

An Episode Under the Terror

By Honore De Balzac

On the twenty-second of January, 1793, about eight o'clock in the evening, an old lady was descending the steep hill which ends in front of the church of St. Laurent, on Faubourg St.-Martin, Paris. It had snowed so hard all day that footfalls could scarcely be heard. The streets were deserted, the not unnatural dread inspired by the silence was intensified by the terror under which France was then groaning; so that the old lady had not as yet met anybody; her sight, which had long been poor, made it impossible for her to see, in the distance, by the dim light of the street lanterns, the few people who were scattered about like ghosts in the broad highway of the faubourg. She went her way courageously, alone, through that solitude, as if her age were a talisman certain to preserve her from all evil.

When she had passed Rue des Morts, she fancied that she could distinguish the firm and heavy step of a man walking behind her. It seemed to her that it was not the first time that she had heard that sound; she was terrified at the thought that she had been followed, and she tried to walk even faster, in order to reach a brightly lighted shop, hoping to be able to set at rest in the light the suspicions which had seized her. As soon as she had stepped beyond the horizontal rays of light that shone from the shop, she suddenly turned her head and caught sight of a human figure in the fog; that indistinct glimpse was enough for her; she staggered for an instant under the weight of the fear which oppressed her, for she no longer doubted that she had been attended by the stranger from the first step that she had taken outside of her home; and the frantic longing to escape a spy gave her additional strength. Incapable of reasoning, she quickened her pace, as if she could possibly elude a man who was surely more active than she. After running for some minutes, she reached a pastry-cook's shop, rushed in, and fell rather than sat down upon a chair in front of the counter.

The instant that she rattled the latch of the door, a young woman, who was engaged in embroidering, raised her eyes, recognized through the glass door the old-fashioned mantle of violet silk in which the old lady was wrapped, and hastily opened a drawer, as if to take out something which she intended to give her. Not only did the young woman's movement and expression denote a wish to be rid of the stranger at once, as if she were one of those people whom one is not glad to see, but she also uttered an impatient exclamation when she found the drawer empty; then, without glancing at the lady, she rushed from behind the counter, toward the back shop, and called her husband, who appeared instantly.

"Where have you put — —?" she asked him with a mysterious expression, indicating the old lady by a glance, and not finishing her sentence.

Although the pastry cook could see only the enormous black silk bonnet, surrounded by violet ribbons, which the stranger wore upon her head, he disappeared, after a glance at his wife, which seemed to say: "Do you suppose that I am going to leave *that* on your counter?"

Amazed at the old lady's silence and immobility, the tradeswoman walked toward her, and as she examined her she was conscious of a feeling of compassion, and perhaps of curiosity as well. Although the stranger's complexion was naturally sallow, like that of a person vowed to secret austerities, it was easy to see that some recent emotion had made her even paler than usual. Her bonnet was so arranged as to conceal her hair, which was presumably whitened by age, for the

neatness of the collar of her dress indicated that she did not wear powder. That lack of adornment imparted to her face a sort of religious asceticism.

Her features were serious and dignified. In the old days the manners and customs of people of quality were so different from those of people belonging to the lower classes, that one could easily distinguish a person of noble birth. So that the young woman was convinced that the stranger was a *ci-devant*, and that she had belonged to the court.

“Madame,” she said involuntarily and with respect, forgetting that that title was proscribed.

The old lady did not reply. She kept her eyes fastened upon the shop window, as if some terrifying object were there apparent.

“What’s the matter with you, citizeness?” asked the proprietor, who reappeared at that moment.

The citizen pastry cook aroused the lady from her reverie by handing her a little pasteboard box covered with blue paper.

“Nothing, nothing, my friends,” she replied in a mild voice.

She looked up at the pastry cook as if to bestow a grateful glance upon him; but when she saw a red cap on his head she uttered an exclamation:

“Ah! you have betrayed me!”

The young woman and her husband replied by a gesture of horror which made the stranger blush, perhaps for having suspected them, perhaps with pleasure.

“Excuse me,” she said with childlike gentleness.

Then, taking a louis d’or from her pocket, she handed it to the pastry cook.

“This is the price agreed upon,” she added.

