

when we retire, we know not but that we may be prisoners by to-morrow. The continual danger which surrounds us, the impossibility of escape, without risking our lives, has estranged us from fear; but we wish to live here, as it were, in a world of our own, and not by an outside intercourse to conjure up dangers against ourselves. We are here like a secluded colony—you must be therefore careful not to do anything which may disturb the peace of this house. Your uncle will give you all further instructions."

Benoit was now dismissed from the count's presence, and he retired with his uncle, who, as a mark of welcome, pressed both his hands, saying:

"You must be silent; neither by thoughtlessness nor indiscretion say anything which may in any way compromise us. I will now inform you how we are situated here."

So saying, he sauntered along the corridor of one of the wings and stepped into the last room, the windows of which opened to a balcony overlooking the water and forest.

"You must know," continued his uncle, "that the count is as kind as he is resolute. His house is a refuge for his friends when they consider themselves in danger, which is to-day the case with almost everyone. A couple of dozens of our inmates with their friends have been already beheaded. Those who are here are considered by the count as members of his family, but a part of them are merely introduced by the count's personal friends—they are suspected—such as the viscountess l'Espinas, the countess Chavreux, with her husband and son, Baron de Breignolles, with his daughter. It is surprising, that we are allowed to remain here in peace."

"Yes, uncle," replied Benoit, astonished at this communication, "this is certainly very fortunate for the noble count and his protégés."

"It would be incredible," said the uncle, mysteriously, "if Robespierre himself was not our protector."

"How, Robespierre? Impossible, uncle Lorence!"

"He occasionally comes here—several of those terrible men visit us."

"Count Montreuil must be a good patriot, a friend of the great citizens?"

"He is a pious man, a convert," replied uncle Lorence; "you will soon discover how religious we are. Robespierre adores him like a prophet, because he has predicted for him great things. Others again, as Fréron and Danton, respect him, because he has done them good services; and many of the Jacobin party have remained attached to him, because they were received at his entertainments, for instance, Tallien, who is now in Bordeaux."

"How?" exclaimed Benoit, electrified. "Also, Tallien, the commissioner of the convention?"

"Yes," replied the steward, surprised at the excitement of his nephew. "What appears to you so remarkable in this?"

"Nothing, nothing, uncle Lorence. I know citizen Tallien from Bordeaux; but he is no more there, he has been recalled to Paris."

"Well, then, we have one friend more," said Lorence. "These friends, you see, protect us. Besides," continued he, smiling and looking at Benoit, to observe the effect of his words, "we are prepared for every emergency."

He opened the door of the balcony and stepped out.

"You see, Benoit, from this side our castle is almost inaccessible. The hill here slopes steeply down twenty feet, direct to the water. In the front our grated gate being always locked and opened only to friends, we can, in case of an attack, easily gain time to escape from this side by crossing the rivulet and reaching the forests, or by boats down the water."

"But are the boats always in readiness?" asked Benoit, attentively examining the locality.

"Stop a minute, my boy!" cried the steward, quite pleased at the surprise that his communications would give to his nephew. Stooping down in a corner of the room, and pushing back the carpet, he touched a secret spring, and without exertion, lifted a tile, which looked like a part of the flooring. Benoit observed a ladder descending into a dark cavity.

"This road is not very comfortable," smirked the steward, "but if you have to take it, inconveniences don't matter. Follow me, my boy—you shall see how we descend here to the lower regions, to cross the Styx."

The steward descended the ladder, Benoit curiously following him. The vault in which both arrived was situated below the stony hill which served as the underground of the building, and was arranged for cellars. The space in which they now were, and which was dimly lighted by small grated windows, was such a cellar. It was empty, and the uncle passed through it till he reached a door which he opened. It led to a narrow passage sloping down to the rivulet.

"I should have brought a candle with me," said Lorence, stopping. "However, we will be able to see, as the passage is not thirty feet long. A few steps further there is a boat provided with oars and a box containing ammunition and other necessities for an escape. The boat rests on round blocks, and is not far from the wicket leading to the water. The wicket is covered outside with sods to conceal it, and by applying a powerful push may be opened without trouble; another push sends the boat into the water. In this way, you see, we can escape our pursuers in case of need; but, I trust, it will not be necessary!"

"And yet, uncle Lorence," remarked Benoit, "you have written me that many servants of the count have been arrested. Why did they not escape through this passage?"

The uncle turned his grey head on one side, as if to ponder upon this question, then replied:

"They have not been taken here, but in Paris."

"How was this possible?"

"They imprudently went there to visit the principal church."

"The principal church?" asked Benoit more and more surprised. "How am I to understand this?"

"Benoit," said the uncle confidentially, while re-ascending the ladder, "I have told you already that the count is a convert. He is the proclaimer of the Messiah. But in Paris the pious mother lives; she is the proper chief priestess of the converts, and presides in the principal church. Thither went the servants who were very pious, and one fine day did not come back, because they were denounced as bad patriots, were arrested and then beheaded. Since that time, no one from our castle is allowed to go to Paris, and to the pious mother."

