An Episode Under the Terror

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by Honore de Balzac

Translated by Clara Bell and others

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Etext prepared by Dagny, dagnyj@hotmail.com and Bonnie Sala

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AN EPISODE UNDER THE TERROR BY HONORE DE BALZAC

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DEDICATION

To Monsieur Guyonnet-Merville.

Is it not a necessity to explain to a public curious to know everything, how I came to be sufficiently learned in the law to carry on the business of my little world? And in so doing, am I not bound to put on record the memory of the amiable and intelligent man who, meeting the Scribe (another clerk-amateur) at a ball, said, “Just give the office a turn; there is work for you there, I assure you”? But do you need this public testimony to feel assured of the affection of the writer?

DE BALZAC.

AN EPISODE UNDER THE TERROR

On the 22nd of January, 1793, towards eight o'clock in the evening, an old lady came down the steep street that comes to an end opposite the Church of Saint Laurent in the Faubourg Saint Martin. It had snowed so heavily all day long that the lady's footsteps were scarcely audible; the streets were deserted, and a feeling of dread, not unnatural amid the silence, was further increased by the whole extent of the Terror beneath which France was groaning in those days; what was more, the old lady so far had met no one by the way. Her sight had long been failing, so that the few foot passengers dispersed like shadows in the distance over the wide thoroughfare through the faubourg, were quite invisible to her by the light of the lanterns.

She had passed the end of the Rue des Morts, when she fancied that she could hear the firm, heavy tread of a man walking behind her. Then it seemed to her that she had heard that sound before, and dismayed by the idea of being followed, she tried to walk faster toward a brightly lit shop window, in the hope of verifying the suspicions which had taken hold of her mind.

So soon as she stood in the shaft of light that streamed out across the road, she turned her head suddenly, and caught sight of a human figure looming through the fog. The dim vision was enough for her. For one moment she reeled beneath an overpowering weight of dread, for she could not doubt any longer that the man had followed her the whole way from her own door; then the desire to escape from the spy gave her strength. Unable to think clearly, she walked twice as fast as before, as if it were possible to escape from a man who of course could move much faster; and for some minutes she fled on, till, reaching a pastry-cook's shop, she entered and sank rather than sat down upon a chair by the counter.

A young woman busy with embroidery looked up from her work at the rattling of the door-latch, and looked out through the square window-panes. She seemed to recognize the old-fashioned violet silk mantle, for she went at once to a drawer as if in search of something put aside for the newcomer. Not only did this movement and the expression of the woman's face show a very evident desire to be rid as soon as possible of an unwelcome visitor, but she even permitted herself an impatient exclamation when the drawer proved to be empty. Without

looking at the lady, she hurried from her desk into the back shop and called to her husband, who appeared at once.

“Wherever have you put?–-” she began mysteriously, glancing at the customer by way of finishing her question.

The pastry-cook could only see the old lady’s head-dress, a huge black silk bonnet with knots of violet ribbon round it, but he looked at his wife as if to say, “Did you think I should leave such a thing as that lying about in your drawer?” and then vanished.

The old lady kept so still and silent that the shopkeeper’s wife was surprised. She went back to her, and on a nearer view a sudden impulse of pity, blended perhaps with curiosity, got the better of her. The old lady’s face was naturally pale; she looked as though she secretly practised austerities; but it was easy to see that she was paler than usual from recent agitation of some kind. Her head-dress was so arranged as to almost hide hair that was white, no doubt with age, for there was not a trace of powder on the collar of her dress. The extreme plainness of her dress lent an air of austerity to her face, and her features were proud and grave. The manners and habits of people of condition were so different from those of other classes in former times that a noble was easily known, and the shopkeeper’s wife felt persuaded that her customer was a ci-devant, and that she had been about the Court.

“Madame,” she began with involuntary respect, forgetting that the title was proscribed.

