

"Ah!" cried the mother. "They have woken!" René-Jean got up, then Gros-Alain, and Georgette followed René-Jean stretched his arms towards the window, and said, "I am warm."  
"Me warm," cooed Georgette.  
The mother shrieked: "My children! René! Alain! Georgette!"

The little ones looked about. They strove to comprehend. When men are frightened, children are only curious. He who is easily astonished is difficult to alarm; ignorance is intrepidity. Children have so little claim to purgatory that if they saw it they would look at it in pleased wonder!

The mother repeated, "René! Alain! Georgette!" René-Jean turned his head; that voice roused him from his reverie. Children have short memories, but their recollections are swift; the whole past is yesterday to them. René-Jean saw his mother, found that perfectly natural, and feeling a vague want of support in the midst of those strange surroundings, he called, "Mamma!"

"Mamma!" said Gros-Alain.  
"M'ma!" said Georgette.  
And she held out her little arms.  
"My children!" shrieked the mother.  
All three went close to the window-ledge; fortunately the fire was not on that side.

"I am too warm," said René-Jean. He added, "It burns." Then his eyes sought the mother. "Come here, mamma!" he cried.

"Tum, m'ma," repeated Georgette.  
The mother, with her hair streaming about her face, her garments torn, her feet and hands bleeding, let herself roll from bush to bush down into the ravine. Cimourdain and Guéchamp were there, as powerless as Gauvain was above. The soldiers, desperate at being able to do nothing, swarmed about. The heat was insupportable, but nobody felt it. They looked at the bridge—the height of the arches—the different stories of the castle—the inaccessible windows. Help to be of any avail must come at once. Three stories to climb. No way of doing it.

Radoub, wounded, with a sabre-cut on his shoulder and one ear torn off, rushed forward dripping with sweat and blood. He saw Michelle Fléchar.

"Hullo!" cried he. "The woman that was shot! So you have come to life again?"

"My children!" groaned the mother.

"You are right," answered Radoub; "we have no time to busy ourselves about ghosts."

He attempted to climb the bridge, but in vain; he dug his nails in between the stones and clung there for a few seconds, but the layers were as smoothly joined as if the wall had been new—Radoub fell back. The conflagration swept on each instant, growing more terrible. They could see the heads of the three children framed in the red light of the window. In his frenzy Radoub shook his clenched hand at the sky, and shouted, "Is there no mercy yonder!"

The mother, on her knees, clung to one of the piers crying, "Mercy, mercy!"

The hollow sound of cracking timbers rose above the roar of the flames. The panes of glass in the bookcases of the library cracked and fell with a crash. It was evident that the timber work had given way. Human strength could do nothing. Another moment and the whole would fall. The soldiers only waited for the final catastrophe. They could hear the little voices repeat, "Mamma! mamma!"

The whole crowd was paralysed with horror. Suddenly, at the casement near that where the children stood, a tall form appeared against the crimson background of the flames.

Every head was raised—every eye fixed. A man was above there—a man in the library—in the furnace. The face showed black against the flames, but they could see the white hair—they recognized the Marquis de Lantenac. He disappeared, then appeared again.

The indomitable old man stood in the window showing out an enormous ladder. It was the escape-ladder deposited in the library—he had seen it lying upon the floor and dragged it to the window. He held it by one end—with the marvellous agility of an athlete he slipped it out of the casement and slid it along the wall down into the ravine.

Radoub folded his arms about the ladder as it descended within his reach, crying, "Long live the Republic!"

The marquis shouted, "Long live the King!"

Radoub muttered, "You may cry what you like, and talk nonsense if you please;—but you are an angel of mercy all the same."

The ladder was safely grounded, and a communication established between the burning floor and the ground. Twenty men rushed up, Radoub at their head, and in the twinkling of an eye they were hanging to the rungs from the top to the bottom, making a human ladder. Radoub, on the topmost rung, touched the window. He had his face turned toward the conflagration. The little army scattered among the heath and along the sides of the ravine pressed forward, overcome by contending emotions, upon the plateau, into the ravine, out on the platform of the tower.

