

# THE MYSTERY SURROUNDING THE DEATH OF JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU.

BY JULIEN RASPAIL.

[During the last spring and summer, the French newspapers and periodicals fairly teemed with articles concerning Jean Jacques Rousseau, the bicentennial of whose birth occurred at the end of June. The government, several municipalities and many private individuals held ceremonies of different sorts in honor of the event, which naturally brought again to the fore the old question of how Rousseau met his death. Perhaps the most striking and original contribution on this subject is the one given below, written at my suggestion by a distinguished physician of Paris, who is in a position to speak with authority and who is at the same time an ardent admirer of the celebrated philosopher.]

Dr. Julien Raspail belongs to one of those notable families, rare in all countries, whose various branches during several generations are marked by distinction. Dr. F. V. Raspail (1794-1878), chemist, vegetable physiologist and earnest republican agitator at a period when holding radical opinions meant imprisonment and exile, was the first to render the name famous. One of the fine new boulevards of Paris bears this patronymic. Dr. Raspail had four sons and one daughter. Benjamin Raspail (1823-1899), painter and engraver of talent, was a deputy under both Republics and shared exile with his father during the Empire. Camille Raspail (1827-1897) was a physician and a deputy. Emile Raspail (1831-1887) was an industrial chemist and a politician. Marie Raspail (1834-1876) devoted her life to her father and accompanied him to prison, where the last time, at the age of eighty, he was confined for his political ideas; she took cold and died there prematurely. Xavier Raspail, born in 1839, still lives, an able physician and a well-known naturalist. Eugène Raspail (1812-1888), a nephew, was a deputy and learned scientist. Of Dr. Raspail's children, Emile alone left descendants, the author of this article being the only one who has attained a reputation; but as there are five great-grandchildren of the founder of the house, the name of Raspail may soon again be celebrated in the political and scientific history of contemporary France. THEODORE STANTON.]

JEAN Jacques Rousseau died at Ermenonville, a village near Paris, on July 2, 1778. On the morning of his death he rose very early, as was his habit, and took his customary walk in the beautiful park

of the castle where he was residing, returning home in a perfect state of health. He breakfasted and then retired to his apartments with his companion, Theresa Levasseur. About ten o'clock, the Marquis de Girardin, his host, heard cries coming from the room where Rousseau was, and hastening thither, he found the body of the philosopher lying motionless on the floor, with Theresa, all covered with blood, at its side. At first, it was thought that Rousseau had died from an attack of serous apoplexy. The different accounts given by Theresa, the only person who saw Rousseau die, and by



THE CASTLE OF ERMENONVILLE.

one or two of his close friends, including the Marquis de Girardin, as well as the death certificate and the record of the autopsy, all pronounced the death to have been a natural one. But soon ugly rumors began to spread about. It was hinted that Rousseau had shot himself in the forehead with a pistol. There seemed some ground for this statement, for all those who saw the body—the servants of the castle as well as the inhabitants of the village—noticed a large wound on the forehead. But Theresa, M. de Girardin and one or two others declared that this wound came from the fall from his chair, face forwards, on the bare floor, which occurred when the

sudden attack happened. The general public, however, clung to its belief in suicide, and during the whole of the nineteenth century the discussion went on, one side holding to a natural death, the other to a self-inflicted one.

On December 18, 1897, a new fact was added to the controversy.

Rousseau's body was at first buried in the park of the castle at Ermenonville. But when the Convention decreed that the Pantheon at Paris should be made the burial place of the great men of France, Rousseau's remains were solemnly transferred there in October, 1794. When the Empire fell and the Bourbons returned, the Pantheon was returned to the church, when it soon became common report that overzealous priests had violated the tombs of Rousseau and Voltaire, and had thrown their bodies into some unknown potter's field. So the Minister of Public Instruction appointed in 1897 a commission who should examine and report whether the remains of Voltaire and Rousseau were still in the crypt of the Pantheon. On December 18, the two tombs were opened in the presence of this commission, and here is what was reported concerning Rousseau: "The skeleton of Jean Jacques Rousseau is in a perfect state of preservation, the arms crossed on the breast, and the head slightly inclined towards the left like a man sleeping. The skull is intact; there is no indication of it being perforated or fractured."

