



THE PRESIDENT AND THE MADMAN

Bruce Watson

Author, *Sacco and Vanzetti*



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One warm summer night in 1881, a scrawny, nervous man sat in his boarding house a few blocks from the White House. Outside his window, gaslights flickered and horses clopped over cobblestones, but Charles Guiteau barely noticed. For six weeks now, a divine inspiration had festered in his fevered brain. The president, God told Guiteau, had to be “removed.”

Since early June, the lunatic had stalked the president with gun in hand. Enraged at James Garfield for fracturing the Republican Party, convinced that the split would precipitate a second civil war, Guiteau pursued his prey with single-minded calculation. One Sunday he aimed at Garfield through a church window; the following Saturday he crouched in a train depot as the president walked past, but spared him out of pity for the ailing wife clinging to her husband’s arm. A few mornings later, the little man waited along the Potomac, where the president often rode. No horse passed. Now Guiteau could wait no longer, and he began a letter to be delivered the next day:

To Gen. Sherman:

I have just shot the President. I shot him several times as I wished him to go as easily as possible. His death was a political necessity. I am a lawyer, a theologian, and politician. . . . I am

going to the jail. Please order out your troops and take possession of the jail at once.

Very respectfully,
Charles Guiteau

The following morning, July 2, President Garfield stepped from his carriage outside the Baltimore and Potomac depot at Sixth Street and Constitution Avenue. As he strolled past admirers, the president all but beamed. After weathering a season of political infighting, he was leaving Washington, D.C., for the summer. Plans called for him to meet his wife at the Jersey shore, cruise the Hudson, attend his twenty-fifth college reunion at Williams College, and then spend August on a farm in Massachusetts. Chatting with his secretary of state, Garfield strode into the waiting room. Across the clutter of heads and hats, he spotted the Venezuelan minister. He had just returned the latter's polite nod when he heard a shot and felt a stabbing pain in one arm.

"My God! What is this?" he cried. Another blast echoed. A second bullet caught him full in the back, and he pitched face down onto the marble floor.

Two names of presidential assassins are deeply etched in American memory: John Wilkes Booth and Lee Harvey Oswald. Fewer Americans today recall Leon Czolgosz, who shot President William McKinley in 1901. The only other man to kill a U.S. president, though his name was once synonymous with villainy, has been forgotten. Yet, for decades after Charles Guiteau went to the gallows singing "I am going to the Lordy," his fate was debated in psychiatric journals, law schools, and the court of public opinion. For despite his confession and a Victorian propriety that considered mental illness a question of morality, "the assassin Guiteau" was tried on a defense of insanity.