The marquis disappeared again, then reappeared bearing a child in his arms. There was a tremendous clapping of hands.

The marquis had seized the first little one that he found within reach. It was Gros-Alain.

Gros-Alain cried, "I am afraid."

The marquis gave the boy to Radoub; Radoub passed him on to the soldier behind, who passed him to another, and just as Gros-Alain, greatly frightened and sobbing loudly, was given from hand to hand to the bottom of the ladder, the marquis, who had been absent for a moment, returned to the window with René-Jean, who struggled and wept and beat Radoub with his little fists as the marquis passed him on to the sergeant.

The marquis went back into the chamber that was now filled with flames. Georgette was there alone. He went up to her. She smiled. This man of granite felt his eyelids grow moist. He asked, "What is your name?"

"Georgette," she said.

He took her in his arms; she was still smiling, and, at the instant he handed her to Radoub, that conscience so lofty and yet so darkened was dazzled by the beauty of innocence; the old man kissed the child.

"It is the little girl!" said the soldiers; and Georgette in her turn descended from arm to arm till she reached the ground, amid cries of exultation. They clapped their hands; they leaped; the old grenadiers sobbed, and she smiled at them.

The mother stood at the foot of the ladder breathless, mad, intoxicated by this change—flung, without a pause, from hell into paradise. Excess of joy lacerates the heart in its own way. She extended her arms; she received first Gros-Alain, then René-Jean, then Georgette. She covered them with frantic kisses, then burst into a wild laugh, and fainted.

A great cry rose: "They are all saved!"

All were indeed saved, except the old man.

But no one thought of him—not even he himself, perhaps. He remained for a few instants leaning against the window-ledge lost in a reverie, as if he wished to leave the gulf of flames time to make a decision. Then, without the least haste, slowly indeed and proudly, he stepped over the window-sill, and erect, upright, his shoulders against the rungs, having the conflagration at his back, the depth before him, he began to descend the ladder in silence with the majesty of a phantom. The men who were on the ladder sprang off; every witness shuddered; around this man thus descending from that height there was a sacred horror as about a vision. But he plunged calmly into the darkness before him; they recoiled, he drew nearer them; the marble pallor of his face showed no emotion; his haughty eyes were calm and cold; at each step he made toward those men whose wondering eyes gazed upon him out of the darkness, he seemed to tower higher, the ladder shook and echoed under his firm tread—one might have thought him the statue of the commandant descending anew into his sepulchre.

As the marquis reached the ground, and his foot left the last rung and planted itself on the earth, a hand seized his shoulder. He turned about.

"I arrest you," said Cimourdain.

"I approve of what you do," said Lantenac.

## BOOK THE FIFTH.

### THE COMBAT AFTER THE VICTORY.

#### I.—LANTENAC TAKEN.

The marquis had indeed descended into the tomb. He was led away.

The crypt dungeon of the ground-floor of La Tourgue was at once opened under Cimourdain's lynx-eyed superintendence. A lamp was placed within, a jug of water and a loaf of regulation bread; a bundle of straw was flung on the ground, and in less than a quarter of an hour from the instant when the priest's hand seized Lantenac, the door of the dungeon closed upon him.

This done, Cimourdain went to find Gauvain; at that instant eleven o'clock sounded from the distant church-clock of Parigüé. Cimourdain said to his former pupil, "I am going to convoke a court-martial; you will not be there. You are a Gauvain, and Lantenac is a Gauvain. You are too near a kinsman to be his judge; I blame Egalité for having voted upon Capet's sentence. The court-martial will be composed of three judges: an officer, Captain Guéchamp; a non-commissioned officer, Sergeant Radoub, and myself—I shall preside. But none of this concerns you any longer. We will conform to the decree of the Convention; we will confine ourselves to proving the identity of the ci-devant Marquis de Lantenac. To-morrow the court-martial—the day after to-morrow the guillotine. Vendée is dead."

