

HELEN'S ESCAPE.

BY H. F. ABEL.

CHAPTER III.

Jack Corner's opinion about Monsieur Pontneuf naturally produced a vivid impression upon me; for the notion that my quiet, polite, refined professor could be the accomplice of men whose notions and acts were just at this time arousing the horror of the civilised world, had never entered my head. But when I came to think over it, the idea was not so ridiculous as it had at first appeared; for the position of Monsieur Pontneuf in my house was just such a one as would disarm suspicion, and he had innumerable opportunities of corresponding and plotting and arranging without the smallest chance of detection. Still, there was not sufficient reason for me to take any action in the matter, and certainly the scrap of conversation I had overheard in the summer-house did not strike me as being of a particularly compromising nature; indeed, the impression I gained therefrom was that Monsieur Pontneuf, so far from being "wanted" himself, was on the lookout for somebody else. But Jack Corner was not the sort of man to hint so grave a suspicion against any one without good reason, and I felt sure that he must have overheard or have learnt something which had warranted him in saying what he did to me.

As we were going to Paris the next day, and as Jack was about to start on what he called "his farewell bachelor jaunt," I had asked him to dine with us, and it occurred to me that Monsieur Pontneuf might join our party, although I knew that as a rule he kept aloof from all social entertainment. To my surprise, the professor gladly and readily accepted my invitation; and appeared at the appointed time, faultlessly arrayed, and looking as unlike the ideal assassin of czars and destroyer of public buildings as could be imagined.

During the dinner, Monsieur Pontneuf showed himself in quite new colours: all his reserve and shyness disappeared; he charmed my wife with his intelligent talk, and still more so by the masterly manner in which he operated on a pair of ducks. He laughed and chatted and joked until it became hard to realise that he was identical with the "Dismal Froggy" of the villagers.

When the ladies had withdrawn, and a bottle of my choice Burgundy was placed on the table, he expanded still further, until I really regretted that during so long a period I had been without the society of so charming a companion. It was now for the first time that he learned that I had been in Paris during the siege and under the Commune, and the subject seemed to interest him very much, especially when I related the episode of Mr. Rayne's mysterious arrival and departure. I asked him what he thought about Mr. Rayne.

"It is plain enough what he was," replied the professor. "He was one of that rascally so-called Foreign Legion enlisted from the scum of all the great cities of Europe—men who had nothing to lose and everything to gain, who hailed the supremacy of the Commune as an opportunity for enriching themselves at the expense of others; and to whom is due, quite as much as to my own countrymen, the shameful destruction of public buildings. He had probably been caught pillaging and had escaped to you."

Jack Corner spoke villainous French, but he could understand most of what was said. "Is Monsieur a Republican?" he asked.

"I should state here that before the professor had arrived, Jack had told me that he intended, if possible, to find out who and what our guest was, and I knew that with this simple question Jack was commencing his 'pumping' process, especially as he pushed the bottle to the professor as often as he could, with the idea, no doubt, of loosening the professor's tongue."

"No, sir," replied Monsieur Pontneuf with true refugee dignity. "I am a Bonapartist—one of a party almost as much detested in Paris just now as a Communeard or a German, or I should not be teaching my native language in England."

I took no part in the conversation which ensued between the two men, a conversation which, under a social guise, reminded me very much of a passage of wit between a clever cross-examining counsel and an equally clever witness. Indeed, I was rather interested in the result; and in order that my presence should not act as a deterrent, I had another bottle brought on table, and after entreating my guests not to hurry themselves, left the room on the plea that I had a few domestic arrangements to

see to. There was nothing unbecoming as a host in my doing this, for we never gave formal dinner-parties, and I knew that Jack Corner's aunt was perfectly happy in the drawing-room, talking local gossip with my wife, and listening to Helen's old English ballads at the piano.

My two guests, however, must have been vastly absorbed in their talk, for I had been an hour in the drawing-room before Jack came in. I noticed that he was rather pale, and when he turned over the leaves of Helen's music, that his hand shook; so I took the first opportunity of asking him what had passed between him and the professor, and why the Frenchman had not come in.

"He's a mystery—that's all I can tell you. I haven't got much out of him, for he is far too wide awake, and he has gone off without a word."

"Gone off!" I exclaimed. "What do you mean, Jack? I hope you haven't offended him?"

"I hope not," replied Jack, smiling. "But I think he began to see the drift of my talk, and I don't think he liked it. However, I may be mistaken, and after all, it is perhaps only his eccentricity."

Helen and Jack sang duets together, and Jack gave us a rollicking song of the sea, and then we sat down to a quiet rubber of whist, which occupied us until eleven o'clock, when Miss Corner, an old lady of the "smiler" type, pleased with everybody and everything showed signs of fatigue.

