INFINITY WANDERERS

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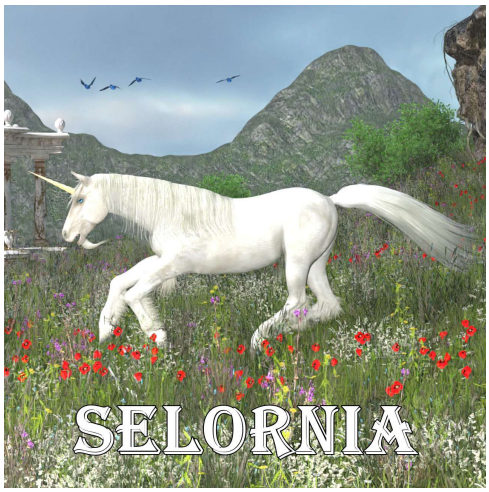

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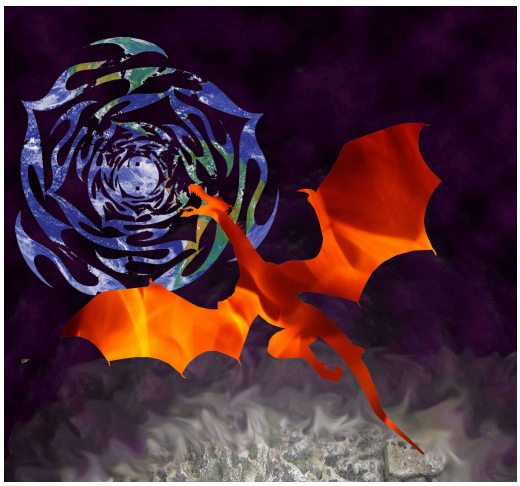

CONTENTS

Robespierre and I: An Homage to Charles Dickens

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

It was the best of times,/ it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom,/ it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief,/ it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light,/ it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope,/ it was the winter of despair.
Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities

I am Théophile Leroux, Esq., a nondescript country lawyer from Arras, France. I led an anonymous life until I met Maximilien Robespierre in 1781, when Robespierre returned to his family home in Arras after completing his law studies. I was immediately in awe of the younger man and became a member of a closely-knit circle of friends who signed onto Robespierre's ideals of the Enlightenment and his defense of the rights of man. With no accomplishments of my own, I enjoyed the reflected shine of Robespierre's personality, and made it the center of my life to attend those society meetings at Arras in which Robespierre held court.

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Over the next few years, I followed my 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 became part of the National Assembly, which soon turned into the National Constituent Assembly.

I followed Robespierre to Paris and applied a small inheritance from my recently deceased parents to the purchase of a floor coverings shop in an area just north of the city limits. I was ill suited for this venture and became dependent on the judgment of two employees who had come with the shop when I bought it from its previous owners.

The shop was steadily losing money and I often thought of selling it and returning to Arras. However, I could not tear myself away from my idol and placed all my efforts into continuing to trail behind Robespierre's political career. I joined the new Society of the Friends of the Constitution, known eventually as the Jacobin Club, which Robespierre came to dominate. I never contributed much to the Jacobins' radical initiatives, but approved of them and helped carry them out as well as my skills allowed.

By 1792 I was bankrupt and had to sell the shop for a song and move to a garret on the top of a townhouse near the central market at Les Halles. There, I lived frugally, dressed and ate like a pauper, eschewed all social amenities, and concentrated on the only passion in my life: being part of the radical revolutionary movement led by Robespierre.

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On July 29, 1792, at the Jacobin Club, Robespierre demanded the suspension of the monarchy and the election of a National Convention to write a new constitution. I wholeheartedly supported the measures and volunteered to help write the constitution, though my offer was not accepted.

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 and watch over the actions of the government, and a Revolutionary Tribunal, whose sentences were not appealable and were to be carried out immediately. He led the government from that point forward.

As a member of Robespierre's inner circle, I was assigned a number of duties in support of his party. One of them was to monitor the activities of the Revolutionary Tribunal. I was charged with attending sessions of the Tribunal to ensure that revolutionary justice was administered uniformly, within the limits set by the Convention.

One cold night in mid-December 1793 I set out to attend a session of the Tribunal that convened at the Conciergerie, the Medieval royal palace where Queen Marie-Antoinette was imprisoned until her execution. The tribunal consisted of five Judges, a Public Prosecutor, and an established Jury, which sat every day.

That evening, fifty-two accused were to receive Revolutionary justice. They were old and young, men and women, rich and poor; for the most part, an unremarkable lot, not unlike many I had previously seen tried and, in most cases, found guilty. I stood in a corner of the room, jotting a few observations in my notebook.