But the old lady made no answer. She was staring fixedly at the shop windows as though some dreadful thing had taken shape against the panes. The pastry-cook came back at that moment, and drew the lady from her musings, by holding out a little cardboard box wrapped in blue paper.

“What is the matter, citoyenne?” he asked.

“Nothing, nothing, my friends,” she answered, in a gentle voice. She looked up at the man as she spoke, as if to thank him by a glance; but she saw the red cap on his head, and a cry broke from her. “Ah! YOU have betrayed me!”

The man and his young wife replied by an indignant gesture, that brought the color to the old lady’s face; perhaps she felt relief, perhaps she blushed for her

suspicions.

“Forgive me!” she said, with a childlike sweetness in her tones. Then, drawing a gold louis from her pocket, she held it out to the pastry-cook. “That is the price agreed upon,” she added.

There is a kind of want that is felt instinctively by those who know want. The man and his wife looked at one another, then at the elderly woman before them, and read the same thoughts in each other’s eyes. That bit of gold was so plainly the last. Her hands shook a little as she held it out, looking at it sadly but ungrudgingly, as one who knows the full extent of the sacrifice. Hunger and penury had carved lines as easy to read in her face as the traces of asceticism and fear. There were vestiges of bygone splendor in her clothes. She was dressed in threadbare silk, a neat but well-worn mantle, and daintily mended lace,—in the rags of former grandeur, in short. The shopkeeper and his wife, drawn two ways by pity and self-interest, began by lulling their consciences with words.

“You seem very poorly, citoyenne–-”

“Perhaps madame might like to take something,” the wife broke in.

“We have some very nice broth,” added the pastry-cook.

“And it is so cold,” continued his wife; “perhaps you have caught a chill, madame, on your way here. But you can rest and warm yourself a bit.”

“We are not so black as the devil!” cried the man.

The kindly intention in the words and tones of the charitable couple won the old lady’s confidence. She said that a strange man had been following her, and she was afraid to go home alone.

“Is that all!” returned he of the red bonnet; “wait for me, citoyenne.”

He handed the gold coin to his wife, and then went out to put on his National Guard’s uniform, impelled thereto by the idea of making some adequate return for the money; an idea that sometimes slips into a tradesman’s head when he has been prodigiously overpaid for goods of no great value. He took up his cap, buckled on his sabre, and came out in full dress. But his wife had had time to reflect, and reflection, as not unfrequently happens, closed the hand that kindly

intentions had opened. Feeling frightened and uneasy lest her husband might be drawn into something unpleasant, she tried to catch at the skirt of his coat, to hold him back, but he, good soul, obeying his charitable first thought, brought out his offer to see the lady home, before his wife could stop him.

“The man of whom the citoyenne is afraid is still prowling about the shop, it seems,” she said sharply.

“I am afraid so,” said the lady innocently.

“How if it is a spy? … a plot? … Don’t go. And take the box away from her–-”

The words whispered in the pastry-cook’s ear cooled his hot fit of courage down to zero.

“Oh! I will just go out and say a word or two. I will rid you of him soon enough,” he exclaimed, as he bounced out of the shop.

The old lady meanwhile, passive as a child and almost dazed, sat down on her chair again. But the honest pastry-cook came back directly. A countenance red enough to begin with, and further flushed by the bake-house fire, was suddenly blanched; such terror perturbed him that he reeled as he walked, and stared about him like a drunken man.

“Miserable aristocrat! Do you want to have our heads cut off?” he shouted furiously. “You just take to your heels and never show yourself here again. Don’t come to me for materials for your plots.”

He tried, as he spoke, to take away the little box which she had slipped into one of her pockets. But at the touch of a profane hand on her clothes, the stranger recovered youth and activity for a moment, preferring to face the dangers of the street with no protector save God, to the loss of the thing she had just paid for. She sprang to the door, flung it open, and disappeared, leaving the husband and wife dumfounded and quaking with fright.

