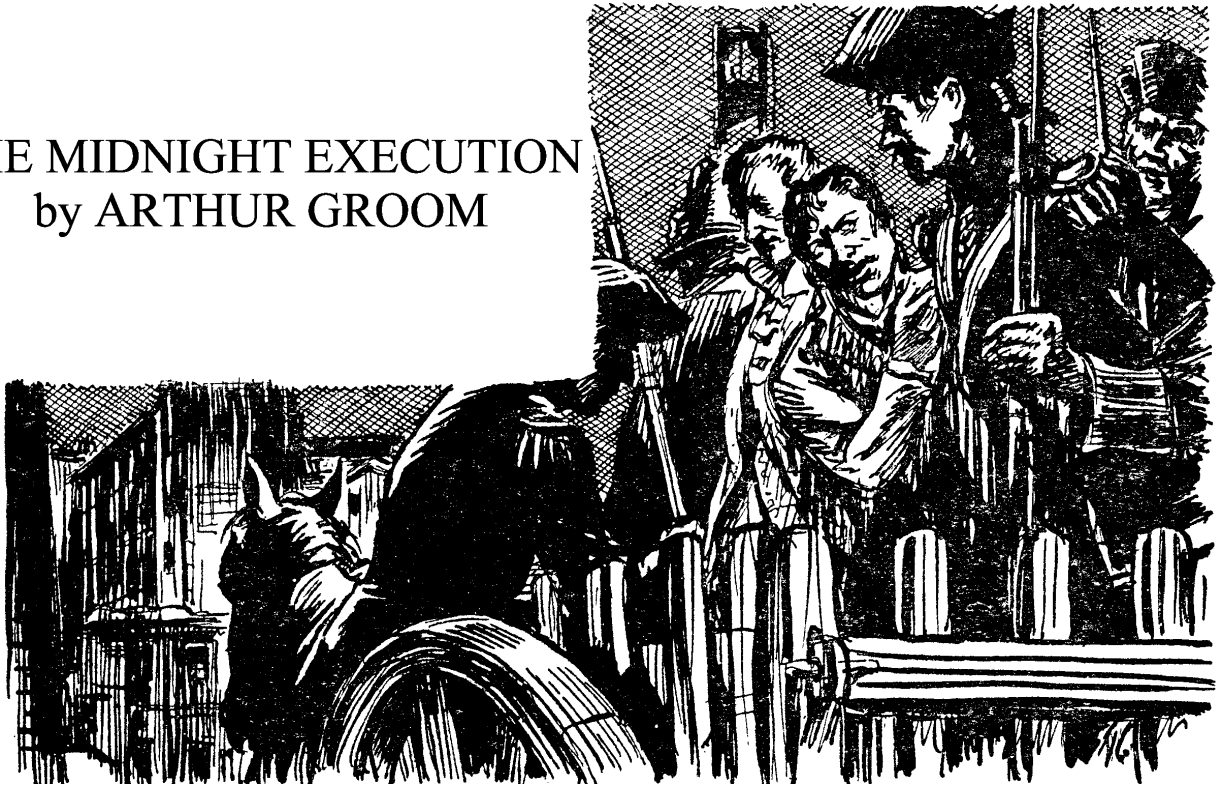


THE MIDNIGHT EXECUTION by ARTHUR GROOM



LOUIS-HENRI, ci-devant Marquis de Bruneau, raised his head from the filthy palliasse in the corner of the dark cell, as there came the sound of a key grating in the lock, the squealing of the uncoiled hinges, and the sound of someone being pushed into the damp, unwholesome chamber.

Clang!

The door closed again, the key was turned. Slowly the young aristocrat rose from his bed and lifted the newcomer to his feet. "Bear up, my friend," he murmured, "it takes but the fraction of a second to die under the caress of Madame Guillotine."

"Get away from me, you filthy aristocrat."

Louis-Henri let his hands drop limply to his sides, as the other spat at him. He wasn't shocked, only amazed that anyone could hate him so. He peered at the face of his fellow prisoner. It was young, as young as his own, but the teeth were broken, the eyes bloodshot, and the hair dank and tangled over the brow. "My apologies!" he said with a slight bow. "Your bed is in the other corner." A faint smile formed on the well-made lips. "You can have your choice to-morrow night. I am due to die in the morning."

For a moment the other did not reply; instead he went to the barred door and peered into the corridor. Then he turned and faced the Marquis de Bruneau. "A thousand pardons, milord," he whispered hoarsely, "but they have a habit of watching the behaviour of a new prisoner the moment he is flung into a cell."

Louis-Henri's fists clenched slowly and he drew a deep, hissing breath through his firm, white even teeth. "I thought as much," he said softly. "You are Pierre Rohan. But – but I don't understand. How and why are you here?"

"I am an enemy of the State," came the quiet reply, "and thus I am to die at midnight."

“Midnight?”

“Yes, milord, at midnight. Listen!” The newcomer sat himself on the second palliasse. “I came here deliberately. It was not difficult. When I heard that you were to be executed at that hour, to-night, because they fear that your tenants, and others on your estate who think well of you, are planning a last-minute rescue from the platform of the guillotine itself, then I faced them and swore that I would get you free. I yelled at them, I cursed them!” The speaker laughed bitterly. “How I raved, and how I cursed, milord!”

“But . . . ?”