The most interesting case concerned one Charles Darnay, a descendant of an exiled nobleman, the Marquis de Evrémonde. Darnay had been tried the day before and released on the strength of the testimony of his father-in-law, a Dr. Manette. However, he had been apprehended again the same night and was facing the Tribunal because of a denunciation by a husband-and-wife team, the Defarges. The complainants based their charges against Darnay on a letter written by Dr. Manette while he was a prisoner at the Bastille, in which Manette described in great detail the heinous acts committed in 1757 by Darnay's father and uncle

against a commoner family, including raping a young woman and killing her brother. Manette had been sent to The Bastille through the influence of these noblemen to prevent him from giving incriminating testimony. He had been in prison for eighteen years and was known and respected by many in the audience.

As I watched the proceedings, my attention was drawn to a man in his thirties, who was standing in the shadows next to me and seemed to be in a state of increased agitation. A couple of times I heard him shout “that is unfair,” and “the man is innocent,” and words to that effect. Curious, I approached the man and placed a calming hand on his shoulder. “Dear sir,” I said as mildly as I could, “If you continue, you may draw the unfavorable attention of the public, which I think would be inadvisable.” The man came to his senses at this, but was obviously in a state of great anxiety. I led him gently to the antechamber and brought him to a table where a vendor had set up a variety of food and drink items for the public attending the judicial spectacle. “May I buy you a glass of wine?” I offered.

“I have given up drinking, but this is too much for me to countenance” he replied.

“I am Théophile Leroux, a lawyer from Arras” I introduced myself. “My name is Sydney Carton” he replied, in somewhat accented French.

“Are you from abroad, Monsieur Carton?”

“British.”

“Why are you so upset at the testimony against that man Darnay, or is it Evrémonde?”

“I have known Monsieur Darnay for many years. I met him and his wife Lucie while they lived in London. Charles is an excellent fellow, who repudiated his father and uncle and moved to England to be away from them. It is unjust to accuse him of the actions of the elder

Evrémondes thirty-five years ago, in which he clearly had no part. If he is condemned to the guillotine, that will be a mortal blow to Lucie. That must be avoided at all costs!" he emptied the glass of wine in one gulp and slammed it on the table.

I was taken aback by Carton's passion and again cautioned him to lower his voice. "Let's go back in" I suggested, and drew him into the back of the room.

As we came in, the reading of Doctor Manette's letter from prison was drawing to a close. A terrible sound rose from the gallery when the reading of this document was done. The President of the Tribunal remarked that the good physician deserved the support of the Republic by rooting out an obnoxious family of Aristocrats, and at his words there was wild excitement and patriotic fervor among the Jury and the entire audience. As every juryman voted, there was an increasing outcry. The vote was unanimous: Charles Darnay was to be sent back to the Conciergerie and be executed within four-and-twenty hours.

M. Carton was shivering uncontrollably with rage as I led him back out of the room. There we encountered a young woman and two elderly men: M. Darnay's wife, Dr. Manette, and another man I did not know. The woman was at the point of fainting, but M. Carton propped her up. His arm trembled as it raised her, and supported her head.

"Shall I take her to a coach?" he asked the others. Without waiting for an answer, he carried her lightly to the door, and laid her tenderly down in a coach that awaited outside.

I was moved by the heart-rending scene, and the patent injustice that was being committed. I waved Carton goodbye and promised: "I will see what I can do about this!!"

Nobody seemed to hear my words.

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I arrived at Robespierre's apartments in the Marais after midnight. The lateness of the hour did not faze me, for I knew he was a prodigious worker who often stayed up most or all of the evening. I found him working on his *Report on the Principles of Revolutionary Government*, a document he would issue the following year setting the philosophical basis for his dictatorship.

Robespierre was not pleased by the interruption and questioned me curtly: "Leroux! What brings you here late at night? Is there important news?"

"No, Maximilien" I replied mildly. "I come to beseech you to intervene to prevent a great injustice from taking place." Seeing that he was about to cut me off, I blurted in a few hasty sentences the impending execution of Charles Darnay, which I termed a travesty of Revolutionary justice that must be avoided.

Robespierre reacted coolly to my speech, and replied with a question dripping with sarcasm: "So, what would you have me do?"

I had not fully thought through what relief was needed, but I managed to respond: "Perhaps send a note to the Tribunal asking that the death sentence against Monsieur Darnay be rescinded."

Anger flashed for a moment in Robespierre's eyes. He brought himself under control and replied slowly, emphasizing every word: "You would have *me* attempt to countermand the judgment of the very Tribunal that I took great pains to establish. You would have *me* create disorder in the workings of an essential arm of the State, and open *me* to charges of favoritism. You would set a precedent for every potential condemned man to try to move *me* to intervene on his behalf, creating chaos and interfering with my own work for the benefit of the nation.