At first blush it would seem that this report settled beyond question the fact that Rousseau died a natural death and put an end to the accusation that he had committed suicide. But the truth is it did nothing of the kind, for the commission made no scientific identification of the alleged Rousseau skeleton. In fact, the very day after this report was made public, Dr. Hamy, the learned professor of anthropology at the Paris Museum of Natural History, published in the newspapers a letter in which he expressed his doubts as to the authenticity of the skeleton found in Rousseau's tomb. So the polemic continued as passionately as ever and the mystery which surrounds the death of Jean Jacques Rousseau remains as impenetrable as before. For instance, M. Jules Lemaitre, in his brilliant lecture on Rousseau, delivered at Paris in 1907, said: "It will never be known for a certainty whether he killed himself or died a natural death"; and two well-known French physicians—Drs. Cabanès and Fabien Girardet—have recently published two long essays on this subject. Though both of these medical men pronounce in favor of a natural death, another distinguished authority, Dr. Archard, of the Paris Medical School, writes at the same mo-

ment: "We can safely say what Rousseau did *not* die of, but we cannot say what illness killed him."

A document of the highest importance, which can throw an entirely new light on the subject, has been neglected by nearly all the students of the problem. I refer to the death-mask of Rousseau, made the day after his decease by the celebrated sculptor Houdon, famous in the United States for his busts of several distinguished Americans. Now, I have the good fortune to own this historic mask, which has been in my family since May 14, 1861, and a careful study

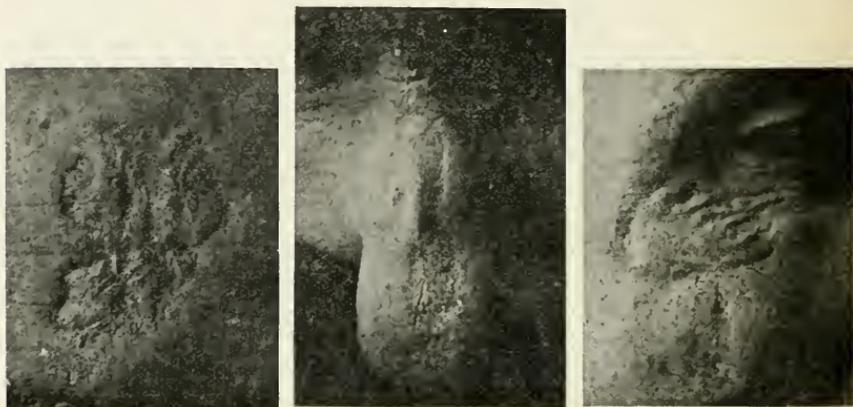


DEATH-MASK OF J. J. ROUSSEAU.  
Moulded by Houdon. (Photograph by Dr. Raspail.)

of it has enabled me to come to new and very unexpected conclusions concerning the death of Jean Jacques Rousseau. In the first place, the wound already referred to comes out very clearly on this mask and has been noticed by others and especially by my grandfather; but what has never been remarked and to which I am the first to call attention is the fact that the face shows two other wounds, which those who have examined the mask have passed over unperceived. One of these is near the right eye. Now, the two eyes of the mask are very dissimilar. The lids of the left eye are much

more open than those of the right eye, the lower lid swelling out very noticeably. The right eye is quite different. The lids are much less open, the palpebral interspace more elongated, the swelling out of the lower lid is scarcely visible, and this same lid shows a slight ectropion. These very marked deformations of the external parts of this eye are fully explained by the neighboring contusion. Rousseau's right eye in its normal condition showed none of these characteristics, as is proved by Latour's excellent pastel portrait of the philosopher. In this portrait, the two palpebral openings are the same, the swelling out of the lower lids is equally pronounced in both eyes, and there is no ectropion of the lower lid of the right eye.

The third wound is on the nose. Just below the root of the nose a slight depression of the skin is noticeable, which is seen on both



WOUND ON FOREHEAD. WOUND ON THE NOSE. WOUND ON THE EYE.

sides of the bridge. The upper portion of this wound is of a horse-shoe shape and descends along the left side of the nose, where the fractured bone is laid bare. Here, as in the case of the two other wounds, there is a narrowing at the middle part. The traumatic origin of this disfigurement cannot be doubted. In Latour's pastel, the nose is well drawn and comes out clearly. No deformity of any kind is visible. We know that Rousseau had a well-formed nose. For instance, Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, in his detailed description of Rousseau's physiognomy, refers to his "well-made nose." But in this death-mask, one is struck by the deformity just mentioned.

