

7. The Reign of Terror

The French Revolution was well on its way. Which path would it take? Could Louis XVI live through the changes it would bring? Could the revolutionists live with the British solution, both a Parliament and a king?

At first it seemed that Louis would be able to keep his crown. He said that he accepted the revolutionists' Declaration of the Rights of Man, which was inspired by the United States Declaration of Independence. All men and women were to be considered equal. The class lines created by

birth were to be erased. The constitution of 1792 ruled that the king would stay on his throne. But the real power was to be in the hands of a legislature—a lawmaking body.

Those were great days in the lives of the French people. The surprise was that so much had been done with so little bloodshed. The Revolution seemed a great success. Then in 1792, the scene changed. France was thrown into a war with the great powers of Austria and Prussia. The new French government was in deep trouble.

Louis XVI did not really accept his new role as a not too powerful king. He hoped that European kings would win the war against France and rescue him. This was an idle dream. The French government was overthrown by the more radical (extreme) group called the Jacobins. Louis was found guilty of treason—plotting with the enemies of France.

The new Jacobin government was in a very dangerous situation. It was fighting a war against powerful enemies. At the same time, it was fighting its enemies within France. It felt itself surrounded. It trusted no one—including its own members. The Jacobins' answer was to start the Reign of Terror (rule of death). Over 500,000 French people were accused of being traitors. They were thrown into the overcrowded jails. From 3,500 to 4,000 were executed at the guillotine. Others were shot to death or were drowned on boats that were sunk in the Loire River. What were their crimes? They were suspected of not being completely loyal to the revolutionary government of the Jacobins.

In this story it is five years after the fall of the Bastille. We meet Robespierre, who planned the Reign of Terror. Now he himself has been sentenced to die by the same blade that had killed so many other "enemies" of France. He writes in his diary of his days of glory. He recalls the people he worked with and against whom he plotted.

Ask yourself why Robespierre felt that the Terror was necessary. Did the leaders of the Terror destroy themselves? Could there have been a French Revolution without the Terror?

Paris July 27, 1794

What a ridiculous way for Maximilien Robespierre to end his life! A few days ago I was the leader of the revolutionary government. I was the head of the Committee of Public Safety.

Now the "head" will lose his head. And for what? My enemies never understood what I was trying to do. They insisted that I wanted nothing but power. They even had the nerve to say that I wanted to become a dictator. What nonsense! They

forget that in the National Assembly I was the champion of democracy. I was the one who worked to win the vote for all French people!

My dream was to make France a republic that would be fair, honest, and just. But I found that people had to die so that France could live. Life is sacred to me. It hurt me to send people to the guillotine. But I had to do it. France had to be cleansed and purified of all those who stood in the way of fair government! All the people who were not with us were against us. They were the suspects; they were the guilty ones! It was the only way I knew to make the Revolution live. Yes, people had to die for a better life for the good people of France. The end justifies the means!

Thoughts race wildly through my mind. I am perspiring. Can it be that I, the great Robespierre, am afraid? How will I act when I climb those stairs to the guillotine? Will I be able to make it on my own? I remember how the king behaved. There was a man who never looked or acted like a king during his lifetime. He was timid, always afraid. He never made a decision on his own. He was a slow thinker and doer! I thought they would have to carry him to the scaffold. But no, this was his greatest moment! Imagine, Madame La Guillotine bringing out the best in our King Louis!

I can see Louis now. He refused to let the soldiers take off his outer clothes. He would not even let the soldiers tie his hands. Yes, he died bravely. He had a strange dignity in death that he never had in his lifetime. I can still hear the mob screaming, "Long live the nation! Long live the Republic!" Then a soldier held up the king's head for all to see. For a moment, I wondered whether his life might have been spared. Was it a mistake to kill the king? No, that was no mistake. The king had to die. He stood for all the evils of the absolute monarchy. He was the Old Regime in all of its evil ways.

Soon I will join those who gave their lives for the cause. I wonder whether Marat would have defended me. Would he have taken my side? Or would he have joined the rest and sent me to the guillotine?

I know the answer. He hated everyone in authority. He thought of himself as a great scientist and felt that no one recognized his talents. Too bad! He was no democrat. In his own

way, he wanted to help the poor people, but he would not have given them any power. I have to laugh now, in spite of my troubles, when I think of people calling me cruel and ruthless. They do not remember when Marat called for 270,000 heads! He would solve all problems by killing and killing and killing. Too bad that he did not have the honor of dying by losing his own head to Madame La Guillotine! Stabbed to death while taking a bath! What a poor way to die!

There is one other I think of often. I remember meeting Danton before the Revolution. What a kind man he was. And he was one of the strongest men I have even known. He had a neck like a bull, with a head to match! And those piercing eyes: They seemed to look right through you! No wonder they called him Hercules and Atlas!

Danton was the best speaker I have ever heard. He could turn an audience upside down. Ah, how the Revolution changed him. A good man became cruel and harsh. I admit that I was afraid of him. He challenged me. I was afraid of losing my head as well as my job. I accepted his challenge. I sent him to the head chopper before he could get to me. Yet he was not all bad. He tried to help the poor. He worked hard to get feudal dues abolished.

I was too clever for him. I accused him of making secret deals with the nobles and get-rich-quick types. I wonder now if he really did those things.

Danton, I laughed when you said that you would break that guillotine before long, or you would lose your own head to it. I guess that you were tired of all the killing. I knew then that you were a dead man; you had to lose your head. But I did not laugh as I watched you climb the stairs to the knife. I admired the way you stood there and said, "Show my head to the people. It is worth it!" You were right; I can admit this now in my secret diary. I was shaken when you shouted, "Robespierre will be next!"

