PART III. THE EVERLASTING RULE
CHAPTER XVIII. THE INCORRUPTIBLE

It was towards noon of the following day when Caron La Boulaye presented himself at the house of Duplay, the cabinet-maker in the Rue St. Honore, and asked of the elderly female who admitted him if he might see the Citizen-deputy Robespierre.

A berline stood at the door, the postillion at the horses' heads, and about it there was some bustle, as if in preparation of a departure. But La Boulaye paid no heed to it as he entered the house.

He was immediately conducted upstairs to the Incorruptible's apartment--for he was too well known to so much as need announcing. In answer to the woman's knock a gentle, almost plaintive voice from within bade them enter, and thus was Caron ushered into the humble dwelling of the humble and ineffective-looking individual whose power already transcended that of any other man in France, and who was destined to become still more before his ephemeral star went out.

Into that unpretentious and rather close-smelling room--for it was bed-chamber as well as dining-room and study--stepped La Boulaye unhesitatingly, with the air of a man who is intimate with his surroundings and assured of his welcome in them. In the right-hand corner stood the bed on which the clothes were still tumbled; in the centre of the chamber was a table all littered with the disorder of a meal partaken; on the left, by the window, sat Robespierre at his writing-table, and from the overmantel at the back of the room a marble counterpart of Robespierre's own head and shoulders looked down upon the newcomer. There were a few pictures on the whitewashed walls, and a few objects of art about the chamber, but in the main it had a comfortless air, which may in part have resulted from the fact that no fire had been lighted.

The great man tossed aside his pen, and rose as the door closed after the entering visitor. Pushing his horn-rimmed spectacles up on to his forehead he stretched out his hand to La Boulaye.

"It is you, Caron," he murmured in that plaintive voice of his. It was a voice that sorted well with the humane man who had resigned a judgeship at Arras sooner than pass a death-sentence, but hardly so well with him who, as Public Prosecutor in Paris, had brought some hundreds of heads to the sawdust. "I have been desiring to congratulate you upon your victory of yesterday," he continued, "even as I have been congratulating myself upon the fact that it was I who found you and gave you to the Nation. I feared that I might not see you ere I left."

"You are leaving Paris?" asked La Boulaye, without heeding the compliments in the earlier part of the other's speech.
"For a few days. Business of the Nation, my friend. But you--let us talk of you. Do you know that I am proud of you, cher Caron? Your eloquence turned Danton green with jealousy, and as for poor Vergniaud, it extinguished him utterly. Ma foi! If you continue as you have begun, the day may not be far distant when you will become the patron and I the Protege." And his weak eyes beamed pleasantly from out of that unhealthy pale face.

Outwardly he had changed little since his first coming to Paris, to represent the Third Estate of Artoise, saving, his cheeks were grown more hollow. Upon his dress he still bestowed the same unpretentious care that had always characterised it, which, in one of the most prominent patriots of the Mountain, amounted almost to foppishness. Blue coat, white waistcoat, silk hose and shoes buckled with silver, gave him an elegant exterior that must have earned him many a covert sneer from his colleagues. His sloping forehead was crowned by a periwig, sedulously curled and powdered--for all that with the noblesse this was already a discarded fashion.

La Boulaye replied to his patron's compliments with the best grace he could command considering how full of another matter was his mind.

"I may congratulate myself, Maximilien," he added, "upon my good fortune in coming before you took your departure. I have a request to prefer, a favour to ask."

"Tut! Who talks of favours? Not you, Caron, I hope. You have but to name what you desire, and so that it lies within my power to accord it, the thing is yours."

"There is a prisoner in the Luxembourg in whom I am interested. I seek his enlargement."

"But is that all?" cried the little man, and, without more ado, he turned to his writing-table and drew a printed form from among the chaos of documents. "His name?" he asked indifferently, as he dipped his quill in the ink-horn and scratched his signature at the foot of it.

"An aristocrat," said Caron, with some slight hesitancy.

"Eh?" And the arched brows drew together for an instant. "But no matter. There are enough and to spare even for Fouquier-Tinville's voracious appetite. His name?"

"The ci-devant Vicomte Antole d'Ombreval."

"Qui-ca?" The question rang sharp as a pistol-shot, sounding the more fearful by virtue of the contrast with the gentle tones in which Robespierre had spoken hitherto. The little man's face grew evil. "d'Ombreval?" he cried. "But what is this man to you? It is by your favour alone that I have let him live so long, but now--" He stopped short. "What is your interest in this man?" he demanded, and the question was so fiercely put as to suggest that it would be well for La Boulaye that he should prove that interest slight indeed.

