

Famous Prisoners of Saint-Lazare: Henriette Caillaux

By

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In the spring and summer of 1914 as all of Europe stood on the precipice of war, the attention of France was diverted by the greatest political scandal since the Dreyfus affair. On March 16th, the wife of the minister of Finance, Joseph Caillaux, walked into the editorial offices of the newspaper *Le Figaro*. She shot and killed the paper's editor Gaston Calmette. Calmette had recently launched fierce personal attacks on her husband's integrity in the pages of the widely-read journal. The murder led to rioting in the streets, and the subsequent scandal became part of the debates for the national elections held in April that continued the bitter political struggles between the radical republicans and conservatives, including France's monarchists.

Madame Caillaux was arrested on the scene and conveyed via her car to the prison of Saint-Lazare. The intense national and international publicity surrounding the murder and subsequent trial focused public attention on the infamous women's prison in the 10th arrondissement. Within days prison officials were accused of affording "unusual favors and comforts" to their celebrity prisoner.¹

Housed in a private, heated cell, Madame Caillaux was attended to by her maid and hair dresser, was allowed special visitation privileges, and even dined with her husband in the offices of the prison's director. Two of the nuns who staffed the prison were assigned to watch over her. This special treatment greatly upset the other prisoners and there was talk in the newspapers of the possibility of a prison mutiny in protest.² This outrage was also shared by many outside the

¹ "Clamor over Favor to Mme. Caillaux," *The New York Times*, 23 March 1914.

² "Favors to Mme. Caillaux," *Ibid.*, 12 April 1914.

prison walls. Prison authorities claimed that Madame Caillaux was being treated according to prison regulations, and that it was the responsibility of the prison doctor to determine the exact details of each prisoner's regimen.³

Rowdy crowds gathered on the streets outside the prison whenever Madame Caillaux left for questioning, or when her husband and daughter visited. Dance halls and cabarets in Paris echoed with hastily-created songs reflecting popular opinion about the case. At the time of her arrest Madame Caillaux had haughtily reminded the police: "I am a lady." One of the tunes that immediately appeared was entitled "*A Woman and Lady*":⁴

The woman stole a piece of bread;
They hustled her roughly in the prisoner's van.
The lady cried: "Touch me not. I have my auto."
They took the woman off to jail, to a dirty little cell.
But the lady entered the governor's drawing room.
The woman slept on a pallet hard.
But to the lady was given a satin coverlet and its color was red.
The woman fed on skilly broth.⁵
But the lady got food that was rich and red-blood red.

The newspapers also reported a song performed at the Théâtre Mayol. Sung by the symbolic figure of France's "Marianne" the lyrics suggest her experiences as reflecting those of the nation itself:

³ "Clamor over Favor to Mme. Caillaux," *Ibid.*, 31 March 1914.

⁴ "Ironic Songs Mark French Election," *The Chicago Tribune*, 19 April 1914.

⁵ A thin soup or gruel.

When I was quite young I loved a little corporal, Napoleon.

But he ill treated me.

I soon finished with Louis-Philippe;

Then I had a new affair –

Another Prince Napoleon,

And I loved him well;

But for him I lost my two children Alsace, Lorraine.

Now I am growing old;

I must pay for my lovers.

My future is very dark.

I've nothing but St. Lazare.

The nine day trial was a tremendous public spectacle, with every detail of the testimony and the actions of lawyers and witnesses being reported in great detail. Access to the courtroom became the hottest ticket in Paris.⁶ Incredibly, on July 28th, after only fifty minutes of deliberations, the jury acquitted Madame Caillaux and she was immediately released. Her lawyer, Fernand Labori, successfully argued that the murder was not pre-meditated but rather was an accident and an act of passion.⁷ The verdict created bedlam in the courtroom and riots in the streets. In his closing arguments Labori said: “My wish is that Madame Caillaux shall leave here acquitted, and that the press shall be purified. Let us keep our anger for our enemies

⁶ “Caillaux Trial Seats Expensive,” *The New York Times*, 19 July 1914.

⁷ “Accident, Sobs Mme. Caillaux,” *Ibid.*, 21 July 1914.

abroad. Let us leave this court resolute and united to face the perils that threaten us.”⁸ Within weeks war would engulf France and the rest of Europe.

⁸ “Prisoner falls on Labori’s neck,” *Ibid.*, 29 July 1914.