When one considers these three wounds, the first peculiarity which occurs to the mind is their parallel direction; the second is their respective situation. If, as was stated by Theresa Levasseur

and M. de Girardin, the wound on the forehead was made by falling forward from his chair, the salient parts of Rousseau's face would alone have shown the effects of this fall. But nothing of the kind is found on Rousseau's very high eyebrows nor on the point of the nose. The contrary is the case, as we have seen. It is the receding parts of the face which were hurt—the retreating forehead, the side of the nose, and the still more protected parts, the base of the nose and the under part of the right eye. Again, two of these wounds are on the right side of the face, while the third is on the left side. Now, it is stated that when Rousseau fell from his chair, he fell dead, and so could not have made the movements necessary to produce these wounds. The similarity in the shape of the wounds is also remarkable. This is strikingly shown by superposing the outline figures of the three wounds. In the case of the forehead and eye wounds, it will be noticed that the upper portion of both is transversally oval, that both grow more narrow towards the middle,

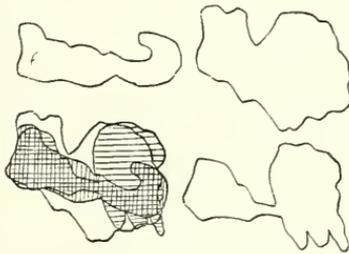


DIAGRAM OF THE THREE SCARS.

that the lower portion of both becomes more elongated and is not so large as the upper portion.

The difference in the contour of these two wounds is explained by the nature of the tissues hurt and by the unequal violence of the two blows. As regards the wound of the forehead, the hurt surface is nearly a plane, the soft tissues very thin, with a hard bony resisting surface underneath. A hard blow was given here and the imprint of the instrument which gave the blow is large and clearly marked. It is a serious wound; the crushing of the soft tissues and the crashing in of the bony plane. This I show further on. The blow in the region of the eye was much less hard. The wound is more on the surface, a simple bruise, an ecchymosis in the upper part, that is in the portion where an infiltration of the flesh is produced rapidly. The alteration of the tissues is still less in the lower part of the wound, in the region of the cheek.

I explain in the same way the difference between the nose wound

and the two others. The two first were occasioned by a blunt instrument which struck against relatively large and resistant surfaces. But the nose is of an entirely different formation, both as regards shape and tissues, and so a blow there should not produce the same kind of wound as a blow on the forehead or under the eye.

Though it is evident that the blows were produced by the same blunt instrument, it is not so easy to say what this instrument was. It might have been the small end of a hammer flattened by long use.

What was the gravity of these wounds? That of the right eye was not serious. That on the nose was deeper; but, though it made an impression on the bony structure, it did not produce dangerous results, nothing beyond an abundant hemorrhage. The only one of the three wounds which counts was that of the forehead. Did it effect only the soft tissues or did it effect the structure of the cranium? If it had been but a simple surface trauma, a slight abrasion of the epidermis, as it was declared to be by Theresa Levasseur, the Marquis de Girardin, and the signers of the autopsy, the contour of the wound would be quite indistinct, whereas the outline is very clearly marked. The border of the wound is formed of several sharp protuberances which separate very distinctly the portion of the bony surface broken through by the blow from the portion left intact. Other evidence enables me to be very affirmative on this point. If you look at the Houdon mask from above in such a way that the two frontal bumps are seen in profile so that their silhouettes cross the middle of the wound, it is evident that there is a depression, a sinking in, a breaking in of the right frontal bump at the point where is the wound. But Latour's portrait presents both of the bumps alike. It is plain that this blow crushed in the skull at this point and caused Rousseau's death. In other words, Jean Jacques Rousseau was assassinated.

Theresa Levasseur, was, as we have already seen, the only person who saw Rousseau die, and she has given four different versions of the event. But it is impossible that a woman of her mental calibre could have constructed the long accounts which she is said to have furnished of what Rousseau said and all the incidents preceding his death. Her memory could not have held them and her mind could not have coordinated them. All those persons who were intimate with Rousseau and his household agree in pronouncing Theresa to have been dull to a degree. Rousseau himself in his "Confessions" paints her in these same colors. The statements given out at the castle must have emanated from M. de Girardin. Now, it is well known that his word could not be depended upon

and it has often been shown that many things which he said about Rousseau were inexact. In this respect, Theresa Levasseur was still more unreliable. She was a woman without morals and was never