There is a sort of poverty which the poor are quick to divine. The pastry cook and his wife looked at each other and then at the old lady, exchanging the same thought. That louis d’or was evidently the last. The lady’s hands trembled as she held out that coin, at which she gazed sorrowfully but without avarice; but she seemed to realize the full extent of the sacrifice. Fasting and poverty were written upon that face, in lines as legible as those of fear and ascetic habits. There were vestiges of past splendor in her clothes: they were worn silk; a neat though old-fashioned cloak, and lace carefully mended—in a word, the rags and tatters of opulence. The trades people, wavering between pity and self-interest, began by relieving their conscience in words:

“But, citizeness, you seem very weak—”

“Would madame like something to refresh herself?” asked the woman, cutting her husband short.

“We have some very good soup,” added the pastry cook.

“It’s so cold! perhaps madame was chilled by her walk? But you can rest here and warm yourself a little.”

“The devil is not as black as he is painted,” cried the pastry cook.

Won by the kind tone of the charitable shopkeeper’s words, the lady admitted that she had been followed by a stranger, and that she was afraid to return home alone.

“Is that all?” replied the man with the red cap. “Wait for me, citizeness.”

He gave the louis to his wife; then, impelled by that species of gratitude which finds its way into the heart of a tradesman when he receives an extravagant price for goods of moderate value, he went to don his national guardsman’s uniform, took his hat, thrust his sabre into his belt, and reappeared under arms. But his wife had had time to reflect; and, as in many other hearts, reflection closed the open hand of kindness. Perturbed in mind, and fearing that her husband

might become involved in some dangerous affair, the pastry cook's wife tried to stop him by pulling the skirt of his coat; but, obeying a charitable impulse, the good man at once offered to escort the old lady.

"It seems that the man who frightened the citizeness is still prowling about the shop," said the young woman, nervously.

"I am afraid so," the lady artlessly replied.

"Suppose he should be a spy? Suppose it was a conspiracy? Don't go with her, and take back the box."

These words, whispered in the pastry cook's ear by his wife, congealed the impromptu courage which had moved him.

"I'll just go out and say two words to him, and rid you of him in short order!" cried the man, opening the door and rushing out.

The old lady, passive as a child and almost dazed, resumed her seat. The worthy tradesman soon reappeared; his face, which was naturally red, and moreover was flushed by the heat of his ovens, had suddenly become livid; he was so terribly frightened that his legs trembled and his eyes resembled a drunken man's.

"Do you mean to have our heads cut off, you miserable aristocrat?" he cried angrily. "Just let us see your heels; don't ever show your face here again, and don't count on me to supply you with materials for a conspiracy!"

As he spoke, the pastry cook tried to take from the old lady the small box, which she had put in one of her pockets. But no sooner did the man's insolent hands touch her clothing, than the stranger, preferring to brave the dangers of the street with no other defender than God, rather than to lose what she had purchased, recovered the agility of her youth; she rushed to the door, opened it abruptly, and vanished from the eyes of the dazed and trembling woman and her husband.

As soon as the stranger was out of doors, she walked rapidly away; but her strength failed her, for she heard the snow creak beneath the heavy step of the spy, by whom she was pitilessly followed. She was obliged to stop, and he stopped; she dared neither speak to him nor look at him, whether as a result of the fear which gripped her heart, or from lack of intelligence. She continued her way, walking slowly; thereupon the man slackened his pace, so as to remain at a distance, which enabled him to keep his eye upon her. He seemed to be the very shadow of the old woman. The clock was striking nine when the silent couple again passed the church of St. Laurent. It is in the nature of all souls, even the weakest, that a feeling of tranquility should succeed violent agitation; for, although our feelings are manifold, our bodily powers are limited. And so the stranger, meeting with no injury at the hands of her supposed persecutor, chose to discover in him a secret friend, zealous to protect her; she recalled all the circumstances which had attended the unknown's appearance, as if to find plausible arguments in favor of that comforting opinion; and she took pleasure in detecting good rather than evil intentions in his behavior.

Forgetting the terror which that man had inspired in the pastry cook, she walked with an assured step into the upper parts of Faubourg St.-Martin. After half an hour she reached a house near the junction of the main street of the faubourg and that which leads to the Barrière de Pantin. Even to-day, that spot is one of the most solitary in all Paris. The north wind, blowing over the Buttes Chaumont and from Belleville, whistled through the houses, or rather the hovels, scattered about in that almost uninhabited valley, where the dividing walls are built of earth and bones. That desolate spot seemed to be the natural refuge of poverty and despair. The man who

had persisted in following the wretched creature who was bold enough to walk through those silent streets at night, seemed impressed by the spectacle presented to his eyes. He became thoughtful, and stood in evident hesitation, in the dim light of a lantern whose feeble rays barely pierced the mist.

