

"Let each one confess his faults aloud," said Grand-François. "Monseigneur, speak."

The marquis answered, "I have killed."

"I have killed," said Hoisnard.

"I have killed," said Guinoiseau.

"I have killed," said Brin d'Amour.

"I have killed," said Chatenay.

"I have killed," said Imánus.

And Grand-François replied: "In the name of the most Holy Trinity, I absolve you. May your souls depart in peace."

"Amen," replied all the voices.

The marquis then rose. "Now let us die," he said.

"And fall to slaying," added Imánus.

The blows from the butt-end of the besiegers' muskets began to shake the chest which barred the door.

"Think of God," said the priest; "earth no longer exists for you."

"It is true," replied the marquis; "we are in the tomb."

All bowed their heads and smote their breasts. The marquis and the priest were alone standing. The priest prayed, keeping his eyes cast down; the peasants prayed, the marquis reflected. The coffer echoed dismally, as if under the stroke of hammers.

At this instant a rapid, strong voice sounded suddenly behind them, exclaiming, "Did I not tell you so, monseigneur?"

All turned their heads in stupefied wonder. An outlet was just opening in the wall.

A stone, perfectly fitted into the others, but not cemented, and having a pivot above and a pivot below, had just revolved like a turnstile, leaving the wall open. The stone having revolved on its axis, the opening was double, and offered two means of exit, one to the right and one to the left, narrow, but leaving space enough to allow a man to pass. Beyond this door, so unexpectedly opened, could be seen the first steps of a spiral staircase. A face appeared in the opening. The marquis recognized Halmalo.

XII.—DELIVERANCE.

"Tis you, Halmalo?"

"It is I, monseigneur. You see there are stones that turn; they really exist; you can get out of here. I am just in time; but come quickly. In ten minutes you will be in the heart of the forest."

"God is great," said the priest.

"Save yourself monseigneur!" cried the men in concert.

"All of you go first," said the marquis.

"You must go first, monseigneur," returned the Abbé Turmeau. "I go the last."

And the marquis added, in a severe tone. "No struggle of generosity. We have no time to be magnanimous. You are wounded. I order you to leave and to fly. Quick! Take advantage of this outlet. Thanks, Halmalo."

"Marquis, must we separate?" asked the Abbé Turmeau.

"Below, without doubt. We can only escape one by one."

"Does monseigneur appoint a rendez-vous?"

"Yes. A glade in the forest, the Pierre Gauvaine. Do you know the place?"

"We all know it."

"I shall be there to-morrow at noon. Let all those who can walk meet me at that time."

"Every man will be there."

"And we will begin the war anew," said the marquis.

As Halmalo pushed against the turning-stone, he found that it did not stir. The aperture could not be closed again.

"Monseigneur," he said, "We must hasten. The stone will not move. I was able to open the passage, but I cannot shut it."

The stone in fact had become deadened, as it were, on its hinges from long disuse. It was impossible to make it revolve back into its place.

"Monseigneur" resumed Halmalo, "I had hoped to close the passage, so that the Blues, when they got in and found no one, would think you must have flown off in the smoke. But the stone will not stir. The enemy will see the outlet open, and can follow. At least, do not let us lose a second. Quick; everybody make up for the staircase!"

Imánus laid his hand on Halmalo's shoulder.

"Comrade, how much time will it take to get from here to the forest and to safety?"

"Is there anyone seriously wounded?" asked Halmalo.

They answered, "Nobody."

"In that case, a quarter of an hour will be enough."

"Go," said Imánus; "if the enemy can be kept of here for a quarter of an hour—"

"They may follow; they cannot overtake us."

"But," said the marquis, "they will be here in five minutes; that old chest cannot hold out against them any longer. A few blows from their muskets will end the business. A quarter of an hour! Who can keep them back for a quarter of an hour?"

"I," said Imánus.

"You, Gouge-le-Bruant?"

"I, monseigneur. Listen. Five out of six of you are wounded. I have not a scratch."

"Nor I," said the marquis.

"You are the chief, monseigneur. I am a soldier. Chief and soldier are two."

"I know we have each a different duty."

"No, monseigneur, we have, you and I, the same duty; it is to save you."

Imánus turned toward his companions.

"Comrades, the thing necessary to be done is to hold the enemy in check and retard the pursuit as long as possible. Listen. I am in possession of my full strength; I have not lost a drop of blood; not being wounded, I can hold out longer than any of the others. Fly, all of you. Leave me your weapons. I will make good use of them. I take it on myself to stop the enemy for a good half-hour. How many loaded pistols are there?"

"Four."

"Lay them on the floor"

His command was obeyed.

"It is well. I stay here. They will find somebody to talk with. Now quick—get away."

Life and death hung in the balance; there was no time for thanks—scarcely time for those nearest to grasp his hand.

"We shall meet soon," the marquis said to him.

"No, monseigneur; I hope not—not soon—for I am about to die."

They got through the opening one after another and passed down the stairs—the wounded going first. While the men

were escaping, the marquis took a pencil out of a note-book which he carried in his pocket, and wrote a few words on the stone, which, remaining motionless, left the passage gaping open.