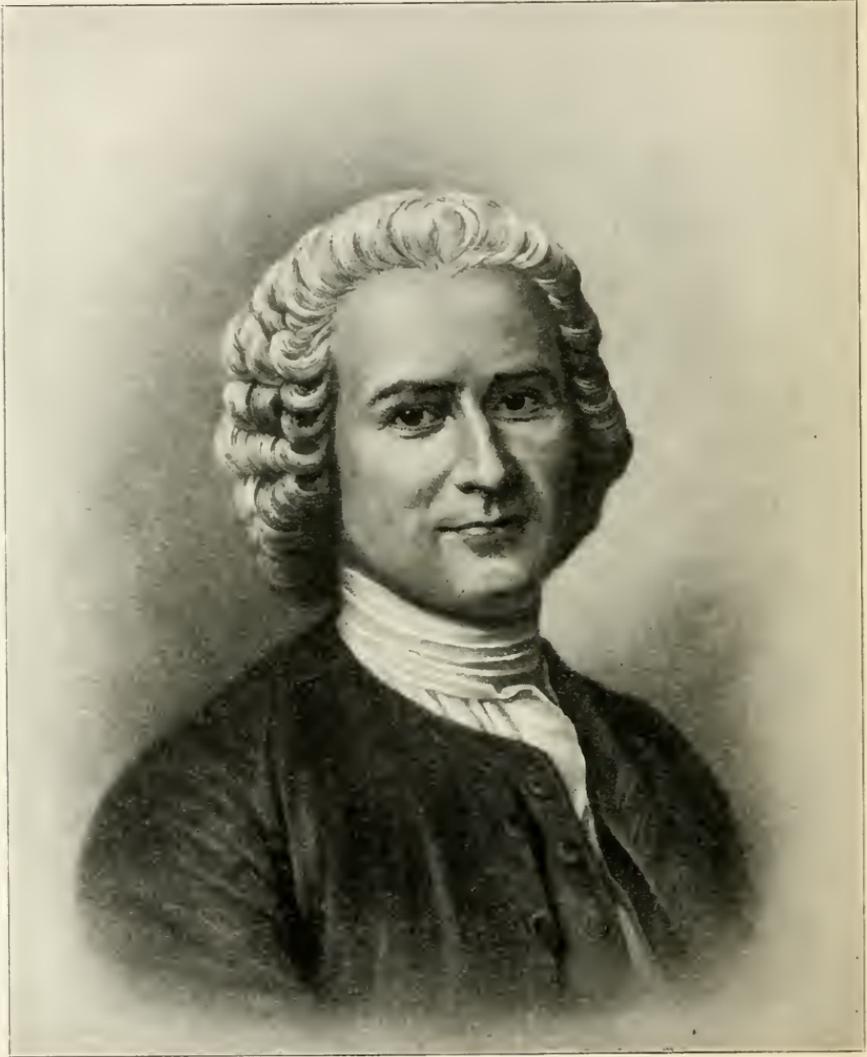


THERESA LEVASSEUR.

sincerely attached to Rousseau. His friends paint her in the very worst light. She was not faithful to him and he complained of this more than once and even threatened, on this account, to put an end to their relation. Just before his death, her conduct with a

valet in the service of M. de Girardin was especially open to criticism and caused Rousseau the profoundest sorrow. Statements coming from such a source are worthless.

The assertion that Rousseau poisoned himself is no longer

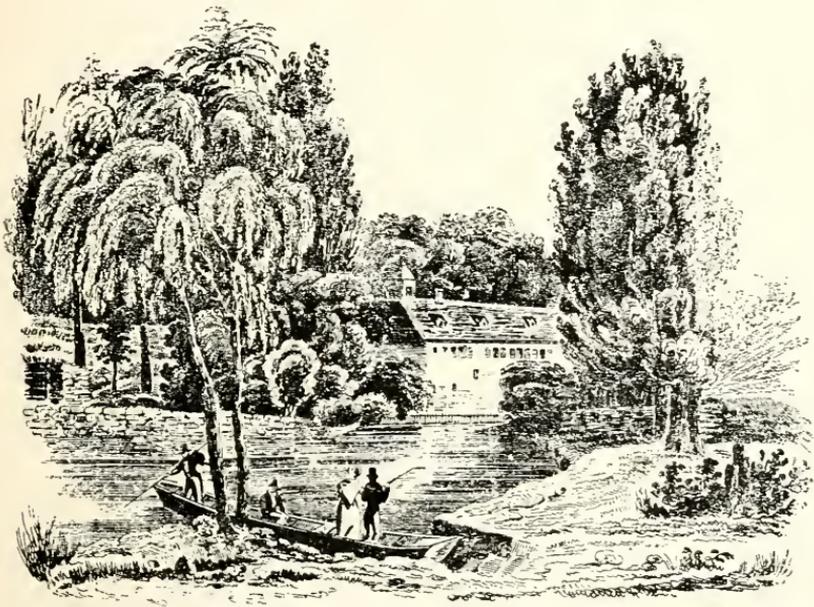


JEAN JACQUES ROUSSEAU.