Fear gave eyes to the old woman, who fancied that she could detect something sinister in the stranger's features; her former terror reawoke, and, taking advantage of the uncertainty which had checked his advance, to glide in the darkness toward the door of the solitary house, she pressed a spring and disappeared with magical rapidity.

The stranger, motionless as a statue, gazed at that house, which was in some measure the type of the wretched dwellings of the faubourg. That unstable hovel, built of rough stones, was covered with a layer of yellow plaster, so cracked that it seemed in danger of falling before the slightest gust of wind. The roof, of dark brown tiles covered with moss, had sunk in several places so that it seemed likely to give way under the weight of the snow. On each floor there were three windows, the sashes of which, rotted by the dampness and shrunk by the heat of the sun, made it clear that the cold air must find an easy entrance into the rooms. That isolated house resembled an old tower which time had forgotten to destroy. A faint light shone through the irregular windows of the attic at the top of the tumble-down structure, while all the rest of the house was in absolute darkness. The old woman climbed, not without difficulty, the steep, rough stair-case, which was supplied with a rope instead of a baluster; she knocked softly at the door of the apartment in the attic, and dropped hastily upon a chair which an old man offered her.

"Hide! hide yourself!" she said. "Although we go out very seldom, everything that we do is known; our footsteps are watched."

"What is there new, pray?" asked another old woman who was seated by the fire.

"The man who was prowling around the house last night followed me to-night."

At these words the three occupants of the attic looked at each other with indications of profound terror on their faces. The old man was the least moved of the three, perhaps because he was in the greatest danger. Under the weight of a great calamity, or under the yoke of persecution, a courageous man begins, so to speak, by preparing to sacrifice himself; he looks upon his days simply as so many victories over destiny. The eyes of the two women, fastened upon this old man, made it easy to divine that he was the sole object of their intense anxiety.

"Why despair of God, my sisters?" he said in a low but powerful voice. "We sang His praises amid the cries of the assassins and the shrieks of the dying at the Carmelite convent. If He decreed that I should be saved from that butchery, it was doubtless because He reserved me for another destiny, which I must accept without a murmur. God protects His people, He may dispose of them at His pleasure. It is of you, not of me, we must think."

"No," said one of the old women; "what are our lives compared with that of a priest?"

"When once I found myself outside of the Abbey of Chelles, I looked upon myself as dead," said that one of the two women who had not gone out.

"Here," replied the other, handing the priest the little box, "here are the wafers.—But," she cried, "I hear some one coming up the stairs."

Thereupon all three listened intently. The noise ceased.

"Do not be alarmed," said the priest, "if some one should try to enter. A person upon whose fidelity we can rely has undoubtedly taken all necessary measures to cross the frontier, and will come here to get the letters which I have written to the Duc de Langeais and to the Marquis de Beauséant, asking them to consider the means of rescuing you from this terrible country, from the death or destitution which awaits you here."

“Then you do not mean to go with us?” cried the two nuns gently, with manifestations of despair.

“My place is where there are victims,” said the priest simply.

They held their peace and gazed at their companion with devout admiration.

“Sister Martha,” he said, addressing the nun who had gone to buy the wafers, “the messenger I speak of will reply ‘*Fiat voluntas*’ to the word ‘*Hosanna*.’ ”

“There is some one on the stairs!” cried the other nun, opening the door of a hiding place under the lower part of the roof.

This time they could plainly hear, amid the profound silence, the footsteps of a man upon the stairs, which were covered with ridges of hardened mud. The priest crept with difficulty into a sort of cupboard, and the nuns threw over him a few pieces of apparel.

“You may close the door, Sister Agatha,” he said in a muffled voice.

The priest was hardly hidden when three taps on the door caused a shock to the two holy women, who consulted each other with their eyes, afraid to utter a single word. Each of them seemed to be about sixty years old. Secluded from the world for forty years, they were like plants habituated to the air of a hothouse, which wilt if they are taken from it. Accustomed to the life of a convent, they were unable to imagine any other life. One morning, their gratings having been shattered, they shuddered to find themselves free. One can readily imagine the species of imbecility which the events of the Revolution had produced in their innocent minds. Incapable of reconciling their conventual ideas with the difficult problems of life, and not even understanding their situation, they resembled children who had been zealously cared for hitherto, and who, deserted by their motherly protector, prayed instead of weeping. And so, in face of the danger which they apprehended at that moment, they remained mute and passive, having no conception of any other defense than Christian resignation.