Once outside in the street, she started away at a quick walk; but her strength soon failed her. She heard the sound of the snow crunching under a heavy step, and knew that the pitiless spy was on her track. She was obliged to stop. He stopped likewise. From sheer terror, or lack of intelligence, she did not dare to speak or to look at him. She went slowly on; the man slackened his pace and fell

behind so that he could still keep her in sight. He might have been her very shadow.

Nine o’clock struck as the silent man and woman passed again by the Church of Saint Laurent. It is in the nature of things that calm must succeed to violent agitation, even in the weakest soul; for if feeling is infinite, our capacity to feel is limited. So, as the stranger lady met with no harm from her supposed persecutor, she tried to look upon him as an unknown friend anxious to protect her. She thought of all the circumstances in which the stranger had appeared, and put them together, as if to find some ground for this comforting theory, and felt inclined to credit him with good intentions rather than bad.

Forgetting the fright that he had given the pastry-cook, she walked on with a firmer step through the upper end of the Faubourg Saint Martin; and another half-hour’s walk brought her to a house at the corner where the road to the Barriere de Pantin turns off from the main thoroughfare. Even at this day, the place is one of the least frequented parts of Paris. The north wind sweeps over the Buttes-Chaumont and Belleville, and whistles through the houses (the hovels rather), scattered over an almost uninhabited lowlying waste, where the fences are heaps of earth and bones. It was a desolate-looking place, a fitting refuge for despair and misery.

The sight of it appeared to make an impression upon the relentless pursuer of a poor creature so daring as to walk alone at night through the silent streets. He stood in thought, and seemed by his attitude to hesitate. She could see him dimly now, under the street lamp that sent a faint, flickering light through the fog. Fear gave her eyes. She saw, or thought she saw, something sinister about the stranger’s features. Her old terrors awoke; she took advantage of a kind of hesitation on his part, slipped through the shadows to the door of the solitary house, pressed a spring, and vanished swiftly as a phantom.

For awhile the stranger stood motionless, gazing up at the house. It was in some sort a type of the wretched dwellings in the suburb; a tumble-down hovel, built of rough stones, daubed over with a coat of yellowish stucco, and so riven with great cracks that there seemed to be danger lest the slightest puff of wind might blow it down. The roof, covered with brown moss-grown tiles, had given way in several places, and looked as though it might break down altogether under the weight of the snow. The frames of the three windows on each story were rotten with damp and warped by the sun; evidently the cold must find its way inside.

The house standing thus quite by itself looked like some old tower that Time had forgotten to destroy. A faint light shone from the attic windows pierced at irregular distances in the roof; otherwise the whole building was in total darkness.

Meanwhile the old lady climbed not without difficulty up the rough, clumsily built staircase, with a rope by way of a hand-rail. At the door of the lodging in the attic she stopped and tapped mysteriously; an old man brought forward a chair for her. She dropped into it at once.

“Hide! hide!” she exclaimed, looking up at him. “Seldom as we leave the house, everything that we do is known, and every step is watched–-”

“What is it now?” asked another elderly woman, sitting by the fire.

“The man that has been prowling about the house yesterday and to-day, followed me to-night–-”

At those words all three dwellers in the wretched den looked in each other’s faces and did not try to dissimulate the profound dread that they felt. The old priest was the least overcome, probably because he ran the greatest danger. If a brave man is weighed down by great calamities or the yoke of persecution, he begins, as it were, by making the sacrifice of himself; and thereafter every day of his life becomes one more victory snatched from fate. But from the way in which the women looked at him it was easy to see that their intense anxiety was on his account.

“Why should our faith in God fail us, my sisters?” he said, in low but fervent tones. “We sang His praises through the shrieks of murderers and their victims at the Carmelites. If it was His will that I should come alive out of that butchery, it was, no doubt, because I was reserved for some fate which I am bound to endure without murmuring. God will protect His own; He can do with them according to His will. It is for you, not for me that we must think.”