made. That he shot himself with a pistol cannot be accepted after an examination of Houdon's death-mask. It reveals none of the well-known signs of a pistol shot, none whatsoever. Nor is there any solid proof that he died a natural death. In the description by

those who were near him of the cause of his death, of his state of health at that moment, are none of the symptoms of serous apoplexy, called to-day an acute attack of uræmia. And the clumsy statements of the autopsy also render this explanation improbable. Assassination is the only way out of the difficulty. But who would and could have killed Rousseau? Why, Theresa Levasseur, of course.

I have already shown that Theresa's life at Ermenonville was almost a public scandal. Rousseau finally learned of her abominable conduct and forthwith resolved, as I have already said, to carry out



ROUSSEAU'S HOME ON THE ISLAND OF ST. PIERRE IN THE LAKE OF BIENNE, SWITZERLAND.

a determination which he had arrived at in 1769 under similar circumstances—he was determined to break off all relations with her. It was with this in view that he was found alone with her on the morning of July 2, 1778, when she must have lost control of herself and killed him in a fit of anger. Referring to this fatal interview, Mme. de Girardin wrote as follows to Rousseau's friend, Olivier de Corancez:

“Frightened about Rousseau's position, I went to him and saw him. ‘Why do you come at such a moment?’ he asked me, and then continued: ‘You will be much affected by the scene and the catas-

troupe with which it will end.' He begged me to leave him alone and go away. I did so, when he locked the door behind me."

When Rousseau returned from his morning walk, he did not complain of any illness; so it could not have been his state of health that frightened Mme. de Girardin. She went to Rousseau's room without being asked, for she knew what was going to happen between Rousseau and his mistress; she felt that there would be a stormy scene and she feared the consequences. If she had found him ill or if she had supposed him about to commit suicide, she would not have retired quietly as she did. And when her husband reached Rousseau's room after the tragedy, his first purpose was to hide the real facts and prevent a public scandal. So he and Theresa prepared together the account as given above. But the only logical and satisfactory explanation of what happened is that which I advance, viz., that Rousseau was assassinated by Theresa Levasseur.

If we accept this view, how are we to account for the fact that the skeleton found in the Pantheon is intact? In a very simple fashion. When the priests removed Rousseau's body they put a skeleton in its place. Several facts point to this as having been done. In the first place, the commission found no fracture of the bones of the head and face, whereas there should have been two, one on the forehead and another on the side of the nose. Further proof is to be found in the general condition of the skeleton. Rousseau, we have seen, died in mid-summer 1778. The body was not embalmed. In 1794, the coffin was exhumed and carried some thirty miles over bad roads from Ermenonville to the Pantheon in Paris. The coffin was again moved twice after having been put in the crypt of the church, in 1821 and again in 1830. This last removal occurred fifty-two years after Rousseau's death, when all the soft tissues of the body which hold in place the bones must have long been entirely decomposed. Each time the coffin was disturbed, it was carried up and down staircases. Under all these circumstances the different parts of the skeleton must have been displaced. But the commission of 1897 informs us that even the smallest bones were in their proper position! This perfect order proves beyond doubt that the commission was not in the presence of the body of Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Up to the present day, an almost impenetrable mystery has enveloped the death of Rousseau. The minute examination of the death-mask made by Houdon shows that it is possible to lift at least a corner of the veil and reveal what really happened in the philosopher's apartments at Ermenonville. But as I have also made plain

that another part of the mystery lies hidden in the Pantheon tomb. This too can be easily cleared up. A scientific examination of the supposed skeleton of Rousseau should be made. It should be compared with the death-mask by Houdon. In fact, there should be repeated here what was done in 1905 by the Anthropological School of Paris for General Porter at the time when he identified the body of John Paul Jones and when a bust of the Commodore by Houdon played the leading part.