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Ravachol

Octave Mirbeau

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Retrieved on May 15, 2012 from www.spunk.org
Translated and introduced by Robert Helms.

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Francois-Claudius Koenigstein (Oct. 14, 1859 — July 11, 1892), known to posterity as Ravachol, was born to Dutch and French parents at Saint-Chamond, near St. Etienne in Eastern France. He was angered by two actions taken by the French government on May 1, 1891. One was at Fourmies, where the newly designed Lebel machine gun was used against a peaceful May Day rally at which women and children were carrying flowers and palms. Casualties there numbered 14 dead and 40 wounded. The other incident was at Clichy, where police attacked a six-man anarchist labor rally. The workers defended themselves with pistol-shots and were subsequently given long terms at hard labor.

Ravachol took retribution for the Clichy defendants by bombing the homes of the presiding judge (Mar. 11, 1892) and the prosecutor (Mar. 27, 1892). During the same month he bombed the Lobau Barracks in Paris in response to the Army's slaughter of innocents at Fourmies. These three attentats caused extensive property damage, but no deaths. Ravachol was pointed out to police by a waiter in a restaurant, and then on the night before his trial began on April 25, the restaurant was bombed, killing its owner. A long cycle of vendetta between the anarchists and the government was to follow.

Ravachol's first trial resulted in a sentence of life at forced labor. Octave Mirbeau's article appeared the following week in *L'Endehors*, 52 (May 1, 1892), giving one of the most balanced anarchist views of Ravachol's terrorist activity. Two months later, though, he was extradited to Montbrison in his native region and condemned to death for the killings of an old hermit and a certain landlady he once knew. Before his death Ravachol denied having committed these murders, but he admitted to some burglaries and grave-robbings. He was beheaded at Montbrison and buried there. Today, Ravachol is an important cult hero among French anarchists.

* * *

His head escapes the guillotine!

The jurors who have dared to do this, who covered their ears to the barking clamors of death, — were they afraid? Were they afraid to kill a man whose mysterious vengeance won't entirely die with him? Or indeed, beyond the act itself, the awesome horror of which was being howled at them, did they hear the voice of that forward-looking idea, the dominant idea that specifically characterizes this act and ennoble it? I don't know. One never knows what can happen in the conscience of a juror, or what ultimate compulsion he obeys, when dishing out life and death.

The jurors didn't tremble as much as the press that sneered at them, abused them, and damned them. The press wanted blood. Just like the crude middle class, whose blind instincts they reflect, and whose threatened privileges they defend, the journalists are afraid. And fear is a savage thing. For to give itself the illusion of a fierce courage, fear likes to apply rouge to its pale features. They believe, also, that the sound of the legal blade, and the sound of mutilated flesh bouncing on that infamous plank, can drown out the sound of the grinding teeth, the racing pulses, and the voices which grow bolder and angrier every day, boiling up from the hellish underbelly of society. The press is mistaken. There are certain corpses

that walk again, and certain voices that won't be stifled. And the void is filled with terrible enigmas.

I am horrified by the bloodshed, the ruins, and the death; I love life, and all life is sacred to me. This is why I'm going to ask for the anarchist ideal which no form of government can create: love, beauty, and peace between men. Ravachol doesn't frighten me. He is as transient as the terror he inspires. He is the thunder clap that is followed by the glory of the sun and the calm sky.

Beyond the somber task at hand smiles the admirable Kropotkin's dream of universal harmony.

Besides, our society has no right to complain, since it has given birth to Ravachol: it sowed misery, and reaped revolution.

This is just.

And this begs the question...

Who is it — throughout this endless procession of tortures which has been the history of the human race — who is it that sheds the blood, always the same, relentlessly, without any pause for the sake of mercy? Governments, religions, industries, forced labor camps, all of these are drenched in blood. The murder is weary of their laws, their prayers, and their progress. Again just recently, there were the frenzied butchers who turned Paris into a slaughterhouse as the Commune perished. There were pointless massacres, such as at Fourmies where the bodies of innocent women and little kids tried out the ballistic virtues of the Lebel's machine gun for the first time. And there are always the mines in which fifty, a hundred, or five hundred poor devils are suffocated, swallowed in a single moment of horrible destruction, their charred bodies never to see daylight again. And there are also the horrid conquests of distant countries where happy races, unknown and peaceful, groan under the boot of that robber of continents, that filthy rapist of forest communities and virgin lands, the western slave trader.

Each footstep taken in this society bristles with privileges, and is marked with a bloodstain; each turn of the government machinery grinds the tumbling, gasping flesh of the poor; and tears are

running from everywhere in the impenetrable night of suffering. Facing these endless murders and continuous tortures, what's the meaning of society, this crumbling wall, this collapsing staircase?

We live in ugly times. The misery has never been worse, because it's never been more obvious, and it's never stood closer to the spectacle of wasted riches and the promised land of well-being from which it is relentlessly turned away. Never has the law, which protects only the banks, pressed so hard upon the tortured shoulders of the poor. Capitalism is insatiable, and the wage system compounds the evils of ancient slavery. The shops are packed full of clothing, and there are those who go about completely naked; the indifferent rich are puking up food, while others perish from hunger in their doorways. No cry is heeded: whenever a single, louder complaint penetrates the din of sad murmurs, the Lebel is loaded and the troops are mobilized.

And that's not all.

A population does not live solely on its stomach. It also has a life of the mind. Its intellectual joys are just as necessary as its physical joys. It has a right to beauty just as it has a right to bread. Indeed, those who could give it its higher pleasures, those who could introduce to the people this vital beauty are treated like public enemies, hunted down as criminals, hounded for being anarchists and beaten like beggars. They are reduced to a solitary life. An enormous barrier separates them from the crowd, by whom they are regarded as repulsive spectacles, and over whom there is spread the enormous, sordid, impenetrable veil of triumphant stupidity. We are witnessing an incredible social moment: at this time, while abundant with great thinkers, the public taste has never been so degraded, nor has ignorance ever enjoyed such base pleasures. Surely, if the hour in which we live is hideous, it is formidable as well: it's the hour of popular awakening. And this hour is full of uncertainty. The patience of the downtrodden and the dispossessed has lasted long enough. They want to live, they want to enjoy, they want their share of all the happiness and sunshine. Whatever the rulers do,

reacting to their worst fears, they will not forestall the inevitable course of events. We're touching upon a decisive moment in human history. The old world is collapsing under the weight of its own crimes, and is itself lighting the fuse of the bomb that will blast it all away. This bomb will be all the more terrible because it will contain neither gunpowder nor dynamite. It'll contain compassion and an idea; two forces against which nothing can be done.