

WAS IT A DREAM?

About Ben Adhem (how that tribe increases!)—
Pondering one night o'er mortgages and leases,
Fell dead asleep in his old office chair,
And saw, or thought he saw, an angel fair.
Gazing upon her with astonished eyes,
"Excuse this seeming of ill-bred surprise,
But I'm not dead, you know, not really dead."
"As a door-nail," the spirit smiling said,
"But this cannot be Paradise, I'm sure;
Everything looks so commonplace and poor—
Old rusty, fusty books, and parchment rolls—
An odd place this to put departed souls!"
The angel pointed to the loaded shelf:
"Each book is filled, unconscious, by yourself;
You cannot read them, even—lettered fair,
And in your own handwriting as they are.
Forgotten deeds—notes cancelled—deeds of gift—
Lepers and outcasts' eyes to heaven lift.
You look surprised, Ben Adhem; you ne'er thought,
While you among the poor and needy wrought,
'Twas God's will you were doing."

To her Ben Adhem
With amazement said, "Was that God's will, then?
I thought His will was I my soul should save;
For that I've had no time; so like a slave
I've had to work. I helped men when I could,
But sin about one cuts one off from good;
No priest, no altar, so no prayers I've said;
I meant to do this on my dying bed."
"God kept your record," said the angel, "when
You visited the sorrowing sons of men;
When you the widow's heart lit with joy's flame,
And children's eyes shone brighter when you came,
You did these unto Him, not for reward.
You entered then the joy that's of the Lord.
Right for right's sake. In this let work have rest;
Who loves, and works, and blesses shall be blessed.
And mark! Who does good works to save his soul
Has not a soul worth saving—that's the whole."

When morning broke upon the peaceful face,
Its rugged outlines smoothed by heavenly grace,
No priest stood by to shrieve the unconscious one;
But did not Christ himself pronounce, "Well done?"

P. G. HAMERTON.

NINETY-THREE.

BY VICTOR HUGO.

PART THE THIRD.

IN VENDEE.

BOOK THE THIRD.

THE MOTHER.

III.—MUTTERINGS AMONG THE PEASANTS.

She was indeed a startling object; trembling at everything, scared, quaking, showing a sort of wild-animal trouble, so frightened that she was frightful. There is always something terrible in the feebleness of a despairing woman. She is a creature who has reached the furthest limits of destiny. But peasants have not a habit of noticing details. One of them muttered, "She might easily be a spy."

"Hold your tongue and get away from here," the good woman who had already spoken to her said in a low tone.

Michelle Fléhard replied: "I am doing no harm. I am looking for my children."

The good woman glanced at those who were staring at Michelle, touched her forehead with one finger, and winked, saying, "She is a simpleton."

Then she took her aside and gave her a biscuit.

Michelle Fléhard, without thanking her, began to eat greedily.

"Yes," said the peasants, "she eats like an animal—she is an idiot."

So the tail of the mob dwindled away. They all went away, one after another.

When Michelle Fléhard had devoured her biscuit, she said to the peasant-woman, "Good! I have eaten. Now where is La Tourgue?"

"It is taking her again!" cried the peasant.

"I must go to La Tourgue! Show me the way to La Tourgue!"

"Never!" exclaimed the peasant. "Do you want to get yourself killed, eh? Besides, I don't know. Oh, see here! You are really crazy! Listen, poor woman, you look tired. Will you come to my house and rest yourself?"

"I never rest," said the mother.

"And her feet are torn to pieces!" murmured the peasant.

Michelle Fléhard resumed, "Don't I tell you that they have stolen my children! A little girl and two boys. I come from the Carmichael in the forest. You can ask Tellemarch the Caimand about me. And the man I met in the field down yonder. It was the Caimand who cured me. It seems I had something broken. All that is what happened to me. Then there is Sergeant Radoub besides. You can ask him. He will tell thee. Why he was the one we met in the wood. Three! I tell you three children! Even the oldest one's name—René-Jean—I can prove all that. The other's name is Gros-Alain, and the little girl's is Georgette. My husband is dead. They killed him. He was the farmer at Siscoignard. You look like a good woman. Show me the road! I am not crazy—I am a mother! I have lost my children! I am trying to find them. That is all. I don't know exactly which way I have come. I slept last night in a barn on the straw. La Tourgue, that is where I am going. I am not a thief. You must see that I am telling the truth. You ought to help me find my children. I do not belong to the neighbourhood. I was shot, but I do not know where."

The peasant shook her head and said, "Listen, traveller. In times of revolution you mustn't say things that cannot be understood, you may get yourself taken up in that way."

"But La Tourgue!" cried the mother. "Madam, for the

love of the Child Jesus and the Blessed Virgin up in Paradise, I beg you, madam, I entreat you, I conjure you, tell me which way I must go to get to La Tourgue!"