“No,” answered one of the women. “What is our life compared to a priest’s life?”

“Once outside the Abbaye de Chelles, I look upon myself as dead,” added the nun who had not left the house, while the Sister that had just returned held out the little box to the priest.

“Here are the wafers … but I can hear some one coming up the stairs.”

At this, the three began to listen. The sound ceased.

“Do not be alarmed if somebody tries to come in,” said the priest. “Somebody on whom we could depend was to make all necessary arrangements for crossing the frontier. He is to come for the letters that I have written to the Duc de Langeais and the Marquis de Beauseant, asking them to find some way of taking you out of this dreadful country, and away from the death or the misery that waits for you here.”

“But are you not going to follow us?” the nuns cried under their breath, almost despairingly.

“My post is here where the sufferers are,” the priest said simply, and the women said no more, but looked at their guest in reverent admiration. He turned to the nun with the wafers.

“Sister Marthe,” he said, “the messenger will say Fiat Voluntas in answer to the word Hosanna.”

“There is some one on the stairs!” cried the other nun, opening a hiding-place contrived in the roof.

This time it was easy to hear, amid the deepest silence, a sound echoing up the staircase; it was a man’s tread on the steps covered with dried lumps of mud. With some difficulty the priest slipped into a kind of cupboard, and the nun flung some clothes over him.

“You can shut the door, Sister Agathe,” he said in a muffled voice.

He was scarcely hidden before three raps sounded on the door. The holy women looked into each other’s eyes for counsel, and dared not say a single word.

They seemed both to be about sixty years of age. They had lived out of the world for forty years, and had grown so accustomed to the life of the convent that they could scarcely imagine any other. To them, as to plants kept in a hot-house, a change of air meant death. And so, when the grating was broken down one morning, they knew with a shudder that they were free. The effect produced by the Revolution upon their simple souls is easy to imagine; it produced a

temporary imbecility not natural to them. They could not bring the ideas learned in the convent into harmony with life and its difficulties; they could not even understand their own position. They were like children whom mothers have always cared for, deserted by their maternal providence. And as a child cries, they betook themselves to prayer. Now, in the presence of imminent danger, they were mute and passive, knowing no defence save Christian resignation.

The man at the door, taking silence for consent, presented himself, and the women shuddered. This was the prowler that had been making inquiries about them for some time past. But they looked at him with frightened curiosity, much as shy children stare silently at a stranger; and neither of them moved.

The newcomer was a tall, burly man. Nothing in his behavior, bearing, or expression suggested malignity as, following the example set by the nuns, he stood motionless, while his eyes traveled round the room.

Two straw mats laid upon planks did duty as beds. On the one table, placed in the middle of the room, stood a brass candlestick, several plates, three knives, and a round loaf. A small fire burned in the grate. A few bits of wood in a heap in a corner bore further witness to the poverty of the recluses. You had only to look at the coating of paint on the walls to discover the bad condition of the roof, and the ceiling was a perfect network of brown stains made by rain-water. A relic, saved no doubt from the wreck of the Abbaye de Chelles, stood like an ornament on the chimney-piece. Three chairs, two boxes, and a rickety chest of drawers completed the list of the furniture, but a door beside the fireplace suggested an inner room beyond.

The brief inventory was soon made by the personage introduced into their midst under such terrible auspices. It was with a compassionate expression that he turned to the two women; he looked benevolently at them, and seemed, at least, as much embarrassed as they. But the strange silence did not last long, for presently the stranger began to understand. He saw how inexperienced, how helpless (mentally speaking), the two poor creatures were, and he tried to speak gently.

“I am far from coming as an enemy, citoyennes–-” he began. Then he suddenly broke off and went on, “Sisters, if anything should happen to you, believe me, I shall have no share in it. I have come to ask a favor of you.”

Still the women were silent.