"But if these servants were for this reason impeached, why is the count, who is one of the converts, left in peace?"

"How can I tell? Little thieves are caught, great ones escape."

"What are these converts doing?" asked Benoit, urgently, desiring to see clearly in a case which might ultimately concern him.

"Heavens!" answered Lorence, who was manifestly a good Voltairian. "They praise the benignity of the Omnipotent! They rejoice at having been converted in true and joyful piety. They have perceived that a new deluge has come over the world, and that only those can be saved who practise religion with reason and enjoyment of life."

pels no one, but says that he who is not worthy of being converted, will perish in this deluge—nothing can save him."

"And does Robespierre and the rest believe in the count?"

"More or less. Robespierre believes in him the most, as the count has told him he would restore religion, and that the happiness of mankind would proceed from him, when the waters have run off."

"But why did he suffer the count's servants to be beheaded?" enquired Benoit.

"Yes," answered Lorence, considerably taking a pinch of snuff; "these poor fellows possessed rather too much conversion. They pretended to know that Robespierre would perish on account of his sins, which they once had declared in his presence. They presumed that only the pious mother could rule reformed mankind, and had founded among themselves a new sect which they wished to establish in Paris. This is the reason why they have perished, and the count says it proves that they were not truly converted."

Thus talking, the uncle had retraced his steps along the corridor; he stopped at the door of a large apartment.

"Now, Benoit, I will show you our church to which you have soon to repair to attend service. There, perhaps, you may witness a conversion."

He opened the door, and Benoit looked into a room, wainscotted with oak, around the four walls of which were placed large, high-backed chairs of dark carved wood. From the centre of the ceiling there was suspended a large, white china lamp. This comprised all the furniture.

"Here they assemble in the evening before supper, which is served in the adjoining saloon. In an hour the lamp must be lit. It is not every evening that a conversion takes place, but very frequently."

"One question more, uncle. Is citizen Tallien numbered among the converts?"

"I do not know," replied he. "The count has been converted but within the last few months, since he became acquainted with the pious mother. But it is a long time since he visited her, because he will not leave the castle, the spirit having made known to him that his castle was the ark which alone was affording shelter."

The steward gave the new servant a few more instructions and admonitions and then left him. Benoit being excited by all he had heard and seen, impatiently waited for the hour of worship, which, he hoped, would make him better acquainted with this strange society.

The evening was already pretty far advanced when the inmates assembled almost simultaneously in the large wainscotted apartment. Every one in the house seemed to be present; but the entrance and meeting of the persons betrayed in no way the solemnity so necessary for devotion. They were discussing all kinds of worldly affairs, jesting, and paying compliments to each other, or making satirical remarks. The count himself appeared to be in excellent spirits; notwithstanding his great age he was still very active, and was chatting merrily with two pretty young ladies when he entered the apartment which, Benoit had been told, was the church of the converts, and in which the lamp was now diffusing a pleasant, subdued light. The steward informed his nephew that the servants' places were between the two doors, and that they were allowed to sit down when their services were no more required.

The count seated himself in a chair placed in the recess of one of the windows, beside him sat the two young ladies; the rest of the party selected seats for themselves, chatting and laughing in the most unconstrained manner, as if they were in a saloon. After all the family was seated, the steward and other domestics sat down.

It now became quieter, though here and there the conversation had not entirely abated. One of the young ladies sitting beside the count sank into deep meditation, her beautiful, large eyes being fixed on the floor, while the other was continuing her conversation with him, who, however, seemed absorbed with other thoughts, answering only in monosyllables and gestures to the words of his neighbour. For the next half hour there was little change in the physiognomy of the party, and Benoit had more and more difficulty in conjecturing how this strange meeting was to end.