The man who desired to enter interpreted that silence to suit himself; he opened the door and appeared abruptly before them. The two nuns shuddered as they recognized the man who had been prowling about their house, making inquiries about them, for some time. They did not move, but gazed at him with anxious curiosity, after the manner of the children of savage tribes, who examine strangers in silence. He was tall and stout; but there was nothing in his manner, or appearance, to indicate an evil-minded man. He imitated the immobility of the nuns, and moved his eyes slowly about the room in which he stood.

Two straw mats, laid upon boards, served the two nuns as beds. There was a single table in the center of the room, and upon it a copper candlestick, a few plates, three knives, and a round loaf. The fire on the hearth was very low, and a few sticks of wood piled in a corner testified to the poverty of the two occupants. The walls, covered with an ancient layer of paint, demonstrated the wretched condition of the roof, for stains like brown threads marked the intrusion of the rain-water. A relic, rescued doubtless during the pillage of the Abbey of Chelles, adorned the mantel. Three chairs, two chests, and a wretched commode completed the furniture of the room. A door beside the chimney indicated the existence of an inner chamber.

The inventory of the cell was speedily made by the person who had thrust himself into the bosom of that group under such alarming auspices. A sentiment of compassion was expressed upon his face, and he cast a kindly glance upon the two women, but seemed at least as embarrassed as they. The strange silence preserved by all three lasted but a short time, for the stranger at last divined the mental weakness and the inexperience of the two poor creatures, and he said to them in a voice which he tried to soften:

“I do not come here as an enemy, citizenesses.”

He paused, and then resumed: "My sisters, if any misfortune should happen to you, be sure that I have had no part in it. I have a favor to ask of you."

They still remained silent.

"If I annoy you, if I embarrass you, tell me so frankly, and I will go; but understand that I am entirely devoted to you; that if there is any service that I can do you, you may employ me without fear; that I alone perhaps am above the law, as there is no longer a king."

There was such a ring of truth in these words that Sister Agatha, the one of the two nuns who belonged to the family of Langeais, and whose manners seemed to indicate that she had formerly been familiar with magnificent festivities and had breathed the air of courts, instantly pointed to one of the chairs, as if to request their guest to be seated. The stranger manifested a sort of mixture of pleasure and melancholy when he saw that gesture; and he waited until the two venerable women were seated, before seating himself.

"You have given shelter," he continued, "to a venerable unsworn priest, who miraculously escaped the massacre at the Carmelite convent."

"*Hosanna!*" said Sister Agatha, interrupting the stranger, and gazing at him with anxious interest.

"I don't think that that is his name," he replied.

"But, monsieur," said Sister Martha hastily, "we haven't any priest here, and—"

"In that case you must be more careful and more prudent," retorted the stranger gently, reaching to the table and taking up a breviary. "I do not believe that you know Latin, and—"

He did not continue, for the extraordinary emotion depicted on the faces of the unhappy nuns made him feel that he had gone too far; they were trembling, and their eyes were filled with tears.

"Do not be alarmed," he said to them cheerily; "I know the name of your guest and your names; and three days ago I was informed of your destination and of your devotion to the venerable Abbé of —"

"Hush!" said Sister Agatha innocently, putting her finger her lips.

"You see, my sisters, that if I had formed the detestable plan of betraying you, I might already have done it more than once."

When he heard these words, the priest emerged from his prison and appeared in the middle of the room.

"I cannot believe, monsieur," he said to the stranger, "that you are one of our persecutors, and I trust you. What do you want with me?"

The priest's saintlike confidence, the nobility of soul that shone in all his features, would have disarmed an assassin. The mysterious personage who had enlivened that scene of destitution and resignation gazed for a moment at the group formed by those three; then he assumed a confidential tone, and addressed the priest in these words:

"Father, I have come to implore you to celebrate a mortuary mass for the repose of the soul of a—a consecrated person, whose body, however, will never lie in holy ground."

The priest involuntarily shuddered. The two nuns, not understanding as yet to whom the stranger referred, stood with necks outstretched, and faces turned toward the two men, in an attitude of intense curiosity. The priest scrutinized the stranger; unfeigned anxiety was depicted upon his face, and his eyes expressed the most ardent entreaty.