No, Monsieur Leroux. I am not about to do that, and am very disappointed at you for even asking."

With a dismissive wave of the hand, Robespierre ushered me from his presence. I did not have the courage or the presence of mind to stand up to him and argue what I knew to be a meritorious case. Lowering the head, I beat a hasty retreat from the presence of my idol.

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I went back to my garret and tried to get at least a few hours of sleep. But my conscience would not let me rest. I kept playing the incident in my mind and trying to come up with the arguments I could have made that might have swayed Robespierre. I came up with nothing.

The following day I rose, planning to come to work at the Jacobins' headquarters as I did every day. However, a mixture of dread and morbid curiosity drove me instead to the Place de la Révolution, where the public executions took place. A crowd was gathering already, and a holiday atmosphere prevailed through the mass of people who had come to watch the spectacle.

At mid-day, they began marching the condemned men and women, one by one, to the gallows. As each one took his or her place before Madame Guillotine, an officer read the name of the condemned and the charges that led to the death sentence. His pronouncements were received with cheers, catcalls, and other displays of approval from the mob.

Near the end of the executions, the officer read: "Charles Evrémonde, called Darnay, condemned enemy of the Republic, Aristocrat, one of a family of tyrants, one of a race proscribed, for that they used their abolished privileges to the infamous oppression of the people. Hereby sentenced to death."

As the crowd roared in approval, I forced myself to look at the condemned man. To my astonishment, the man by the guillotine was not Darnay, but Sydney Carton. He seemed at peace with himself and, after waiving aside the efforts of the priest who tried to read him some prayer, he closed his eyes, broke into a tight smile, and offered his neck to the blade.

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On the evening of July 27, 1794, I had not eaten for three days. I 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 my favorite – strawberry tart. Instead, I resisted the impulse and got ready to attend the evening session of the Convention at the Salle des Machines of the Tuileries Palace. I arrived at the Palace just in time to witness the Convention vote to arrest Robespierre and his supporting deputies and officials. Some disgraced deputies managed to escape the Tuileries and took shelter in Paris' City Hall, the Hôtel de Ville. I was not arrested, but chose to join them in solidarity and was imprisoned as they were rounded up. All along, I felt I was dying of hunger.

"At least I should have had the *tarte aux fraises*" I bemoaned.

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

I had been placed in a holding cell awaiting execution. I fell into a stupor and had to be rudely awakened by the guards. When my turn arrived, I was escorted out of the cell and marched to the scaffold. At first, I was almost numb with fright and feebly attempted to dislodge myself from the arms of his custodians, to no avail. They dragged me over the hot

cobblestones, which burned through my thin shoes and hurt as if I was walking on coals. From afar, I could hear the drum roll that announced the execution of yet another in Robespierre's inner circle. I wetted myself.

The cold dampness down my britches shocked me into composing myself. "I must show some dignity" I thought, and stopped resisting my captors. At one point, I straightened up and looked skyward, my 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 disappeared. It is a crane, I realized, startled by the apparition. I used to see cranes like this in Arras, flying north in the early spring towards their breeding grounds in Northern Europe. Had I stayed home, I might be seeing them again someday.

The guillotine was installed in a raised platform, reached by six wooden steps. I was escorted, trembling for I am not a brave man like Carton, up the steps to stand near a cleric. The man offered a prayer for my soul, which I shrugged off. I no longer believed in religion, maybe not even in God, and this absence of faith left me without a source of comfort in this final hour.

I was made to kneel. The platform was surrounded by soldiers and citizens who seemed to relish the sight of the executions and jeered at my impending doom as they had done to scores of other victims. I myself had witnessed some beheadings, including those of King Louis XVI, Queen Marie Antoinette and other notable figures of the *ancien régime*, plus of course Sydney Carton. At least 40,000 men and women had been thus executed throughout France. I

had accepted these measures without daring to question whether they were just or necessary. Now I feel differently.

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As they cover my eyes with a cloth and insert my head into the hole that will expose my neck to the blade, I examine my life and realize that my allegiance to Robespierre was driven by a timidity that never allowed a moment of self-expression and prevented me from developing normal relationships with other human beings.

And my final regret, as the cord is being pulled and the guillotine comes hurtling down, is that I just did not dare to *live* enough. I finally realize that there is beauty and happiness in the world besides politics, and those could have been mine, had I dared to rise above my limitations to assert myself and grasp them.

END

Matias Travieso-Diaz

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over two hundred and forty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books, and podcasts. One of his novels, an autobiography entitled “Cuban Transplant,” and four anthologies of his stories have also been published.