“If I am annoying you—if—if I am intruding, speak freely, and I will go; but you must understand that I am entirely at your service; that if I can do anything for you, you need not fear to make use of me. I, and I only, perhaps, am above the law, since there is no King now.”

There was such a ring of sincerity in the words that Sister Agathe hastily pointed to a chair as if to bid their guest be seated. Sister Agathe came of the house of Langeais; her manner seemed to indicate that once she had been familiar with brilliant scenes, and had breathed the air of courts. The stranger seemed half pleased, half distressed when he understood her invitation; he waited to sit down until the women were seated.

“You are giving shelter to a reverend father who refused to take the oath, and escaped the massacres at the Carmelites by a miracle–-”

“HOSANNA!” Sister Agathe exclaimed eagerly, interrupting the stranger, while she watched him with curious eyes.

“That is not the name, I think,” he said.

“But, monsieur,” Sister Marthe broke in quickly, “we have no priest here, and–-”

“In that case you should be more careful and on your guard,” he answered gently, stretching out his hand for a breviary that lay on the table. “I do not think that you know Latin, and–-”

He stopped; for, at the sight of the great emotion in the faces of the two poor nuns, he was afraid that he had gone too far. They were trembling, and the tears stood in their eyes.

“Do not fear,” he said frankly. “I know your names and the name of your guest. Three days ago I heard of your distress and devotion to the venerable Abbe de–-”

“Hush!” Sister Agathe cried, in the simplicity of her heart, as she laid her finger on her lips.

“You see, Sisters, that if I had conceived the horrible idea of betraying you, I

could have given you up already, more than once–-”

At the words the priest came out of his hiding-place and stood in their midst.

“I cannot believe, monsieur, that you can be one of our persecutors,” he said, addressing the stranger, “and I trust you. What do you want with me?”

The priest’s holy confidence, the nobleness expressed in every line in his face, would have disarmed a murderer. For a moment the mysterious stranger, who had brought an element of excitement into lives of misery and resignation, gazed at the little group; then he turned to the priest and said, as if making a confidence, “Father, I came to beg you to celebrate a mass for the repose of the soul of—of—of an august personage whose body will never rest in consecrated earth–-”

Involuntarily the abbe shivered. As yet, neither of the Sisters understood of whom the stranger was speaking; they sat with their heads stretched out and faces turned towards the speaker, curiosity in their whole attitude. The priest meanwhile, was scrutinizing the stranger; there was no mistaking the anxiety in the man’s face, the ardent entreaty in his eyes.

“Very well,” returned the abbe. “Come back at midnight. I shall be ready to celebrate the only funeral service that it is in our power to offer in expiation of the crime of which you speak.”

A quiver ran through the stranger, but a sweet yet sober satisfaction seemed to prevail over a hidden anguish. He took his leave respectfully, and the three generous souls felt his unspoken gratitude.

Two hours later, he came back and tapped at the garret door. Mademoiselle de Beauseant showed the way into the second room of their humble lodging. Everything had been made ready. The Sisters had moved the old chest of drawers between the two chimneys, and covered its quaint outlines over with a splendid altar cloth of green watered silk.

The bare walls looked all the barer, because the one thing that hung there was the great ivory and ebony crucifix, which of necessity attracted the eyes. Four slender little altar candles, which the Sisters had contrived to fasten into their places with sealing-wax, gave a faint, pale light, almost absorbed by the walls; the rest of the room lay well-nigh in the dark. But the dim brightness,

concentrated upon the holy things, looked like a ray from Heaven shining down upon the unadorned shrine. The floor was reeking with damp. An icy wind swept in through the chinks here and there, in a roof that rose sharply on either side, after the fashion of attic roofs. Nothing could be less imposing; yet perhaps, too, nothing could be more solemn than this mournful ceremony. A silence so deep that they could have heard the faintest sound of a voice on the Route d'Allemagne, invested the nightpiece with a kind of sombre majesty; while the grandeur of the service—all the grander for the strong contrast with the poor surroundings—produced a feeling of reverent awe.

