

# Calm in Storm

by Charles Dickens

*Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities is about two cities -- London and Paris -- during the French Revolution. This passage is about the time when the guillotine, a killing machine developed to efficiently behead people, was in steady use by the new government in France.*

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There was no pause, no pity, no peace, no interval of relenting rest, no measurement of time. Though days and nights circled as regularly as when time was young, and the evening and morning were the first day, other count of time there was none. Hold of it was lost in the raging fever of a nation, as it is in the fever of one patient. Now, breaking the unnatural silence of a whole city, the executioner showed the people the head of the king—and now, it seemed almost in the same breath, the head of his fair wife which had had eight weary months of imprisoned widowhood and misery, to turn it grey.

And yet, observing the strange law of contradiction which obtains in all such cases, the time was long, while it flamed by so fast. A revolutionary tribunal in the capital, and forty or fifty thousand revolutionary committees all over the land; a law of the Suspected, which struck away all security for liberty or life, and delivered over any good and innocent person to any bad and guilty one; prisons gorged with people who had committed no offence, and could obtain no hearing; these things became the established order and nature of appointed things, and seemed to be ancient usage before they were many weeks old. Above all, one hideous figure grew as familiar as if it had been before the general gaze from the foundations of the world—the figure of the sharp female called La Guillotine.

It was the popular theme for jests; it was the best cure for headache, it infallibly prevented the hair from turning grey, it imparted a peculiar delicacy to the complexion, it was the National Razor which shaved close: who kissed La Guillotine, looked through the little window and sneezed into the sack. It was the sign of the regeneration of the human race. It superseded the Cross. Models of it were worn on breasts from which the Cross was discarded, and it was bowed down to and believed in where the Cross was denied.

It sheared off heads so many, that it, and the ground it most polluted, were a rotten red. It was taken to pieces, like a toy-puzzle for a young Devil, and was put together again when the occasion wanted it. It hushed the eloquent, struck down the powerful, abolished the beautiful and good. Twenty-two friends of high public mark, twenty-one living and one dead, it had lopped the heads off, in one morning, in as many minutes. The name of the strong man of Old Scripture had descended to the chief functionary who worked it; but, so armed, he was stronger than his namesake, and blinder, and tore away the gates of God's own Temple every day.

## Questions

1. Give an example of a simile in the passage.
2. Dickens lists several jests, or jokes, about the guillotine: “it was the best cure for headache, it infallibly prevented the hair from turning grey, it imparted a peculiar delicacy to the complexion, it was the National Razor which shaved close: who kissed La Guillotine, looked through the little window and sneezed into the sack.” Choose one of these “jokes” and explain it.
3. Dickens opens “A Tale of Two Cities” by saying “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” In this passage he mentions “the strange law of contradiction.” What is the contradiction that appears in this passage? Use the same structure as the phrase mentioned from the opening of the book. Cite text from the passage to support your answer.
4. What is an example of personification in this passage?

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**Vocabulary List**

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. Interval
2. Raging
3. Tribunal
4. Hideous
5. Jests
6. Infallibly
7. Superseded
8. Eloquent

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**Context Clues**

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1) “There was no pause, no pity, no peace, no **interval** of relenting rest, no measurement of time.”

- a. time frame   b. alone time   c. meeting   d. place

2) “Hold of it was lost in the **raging** fever of a nation, as it is in the fever of one patient.”

- a. high   b. stopping   c. growing   d. intense

3) “A revolutionary **tribunal** in the capital, and forty or fifty thousand revolutionary committees all over the land...”

- a. party   b. church   c. assembly   d. gravesite

4) “Above all, one **hideous** figure grew as familiar as if it had been before the general gaze from the foundations of the world—the figure of the sharp female called La Guillotine.”

- a. hidden   b. large   c. strange   d. ugly

5) “It was the popular theme for **jests**; it was the best cure for headache...”

- a. artwork   b. jokes   c. stories   d. plays

6) “...it **infallibly** prevented the hair from turning grey...”

- a. unmistakably   b. usually   c. quickly   d. jokingly

7) “It **superseded** the Cross.”

- a. covered   b. healed   c. replaced   d. minimized

8) “It hushed the **eloquent**, struck down the powerful, abolished the beautiful and good.”

- a. stylish   b. talkative   c. attractive   d. curious