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## Purple

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*He dreams ... he is condemned to death and led to execution. The procession advances to the sound of a march that is sometimes somber and wild, and sometimes brilliant and solemn, in which a dull sound of heavy footsteps follows without transition the loudest outbursts. At the end, the idée fixe reappears for a moment like a final thought of love interrupted by the fatal blow.*  
Hector Berlioz, description of the Fourth Movement of the Symphonie Fantastique

On a cold afternoon in late March, 1767, Théophile Leroux and Mathilde, the daughter of the town of Arras' druggist, were taking a walk by the river, watching a swoop of cranes fly by overhead. Mathilde was very pretty and Leroux, just turned eighteen, felt an undeclared attraction to her that was quickly turning into love.

"Mathilde" he started, intending perhaps to propose, but she cut him off, turning her attention to a clump of crocuses emerging from the frozen ground. "Aren't these lovely?" she declared. Plucking one of the small flowers, she brought it to her eyes and continued, enthusiastically: "Look at the rich purple of these blooms!"

Mathilde's exuberance stunned Leroux, for he was color blind. He was unable to distinguish colors, so that everything to him appeared in shades of gray, in gradations from sparkling white to midnight black. He had learned to associate certain tones of gray with certain

objects, and he was able to extrapolate from those to similarly shaded things – a gold coin had a quality of luster and light grayness that could be found in other objects, like wedding rings. But, for the most part, colors eluded him.

Listening to Mathilde babble with admiration over something he was unable to perceive filled Leroux's heart with despair. Mathilde would never want to share life with him. The love declaration froze on his lips and Mathilde walked away.

She was soon engaged to, and married, the scion of a noble family. "It is better that way" Leroux told himself when he learned the news. Yet, had he been more courageous, perhaps he might have won the love of Mathilde, stayed in Arras, and lived happily thereafter.

As it was, he became a country lawyer and led an uneventful life until he met Maximilien Robespierre in 1781, when Robespierre returned to his family home in Arras after completing his law studies. Leroux was immediately in awe of the younger man's charisma and became a member of a closely-knit circle of friends who signed onto Robespierre's modern Enlightenment views and his defense of the rights of man. With no talents or accomplishments of his own, Leroux enjoyed the reflected shine of Robespierre's personality, and made it the center of his life to attend those society meetings at Arras in which Robespierre held court.

Over the next few years, Leroux followed his idol's rising political star until mid-1789, when Robespierre was elected member of a delegation to the Estates-General that had been convened by King Louis XVI to address France's mounting financial crisis. Shortly upon arrival at Versailles, Robespierre had become part of what became the National Constituent Assembly.

Leroux then made an uncharacteristically rash decision. He followed Robespierre to Paris and invested a small inheritance from his recently deceased parents into the purchase of a shop in an area just north of the city limits. There he traded in floor coverings. He was ill suited for this

venture, since his color blindness prevented him from perceiving the delicate tonal palette of an expensive carpet, let alone deciding whether it was pleasing to the eye and if it displayed artistry on the part of the weaver. For that reason, he became dependent on the judgment of two employees in his shop: Elise, a young girl (who on occasion shared his bed) and Guillaume, a middle-aged clerk who had come with the shop when he bought it.

The shop was steadily losing money and Leroux was certain Guillaume was cheating him. He thought of selling the shop and returning to Arras, but found it hard to tear himself away from his idol and continued to trail behind Robespierre's political career. He joined the new Society of the Friends of the Constitution, known eventually as the Jacobin Club, which Robespierre came to dominate.

By 1792 Leroux was bankrupt and had to sell his shop for a song to Guillaume. Facing destitution, he moved to a dismal garret on the top of a town house near the market at Les Halles. There, he lived frugally, dressed and ate like a pauper, eschewed all social amenities, and concentrated on his life's sole passion: being part of the radical revolutionary movement led by Robespierre.

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On August 13, 1792 Louis XVI and his family were imprisoned. On September 21, at its first meeting, the National Convention abolished the monarchy, and the next day declared France to be a republic. Robespierre then led the Convention to establish a Committee of Public Safety to hunt for enemies of the republic and watch over the actions of the government, and a Revolutionary Tribunal, whose sentences were not appealable and were to be carried out immediately. Robespierre and his faction led the government from that point forward.

On the evening of July 27, 1794, Leroux had not eaten for three days. He had just a hundred sous left, and was tempted to sit at a communal table and have a simple meal of bread, rough red wine, sausages, and perhaps his favorite – strawberry tart. Instead, he resisted the impulse and got ready to attend the evening session of the Convention at the Salle des Machines of the Tuileries Palace. While getting dressed, he felt faint and passed out.

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He arrived at the Tuileries Palace just in time to witness the Convention vote to arrest Robespierre and his deputies and officials. Some of the disgraced deputies managed to escape and took shelter in Paris' City Hall, the Hôtel de Ville. Leroux, who had not been arrested, joined them there.

