should be redeemed at the price of those of my deliverers. I was not to be so unhappy. At the very moment when the gate began to yield to the attacks of the assassins, and I was waiting to see my friends sink beneath their blows, the old cry of *Vive la Nation* and the song of the *Carmagnole* was heard in the court of the *Abbaye*. Two priests more had been torn from their beds in the middle of the night, and dragged to this court to die. The assassins were recalled from *le Violon* by this signal of a new murder. Every one of them was anxious to have some share in the death of each of the victims, and so, our prison was forgotten. I now descended from the platform to mingle once more my fears and hopes with those of my generous companions. Oh! how long appeared to us that fearful night, which saw the shedding of so much innocent blood!"

At this point we must cease to follow, line by line, the narrative of Sicard. He relates with painful particularity the murder of the two priests. When required to take the obnoxious oath, they replied with the utmost courage and calmness, that it was against conscience and they could not do it. The only favor they demanded was, that before they were put to death, they might have the privilege of confessing to one another. In an unusual mood of mercy the rabble granted this prayer, and in the mean time busied themselves in removing the corpses with which the court was covered, and in cleansing it, as far as possible, from its horrid stains. It was now ten o'clock and the two priests announced that they were ready to die. All the proceedings hitherto had been directly under the eyes of Sicard, who was standing at the window of his prison, but when the fatal moment came, with a very natural feeling of horror, he turned away, unable to bear the sight of the murder that was about to be committed. They died, as the others had done, faithful to their religious vows. During the whole of this day and the night following, similar scenes were constantly repeated. Wherever a priest could be found, he was immediately seized and required to take the oath, certain death in every case awaiting his refusal. Sicard and his companions were still imprisoned in *le Violon*. Intense and long-continued terror had at length unsettled the reason of the two last, and to the questions of Sicard, they now began to return the wildest answers. One of them opened his knife and besought the Abbé to put an end to his agony by plunging it into his heart; the other made an unsuccessful attempt to hang himself with his handkerchief and garters.

Tuesday morning came and new prisoners were brought to *le Violon*, and shut up with the three already there. The anxieties of Sicard, which had begun in some degree to subside, were excited anew by the reports which they brought from without. The assassins, wearied with their work, had retired to rest and refresh themselves for a while, but they had agreed together to return at four o'clock in the afternoon and sacrifice Sicard. The new comers had heard his name repeated, with the appointed hour of his death, as they were led through the court below. After so many miraculous escapes, it seemed that the greatest danger of all was still to be surmounted. One

of the most intimate friends of Sicard was an influential member of the National Assembly, and in this extremity, the Abbé's thoughts were turned to him, with some hope that this body might be induced to interpose for his deliverance. Accordingly he addressed him a letter, setting forth the imminent danger in which he stood, and urging him in the most earnest manner, to lay his case before the Assembly. This letter was taken at once to its destination, but only parts of it were read, and not even these by the timid friend to whom it was sent, who put it into the hands of one of his colleagues, requesting him as a particular favor to read it in his stead. As soon as the perilous situation of Sicard was known to the National Assembly, an order was immediately issued that he should be set at liberty; but, as before, no effectual measures were taken to see that this order was executed. It is probable that, in the midst of these fearful scenes, the power of the Assembly itself was partially paralyzed. The madness of the mob ruled the hour.

It was now three o'clock, and at four, Sicard was to die. He had heard nothing concerning the result of his application to the Assembly; he did not even know whether or not his petition had been presented, but unwilling tamely to surrender his life, while a possibility of saving it remained, he sent off three notes; one directed to Herault de Sechelles, the President of the Assembly, another to M. Lafont-Ladebat, and a third to a lady whose two daughters he had educated. The Assembly was not in session. Sechelles was engaged in the Committee of Public Instruction. Ladebat could do nothing by himself, but he went immediately to Chabot, and earnestly pleaded with him to exert his influence in behalf of his friend. The lady to whom Sicard had written was not at home, but the note was opened by one of her daughters, who ran at once to M. Pastoret, a member of the Assembly to whom Sicard was known, and put the billet into his hands. Pastoret was also a member of the Committee of Public Instruction, and he immediately betook himself to the Hall of this Committee, where he found Sechelles and Romme, by whom an order was issued, directing the *Commune* to interfere in favor of Sicard. This order was taken at once to the *Commune*, and promptly acted upon, but all would have been too late to save the Abbé's life, had not a sudden tempest of rain arisen just before four o'clock, and induced the assassins to

postpone their intended murder. Doubtless their appetite for blood had become somewhat satiated by the carnage of the last forty-eight hours, and this being the case, a slight obstacle was sufficient to turn them from their purpose.

The hour of Sicard's deliverance was now come. At seven o'clock the doors of his prison were opened and an official of the National Assembly made his appearance, bringing the welcome news that he was free. Under the safe-guard of this officer, and accompanied by Monnot, the generous clock-maker, to whom he was already in debt for his life, he passed through the court which had lately been the theatre of such horrors, and proceeded without delay to the Assembly. Upon his arrival there—but we will give the closing scene in the Abbe's own words, although they are somewhat too much in the self-glorying vein. He says, "I arrived at the National Assembly, where all hearts were waiting for me. Universal acclamations greeted my approach. All the members sprang forward to the bar at which I stood, to embrace me, and tears were streaming from all eyes. Inspired by a feeling which I could not restrain, I gave utterance to my thanks in a speech which has escaped from my memory, since it was the spontaneous expression of a grateful heart. It was reported, however, by the journalists, and printed in the *Moniteur* of that date, and copied also into many other papers."

But little remains to be told. It was thought not prudent for Sicard to spend the following night in the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, lest the rabble might still seek their victim there. Accordingly he found a temporary refuge at the house of a friend in a distant quarter of the city, where he received the first visit from his beloved pupil, Massieu. This young man, he tells us, had gone without food or sleep, during all the days of his imprisonment, and in one day more, he adds, he must have died of grief. In the course of two or three days, order was restored in Paris, and Sicard returned to his establishment, to prosecute his labors there, with the same zeal and success as before.