"Very well," replied the priest; "to-night, at midnight, return here, and I shall be ready to celebrate the only funeral service which we can offer in expiation of the crime to which you refer."

The stranger started; but a feeling of satisfaction, at once grateful and solemn, seemed to triumph over some secret grief. Having respectfully saluted the priest and the two holy women, he disappeared, manifesting a sort of mute gratitude which was understood by those three noble hearts. About two hours after this scene the stranger returned, knocked softly at the attic door, and was admitted by Mademoiselle de Beauséant, who escorted him into the second room of that humble lodging, where everything had been prepared for the ceremony.

Between two flues of the chimney, the nuns had placed the old commode, whose antiquated shape was covered by a magnificent altar-cloth of green silk. A large crucifix of ebony and ivory, fastened upon the discolored wall, heightened the effect of its bareness and inevitably attracted the eye. Four slender little tapers, which the sisters had succeeded in standing upon that improvised altar by fixing them in sealing wax, cast a pale light, which the wall reflected dimly. That faint gleam barely lighted the rest of the room; but, in that it confined its illumination to the consecrated objects, it resembled a ray of light from heaven upon that undecorated altar. The floor was damp. The attic roof, which sloped sharply on both sides, had various cracks through which a biting wind blew. Nothing less stately could be imagined, and yet perhaps there could be nothing more solemn than this lugubrious ceremony.

A silence so profound that it would have enabled them to hear the faintest sound on distant thoroughfares, diffused a sort of somber majesty over that nocturnal scene. In short, the grandeur of the occasion contrasted so strikingly with the poverty of the surroundings that the result was a sensation of religious awe. The two old nuns, kneeling on the damp floor on either side of the altar, heedless of the deadly moisture, prayed in unison with the priest, who, clad in his pontifical vestments, prepared a golden chalice adorned with precious stones, a consecrated vessel rescued doubtless from the plunderers of the Abbey of Chelles. Beside that pyx, an object of regal magnificence, were the water and wine destined for the sacrament, in two glasses hardly worthy of the lowest tavern. In default of a missal, the priest had placed his breviary on a corner of the altar. A common plate was provided for the washing of those innocent hands, pure of bloodshed. All was majestic, and yet paltry; poor, but noble; profane and holy in one. The stranger knelt piously between the two nuns. But suddenly, when he noticed a band of crape on the chalice and on the crucifix—for, having nothing to indicate the purpose of that mortuary mass, the priest had draped God Himself in mourning—he was assailed by such an overpowering memory that drops of sweat gathered upon his broad forehead. The four silent actors in that scene gazed at each other mysteriously; then their hearts, acting upon one another, communicated their sentiments to each other and became blended into the one emotion of religious pity; it was as if their thoughts had evoked the royal martyr whose remains had been consumed by quicklime, but whose shade stood before them in all its royal majesty. They celebrated an *obit* without the body of the deceased. Beneath those disjointed tiles and laths, four Christians interceded with God for a king of France, and performed his obsequies without a bier. It was the purest of all possible devotions, an amazing act of fidelity performed without one thought of self. Doubtless, in the eyes of God, it was like the glass of water which is equal to the greatest virtues. The whole of monarchy was there, in the prayers of a priest and of two poor nuns; but perhaps the Revolution, too, was represented, by that man whose face betrayed too much remorse not to cause a belief that he was acting in obedience to an impulse of unbounded repentance.

Instead of saying the Latin words: "*Introibo ad altare Dei,*" etc., the priest, obeying a divine inspiration, looked at the three persons who represented Christian France, and said to them, in words which effaced the poverty of that wretched place:

"We are about to enter into God's sanctuary!"

At these words, uttered with most impressive unction, a thrill of holy awe seized the stranger and the two nuns. Not beneath the arches of St. Peter's at Rome could God have appeared with more majesty than He then appeared in that abode of poverty, before the eyes of those Christians; so true it is that between man and Him every intermediary seems useless, and that He derives His grandeur from Himself alone. The stranger's fervor was genuine, so that the sentiment which joined the prayers of those four servants of God and the king was unanimous. The sacred words rang out like celestial music amid the silence. There was a moment when tears choked the stranger's voice; it was during the paternoster. The priest added to it this Latin prayer, which the stranger evidently understood: "*Et remitte scelus regicidis sicut Ludovicus eis remisit semetipse!* (And forgive the regicides even as Louis XVI himself forgave them!)"