"Come, monseigneur, they are all gone but you," said Halmalo. And the sailor began to descend the stairs. The marquis followed.

Imánus was alone.

XIII.—THE EXECUTIONER.

The four pistols had been laid on the flags, for the chamber had no flooring to cover them. Imánus grasped a pistol in each hand. He moved obliquely towards the entrance to the staircase which the chest obstructed and masked.

The assailants evidently feared some surprise—one of those final explosions which involve conqueror and conquered in the same catastrophe. The last attack was as slow and prudent as the first had been impetuous. They had not been able to push the chest backward into the chamber—perhaps would not have done it if they could. They had broken the bottom with blows from their muskets, and pierced the top with bayonet holes; by these holes they were trying to look into the hall before entering. The light from the lanterns with which they had illuminated the staircase shone through these chinks.

Imánus perceived an eye regarding him through one of the holes. He aimed his pistol quickly at the place and pulled the trigger. To his joy a horrible cry followed the report. The ball had entered the eye and passed through the brain of the soldier, who fell backward down the stairs.

The assailants had broken two large holes in the cover; Imánus thrust his pistol through one of these and fired at random into the mass of besiegers. The ball must have rebounded, for he heard several cries as if three or four were killed or wounded, then there was a great trampling and tumult as the men fell back. Imánus threw down the two pistols which he had just fired, and taking the two which still remained, peered out through the holes in the chest. He was able to see what execution his shots had done.

The assailants had descended the stairs. The twisting of the spiral staircase only allowed him to look down three or four steps; the men he had shot lay writhing there in death agony. Imánus waited. "It is so much time gained," thought he.

Then he saw a man flat on his stomach creeping up the stairs; at the same instant the head of another soldier appeared lower down from behind the pillar about which the spiral wound. Imánus aimed at this head and fired. A cry followed, the soldier fell, and Imánus, while watching, threw away the empty pistol and changed the loaded one from his left hand to his right.

As he did so, he felt a horrible pain, and, in his turn, uttered a yell of agony. A sabre had traversed his bowels. A fist—the fist of the man who had crept up the stairs—had just been thrust through the second hole in the bottom of the chest, and this fist had plunged a sabre into Imánus' body. The wound was frightful; the abdomen was pierced through and through.

Imánus did not fall. He set his teeth together and muttered, "Good!"

Then he dragged himself, tottering along, and retreated to the iron door at the side of which the torch was still burning. He laid his pistol on the stones and seized the torch, and while with his left hand he held together the terrible wound through which his intestines protruded, with the right he lowered the torch till it touched the sulphur-match.

It caught fire instantaneously—the wick blazed. Imánus dropped the torch—it lay on the ground still burning. He seized his pistol anew, dropped forward upon the flags, and with what breath he had left blew the wick. The flame ran along it, passed beneath the iron door and reached the bridge-castle.

Then seeing that his execrable exploits had succeeded—prouder, perhaps, of this crime than of the courage he had before shown—this man, who had just proved himself a hero only to sink into an assassin, smiled as he stretched himself out to die, and muttered, "They will remember me. I take vengeance on these little ones for the fate of the little one who belongs to us all—the king imprisoned in the Temple!"

XIV.—IMÁNUS ALSO ESCAPES.

At this moment there was a great noise—the chest was hurled violently back into the hall, and gave passage to a man who rushed forward, sabre in hand, crying, "It is I—Radoub—what are you going to do? It bores me to wait. I have risked it. Anyway I have just disembowelled one. Now I attack the whole of you. Whether the rest follow me, or don't follow me, here I am. How many are there of you?"

It was indeed Radoub, and he was alone!

After the massacre Imánus had paused upon the stairs, Gauvain, fearing some secret mine, had drawn back his men and consulted with Cimourdain.

Radoub standing sabre in hand upon the threshold, sent his voice anew in the obscurity of the chamber across which the nearly extinguished torch cast a faint gleam, and repeated his question. "I am one. How many are you?"

There was no answer. He stepped forward. One of those sudden jets of light which an expiring fire sometimes sends out, and which seem like its dying throes, burst from the torch and illuminated the entire chamber. Radoub caught sight of himself in one of the mirrors hanging against the wall—approached it, and examined his bleeding face and wounded ear.

"Horrible mutilation!" said he.

Then he turned about, and, to his utter stupefaction, perceived that the hall was empty.

"Nobody here!" he exclaimed. "Not a creature."

Then he saw the revolving stone and the staircase beyond the opening.

"Ah! I understand! The key of the fields. Come up, all of you!" he shouted. "Comrades, come up! They have run away. They have fled off—dissolved—evaporated—cut their lucky. This old jug of a tower had a crack in it. There is the hole they got out by, the beggars. How is anybody to get the better of Pitt and Coburg while they can play such comedies as this! The very devil himself came to their rescue. There is nobody here."

The report of a pistol cut his words short—a ball grazed his elbow and flattened itself against the wall.

"Aha!" said he. "So there is somebody left. Who was good enough to show me that little politeness?"

"I," answered a voice.

