

stone lay around, which had fallen from the precipice above. By and bye the men, at Bernard's orders, collected in their arms the leaves of last autumn that still lay scattered in the hollows. These they carried into a spacious cave or grotto that was approached with difficulty over the broken fragments of rock. By the aid of torches that cast a strange flickering light, the leaves were spread to form couches in different parts of the cave; and in the innermost corner of this dark dismal chamber, with a few of these leaves for his bed, poor Max fell asleep and forgot for a while the agonising thoughts which for hours had well-nigh driven him to despair.

The wind meanwhile had risen, and the rain was falling in torrents, although, as yet, Max was so sound asleep as to be unconscious of either. Shortly after midnight, however, he was roused from his repose. The glimmer of a lantern fell on his eyes. He looked up, hardly able to realise where he was, when the stern voice of Bernard ordered him to rise immediately and follow him. With a stamp of the foot, the desperate man quickened the youth's movements. He sprung from his couch, and in a few moments, after a crust of bread and some other remains of the last night's meal had been given him, he found himself in the midst of the gang, with no possible idea as to their purpose or destination, pursuing his way through the pathless forest. It was only after many hours of tedious walking that he began to discover the direction they were pursuing. The gag was not replaced; but what was equivalent to it was the threat of Bernard, "Let thy voice once be heard, and that very moment it will be silenced for ever."

Onwards they went, over a rough untrodden way; the wind blew more fiercely, and the rain poured so incessantly, that Max was soon drenched to the skin, and notwithstanding his quick walk, shivered with cold.

After another half-hour, Bernard gave a shrill whistle, and was answered in the distance by another. "They are there," said he, "all right. Forward! we have no time to lose; each moment is invaluable."

The treasure office, what in England would be called the factor's house where the large annual rents of the count's estates were paid and deposited, was situated within a short distance of the proprietor's castle. Bernard had ascertained that the rents had been drawn the preceding day, and that thousands of gold crowns and florins were locked inside iron safes; which, however, were not so strongly secured as to resist the appliances of files and crowbars.

Quickly he laid his plans before his accomplices. They were to wait till after midnight, and then surround the office house. The door was to be broken open, and the iron chest forced or carried off, after which they would take to flight across the frontier, where they would have no further fear of pursuit.

"But what is to be done with the boy?" asked the men, astonished; "he cannot be of use to us in this affair."

"He can," answered Bernard in a low voice, "some one must get into the house to open the door for the rest, and this the boy is to do."

"But what if he raises an alarm?"

"I have already told him it will be his death," rejoined Bernard, with cool determination. "On the first suspicious action, he

will receive one of my bullets in his forehead. Hearst thou, lad?"

"Yes, but I am not going to do what you desire me."

"Well then, thou hast to make thy choice; decide quickly between death, or an easy service and thy freedom," said Bernard.

Max too well knew by experience, the daring man's cruelty, and pondered how he should act. Meanwhile, in order to gain time, he determined to go with them without resistance.

Bernard now gave the word of command, and the whole gang, with Max in their midst, struck off in the direction of the castle. Max walked silently on. He thought not of escape; knowing that to attempt it would be hopeless, but he earnestly resolved in his mind, by what means he possibly could defeat their wicked scheme, even though Bernard's threats should be carried out regarding himself. He put his trust in God, and determined, should the favourable moment come, to seize it, and employ it to the best advantage.

After they had walked some little distance, they saw the castle in dim outline before them, and leaving it on their left, they approached the house where the desired treasure lay concealed. Max looked eagerly around, hoping to discover some living being whose assistance he might obtain; but the whole surroundings of the castle lay in deepest silence and darkness. Two dogs began to bark within the walls; but this sound died soon away, and Max saw that he must continue to trudge on, and depend entirely on his own promptitude in action and the guidance of a kind providence. A chill of fear ran through his veins; now that the moment for action had come. He stood helpless, not knowing what to do. Should he cry aloud, and waken the sleeping inhabitants? Had he dared to do so, it might fail to arouse them, and his life would thereby certainly fall a useless sacrifice. So he still restrained himself till they had reached the house. The smugglers surrounded it, listened, and looked around, to ascertain if their movements were watched or discovered. Max did the same, though from a different cause. But no sound was heard. The baying of the dogs had ceased. The only voice which from the far distance reached their ears, was from the village. It was the horn of the watchman, as he called out the first hour of the morning.

"Now, boy, be ready to enter the window, and open the house door," said Bernard.

"I dare not! Shall I, a boy, lay my hand to such a crime, with the eye of the Great God in heaven upon me? No, never. I understand thee, Bernard," answered the boy; "I know that I am in thy power, but no temptation on earth shall move me to perpetrate such a deed, and sin against my conscience."

"Foolish idiot," said Bernard, with suppressed passion, "obey me on the spot, or die;" holding the mouth of the pistol to his forehead.

But Max, even in the midst of his consternation, well knew that he dared not fulfil his threat. The report would awaken the sleepers, and their wicked plan would, in a moment, be detected.

"Do what you will," said he, with firm voice. "I stir not from this place, and if thou attempt to compel me, I shall give the alarm."

Murder me; stain thy conscience with so dreadful a deed; but think not that thou wilt escape the righteous judgement of the Great God."

A painful moment of deep silence followed this open and firm declaration. Bernard trembled with rage; so wrathful was he at the frustration of his plan, and so embittered at the integrity of the boy, that his finger was already on the trigger, and the life of the weak, helpless youth hung by a thread. But again he was reminded by one of the gang, that such a rash deed could only betray them.

"Well, then," said he, dropping the weapon to his side, with a savage look; "thou art for the moment saved, but this refusal thou shalt bitterly repent."

The rest of the men went without delay to break open the house, taking their tools with them. Max leaned against the trunk of an acacia, and his evil guardian, pistol in hand, remained near him. They could hear distinctly the scraping of the files, and the clatter of the other tools. The outer door was strongly defended, and long withstood their efforts. Max meanwhile looked out eagerly for some sign of life in the house itself, to indicate that the sleepers were in the least degree aware of their danger; but minute after minute passed, and there was no movement.

At length the door gave way to the united strength of the burglars, who quietly entered the unguarded office to complete their work in its drawers and iron safes. They seemed uninterrupted in their deed. No human eye watched their movements, only millions of stars looked silently down from the canopy of heaven, now that the storm had spent itself;

Max felt strongly impelled to avail himself of his present isolation. There he was, alone with his watcher; if he could only succeed in disarming him, he need have no apprehension from the others, for, ere they could come out of the house, he would succeed in making his escape. He summoned up all his determination. As he was, he had everything to fear, and nothing to hope; moreover, if he did not make the attempt promptly, he would be unable to prevent the crime of the robbery. Could he only once elude his watcher, he would hasten to the castle, and give the alarm. Quick as lightning passed these thoughts through his mind. He stood upright, ready for a spring. He glanced quickly at Bernard, who stood a little turned from him, his eyes eagerly fixed on the yielding door, and his thoughts for the time more with his companions than on the boy. The hand that held the pistol hung carelessly by his side, and seemed for the instant to have lost its firm grasp. Little did the man dream what was passing through the mind of the youth, who was meditating whether he could not suddenly wrench the weapon away, and then hastily beat his retreat. In the next moment, the deed was carried into effect. His hand trembled slightly as he stretched it out, but, with a cry of joy, the pistol was in the possession of Max, who, with the speed of a deer, bounded into the dark plantation.

Bernard was at first almost paralysed with surprise and rage. Quickly recovering himself, however, he hastened to the house, and, calling to his companions that "the lad had escaped," ran hastily in the direction of the

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