But whatever feelings may have been swaying Caron at the moment, fear was not one of them.

"My interest in him is sufficiently great to cause me to seek his freedom at your hands," he answered, with composure.

Robespierre eyed him narrowly for a moment, peering at him over his spectacles which he had drawn down on to his tip-tilted nose. Then the fierceness died out of his mien and manner as suddenly as it had sprung up. He became once more the weak-looking, inefficacious man that had first greeted La Boulaye: urbane and quiet, but cold-cold as ice.

"I am desolated, my dear Caron, but you have asked me for the one man in the prisons of France whose life I cannot yield you. He is from Artois, and there is an old score 'twixt him and me, 'twixt his family and mine. They were the grands seigneurs of the land on which we were born, these Ombrevals, and I could tell you of wrongs committed by them which would make you shudder in horror. This one shall atone in the small measure we can enforce from him. It was to this end that I ordered you to effect his capture. Have patience, dear Caron, and forgive me that I cannot grant your request. As I have said, I am desolated that it should be so. Ask me, if you will, the life of any other--or any dozen
others--and they are yours. But Ombreval must die."

Caron stood a moment in silent dismay. Here was an obstacle upon which he had not counted when he had passed his word to Suzanne to effect the release of her betrothed. At all costs he must gain it, he told himself, and to that end he now set himself to plead, advancing, as his only argument--but advancing it with a fervour that added to its weight--that he stood pledged to save the ci-devant Vicomte. Robespierre looked up at him with a shade of polite regret upon his cadaverous face, and with polite regret he deplored that Caron should have so bound himself.

So absorbed were they, the one in pleading, the other in resisting, that neither noticed the opening of the door, nor yet the girl who stood observing them from the threshold.

"If this man dies," cried La Boulaye at last, "I am dishonoured.

"It is regrettable," returned Robespierre, "that you should have pledged your word in the matter. You will confess, Caron, that it was a little precipitate. Enfin," he ended, crumpling the document he had signed and tossing it under the table, "you must extricate yourself as best you can. I am sorry, but I cannot give him to you."

Caron's face was very white and his hands were clenched convulsively. It is questionable whether in that moment he had not flung himself upon the Incorruptible, and enforced that which hitherto he had only besought, but that in that instant the girl stepped into the room.

"And is it really you, Caron?" came the melodious voice of Cecile.

La Boulaye started round to confront her, and stifled a curse at the untimely interruption which Robespierre was blessing as most timely.

"It is--it is, Citoyenne," he answered shortly, to add more shortly still: "I am here on business with the Citizen, your uncle."

But before the girl could so much as appreciate the rebuke he levelled at her intrusion, her uncle had come to the rescue.

"The business, however, is at an end. Take charge of this good Caron, Cecile, whilst I make ready for my journey."

Thus, sore at heart, and chagrined beyond words, La Boulaye was forced to realise his defeat, and to leave the presence of the Incorruptible. But with Cecile he went no farther than the landing.

"If you will excuse me, Citoyenne," he said abstractedly, "I will take my leave of you."

"But I shall not excuse you, Caron," she said, refusing to see his abstraction. "You will stay to dinner--"

"I am sorry beyond measure, but--"

"You shall stay," she interrupted. "Come, Caron. It is months since you were with us. We will make a little fete in honour of your yesterday's triumph," she promised him, sidling up to him with a bewitching glance of blue eyes, and the most distracting toss of golden curls upon an ivory neck.

But to such seductions Caron proved as impervious as might a man of stone. He excused himself with cold politeness. The Nation's business was awaiting him; he might not stay.

"The Nation's business may await you a little longer," she declared, taking hold of his arm with both hands, and had she left it at that it is possible that she had won her way with him. But most indiscreetly she added:

"Come, Caron, you shall tell me who was your yesterday's visitor. Do you know that the sight of her made me jealous? Was it not foolish in me?"
And now, from cold politeness, La Boulaye passed to hot impoliteness. Roughly he shook her detaining hands from him, and with hardly so much as a word of farewell, he passed down the stairs, leaving her white with passion at the slight he had thereby put upon her.

The beauty seemed to pass out of her face much as the meekness was wont to pass out of her uncle's when he was roused. Her blue eyes grew steely and cruel as she looked after him.

"Wait, Caron," she muttered to herself, "I will cry quits with you." And then, with a sob of anger, she turned and mounted the stairs to her apartments.

By Rafael Sabatini