How right he was. That was only four months ago! I, Maximilien Robespierre, was called the "apostle of terror" by the people who should have known better. I, who hated and feared death, became a killer. Now I am about to die by the same instrument I used to save France.

I cannot stop my mind from wandering. I see myself in a tumbril (cart) carrying those condemned to die to the Place de la Revolution. I see the scaffold with the guillotine. It looks hideous, monstrous! The crowd is huge. People are screaming for my head! Why do they hate me so? I am afraid. I am weak. O Lord, please do not let me faint. I must be strong.

Somewhere I have read, "Those who live by the sword will die by the sword!" Now I understand the truth of these words.

Postscript

As Robespierre feared, the crowd screamed and cursed him as he rode to the guillotine. Windows overlooking the execution had been rented at high prices. People wore their fanciest clothes. After the guillotine had done its work, Robespierre's head was held up high. The crowd roared in delight.

The people who sentenced Robespierre to death were afraid of him. They believed that they saved their own heads by cutting off Robespierre's. As for the Terror, they would have preferred to continue the killings. But they had no choice. The people had had enough of the slaughter. Trials and executions continued, but in ever-decreasing numbers.

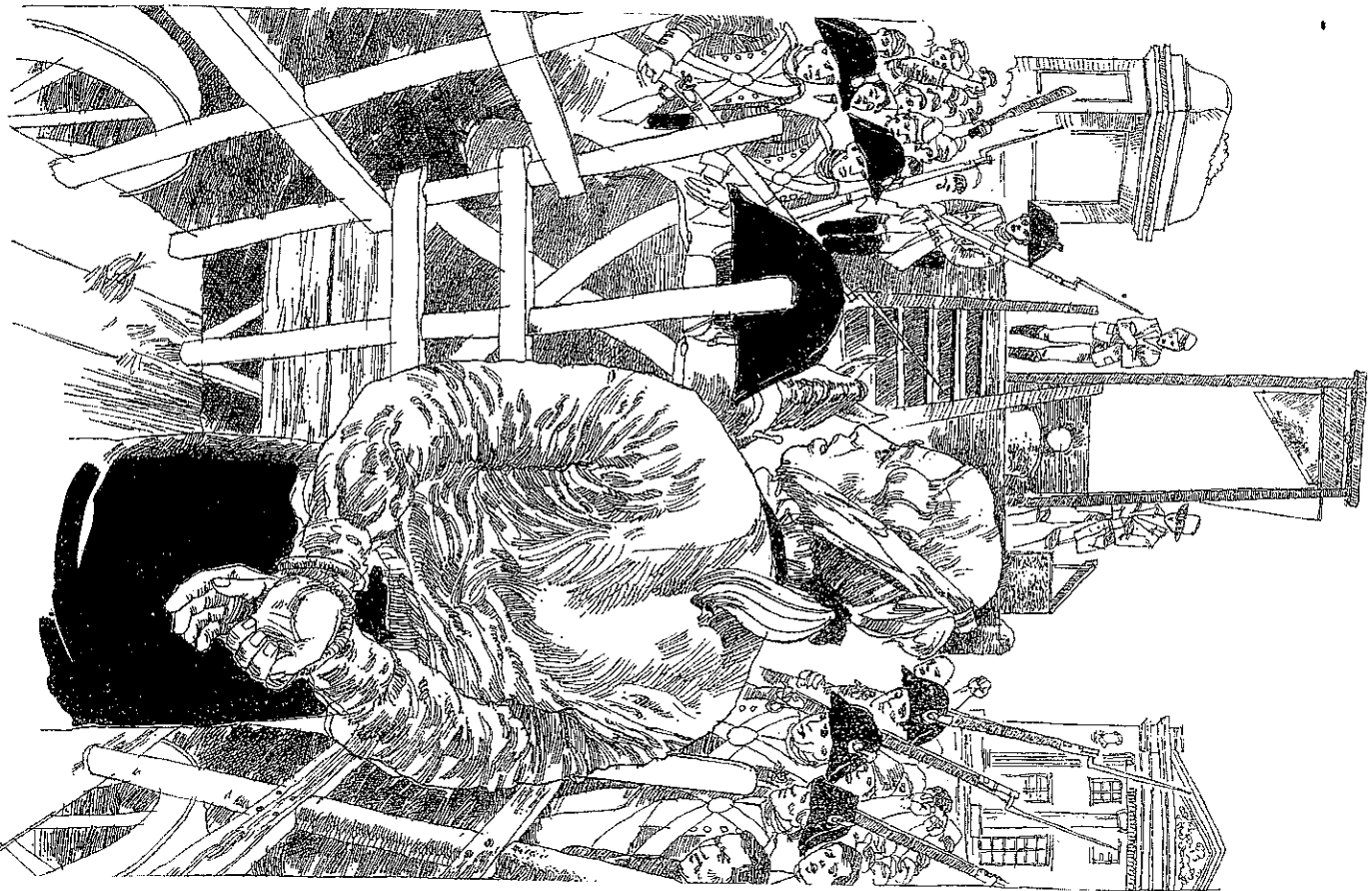
QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What did Louis XVI hope would happen to save his throne?
2. Why did the Jacobins start the Reign of Terror?
3. What were Robespierre's dreams for France?
4. What did Robespierre think of King Louis XVI?
5. What did Robespierre think of Marat and Danton?

UNDERSTANDING THE STORY

A. Write T for each statement that is true and F for each statement that is false.

1. The Reign of Terror was a time of peace and quiet.
2. Louis XVI died bravely on the guillotine.
3. Robespierre sent many people to the guillotine.
4. Robespierre felt that it was a mistake to execute the



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