

Famous Prisoners of Saint-Lazare: Marguerite Steinheil

By

Rev. Edward R. Udovic, C.M., Ph.D.

High profile incarcerations of society women in Paris, especially for crimes like murder, highlighted the sensational reputation of Saint-Lazare prison. One such scandal at the dawn of the twentieth century involved Marguerite-Jeanne Steinheil (b. 1869 – d. 1954). Steinheil was the wife of the artist Adolphe Steinheil, whom she married in 1890. Moving in the highest social circles in Paris, Marguerite became the mistress of the French president Félix Faure, often visiting him for assignations at the Elysée Palace. On February 16th, 1899, during one of their trysts, Faure died suddenly. The salacious circumstances of the president's untimely demise, and the identity of his companion, became widely-known and commented upon in the tabloid press and elsewhere.

On May 31st, 1908, Steinheil's husband and her stepmother were found murdered in their Paris residence. The cause of death in both cases was strangulation. Elsewhere in the house, Marguerite Steinheil was discovered bound and gagged but otherwise unharmed. She told the police that a gang of four black-robed home invaders were responsible for what had happened. The police initially suspected Madame Stieinheil of having some role in the murders, but could find no hard evidence to back up their suspicions. In order to distract attention, however, the widow tried unsuccessfully to frame a male servant, and tampered with evidence. These actions aroused police suspicions again and on November 26th Steinheil was arrested, charged with the murders, and sent to Saint-Lazare while awaiting trial.

The mainstream and tabloid press covered all aspects of the murders, the investigation, the arrest, imprisonment, and trial of Steinheil. Conspiracy theorists wildly linked the Steinheil murders to Madame Steinheil's previous relationship with the president, charging that she had poisoned Faure. Former cell-mates sold the story of the "full confession" she had supposedly made to them.¹ At her trial in November 1909, Steinheil's lies and evidence tampering were all revealed. The presiding judge characterized the defendant's testimony as a "tissue of lies."² Yet absent any direct evidence of motive, or any physical involvement with the murders, she was unexpectedly acquitted and released.

In her 1912 memoir, Steinheil recalled her "three hundred and fifty three days in prison"³ in great detail. As she noted: "Saint Lazare! How many times have I been asked, since I left that prison, to describe it, to describe the life I led there."⁴ One motive for such a detailed description of her "year of agony"⁵ at Saint-Lazare was to refute press accounts that she had received special treatment during her time at the prison.⁶

Steinheil noted, "it would be difficult to conceive a prison more hopelessly dilapidated and insanitary than Saint-Lazare."⁷

I can fancy some reader saying: 'Pools of water in a cell, broken tiles, mice, cockroaches by the hundred! ...She exaggerates ...She is describing a cell in some prison of another century' ...I am not exaggerating; 'Saint-Lazare' doesn't belong to another century. It is so old and tumble-down that more than once, when

¹ Marguerite Steinheil, *My Memoirs* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1912), 304.

² "Mme. Steineheil led fainting from court," *The New York Times*, 6 November 1909.

³ *Op cit.*, 374.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁶ "Women to be barred at Steinheil trial," *The New York Times*, 31 October 1909.

⁷ *Op cit.*, 332.

looking into some dark room... I almost expected to see the heavy chains, the thumb-screws, the rack, the bilboes and other instruments of a torture-chamber.⁸

Taking into account Steinheil's motivation in her memoir: to stress her innocence, the unfairness of her imprisonment and treatment, and her desire to tell a compelling and sellable story, her descriptions of the harsh nature of daily prison life and the decrepit state of Saint-Lazare are consistent with other contemporary accounts.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 334.