I escorted them to the gate and afterwards took a stroll alone in the moonlight. Of course the chief place in my thoughts was occupied by the professor, and I could not satisfactorily account for his sudden disappearance from my house, for, so far as I could judge from his usual behavior, he was the very last man to commit such a breach of good manners as to go away without a word of explanation or farewell. The result of a prolonged meditation, during which I had wandered almost as far as the summer-house, was, that I felt convinced that Jack had been right, and that Monsieur Pontneuf was in reality a great deal more important a personage than he chose to be taken for, whatever the mystery that surrounded him might be. The distant boom of midnight from the church tower warned me that I had gone far enough, if I wished to have a good night's rest before my journey on the next day, and I was turning homewards, when a black patch on the light sandy soil attracted my attention. Stooping down and touching it, I found it stained my finger a dark color. I struck a light, and saw it was blood. I am not a very nervous man; but I must admit that the coming upon this appalling indication of a dark deed at such a lonely spot, at such a weird, still hour of the night, produced a feeling within me which was closely akin to terror. Then I noticed that there was blood farther on, patch after patch, as if some one had been wounded and dragged or had dragged himself along. I followed it until it stopped; but the trampled and torn appearance of the bushes on the stream side of the path showed me that some one had passed down towards the stream, which at this place forms a deep wide pool. Down I went in the bright moonlight, guided by the appearance of the bushes, until, as I anticipated, all further traces were lost at the water's brink. I looked carefully about for some tell-tale relic of what had happened—a shred of cloth or an article of clothing; but there was nothing. I felt sure that something terrible had been enacted here, and instantly I associated Monsieur Pontneuf with it, although I scarcely dare think that Jack Corner was the victim.

I stood horror-struck for some moments, unable to collect my thoughts, irresolute as to how I should act; and the longer I stood, the more firmly I became convinced that my suave, urbane professor was, as Jack Corner had suspected, a fiend in human shape—that Jack had spoken too freely of his suspicions, and had been made an example of the saying that "dead men tell no tales."

Then I strode off in the direction of the Cedars, Jack Corner's house, situated but a quarter of an hour's walk from my own, in a sequestered little dell near the London Road. It was approached through a lodge-gate which opened on to a winding road through dark fir-trees; but Jack, who was of unostentatious habits, had dispensed with the services of a lodge-keeper, although, as the London Road was lonely and much infested by tramps, the gates were securely locked at night. My surprise, therefore, may be imagined when I found the gates wide open, and my suspicions as to my poor friend's fate were thereby confirmed, for I knew that if Jack had returned home in the usual course, he would have seen that his promises were closed for the night. With a courage which

could only have been the fruit of despair, I almost ran up the gloomy, weirdly shadowed road to the house. It was dark and silent and although I rang and hammered at the door for a quarter of an hour, I could get neither reply nor admittance.

Another horrible notion crossed my mind as I stood there in the still night, wondering what my next step should be. Suppose that, after having disposed of Jack Corner, the murderer, in order more effectually to secure his escape, had gone to the house had made away with Miss Corner and poor Gabrielle, and that a forced entrance into it would reveal their lifeless bodies?

Before, however, giving the alarm and procuring the assistance of the police, I determined to visit Pontneuf's lodging in the village, and I began to retrace my steps down the avenue. I stopped short after I had gone a little way, and for the first time I remembered Jack Corner's coachman, who was also man-of-all-work—reported to be the favoured swain of Gabrielle—who slept over the stable, and who, although he was sufficiently far from the house to be unaware of anything that may occur there, might aid me in my investigation. Accordingly, I turned off to the stable; and here another surprise awaited me. The doors of the coach-house were wide open, and the little pony-trap, which I knew Jack had bought as a wedding present for my Helen, was not visible. I called out to the coachman above, but could get no reply; so I lit a stable lantern, and prepared for further horrors, ascended the stairs. The man's door was open, and he was lying on his bed, so gagged with his own neckcloth that he could neither see nor speak, whilst his arms and legs were securely fastened with carriage straps; but I was relieved to find that at any rate he was alive, for upon my entering the room, he moved. I quickly released him from his bonds, and, stammering with excitement and fright, he told me that he had gone to bed as usual at ten o'clock, and had fallen asleep; that he was violently awakened by feeling the neckcloth tied tightly over his face; that on attempting to rise, he found that his legs had already been bound, and that, in spite of his struggles, his arms were presently bound also. He could not tell me who had done it; but said that immediately afterwards he heard the pony put into the trap and driven off.

To my mind, therefore, it was clear that Pontneuf had escaped. However, with the coachman I went on to the cottage where the professor lodged, and after some difficulty, succeeded in awakening the owner. "Is Monsieur Pontneuf in?" I asked.

"Yes, sir, I believe so," replied the man. "I've been abed since nine o'clock, so I couldn't say for sartin sure, but hegenerally is in at this time."

"Get a light, and let us see," I said.

The man hesitated. Perhaps he thought I had been drinking, to make such a request, for every one knew that I had a small dinner-party that evening, and that the Frenchman had been one of the guests.

"Do you hear? Look sharp! It's a matter of life and death," I continued; and this brought him to his senses, for he presently appeared with a candle.

