

# **The Insurgent**

Ludovic Halevy

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# The Insurgent

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"PRISONER," said the president of the military tribunal, "have you anything to add in your own defense?"

"Yes, Colonel," answered the prisoner. "You assigned me a little lawyer who has defended me in his fashion. I want to defend myself in my own.

"My name is Martin, Louis Joseph. I'm fifty-five. My father was a locksmith. He had a little shop up in the St. Martin quarter, and he had only a little business. We were able to live. I learned to read in the National, which was, I believe, Monsieur Thiers's newspaper.

"The 27th of July, 1830, my father went out early in the morning. That evening, at ten o'clock, they brought him back to us, dying on a litter; he had received a bullet in the chest. By his side, on the litter, was his gun.

"'Take it,' he said to me; 'I give it to you, and whenever there shall be an insurrection against the government, always, always, always!'

"An hour after he was dead. I went out into the night. At the first barricade, I stopped and offered myself. A man examined me by the light of a lantern. 'A child,' he cried. I was not yet fifteen. I was very small, very undersized. I answered, 'A child, that's possible; but my father was killed two hours ago. He gave me his gun. Teach me how to use it.'

"From that moment I became what I have always been for forty years an insurgent! If I fought under the Commune, it was not because I was forced for the thirty cents. It was from liking, for pleasure, by habit, by routine.

"In 1830, I behaved myself bravely enough in the attack on the Louvre. That boy who first climbed the iron fence under the fire of the Swiss, that was I. I received the Medal of July; but the shopkeepers gave us a king. We had all our work to do over again. I joined a secret society; I learned how to cast bullets, to make powder. In a word, I completed my education, and I waited.

"I had to wait nearly two years. June 5, 1832, at noon, before the Madeleine, I was the first to unhitch one of the horses from the hearse of General Lamarque. I spent the day crying, 'Hurrah for La Fayette!' and the night making barricades. The next morning we were attacked by the regulars. That afternoon, about four o'clock, we were shut in, bombarded, swept with grapeshot, crushed in the church of St. Méry. I had a ball in my body and three bayonet wounds when the regulars picked me up, on the steps of a little chapel on the right, St. John's chapel. I used to go back often to that little chapel, not to pray, for I hadn't been brought up in those ideas, but to see the stains of my blood which still mark those stones.

"On account of my youth I had only ten years of prison. I was sent to Mont-St.-Michel. That's why I didn't have a hand in the risings of 1834. If I had been out, I should have been fighting in the rue Transnonain, as I had fought in the rue St. Méry, against the government, always, always, always. That was my father's last word, my evangel, my religion. I called that my catechism in six words. I got out of prison in 1842, and I began again to wait.

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"The Revolution of 1848 made itself. The shopkeepers were stupid and cowardly. They didn't go with us, nor against us. Only the city guards defended themselves. We had a little trouble in capturing the post of the Chateau-d'Eau. The night of the 24th of February, I stayed three or four hours on the Place de la Hôtel de Ville. The members of the provisional government, one after another, made speeches to us; they told us we were heroes, great citizens, the foremost people in the world, that we had thrown off the yoke of tyranny. After having fed us on these fine words, they gave us a Republic which wasn't any better than the Monarchy we had upset.

"In June, I took up my gun again, but this time it didn't succeed. I was arrested, condemned, sent to Cayenne. It seems that I behaved myself out there. One day, I saved a captain of marines who was drowning. They thought that was very fine. Remember that I'd have shot that captain, if he'd been on one side of a barricade and I on the other, but a man who is drowning, who is going to die well, I was pardoned. I got back to France in 1852, after the Coup d'État; I had missed the insurrection of 1851.

"At Cayenne, I had made a friend, a tailor named Bernard. Six months after I left for France, Bernard was dead. I went to see his widow. She was in dire poverty. I married her. We had a son in 1854. You will understand soon why I speak of my wife and my son. Only you ought to doubt already whether an insurgent who marries the widow of an insurgent has royalist children.

"Under the Empire there was nothing doing. The police had a hard hand. We were dispersed, disarmed. I worked, I brought up my son in the ideas that my father had given me. It was a long time waiting. Rochefort, Gambetta, the public meetings, all that started us up again.

"At the first serious chance I showed myself. I was one of the little group that assaulted the barracks of the firemen of La Villette. Only there there was a fool thing done. They killed a fireman without necessity. I was taken, thrown in prison; but the government of the 4th of September let us out, from which I concluded that we had done right in attacking the barracks and killing the fireman, even without necessity.

"The siege began. From the start I was against the government, for the Commune. I marched against the Hôtel de Ville the 31st of October and the 22d of January. I loved revolt for the revolt itself. An insurgent, I told you at the start; I am an insurgent. I can't see a political club without going in, an insurrection without running to it, a barricade without taking my stone to it. That has passed with my blood.

"And then, besides, I wasn't altogether ignorant; and I said to myself, 'We've only got to succeed one day, down to the bottom, and then in our town, we shall be the government; and things will go a little better than with all the lawyers who get behind us during the fight and go ahead of us after the victory.'

"The 18th of March came, and naturally I took part. I cried 'Hurrah for the regulars!' I fraternized with them. I went to the Hôtel de Ville. I found there a government at work absolutely, as on the 24th of February.

"Now you tell me that this insurrection was not lawful. That's possible, but I don't know quite why. I begin to get muddled between these insurrections which are a duty and these insurrections which are a crime. I don't see any great difference.

"I fired on the Versailles troops in 1871 as I had fired on the Royal Guard in 1830 and on the City Guard in 1848. After 1830 I had the Medal of July. After 1848 I had the compliments of Monsieur de Lamertine. This time, I'm going to have transportation or death.

"Some insurrections seem to please you. You put up columns to them, you name streets after them; and you give yourselves the places, the offices, the big salaries; and we others, who made the revolution, you call us 'great citizens,' 'heroes,' 'brave people,' etc., etc. It is with that sort of small change that you pay us.

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"And then, some other insurrections don't seem to please you. After those, you distribute exile, transportation, death. Well, now, if you had not paid us so many compliments after the first lot, perhaps we might not have made the second. If you had not put up the Column of July in our quarter, perhaps we might not have gone to your quarters to pull down the Vendôme Column. Those twopenny trumpets didn't agree. One had to upset the other; and that's what happened.

"Now, why I threw in a corner of the street my captain's uniform on the 26th of May, why I was in my blouse when I was taken, I'll tell you. When I learned that those fellows of the Commune, instead of standing up to the fire with us on the barricades, were distributing thousand-franc notes to themselves at the Hôtel de Ville, shaving their beards, dyeing their hair, and going to hide themselves in cellars, I wasn't willing to keep the epaulets they had given me.

"Besides, these epaulets annoyed me. 'Captain Martin' was all foolishness. The 'insurgent Martin,' if you like. I wanted to end as I had begun, to die as my father had died, like an insurrectionist in an insurrection, a barricader in a barricade.

"I wasn't able to get myself killed. I was taken. I belong to you. Only I'd like to ask one favor. I've a son, a boy of seventeen; he's at Cherbourg, on the hulks. He's been fighting, that's true, and he won't deny it; but it was I who put the gun in his hand: it was I who told him that his duty was there. He listened to me. He obeyed me. That's all his crime. Don't condemn him too harshly.

"As for me, you've got me; don't let me go, that's the advice I give you. I'm too old to change, and besides, what would you have? Nothing can alter what is; I was born on the wrong side of the barricade."