The two nuns saw two great tears leave a moist trace on the manly cheeks of the stranger, and fall to the floor. The Office of the Dead was recited. The *Domine salvum fac regem*, chanted in a low voice, touched the hearts of those faithful royalists, who reflected that the infant king, for whom they were praying to the Most High at that moment, was a prisoner in the hands of his enemies. The stranger shuddered at the thought that there might still be committed a new crime, in which he would doubtless be compelled to take part. When the service was at an end, the priest motioned to the two nuns to withdraw. As soon as he was alone with the stranger, he walked toward him with a mild and melancholy expression, and said to him in a fatherly tone:

"My son, if you have dipped your hands in the blood of the martyr king, confess to me. There is no sin which, in God's eyes, may not be effaced by repentance so touching and so sincere as yours seems to be."

At the first words of the priest, the stranger made an involuntary gesture of terror; but his face resumed its tranquility, and he met the astonished priest's eye with calm assurance.

"Father," he said to him in a perceptibly tremulous voice, "no one is more innocent than I of bloodshed."

"I am bound to believe you," said the priest.

There was a pause, during which he examined the penitent more closely; then, persisting in taking him for one of those timid members of the Convention who sacrificed a consecrated and inviolate head in order to preserve their own, he continued in a solemn voice:

"Remember, my son, that to be absolved from that great crime, it is not enough not to have actually taken part in it. Those who, when they might have defended their king, left their swords in the scabbard, will have a very heavy account to settle with the King of Heaven. Ah, yes!" added the old priest, shaking his head with a most expressive movement, "yes, very heavy! for, by remaining idle, they became the involuntary accomplices of that ghastly crime."

"Do you think," inquired the thunderstruck stranger, "that indirect participation will be punished? Is the soldier guilty who is ordered to join the shooting squad?"

The priest hesitated. Pleased with the dilemma in which he had placed that puritan of royalty by planting him between the dogma of passive obedience, which, according to the partisans of monarchy, should be predominant in all military codes, and the no less important dogma which sanctifies the respect due to the person of kings, the stranger was too quick to see in the priest's hesitation a favorable solution of the doubts by which he seemed to be perturbed. Then, in order to give the venerable Jansenist no longer time to reflect, he said to him:

"I should blush to offer you any sort of compensation for the funeral service which you have just performed for the repose of the king's soul and for the relief of my conscience. A thing of inestimable value can be paid for only by an offering which is beyond all price. Deign, therefore,

to accept, monsieur, the gift that I offer you of a blessed relic. The day will come, perhaps, when you will realize its value.”

As he said this, the stranger handed the ecclesiastic a small box of light weight; the priest took it involuntarily, so to speak, for the solemnity of the man's words, the tone in which he said them, and the respect with which he handled the box, had surprised him beyond measure. They returned then to the room where the two nuns were awaiting them.

“You are,” said the stranger, “in a house whose owner, Mucius Scævola, the plasterer who lives on the first floor, is famous throughout the section for his patriotism; but he is secretly attached to the Bourbons. He used to be a huntsman in the service of Monseigneur le Prince de Conti, and he owes his fortune to him. If you do not go out of his house, you are safer than in any place in France. Stay here. Devout hearts will attend to your necessities, and you may await without danger less evil times. A year hence, on the twenty-first of January (as he mentioned the date he could not restrain an involuntary gesture), if you continue to occupy this dismal apartment, I will return to celebrate again a mass of expiation.”

He said no more. He bowed to the silent occupants of the attic, cast a last glance upon the evidences of their poverty, and went away.

To the two innocent nuns, such an adventure had all the interest of a romance; and so, as soon as the venerable abbé informed them of the mysterious gift so solemnly bestowed upon him by that man, the box was placed upon the table and the three anxious faces, dimly lighted by the candle, betrayed an indescribable curiosity. Mademoiselle de Langeais opened the box, and found therein a handkerchief of finest linen, drenched with perspiration; and, on unfolding it, they saw stains.

“It is blood!” said the priest.

“It is marked with the royal crown!” cried the other nun. The two sisters dropped the precious relic with a gesture of horror. To those two ingenuous souls the mystery in which the stranger was enveloped became altogether inexplicable; and as for the priest, from that day he did not even seek an explanation of it.

The three prisoners soon perceived that a powerful arm was stretched over them, in spite of the Terror.

