

5 A Pointless Death

STÉPHANIE's refusal devastated GALOIS, whose fervent spirit longed to find what science had denied him in his love for her. He spent the last days of his prison sentence impatiently waiting to return to his political militancy, which was all that was left for him to make his life worth living. He had lost all hope regarding STÉPHANIE. She would never love him, and mathematics, his other great love, had also betrayed him, in a way. Though convinced that his theories were exact, and that they were valid for the future of algebra, he was aware that continuing to hope they would be understood by the Paris academic establishment was sheer madness. His only hope now was his faith in republican ideals, and he was eagerly looking forward to rejoining the Friends of the People.

He was released on 29 April. However, he did not leave the FAULTRIER establishment, not having enough money to pay for his room in rue des Bernardins, neither did he have any desire to go back to his mother, who had never visited him in Sainte-Pélagie. He could have joined AUGUSTE and MICHEL CHEVALIER in the Saint-Simonian community at Ménilmontant, where he would have been received with open arms. However, the rules imposed by the two *pères* BAZARD and ENFANTIN, the leaders of the movement, though not particularly strict, were rules, nonetheless, and GALOIS wanted to be totally independent at that time. Furthermore, leaving Paris would have meant postponing his political struggle for a republic in France.

After the arrests of July 1831, the Friends of the People had been forced to leave their headquarters in rue Grenelle-Saint-Honoré, and had not met for several months. At the beginning of May 1832, a new event had spurred them to further action. MARIE-CAROLINE, duchesse DE BERRY, had returned to France. Nobody had known that the widow of CHARLES X's son, at the time of her husband's assassination, was expecting an heir. The boy, now aged twelve, was living in exile in Prague, under the guidance of a tutor of the



Fig. 25: Portrait of EVARISTE GALOIS done from memory by his brother ALFRED in 1848

highest calibre, the mathematician CAUCHY, who, by taking on this hardly satisfying task, from the intellectual point of view, was thus able to demonstrate his devotion to the Bourbon dynasty.

The legitimists, who saw LOUIS-PHILIPPE as a usurper, placed all their hopes in this boy. How was the Duchess's return to be interpreted? Did it mean that the legitimists were ready for battle? If this were the case, the republicans thought that LOUIS-PHILIPPE could be put in a difficult position, and a new revolution planned. There was no time to lose. A meeting was planned for all the members in one of their houses, at 18 rue de l'Hôpital-Saint-Louis, on 7 May. GALOIS was informed, and was warmly welcomed back to the Society, since he was well-known for his ability to spur the more luke warm spirits into action.

The need for an armed uprising was immediately accepted. All that was missing was a pretext to provoke the fury of the crowds, and a date. One idea, that was not at first taken very seriously, was that a corpse to be revenged would be very useful. A hero was needed, in whose name the people of Paris would fight, a name to shout, while firing on LOUIS-PHILIPPE's police, a name on the lips of the dying. The discussion soon heated up, and, as his companions expressed their views, GALOIS, who had not spoken up to that point, became more and more excited.

He soon asked to speak, in such an authoritative tone, that all the others immediately fell silent. He explained, movingly, that his life had become pointless. All that was left for him was to offer it to the only thing he still loved: France. The corpse they needed would be his.

All those present began to protest. GALOIS was too young to die, and, in any case, would be much more useful for the republican cause alive than dead. He would not listen. However, several weeks would have to pass, so that, if the King's police had been told about the meeting, his death would not be connected to the Society's activities. He would arrange a duel with his friend L. D., but only his opponent's pistol would be loaded. He would even leave a number of letters making the duel seem plausible. Nobody, with the exception of those present, should know about his sacrifice. The Friends of the People would only have the task of spreading the news that the duel was actually a police ambush.

The members of the Society were not unanimous over GALOIS' plan, but he insisted so much that the meeting came to a close, with the agreement that they would meet again in due course, to organize

the funeral, which would provide the opportunity of inciting the people to revolt. GALOIS' funeral would have to be well organized, and nothing left to chance. The sacrifice of a life was a very high price, and the plan must not fail.

Over the next few days, GALOIS' state of mind was a mixture of excitement, expectation and fear. He would have liked to share his secret with his faithful friend AUGUSTE, but he knew that the latter would oppose his plan, and, after hurrying back to Paris, try to dissuade him. All he did was write to him, on 25 May, about his disappointment over the end of his love story with STÉPHANIE:

How can I console myself after the source of the greatest happiness known to man came to an end in only one month? Happiness and hope are at an end, now surely consumed for the rest of my life.

His disappointments of the previous year led him to say:

Pity never! Hatred, that's all. Anyone who does not deeply feel this hatred for the present, does not really love the future.

And, thinking of his imminent death, he added:

I am able to cast doubts on your cruel prophecy that I shall work no more. But I must admit that it is not entirely groundless.

So as not to arouse suspicions in his friend's mind, he ended the letter with a promise:

I shall come and visit you on 1 June. I hope that we shall see each other frequently during the first fortnight of June. I shall be leaving on 15 for the Dauphiné region.

The time of GALOIS' sacrifice was at hand. On 29 May, he came to all the necessary agreements with L. D. They would meet at dawn on the following day, near the Glacière pond in the pleasant surroundings of the Gentilly area.