The peasant woman went into a passion.

"I do not know! And if I knew, I would not tell! It is a bad place. People do not go there."

"But I am going," said the mother.

And she set forth again. The woman watched her depart, muttering, "Still, she must have something to eat."

She ran after Michelle Fléhard and put a roll of black bread in her hand.

"There is for your supper."

Michelle Fléhard took the buckwheat bread, did not answer, did not turn her head, but walked on.

She went out of the village. As she reached the last houses, she met three ragged, barefooted little children. She approached them, and said, "These are two girls and a boy."

Noticing that they looked at the bread, she gave it to them. The children took the bread, then grew frightened.

She plunged into the forest.

IV.—A MISTAKE.

On the same morning, before the dawn appeared, this happened amid the obscurity of the forest, along the cross-road which goes from Javené to Lécousse.

All the roads of the Bréage are between high banks, but of all the routes, that leading from Javené to Parigué, by the way of Lécousse, is the most deeply imbedded. Besides that, it is winding. It is a ravine rather than a road. This road comes from Vitré, and had the honour of jolting Madame de Sévigné's carriage. It is enclosed to the right and left by hedges. There could be no better place for an ambush.

On this morning, an hour before Michelle Fléhard from another point of the forest reached the first village where she had seen the sepulchral apparition of the waggon escorted by gendarmes, a crowd of men filled the copses where the Javené road crosses the bridge over the Couësson. The branches hid them. These men were peasants, all wearing jackets of skins which the kings of Brittany wore in the sixteenth century and the peasants in the eighteenth. The men were armed, some with guns, others with axes. Those who carried axes had just prepared in an open space a sort of pyre of dried faggots and billets which only remained to be set on fire. Those who had guns were stationed at the two sides of the road in watchful positions. Anybody who could have looked through the leaves would have been everywhere fingers on triggers and guns aimed toward the openings left by the interlacing branches. These men were on the watch. All the guns converged toward the road, which the first gleams of day had begun to whiten.

In this twilight low voices held converse.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Well, they say so."

"She is about to pass?"

"They say she is in the neighbourhood."

"She must not go out."

"She must be burned."

"We are three villages who have come out for that."

"Yes; but the escort?"

"The escort will be killed."

"But will she pass by this road?"

"They say so."

"Then she comes from Vitré?"

"Why not?"

"But somebody said she was coming from Fougères."

"Whether she comes from Fougères or Vitré, she comes from the Devil."

"Yes."

"And must go back to him."

"Yes."

"So she is going to Parigué?"

"It appears so."

"She will not go."

"No."

"No, no, no!"

"Attention."

It became prudent now to be silent, for the day was breaking.

Suddenly these ambushed men held their breath; they caught a sound of wheels and horses' feet. They peered through the branches, and could perceive indistinctly a long waggon, an escort on horseback, and something on the waggon, coming towards them along the high-banked road.

"There she is," said one, who appeared to be the leader.

"Yes," said one of the scouts; "with the escort."

"How many men?"

"Twelve."

"We were told they were twenty."

"Twelve or twenty, we must kill the whole."

"Wait till they get within sure aim."

A little later, the waggon and its escort appeared at a turn in the road.

"Long live the King!" cried the chief peasant.

A hundred guns were fired at the same instant.

When the smoke scattered, the escort was scattered also. Seven horsemen had fallen; five had fled. The peasants rushed up to the waggon.

"Hold!" cried the chief; "it is not the guillotine! It is a ladder."

A long ladder was, in fact, all the waggon carried.

The two horses had fallen wounded; the driver had been killed, but not intentionally.

"All the same," said the chief; "a ladder with an escort looks suspicious. It was going towards Parigué. It was for the escalade of La Tourgue, very sure."

"Let us burn the ladder!" cried the peasants.

And they burned the ladder.

As for the funeral waggon for which they had been waiting, it was pursuing another road, and was already two leagues off, in the village where Michelle Fléhard saw it pass at sunrise.

V.—VOX IN DESERTO.

When Michelle Fléhard left the three children to whom she had given her bread, she took her way at random through the wood.

Since nobody would point out the road, she must find it out for herself. Now and then she sat down, then rose, then re-seated herself again. She was borne down by that terrible

fatigue which first attacks the muscles, then passes into the bones—weariness like that of a slave. She was a slave in truth. The slave of her lost children. She must find them; each instant that elapsed might be to their hurt; who so has a duty like this woman's has no rights; it is forbidden even to stop to take breath. But she was very tired. In the extreme of exhaustion which she had reached, another step became a question. Can one make it? She had walked all the day, encountering no other village, not even a house. She took first the right path, then a wrong one, ending by losing herself amid leafy labyrinths, resembling one another precisely. Was she approaching her goal? Was she nearing the term of her Passion? She was in the Via Dolorosa, and felt the overwhelming of the last station.* Was she about to fall in the road, and die there? There came a moment where to advance farther seemed impossible to her. The sun was declining, the forest growing dark; the paths were hidden beneath the grass, and she was helpless. She had nothing left but God. She began to call; no voice answered.

