

"Try me, General, try me ! Put me to the proof ; it's worth a trial. One more or less for your men to shoot, what does it matter ? One hour of freedom only, not more ; you shall see whether I will keep my word, and whether I am afraid to die."

"Oh, you're no knave, but you must take me for one. Once free and far away, and then to come back to be shot just as if you were keeping an ordinary appointment ? You will hardly get me to swallow that, my boy !"

"Listen, sir, I beg of you. Perhaps you have a good mother, whom you love more than aught else in the whole world. If, like me, you were just going to die, your last thought would be of her, would it not ? And you would bless the man who gave you the opportunity of seeing her once more, for the last time. General, do for me what you would pray others to do for you. Give me one hour of liberty, and I will give you my word of honor to return and give myself up. Is life itself worth a promise broken ?"

While he was speaking, the commandant was pacing to and fro, tugging viciously at his moustache, and evidently struggling hard to appear unmoved.

"Upon my word !" he murmured. "This urchin talks of honor as though he were a Knight of the Round Table !"

He stopped abruptly in front of his prisoner and asked, in a severe tone :

"Your name ?"

"Paul d'Alville."

"Age ?"

"Sixteen on the 15th of July."

"What made you leave your mother to follow the commune ?"

"The thirty sous chiefly ; one must eat ! Then the neighbors and my comrades threatened to shoot me if I did not march with them. They said I was tall enough to carry a musket. My mother was afraid of them, and wept, and begged me to obey them."