The time had also come for writing the letters which would prevent anyone from suspecting the true circumstances of his death. The letters are so skillfully written that they have given rise to different versions of the events in various biographies of GALOIS. Among the most popular are that he really did fight a duel, sparked off by an argument over a woman, or that his opponent was a policeman, who wanted to remove him from the political scene. A real duel, however, would not have made him so sure of dying. This certainty comes out very clearly from the letters. The first is addressed *to all republicans*:



Fig. 26: Portrait of General LAMARQUE as a young man

I beg my patriotic friends not to chide me for dying in any other way than for my country.

I die, the victim of a cruel coquette, and of two of her victims. My life fades away amidst trivial gossip.

Why should I die for so little, for something so despicable.

Heaven is my witness that I could do nothing other than surrender to a provocation, that I tried to ward off, with all the means I had. I repent having told such foreboding truth to men so incapable of hearing it calmly. I shall take with me to the grave a spotless conscience, untainted by lies, untainted by patriotic blood.

Adieu! Life was dear to me, for the common good.

Pardon for those who killed me. They were acting in good faith.

The second letter is addressed to N. L. (NAPOLÉON LEBON?) and V. D. (VINCENT DUCHÂTELET, or VINCENT DELAUNAY?):

Dear friends,

I have been challenged to a duel by two patriots . . . I cannot refuse.

I beg your forgiveness for not having informed either of you.

But my adversaries had ordered me ON MY HONOUR not to inform any patriots.

Your task is very simple: to prove that I fought against my will, that is after having tried all possible compromises, and to say whether I am able to lie even on such a trivial subject as the one in question.

Remember me, since fortune allowed me a long enough life to make my name known to the Nation.

I die your friend.

What strikes the reader is GALOIS' insistence on certain death. He uses the words "I die," "I must die," "I shall take to the grave," "Adieu," "they killed me." During his last hours, before going to the tragic meeting that he himself had arranged, he must have felt deep regret for not having achieved the fame that his mathematics, if it had been understood, could have brought him. His mind was still teaming with half worked out ideas. He felt the need to communicate them to someone. All he had to leave was his mathematics. He wrote a last letter to AUGUSTE, who would not really have been able to understand it, but who would not refuse his friend a last favour:

My dear friend. I have made some new discoveries in the field of mathematical analysis.

He made a brief summary of the *mémoire* he had deposited at the Academy containing the theory that is now named after him, adding some new theorems and conjectures covering seven pages. He concluded, regretfully:

I do not have enough time and my ideas are not sufficiently well developed in this area, which is enormous.

He added the following request:

Ask Jacobi and Gauss, in public, to give their opinions, not on the truth, but on the importance of these theorems.

As planned, on the morning of 30 May, a gun shot, fired at a distance of 25 paces, wounded GALOIS in the abdomen. The bullet perforated his intestine in various points, but did not kill him immediately. What happened then? Did a frightened L. D. run away or rush for help?

One version has a peasant, who was on his way to market, another a former officer in the royal army, finding GALOIS who had been left lying on the edge of the road, at nine-thirty in the morning and taking him to the COCHIN hospital.

ALFRED, when told, rushed to his wounded brother's bedside, but EVARISTE would not even tell him the truth, remaining faithful to the version agreed upon with the Friends of the People, that his assailant was a member of LOUIS-PHILIPPE's police. In the early hours of Thursday 31 May, Ascension Day, peritonitis set in. Since GALOIS was near death, a priest was called, but refused to speak to him.

His last words were for ALFRED: "Don't cry," he said, "I need all my courage to die at twenty."

At ten that morning the republicans had the corpse they needed.

The following day, the news of GALOIS' death appeared briefly in all the newspapers in Paris. It was only *Le Précurseur*, a constitutionalist newspaper in Lyon, that gave more details of the event:

A deplorable duel yesterday robbed science of a young man who inspired the brightest hopes, but whose prodigious fame is only of a political nature. Young Evariste Galois . . . fought a duel with an old friend, a very young man like him, and like him a member of the *Société des Amis du Peuple* . . .

At point blank range, each of them was given a pistol and fired.

Only one of the pistols was loaded.

A few days before, DENUARD, one of the Friends of the People, had rented an apartment at 20 rue Saint-André-des-Arcs, so as to hold a new meeting. The police, who were keeping a close eye on the Society, became suspicious and had the door sealed. On 1 June, the republicans broke the seals and met to decide on the last arrangements for the revolt. The men of GISQUET, the prefect of police, raided the apartment during the meeting, arresting about thirty republicans, while the rest managed to escape. The following morning, at midday, in the cemetery of Montparnasse, roughly 3,000 people were present, ready to attack the police, as soon as the coffin had been lowered into the grave. The National Guard artillery were also on the alert.

While PLAIGNOL and PINEL, the leaders of the Friends of the People, were delivering their funeral orations, in honour of GALOIS, the word began to be passed round that General LAMARQUE had died. MAXIMILIEN LAMARQUE had been appointed a Marshall of France by NAPOLEON, on the latter's death bed. Calculations were quickly made. There would be a much larger, and more emotionally involved crowd at the old general's funeral. Why not take up the opportunity offered by this second corpse, and put the uprising off for another couple of days? The decision was swiftly taken, and the funeral came to a hasty, silent end. EVARISTE GALOIS' death had been pointless.