The Sisters kneeling on each side of the altar, regardless of the deadly chill from the wet brick floor, were engaged in prayer, while the priest, arrayed in pontifical vestments, brought out a golden chalice set with gems; doubtless one of the sacred vessels saved from the pillage of the Abbaye de Chelles. Beside a ciborium, the gift of royal munificence, the wine and water for the holy sacrifice of the mass stood ready in two glasses such as could scarcely be found in the meanest tavern. For want of a missal, the priest had laid his breviary on the altar, and a common earthenware plate was set for the washing of hands that were pure and undefiled with blood. It was all so infinitely great, yet so little, poverty-stricken yet noble, a mingling of sacred and profane.

The stranger came forward reverently to kneel between the two nuns. But the priest had tied crape round the chalice of the crucifix, having no other way of marking the mass as a funeral service; it was as if God himself had been in mourning. The man suddenly noticed this, and the sight appeared to call up some overwhelming memory, for great drops of sweat stood out on his broad forehead.

Then the four silent actors in the scene looked mysteriously at one another; and their souls in emulation seemed to stir and communicate the thoughts within them until all were melted into one feeling of awe and pity. It seemed to them that the royal martyr whose remains had been consumed with quicklime, had been called up by their yearning and now stood, a shadow in their midst, in all the majesty of a king. They were celebrating an anniversary service for the dead whose body lay elsewhere. Under the disjointed laths and tiles, four Christians were holding a funeral service without a coffin, and putting up prayers to God for the soul of a King of France. No devotion could be purer than this. It was a wonderful act of faith achieved without an afterthought. Surely in the sight of God it was like the cup of cold water which counterbalances the loftiest virtues. The prayers put up by two feeble nuns and a priest represented the whole

Monarchy, and possibly at the same time, the Revolution found expression in the stranger, for the remorse in his face was so great that it was impossible not to think that he was fulfilling the vows of a boundless repentance.

When the priest came to the Latin words, Introibo ad altare Dei, a sudden divine inspiration flashed upon him; he looked at the three kneeling figures, the representatives of Christian France, and said instead, as though to blot out the poverty of the garret, “We are about to enter the Sanctuary of God!”

These words, uttered with thrilling earnestness, struck reverent awe into the nuns and the stranger. Under the vaulted roof of St. Peter’s at Rome, God would not have revealed Himself in greater majesty than here for the eyes of the Christians in that poor refuge; so true is it that all intermediaries between God and the soul of man are superfluous, and all the grandeur of God proceeds from Himself alone.

The stranger’s fervor was sincere. One emotion blended the prayers of the four servants of God and the King in a single supplication. The holy words rang like the music of heaven through the silence. At one moment, tears gathered in the stranger’s eyes. This was during the Pater Noster; for the priest added a petition in Latin, and his audience doubtless understood him when he said: “Et remitte scelus regicidis sicut Ludovicus eis remisit semetipse”—forgive the regicides as Louis himself forgave them.

The Sisters saw two great tears trace a channel down the stranger’s manly checks and fall to the floor. Then the office for the dead was recited; the Domine salvum fac regem chanted in an undertone that went to the hearts of the faithful Royalists, for they thought how the child-King for whom they were praying was even then a captive in the hands of his enemies; and a shudder ran through the stranger, as he thought that a new crime might be committed, and that he could not choose but take his part in it.

The service came to an end. The priest made a sign to the sisters, and they withdrew. As soon as he was left alone with the stranger, he went towards him with a grave, gentle face, and said in fatherly tones:

“My son, if your hands are stained with the blood of the royal martyr, confide in me. There is no sin that may not be blotted out in the sight of God by penitence as sincere and touching as yours appears to be.”

At the first words the man started with terror, in spite of himself. Then he recovered composure, and looked quietly at the astonished priest.