In the early morning of July 28, 1794, Robespierre and nearly two dozen of his Jacobin supporters were incarcerated. Starting at seven in the evening, they were taken one by one to the Place de la Révolution and guillotined.

Leroux had been placed in a holding cell awaiting execution. He had fallen into a stupor and had to be rudely awakened by the guards. When his turn arrived, he was escorted out of the cell and marched to the scaffold. At first, he was numb with fright and feebly attempted to dislodge himself from the arms of his custodians, to no avail. They dragged him over the hot cobblestones, which burned through his shoes and hurt as if he was walking on coals. From afar, he could hear the drum roll that announced the execution of yet another in Robespierre's inner circle. Leroux wetted himself.

The cold dampness down his britches shocked him awake. "I must show some dignity" he thought, and stopped resisting his captors. He straightened up and looked skyward, his attention drawn by a harsh cacophony. A murder of crows flew by, headed perhaps for the

common pits at the Picpus Cemetery where the corpses of the executed were dumped. A little behind them, and heading in a northeastern direction, was a stately white bird with large wings, advancing with its long legs stretched out behind and its neck stretched out ahead. It was soaring upward, seeking a thermal, and quickly vanished from sight.

It is a crane, realized Leroux, startled by the apparition. He used to see cranes like this in Arras, flying north in the early spring towards their breeding grounds in Northern Europe. It was in such a day long ago that he almost declared his love for Mathilde. But now it was too late, no time left for regrets.

The guillotine was installed in a raised platform, reached by six wooden steps. Leroux was escorted, trembling, up the steps to stand near a cleric. The man offered a prayer for Leroux's soul, which he shrugged off.

He was made to kneel. The platform was surrounded by soldiers and citizens who seemed to relish the sight of the executions and jeered at Leroux as they had done to scores of other victims. Leroux himself had witnessed some beheadings, including those of King Louis XVI, Queen Marie Antoinette, and other notable figures of the *ancien régime*. At least 40,000 men and women had already been executed throughout France. Leroux had accepted these measures without questioning whether they were just or necessary.

As they covered his eyes with a cloth and inserted his head into the hole that would expose his neck to the blade, he examined his life, colorless as his vision, and realized that it had been driven by self-loathing and timidity, never enjoying a moment of real pleasure or daring to extend care to his fellow human beings.

And his final regret, as the cord was pulled and the guillotine came hurtling down, was "I just did not *live* enough."

There was a sharp burst of pain, and Leroux's severed head was seized by the executioner. The image of his beloved Mathilde became fixed before the dying man's eyes.

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Leroux regained consciousness from his faint slowly, his vision unfocused and terrible pangs of hunger punishing his bowels. It was very dark in his garret, and almost no light entered the room from the outside. With trembling steps, he brought himself to the edge of the table, lit a candle, and took out his pocket watch from his britches. It was past two thirty in the morning! He put on his shabby topcoat and, walking as fast as his debilitated condition allowed, left for the Tuileries to join the meeting of the Convention.

When he arrived, panting, at the large meeting room, he found it empty except for a couple of clerks making entries into their record books. "Where is everyone?" he asked, out of breath.

One of the clerks raised his head from the papers and answered diffidently: "They adjourned for the night after Robespierre and the Jacobins were ordered arrested. Proceedings will resume at some point in the morning."

Leroux almost fainted again, as he recalled his horrific vision. He slunk away. "I have to get out of here," he kept repeating to himself. "Life has given me a second chance. I must not waste it on Robespierre."

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He was unable to leave Paris, for he had no money to pay for passage back to Arras. After days of frantic searching, he found work as a night laborer and raised enough money to pay the rent for his garret and remained in hiding there during the day, fearing that at any moment someone would knock on his door and lead him to the scaffold. But nobody showed up.

He was still in the city when the royalists declared a rebellion against the Convention. A young officer, Napoleon Bonaparte, was put in charge of defending the Tuileries Palace against the royalists. He assembled an array of cannons and used them to repel the attackers; 1,400 royalists died and the rest fled.

The defeat of the royalist insurrection extinguished the threat to the Convention and earned Bonaparte sudden fame and the patronage of the new government. From that point forward, Bonaparte's political and military career took off. He led France in a series of wars in Italy and Austria and was always victorious.

Leroux became Bonaparte's follower as he had earlier been Robespierre's. He observed Napoleon's meteoric rise with enthusiasm and, after Napoleon organized *La Grande Armée*, Leroux enlisted and became an officer in that army as it crushed France's enemies. He remained with the army when it invaded Russia and occupied Moscow and, after the city was burned to the ground, was part of Napoleon's disastrous retreat from Russia. He was one of the thousands who walked in snow up to their knees and froze to death on the night of November 8, 1812.

The image that came before his eyes as he shivered in final delirium was that of Mathilde, picking a crocus out of the snow. Despite the gloom of the woods in winter, Leroux was able to make out the vibrant purple of the flower. And, as he did, he realized that there was happiness in the world, and it could have been his, had he dared to rise above his limitations to grasp it.

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