“A moment, please,” interrupted Pierre, son of the steward of the ci-devant Marquis’s estates on the outskirts of Paris. “I beg to be allowed to finish. We have little time. It was as I had planned. They laughed at me, and told me that, since I was so fond of Louis-Henri, then I had better go with him on his last ride.” Expressive shoulders were shrugged.

“Thus I am here.”

“What of my sister?” The young aristocrat could hardly bear to bring himself to frame the words.

“She was free – up to the day before yesterday!” came the reply. “But now, Monsieur le Marquis, I can answer no other questions. I pretended that I regretted my defence of you; that I would recant and be a loyal citizen of the Revolution; I went on my knees before the jailer and begged, . . .”

Again Pierre Rohan shrugged. “As I guessed, it was quite useless, except that it leaves me free to help you. They are unsuspecting when they might have thought I had a scheme in mind to rescue you. Listen very carefully, milord!”

The two talked in low tones for a few minutes, then, as a guard was heard approaching, Pierre raised his voice to revile his former employer, to shriek for mercy, to hammer on the door and to beg for justice. A laugh came from the guard, his footsteps died away, and silence settled over the great building.

Just before the clock on the Hotel de Ville was due to strike midnight the door of the cell opened. “Louis-Henri, ci-devant Marquis de Bruneau,” growled a harsh voice, “your time has come.” The man made a mark on the paper in his hand. “Pierre Rohan, under-steward of the ci-devant Marquis’s former estates, you, too, are due to die. Remember that the guards have never let a prisoner escape yet. Two tried, but they regretted it afterwards. Eh, Jules?” added the jailer, as he turned to a man standing in the corridor.

A burst of raucous laughter greeted this sally.

The rough cart trundled through the completely deserted streets, the driver hunched up on the rough seat in front, a mere bundle of rags with a head, surmounted by a Cap of Liberty, set absurdly on the top. In the cart were five members of the National Guard, each with a loaded musket, and in their midst stood Louis-Henri and Pierre. The latter was now whining fitfully and making absurd offers to the soldiers, and they found it extremely diverting.

“We’re late!” grunted the sergeant of the party. “You’ve lived five minutes too long, my fine Marquis. Ho! Ho! Ho!”

Suddenly a small square came in sight, a square with a guillotine mounted in the centre. The cart

rumbled over the uneven cobbles, moved more slowly and stopped. In the startling silence came the crash of musket fire. The National Guard sergeant slumped forward into the straw-lined cart.

“Lie down!” screamed a voice from the bundle of rags that was the driver. “Lie down, Louis!”

Even as the young man dropped like a shot partridge to the straw that lined the bottom of the cart, he knew that voice. It belonged to his sister, Françoise, and it sent the aristocrat’s heart pounding against his ribs. There was the crack of a whip, and the horse between the shafts seemed to rouse like its driver. The head went up, hoofs drew sparks from the cobbles, and the cart swerved to the left and dashed across the square.

Louis-Henri twisted his head, just in time to see Pierre pushing the last of the soldiers out of the swaying vehicle; then the son of his steward slumped down by his side.

It was hard to think during that nightmarish ride across the tiny square, down a narrow, noisome alleyway, through interminable streets that reeked of stale garbage, and finally into the Place de la Revolution. “Get ready, milord, to jump out and run. Run to the entrance to the Rue Jean, turn down and enter under an archway on the right. It will be the first you will come to. Don’t worry about us, we have made all arrangements. Remember, Monsieur, don’t hesitate. Get out of sight. There will be someone waiting for you under the archway. Already we are slowing down. . . . Now!”

The young man fought down the almost irresistible desire to see that his sister was safe before thinking of himself, but he managed to obey Pierre’s instructions. As he ran blindly down the Rue Jean he heard the cart move again, heard the sound of distant shots, heard the hoarse cries of men who were hunting him like a beast. Panting, and with a pain like an iron band across his chest, the *ci-devant* Marquis passed under the archway.

“NOW! This way! Quickly!”

Someone took his arm, someone led him through a doorway and up a flight of stairs. A door was kicked open, and he was in a warm, lighted room, The curtains were tightly drawn.

“Henri!” Warm arms were stretched out to enfold the weary young man, a kindly voice murmured in his ear as it had done so many times when he had been just a child. “You are safe now, milord, as safe as anyone in Paris to-day.”

Louis-Henri looked up and met the soft grey eyes of his old nurse. “You?” he gasped. “Is everyone on my estate in this? How did you all know that my execution had been fixed for midnight, instead of for the morning?”

It was Françoise who answered, a strange figure in her collection of rags. “It was simple, my dear Louis,” she answered. “We had merely to spread the rumour that there was a plan to rescue you, for Robespierre to move as we had hoped.” She laughed, gaily and yet with a quaver in her voice. “How did he think we could rescue you under the eyes of ten thousand savages? Yet he thought it was impossible in the stillness of the night.”

The Marquis de Bruneau took a cup of wine from the hands of Pierre Rohan. “Now what?” he asked.

“Now rest!” came the reply. “Then disguise, both of men and, again, of a horse and cart, and the rest is easy.” Françoise smiled down into her brother’s face. “Did you not recognise the heavy gallop of dear Greyheart the plough-horse? ’Twas not easy to make the change with the original

nag, but we managed it; yes, as we shall manage to get away from Paris. Never fear, Louis, this Terror is not the doing of the real France. She is there, in Henriette Armand, in Pierre Rohan, within all our other friends. There, beats the real heart of France. Vive La France!”

“Amen!” whispered Louis-Henri, ci-devant Marquis de Bruneau.