“Father,” he said, and the other could not miss the tremor in his voice, “no one is more guiltless than I of the blood shed–-”

“I am bound to believe you,” said the priest. He paused a moment, and again he scrutinized his penitent. But, persisting in the idea that the man before him was one of the members of the Convention, one of the voters who betrayed an inviolable and anointed head to save their own, he began again gravely:

“Remember, my son, that it is not enough to have taken no active part in the great crime; that fact does not absolve you. The men who might have defended the King and left their swords in their scabbards, will have a very heavy account to render to the King of Heaven—Ah! yes,” he added, with an eloquent shake of the head, “heavy indeed!—for by doing nothing they became accomplices in the awful wickedness–-”

“But do you think that an indirect participation will be punished?” the stranger asked with a bewildered look. “There is the private soldier commanded to fall into line—is he actually responsible?”

The priest hesitated. The stranger was glad; he had put the Royalist precisian in a dilemma, between the dogma of passive obedience on the one hand (for the upholders of the Monarchy maintained that obedience was the first principle of military law), and the equally important dogma which turns respect for the person of a King into a matter of religion. In the priest’s indecision he was eager to see a favorable solution of the doubts which seemed to torment him. To prevent too prolonged reflection on the part of the reverend Jansenist, he added:

“I should blush to offer remuneration of any kind for the funeral service which you have just performed for the repose of the King’s soul and the relief of my conscience. The only possible return for something of inestimable value is an offering likewise beyond price. Will you deign, monsieur, to take my gift of a holy relic? A day will perhaps come when you will understand its value.”

As he spoke the stranger held out a box; it was very small and exceedingly light. The priest took it mechanically, as it were, so astonished was he by the man’s solemn words, the tones of his voice, and the reverence with which he held out the gift.

The two men went back together into the first room. The Sisters were waiting for them.

“This house that you are living in belongs to Mucius Scaevola, the plasterer on the first floor,” he said. “He is well known in the Section for his patriotism, but in reality he is an adherent of the Bourbons. He used to be a huntsman in the service of his Highness the Prince de Conti, and he owes everything to him. So long as you stay in the house, you are safer here than anywhere else in France. Do not go out. Pious souls will minister to your necessities, and you can wait in safety for better times. Next year, on the 21st of January,”—he could not hide an involuntary shudder as he spoke,—“next year, if you are still in this dreary refuge, I will come back again to celebrate the expiatory mass with you–-”

He broke off, bowed to the three, who answered not a word, gave a last look at the garret with its signs of poverty, and vanished.

Such an adventure possessed all the interest of a romance in the lives of the innocent nuns. So, as soon as the venerable abbe told them the story of the mysterious gift, it was placed upon the table, and by the feeble light of the tallow dip an indescribable curiosity appeared in the three anxious faces. Mademoiselle de Langeais opened the box, and found a very fine lawn handkerchief, soiled with sweat; darker stains appeared as they unfolded it.

“That is blood!” exclaimed the priest.

“It is marked with a royal crown!” cried Sister Agathe.

The women, aghast, allowed the precious relic to fall. For their simple souls the mystery that hung about the stranger grew inexplicable; as for the priest, from that day forth he did not even try to understand it.

Before very long the prisoners knew that, in spite of the Terror, some powerful hand was extended over them. It began when they received firewood and provisions; and next the Sisters knew that a woman had lent counsel to their protector, for linen was sent to them, and clothes in which they could leave the house without causing remark upon the aristocrat’s dress that they had been forced to wear. After awhile Mucius Scaevola gave them two civic cards; and often tidings necessary for the priest’s safety came to them in roundabout ways.

Warnings and advice reached them so opportunely that they could only have been sent by some person in the possession of state secrets. And, at a time when famine threatened Paris, invisible hands brought rations of “white bread” for the proscribed women in the wretched garret. Still they fancied that Citizen Mucius Scaevola was only the mysterious instrument of a kindness always ingenious, and no less intelligent.