Radoub looked about and caught sight of Imánus in the gloom.

"Ah!" cried he. "I have got one at all events. The others have escaped, but you will not, I promise you."

"Do you believe it?" retorted Imánus.

Radoub made a step forward and paused.

"Hey, you, lying on the ground there—who are you?"

"I am a man who laughs at you who are standing up."

"What is it you are holding in your right hand?"

"A pistol."

"And in your left hand?"

"My bowels."

"You are my prisoner."

"I defy you!"

Imánus bowed his head over the burning wick, spent his last breath in stirring the flame, and expired.

A few seconds after Gauvain and Cimourdain, followed by the whole troop of soldiers, were in the hall. They all saw the opening. They searched the corners of the room and explored the staircase; it had a passage at the bottom which led to the ravine. The besieged had escaped. They raised Imánus—he was dead. Gauvain, lantern in hand, examined the stone which had afforded an outlet to the fugitives; he had heard of the turning-stone, but he, too, had always disbelieved the legend. As he looked he saw some lines written in pencil on the massive block; he held the lantern closer and read the words: "*Au revoir, Vicomte Lantenac.*"

Guéchamp was standing by his commandant. Pursuit was utterly useless; the fugitives had the whole country to aid them—thickets, ravines, copses the inhabitants. Doubtless they were already far away. There would be no possibility of discovering them—they had the entire forest of Fougères, with its countless hiding places, for a refuge. What was to be done? The whole struggle must begin anew. Gauvain and Guéchamp exchanged conjectures and expressions of disappointment. Cimourdain listened gravely, but did not utter a word.

"And the ladder, Guéchamp?" said Gauvain.

"Commandant, it has not come."

"But we saw a waggon escorted by gendarmes."

Guéchamp only replied, "It did not bring the ladder."

"What did it bring, then?"

"The guillotine," said Cimourdain.

XV.—NEVER PUT A WATCH AND A KEY IN THE SAME POCKET.

The Marquis de Lantenac was not so far away as they believed. But he was none the less in safety, and completely out of their reach. He had followed Halmalo.

The staircase by which they descended in the wake of the other fugitives ended in a narrow vaulted passage close to the ravine and the arches of the bridge. This passage opened into a deep natural fissure which led into the ravine on one side and into the forest on the other. The windings of the path were completely hidden among the thickets. It would have been impossible to discover a man concealed there. A fugitive, once arrived at this point, had only to twist away like a snake. The opening from the staircase into the secret passage was so completely obstructed by brambles that the builders of the passage had not thought it necessary to close the way in any other manner.

The marquis had only to go forward now. He was not placed in any difficulty by lack of a disguise. He had not thrown aside his peasant's dress since coming to Brittany, thinking it more in character.

When Halmalo and the marquis passed out of the passage into the cleft the five other men, Guinoiseau, Hoisnard Branche-d'Or, Brin d'Amour, Chatenay, and the Abbé Turmeau, were no longer there.

"They did not take much time to get away," said Halmalo.

"Follow their example," returned the marquis.

"Must I leave monseigneur?"

"Without doubt. I have already told you so. Each must escape alone to be safe. One man passes where two cannot. We would attract attention if we were together. You would lose my life and I yours."

"Does monseigneur know the district?"

"Yes."

"Does monseigneur still appoint the rendezvous for the Pierre Gauvaine?"

"To-morrow, at noon."

"I shall be there. We shall all be there."

Then Halmalo burst out, "Ah, monseigneur! When I think that we were together in the open sea, that we were alone, that I wanted to kill you, that you were my master, that you could have told me so, and that you did not speak! What a man you are!"

The marquis replied, "England! There is no other source. In fifteen days the English must be in France."

"I have much to tell monseigneur. I obeyed his orders."

"We will talk of all that to-morrow."

"Farewell till to-morrow, monseigneur."

"By the way, are you hungry?"

"Perhaps I am, monseigneur. I was in such a hurry to get here that I am not sure whether I have eaten to-day."

The marquis took a cake of chocolate from his pocket, broke it in half, gave one piece to Halmalo and began to eat the other himself.

"Monseigneur," said Halmalo, "at your right is the ravine, at your left the forest."

"Very good. Leave me—go your own way."

Halmalo obeyed. He hurried off through the darkness. For a few instants the marquis could hear the crackling of the underbrush, then all was still. By that time it would have been impossible to track Halmalo. This forest of the Bréage was the fugitive's auxiliary. He did not flee, he vanished. It was this facility for disappearance which made our armies hesitate before this ever retreating Vendée, so formidable as it fled.

The marquis remained motionless. He was a man who forced himself to feel nothing, but he could not restrain his emotion on breathing this free air after having been so long stifled in blood and carnage. To feel himself completely at liberty after having seemed so utterly lost; after having seen the grave so close, to be swept so suddenly beyond its reach; to come out of death back into life—it was a shock even to a man like Lantenac. Familiar as he was with danger, in spite of all the vicissitudes he had passed through, he could not at first steady his soul under this.

He acknowledged to himself that he was content. But he quickly subdued this emotion, which was more like joy than