Gauvain did not answer a word, and Cimourdain, preoccupied by the closing task which remained for him to fulfil, left the young man alone. Cimourdain had to decide upon the hour and choose the place. He had, like Lequinio at Granulle, like Tallien at Bordeaux, like Châlier at Lyons, like Saint-Just at Strasburg, the habit of assisting personally at executions; it was considered a good example for the judge to come and see the headsman do his work—a custom borrowed by the Terror of '93 from the Parliaments of France and the Inquisition of Spain.

Gauvain also was preoccupied.

A cold wind moaned up from the forest; Gauvain left Guéchamp to give the necessary orders, went to his tent in the meadow which stretched along the edge of the wood at the foot of La Tourgue, took his hooded cloak, and enveloped himself therein. This cloak was bordered with the simple galoon which, according to the Republican custom, chary of ornament, designated the commander-in-chief. He began to walk about in this bloody field where the attack had commenced. He was alone there. The fire still continued, but no one any longer paid attention to it. Radoub was beside the children and their mother, almost as maternal as she. The bridge-castle was nearly consumed—the sappers hastened the destruction. The soldiers were digging trenches in order to bury the dead; the wounded were being cared for; the retrade had been demolished; the chambers and stairs dis-numbered of the dead; the soldiers were cleansing the scene of carnage, sweeping away the terrible rubbish of the victory; with true military rapidity setting everything in order after the battle. Gauvain saw nothing of all this.

So profound was his reverie that he scarcely cast a glance toward the guard about the tower, doubled by the orders of Cimourdain.

He could make out the breach through the darkness, perhaps two hundred feet away from the corner of the field where he had taken refuge. He could see the black opening. It was there the attack had commenced three hours before; it was by this dark gap that he—Gauvain—had penetrated into the tower; there was the ground floor where the retrade had stood; it was on that same floor that the door of the marquis' prison opened. The guard at the breach watched this dungeon.

While his eyes were absently fixed upon the heath, in his ear rang confusedly, like the echo of a knell, these words: "To-morrow the court martial; the day after to-morrow the guillotine."

The conflagration, which had been isolated, and upon which the sappers had thrown all the water that could be procured, did not die away without resistance; it still cast out intermittent flames. At moments the cracking of the ceilings could be heard, and the crash, one upon another, of the different stories as they fell in a common ruin; then a whirlwind of sparks would fly through the air, as if a gigantic torch had been shaken; a glare like lightning illuminated the farthest verge of the horizon, and the shadow of La Tourgue, growing suddenly colossal, spread out to the edge of the forest. Gauvain walked slowly back and forth amid the gloom in front of the breach. At intervals he clasped his two hands at the back of his head, covered with his soldier's hood. He was thinking.

#### II.—GAUVAIN'S SELF-QUESTIONING.

His reverie was fathomless. A seemingly impossible change had taken place.

The Marquis de Lantenac had been transformed. Gauvain had been a witness of this transformation. He could never have believed that such a state of affairs would arrive from any complication of events whatever they might be. Never could he have imagined, even in a dream, that anything similar would be possible.

The unexpected—that inexplicable power which plays with man at will—had seized Gauvain, and held him fast. He had before him the impossible transformed into a reality, visible, palpable, inevitable, inexorable. What did he think of it—he, Gauvain?

There was no chance of evasion; the decision must be made. A question was put to him; he could not avoid it. Put by whom? By events.

And not alone by events. For when events, which are mutable, address a question to our souls, Justice, which is unchangeable, summons us to reply.

Above the cloud which casts its shadow upon us is the star that sends its light toward us. We can no more escape from the light than from the shadow.

Gauvain was undergoing an interrogatory. He had been arraigned before a judge. Before a terrible judge. His conscience.

Gauvain felt every power of his soul vacillate. His most solid resolutions, his most piously uttered promises, his most irrevocable decisions, all tottered in this terrible overthrow and burial of his will. These are moral earthquakes. The more he reflected upon that which he had lately seen, the more confused he became.

Gauvain, Republican, believed himself, and was, just. A higher justice had revealed itself. Beyond the justice of revolutions is that of humanity.