She looked about; she perceived an opening in the branches, turned in that direction, and found herself suddenly on the edge of the wood.

She had before her a valley, narrow as a trench, at the bottom of which a clear streamlet ran along over the stones. She discovered then she was burning with thirst. She went down to the stream, knelt by it, and drank.

She took advantage of her kneeling position to say her prayers.

When she rose, she tried to decide upon a course. She crossed the brook.

Beyond the little valley stretched, as far as the eye could reach, a plateau, covered with short underbrush, which, starting from the brook, ascended in an inclined plane, and filled the whole horizon. The forest had been a solitude; this plain was a desert. Behind every bush of the forest she might meet some one; on the plateau, as far as she could see, nothing met her gaze. A few birds, which seemed frightened, were flying away over the heath.

Then, in the midst of this awful abandonment, feeling her knees give way under her, and, as if gone suddenly mad, the distracted mother flung forth this strange cry into the silence: "Is there any one here?"

She waited for an answer. It came. A low, deep voice burst forth; it proceeded from the verge of the horizon, was borne forward from echo to echo; it was either a peal of thunder or a cannon, and it seemed as if the voice replied to the mother's question, and that it said: "Yes."

Then the silence closed in anew.

The mother rose, animated with fresh life; there was some one; it seemed to her as if she had now some person with whom she could speak. She had just drunk and prayed; her strength came back; she began to ascend the plateau in the direction whence she had heard that vast and far-off voice.

Suddenly she saw a lofty tower start up on the extreme edge of the horizon. It was the only object visible amid the savage landscape; a ray from the setting sun crimsoned its summit. It was more than a league away. Behind the tower spread a great sweep of scattered verdure, lost in the mist—it was the forest of Fougères.

This tower appeared to her to be the point whence came the thundering which had sounded like a summons in her ear. Was it that which had given the answer to her cry?

Michelle Fléhard reached the top of the plateau; she had nothing but the plain before her.

She walked towards the tower.

VI.—THE SITUATION.

The moment had come. The inexorable held the pitiless. Cimourdain had Lantenac in his hand.

The old royalist rebel was taken in his form; it was evident that he could not escape, and Cimourdain meant that the Marquis should be beheaded here—upon his own territory—his own lands—on this very spot—in sight of his ancestral dwelling-place, that the feudal stronghold might see the head of the feudal lord fall, and the example thus be made memorable.

It was with this intention that he had sent to Fougères for the guillotine which we lately saw upon its road.

To kill Lantenac was to slay Vendée; to slay Vendée was to save France. Cimourdain did not hesitate. The conscience of this man was quiet; he was urged to ferocity by a sense of duty.

The marquis appeared lost; as far as that went, Cimourdain was tranquil, but there was a consideration which troubled him. The struggle must inevitably be a terrible one. Gauvain would direct it, and, perhaps, would wish to take part; this young chief was a soldier at heart; he was just the man to fling himself into the thick of this pugilistic combat. If he should be killed? Gauvain, his child! The unique affection he possessed on earth! So far fortune had protected the youth, but fortune might grow weary. Cimourdain trembled. His strange destiny had placed him here between these two Gauvains, for one of whom he wished death, for the other life.

The cannon shot which had roused Georgette in her cradle and summoned the mother in the depths of her solitude, had done more than that. Either by accident, or owing to the intention of the man who fired the piece, the ball, although only meant as a warning, had struck the guard of iron bars which protected the great loophole of the first floor of the tower, broken and half wrenched it away. The besieged had not had time to repair this damage.

The besieged had been boastful, but they had very little ammunition. Their situation, indeed, was much more critical than the besiegers supposed. If they had had powder enough, they could have blown up La Tourgue when they and the enemy should be together within it; this had been their dream; but their reserves were exhausted. They had not more than thirty charges left for each man. They had plenty of guns, blunderbusses, and pistols, but few cartridges. They had loaded all the weapons in order to keep up a steady fire—but how long could that steady firing last? They must lavishly exhaust the resources which they required to husband. That was the difficulty. Fortunately (sinister fortune) the struggle would be mostly man to man; sabre and pignard would be more needed than fire-arms. The conflict would be rather a duel with knives than a battle with guns. This was the hope of the besieged.

* In reference to the pictures in Roman Catholic churches. The last station is that wherein our Lord falls under the weight of the cross. Trans.