We went to the professor's room; the door was open, but the room was empty, although the Frenchman's portmanteau was there. I opened it, and within I found his dress-clothes, rammed in evidently with haste, soaked with water, torn, and bedabbled with clay and blood.

The two men stood gaping wonderingly at the clothes, for of course they knew nothing of what I suspected; but to me the case was clear. Words must have passed between my poor friend and the professor upon the subject of Socialism over that second bottle of wine. The Frenchman had gone out, had waylaid Jack, and, after a desperate struggle, had killed him, and flung his body into the stream. Then he must have gone on to the Cedars, perhaps have made away with Miss Corner and Gabrielle, bound and gagged the coachman, and escaped in his victim's pony-chaise.

So I impressed secrecy on the two men, but not with the faintest hope that they could keep such a *bonne bouche* of gossip to themselves, locked the door of the professor's room, and turned homewards, troubled in my mind not only how to take the immediate action which was necessary, but how to break the news to my wife and my poor Helen.

Then I thought of Miss Corner and Gabrielle; again turned back, called up the local constable, and with him proceeded to the house. We broke it open; we searched every nook and corner from attic to basement; but not a trace of either Miss Corner or of Gabrielle could we find, although their

belongings were in their rooms. This completed the veil of mystery around the affair; and I felt that I had been completely outwitted by this scoundrel, whom I had welcomed to my own hearth as a friend.

Early next morning—or rather that same morning, for it was past three ere I crept home to my anxious wife, whose curiosity I had to satisfy with a relation of what had happened—men were set to work to drag the stream for the body, which I felt sure lay hidden somewhere. But nothing was found—a strange fact, considering that the pool, although deep, was very small, and that the stream was both shallow and sluggish. There was picked up, however, a torn, bloodstained handkerchief, with the initials J. C.

When I returned home, heartbroken, and not knowing how next to act—for, during my quiet, monotonous life in this little place my faculties for grappling with sudden emergencies had rusted—I found that my wife had told Helen of my suspicions. The poor girl's agony at this cruel dashing away from her lips of the cup of happiness she was about to taste, was the most painful thing I ever witnessed; and I realised that I would spare no time or trouble or expense in endeavoring to bring the villain to justice who had so foully wronged her.

We had a London detective down to aid the local police in their researches; but their united industry and sagacity could throw no light on the mystery; and at the end of three weeks we were as much in the dark as before.

When the clothing found in the professor's portmanteau was searched, there was found a small notebook, on the fly-leaf of which was written the name of De Busy. The book was alphabetically arranged with proper names of all nationalities followed by addresses in Paris, London, Vienna, Berlin, and St. Petersburg. One leaf alone was torn off almost from the top, and, to my amazement, I saw on the remaining fragment the name Rayne. Jack Corner's surmise had evidently been correct; the *soldisant* professor was nothing else but a secret agent of the Socialist party; and I was convinced that the names in this book were those of other agents in various parts; and that the Englishman who had taken refuge in my room at the Rue de Douai six years previously was one. That this particular leaf, and this only, was torn was to me very significant.

CHAPTER IV.

Helen's health became a subject of such anxiety to me, that I determined to remove her for a while from the neighbourhood of scenes fraught with such painful associations; so we closed our house and started on a prolonged and foreign tour. We travelled for three months in Italy, Sicily, and the Riviera, and at the end of September arrived in Paris, where we proposed to remain a few days previous to returning home.

I am an old habitue of Paris, and I have always remarked how, in the absence of any startling crime, the complaint rises of the lack of news. Politics are all very well, and serve to keep the *flâneurs* of the boulevards and a certain section of the people provided with topics for conversation and discussion; but the typical Monsieur Prudhomme likes nothing better than a good startling crime, with plenty of harrowing details, and a strong spice of mystery about it.

We were not very long in Paris before we found out that the all-absorbing topic of interest was 'l'affaire Arosa.' Wherever we went, we heard of nothing but 'l'affaire Arosa.' The hawkers cried it on the boulevards; in trams and omnibuses and trains it was the subject of conversation; the waiters at the hotel whispered about it during the intervals between the course at the *table d'hôte*; the first part of the daily paper attached was that which was headed 'l'affaire Arosa.'

The name Arosa seemed familiar to me; at any rate, I remembered to have heard it, but for the life of me, I could not recall when or under what circumstances; so I bought a *Canlois* with the view of enlightening myself about 'l'affaire Arosa,' and on the chance that something therein might bring to my mind the circumstances with which, in my memory, the name Arosa was associated. I had not read half-a-dozen lines before I was carried back in imagination to the Rue de Douai during the seven days of the Commune and was again face to face with the poor cowering wretch who had given I name to me as Dixon Rayne. The following is a free translation of what I read: "It was elicited in the course of examination that the accused, who although an Englishman by birth, is a cosmopolitan in crime, and speaks half-a-dozen European languages fairly well, had