In the first place, they received a supply of wood and provisions; then the two nuns realized that a woman must be associated with their protector, when some one sent them linen and clothing which enabled them to go out without being noticed by reason of the aristocratic cut of the garments which they had been forced to retain; and lastly, Mucius Scævola gave them two cards of citizenship. It often happened that information essential to the priest's safety reached him by devious ways; and he found this advice so opportune that it could have been given only by somebody initiated in state secrets.

Despite the famine which prevailed in Paris, the outcasts found at the door of their lodging rations of white bread, which was brought there regularly by invisible hands; they believed, however, that they could identify Mucius Scævola as the mysterious agent of this beneficence, which was always as ingenious as it was timely. The noble occupants of the attic could not doubt that their protector was the person who had come to ask the priest to celebrate the mortuary mass on the evening of the twenty-first of January, 1793; so that he became the object of a peculiar sort of worship to those three beings, who had no hope except in him, and lived only through him. They had added special prayers for him to their daily devotions; night and morning those pious souls offered up entreaties for his happiness, for his prosperity, for his salvation, and prayed to God to rescue him from all snares, to deliver him from his enemies, and to grant him a

long and peaceful life. Their gratitude, being renewed every day, so to speak, was necessarily accompanied by a feeling of curiosity which became more intense from day to day. The circumstances which had attended the appearance of the stranger were the subject of their conversation; they formed innumerable conjectures about him, and the diversion which their preoccupation with him afforded them was a benefaction of a new sort. They were fully determined not to allow the stranger to evade their friendship when he should return, according to his promise, to commemorate the sad anniversary of the death of Louis XVI.

That night, so impatiently awaited, came at last. At midnight they heard the sound of the stranger's heavy steps on the old, wooden staircase; the room had been arrayed to receive him, the altar was in place. This time the sisters opened the door beforehand and went forth eagerly to light the staircase. Mademoiselle de Langeais even went down a few steps in order to see her benefactor the sooner.

"Come," she said to him in a tremulous and affectionate voice, "come, we are waiting for you."

The man raised his head, cast a gloomy glance upon the nun, and made no reply. She felt as if a garment of ice had fallen upon her, and she said no more; at sight of him, gratitude and curiosity expired in all their hearts. He may have been less cold, less silent, less awe-inspiring than he appeared to those poor souls, whom the exaltation of their feeling inclined to an outpouring of friendliness. The three unhappy prisoners, understanding that he proposed to remain a stranger to them, resigned themselves to it. The priest fancied that he detected upon the stranger's lips a smile that was instantly repressed when he saw the preparations that had been made to receive him. He heard the mass and prayed; but he disappeared after responding by a few words of negative courtesy to Mademoiselle de Langeais's invitation to share the little supper they had prepared.

After the ninth of Thermidor the nuns were able to go about Paris without danger. The old priest's first errand was to a perfumer's shop, at the sign of *La Reine des Fleurs*, kept by Citizen and Citizeness Ragon, formerly perfumers to the Court, who had remained true to the royal family, and of whose services the Vendéans availed themselves to correspond with the princes and the royalist committee in Paris. The abbé, dressed according to the style of the period, was standing on the doorstep of that shop, between St. Roch and Rue des Frondeurs, when a crowd which filled Rue St. Honoré prevented him from going out.

"What is it?" he asked Madame Ragon.

"Oh! it's nothing," she replied; "just the tumbril and the executioner going to the Place Louis XV. Ah! we saw him very often last year; but to-day, four days after the anniversary of the twenty-first of January, we can look at that horrible procession without distress."

"Why so?" said the abbé; "what you say is not Christian."

"Why, it's the execution of Robespierre's accomplices; they defended themselves as long as they could, but they're going now themselves where they have sent so many innocent people."

The crowd passed like a flood. Abbé de Marolles, yielding to an impulse of curiosity, saw over the sea of heads, standing on the tumbril, the man who, three days before, had listened to the mass.

"Who is that," he said, "that man who—"

"That is the headsman," replied Monsieur Ragon, giving the executioner his monarchical name.

"My dear, my dear," cried Madame Ragon, "monsieur. l'abbé is fainting!"

And the old woman seized a vial of salts, in order to bring the old priest to himself.

“Doubtless,” said the old priest, “he gave me the handkerchief with which the king wiped his brow when he went to his martyrdom! Poor man! That steel knife had a heart, when all France had none!”

The perfumers thought that the unfortunate priest was delirious.