The noble ladies in the garret could no longer doubt that their protector was the stranger of the expiatory mass on the night of the 22nd of January, 1793; and a kind of cult of him sprung up among them. Their one hope was in him; they lived through him. They added special petitions for him to their prayers; night and morning the pious souls prayed for his happiness, his prosperity, his safety; entreating God to remove all snares far from his path, to deliver him from his enemies, to grant him a long and peaceful life. And with this daily renewed gratitude, as it may be called, there blended a feeling of curiosity which grew more lively day by day. They talked over the circumstances of his first sudden appearance, their conjectures were endless; the stranger had conferred one more benefit upon them by diverting their minds. Again, and again, they said, when he next came to see them as he promised, to celebrate the sad anniversary of the death of Louis XVI., he could not escape their friendship.

The night so impatiently awaited came at last. At midnight the old wooden staircase echoed with the stranger’s heavy footsteps. They had made the best of their room for his coming; the altar was ready, and this time the door stood open, and the two Sisters were out at the stairhead, eager to light the way. Mademoiselle de Langeais even came down a few steps, to meet their benefactor the sooner.

“Come,” she said, with a quaver in the affectionate tones, “come in; we are expecting you.”

He raised his face, gave her a dark look, and made no answer. The sister felt as if an icy mantle had fallen over her, and said no more. At the sight of him, the glow of gratitude and curiosity died away in their hearts. Perhaps he was not so cold, not so taciturn, not so stern as he seemed to them, for in their highly wrought mood they were ready to pour out their feeling of friendship. But the three poor prisoners understood that he wished to be a stranger to them; and submitted. The priest fancied that he saw a smile on the man’s lips as he saw their preparations for his visit, but it was at once repressed. He heard mass, said his prayer, and

then disappeared, declining, with a few polite words, Mademoiselle de Langeais' invitation to partake of the little collation made ready for him.

After the 9th Thermidor, the Sisters and the Abbe de Marolles could go about Paris without the least danger. The first time that the abbe went out he walked to a perfumer's shop at the sign of The Queen of Roses, kept by the Citizen Ragon and his wife, court perfumers. The Ragons had been faithful adherents of the Royalist cause; it was through their means that the Vendean leaders kept up a correspondence with the Princes and the Royalist Committee in Paris. The abbe, in the ordinary dress of the time, was standing on the threshold of the shop — which stood between Saint Roch and the Rue des Frondeurs—when he saw that the Rue Saint Honore was filled with a crowd and he could not go out.

"What is the matter?" he asked Madame Ragon.

"Nothing," she said; "it is only the tumbril cart and the executioner going to the Place Louis XV. Ah! we used to see it often enough last year; but to-day, four days after the anniversary of the twenty-first of January, one does not feel sorry to see the ghastly procession."

"Why not?" asked the abbe. "That is not said like a Christian."

"Eh! but it is the execution of Robespierre's accomplices. They defended themselves as long as they could, but now it is their turn to go where they sent so many innocent people."

The crowd poured by like a flood. The abbe, yielding to an impulse of curiosity, looked up above the heads, and there in the tumbril stood the man who had heard mass in the garret three days ago.

"Who is it?" he asked; "who is the man with–-"

"That is the headsman," answered M. Ragon, calling the executioner— the executeur des hautes oeuvres—by the name he had borne under the Monarchy.

"Oh! my dear, my dear! M. l'Abbe is dying!" cried out old Madame Ragon. She caught up a flask of vinegar, and tried to restore the old priest to consciousness.

"He must have given me the handkerchief that the King used to wipe his brow on the way to his martyrdom," murmured he. " … Poor man! … There was a

heart in the steel blade, when none was found in all France … “

The perfumers thought that the poor abbe was raving.

PARIS, January 183l.

ADDENDUM

The following personages appear in other stories of the Human Comedy.

Beauseant, Marquis and Comte de Father Goriot

Ragon, M. and *Mme.* Cesar Birotteau

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