What had happened could not be eluded; the case was grave; Gauvain made part of it; he could not withdraw himself, and, although Cimourdain had said, "It concerns you no further," he felt within his soul that pang which a tree may feel when torn up by its roots.

Every man has a basis; a disturbance of this base causes a profound trouble—it was what Gauvain now felt. He pressed his head between his two hands, searching for the truth. To state clearly a situation like his is not easy; nothing could be more painful; he had before him the formidable figures which he must sum up into a total; to judge a human destiny by mathematical rules—his head whirled. He tried; he endeavoured to consider the matter; he forced himself to collect his ideas, to discipline the resistance which he felt within himself, and to recapitulate the facts. He set them all before his mind.

To whom has it not happened to make such a report, and to interrogate himself in some supreme circumstances upon the route which must be followed, whether to advance or retreat?

Gauvain had just been witness of a miracle. Before the earthly combat had fairly ended, there came a celestial struggle. The conflict of good against evil. A heart of adamant had been conquered.

Given the man, with all the evil that he had within him, violence, error, blindness, unwholesome obstinacy, pride, egotism—Gauvain had just witnessed a miracle. The victory of humanity over the man. Humanity had conquered the inhuman. And by what means? In what manner? How had it been able to overthrow that colossus of rage and hatred? What arms had it employed? What implement of war? The cradle!

Gauvain had been dazzled. In the midst of social war, in the very acme of all hatreds and all vengeance, at the darkest and most furious moment of the tumult, at the hour when crime gave all its fires and hate all its blackness, at that instant of conflict when every sentiment becomes a projectile, when the mêlée is so fierce that one no longer knows what is justice, honesty, or truth, suddenly the Unknown—mysterious warner of souls—darted the grand rays of eternal truth resplendent across human light and darkness.

Above that dark duel between the false and the relatively true, there, in the depths, the face of truth itself suddenly appeared. At a moment the face of the feeble had interposed.

He had seen three poor creatures, almost new-born, unreasoning, abandoned, orphaned, unaided, lisping, smiling, having against them civil war, retaliation, the horrible logic of reprisals, murder, carnage, fratricide, rage, hatred, all the Gorgons, triumph against those powers. He had seen the defeat and extinction of a horrible conflagration kindled to commit a crime; he had seen atrocious plots disconcerted and brought to nought; he had seen ancient feudal ferocity, inexorable disdain, the professed experiences of the necessities of war, the reasons of State, all the arrogant resolves of a savage old age, vanish before the clear gaze of those who had not yet lived, and this was natural, for he who has not yet lived has done no evil; he is justice, truth, purity; and the highest angels of heaven hover about souls of little children.

A useful spectacle, a counsel, a lesson. The maddened, merciless combatants, in face of all the projects, all the outrages of war, fanaticism, assassination, revenge kindling the faggots, death coming torch in hand, had suddenly seen all powerful Innocence raise itself above this enormous legion of crimes. And Innocence had conquered.

One could say: No, civil war does not exist; barbarism does not exist; hatred does not exist; crime does not exist; darkness does not exist. To scatter these spectres it only needed that divine aurora—Innocence.

Never in any conflict had Satan and God been more plainly visible. This conflict had a human conscience for its arena. The conscience of Lantenac.

Now the battle began again, more desperate, more decisive still, perhaps, in another conscience. The conscience of Gauvain.

What a battle-ground is the soul of man! We are given up to those gods, those monsters, those giants—our thoughts. Often these terrible belligerents trample our very souls down in their mad conflict.

Gauvain meditated.  
The Marquis de Lantenac, surrounded, doomed, condemned, outlawed, snubbed in like the wild beast of the circus, held like a nail in the pincers, enclosed in his refuge now made his prison, bound on every side by a wall of iron and fire, had succeeded in stealing away. He had performed a miracle in escaping. He had accomplished that masterpiece—the most difficult of all in such a war—flight. He had again taken possession of the forest to entrench himself therein—of the district to fight