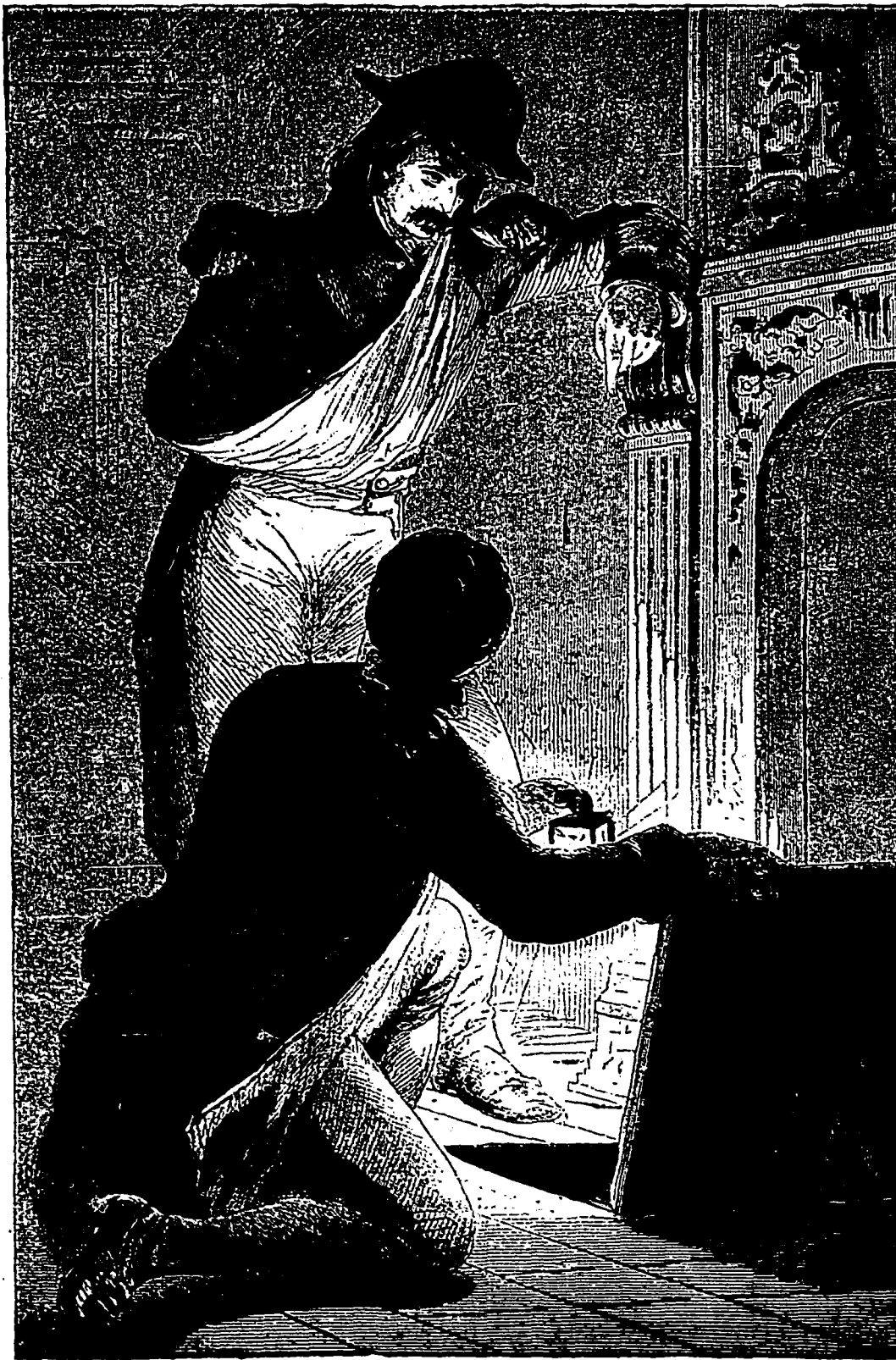
At last the count stretched forth his hand to signify that he wished to speak. Quietness now prevailed, and with a face full of animation, he commenced—

"Alas, my dear friends, how I have longed for the evenings, for this hour which we devote to God! Happy is the convert in whose spirit truth is manifest, and out of whom the word of God does speak. Around us we see the reaper mowing with a bloody sickle, but the hand of the Lord protecteth us—yes, friends, it is no fancy, no deception into which I have fallen; but you will be convinced by all that is coming, that I penetrate with the light of God through darkness."

He stopped, and a dignified old lady proceeded. "Count," said she, "I and a portion of your protégés are not permitted to follow the full bent of the ideas by which you are elevated above the earth. We have still our old religion, are royalists, and enemies to anarchy, which we consider human madness. But, count, these evenings are also precious to us, as we admire the noble fanaticism which shelters us from perdition."

"My dear Chavreux," replied the count in ecstasies, "I know you to make a sacrifice by spending this hour here. But pardon me, if, by these means, I save the persecuted that seek my protection from danger, and gain them for the new human race. For the converted only will overcome this storm, and become the free citizens of the new laws of nature, over whom God presides as righteous King."

To be continued.



A secret in the castle of Montreuil.

The steward now replaced the tile, covering it over with the carpet.

"But is this conversion nothing unnatural?"

"Not every one is converted, Benoit; he who is can divine the future, and is then worshipped as a chosen one. The count is such a chosen one. Every one believes what he says. God speaks through him, a loving and kind God who will send, to tortured mankind, happiness, liberty, and all the glory of Paradise—a prospect of much consolation."

Benoit shook his head as though he did not quite comprehend; but the caustic humour with which his uncle instructed him, produced a smile on his pale face. He repeated his questions.

"Thus there are in this castle none but converts?"

"By no means," replied the uncle. "The count leaves every one his faith, but maintains to have the best and right one."

"And you, uncle! do you belong to the converts?"

"Half and half, my boy. I can take an oath that the count is truly converted, but I don't make it my business to get converted myself."

"And the ladies and gentlemen in the castle?"

"Ah, the ladies belong most to the new church of God, the gentlemen are less numerous represented. The count com-