

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The FALLING KNIFE

by HAROLD MARKHAM



“Number thirty-seven!”

THERE was more than one guillotine in France in the days of Robespierre, and that of Dauvignon was controlled and fed by citizen Meurière, ex-barrister at law and personal friend and disciple of the Sea-green Incorruptible himself.

Meurière copied his master in even the most trivial details. Just as his administration at Dauvignon was an exact replica of Paris, tumbrils and guillotine, all complete; so was his dress a reflection of that of the Arch-Terrorist, from his neatly powdered hair down to the glittering buckles

which still graced his shoes, in spite of the recent change in the fashions.

Most of all, it was the good citizen Meurière's delight to reflect the inner, yet more than the outer, Robespierre—to be incapable alike of favoritism or pity, to be the long-winded mouthpiece of ultra-patriotic sentiments and the imperturbable agent of ruthless justice, in the name of France.

So his lieutenant Piron found him in the matter of Roxalane de Tourneve.

For no less than an hour Piron besought his superior for her life, on

his knees and with tears in his eyes. He urged the loyalty of his service, the bonds of friendship, the innocence and utter harmlessness of the girl, aristocrat though she might be, and her obvious repudiation of her caste, in that she had returned the love of so pronounced a Jacobin as himself. With an eloquence worthy of the cause he pleaded, implored, entreated—and to all Meurière listened stonily, his chin buried in the folds of his tall cravat and his transparent blue eyes gazing fixedly across at the opposite wall.

At last the deputy withdrew his hand from the breast of his coat.

“Enough!” he said coldly. “The matter shall have my consideration!”

Piron gave a wild, inarticulate cry.

“Citizen!” he stammered. “You mean—Roxalane shall live? Oh, I live again, myself, in your words!” And, clasping Meurière’s hand in both of his, he covered it with kisses.

“Enough!” The mirror of Robespierre drew away his hand abruptly. “Rise to your feet, Piron, and cease this blubbering! I have said the matter shall have my consideration. . . And now to supper!”

VIANDS were already on the table, and as the two men ate and drank Meurière lectured his subordinate at length. . . .

“Liberty . . . Equality . . . Fraternity . . . Fraternity . . . Equality . . . Liberty. . . .”

On and on he droned, and a gradual drowsiness came over Piron which could not have been wholly attributable to even so prolonged a sermon. The wine passed freely. Piron woke up on, but not in, his bed at midday on the morrow and realized that he had not undressed.

He had a splitting headache and a vile taste in his mouth. A Sèvres clock on the mantelpiece told him the hour . . . midday . . . Roxalane

. . . she was to have died at ten o’clock with the rest. . . .

Piron shuddered and a dry sob escaped him.

Then he remembered his superior’s promise of the night before. . . . His face brightened and he leapt up from his bed with a glad cry. . . .

Yes, Meurière had promised and Roxalane was saved!

Having washed away the stains of his overnight debauch he strode off gayly to the prison. He had the entrée there, and by now Meurière’s reprieve would have come . . . a word would open the great iron doors and set free his bride.

It was his custom to run an eye down the notice-board outside the main gate whenever he visited the prison, and he did so now, mechanically.

Then the street went dark and he leant for support against the wall.

The exact words of Meurière seemed to appear before him in letters of fire—“The matter shall *have my consideration*”—for it was a list of those executed that morning he read. . . .

While he had lain drunk and senseless in his room, she—Roxalane—had been driven with all the others to her fate.

“Traitor!” gritted Piron under his breath.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead, shook himself, stood upright . . . in a moment he was calm again; but there was a look in his eyes that had not been there before.

MEURIERE and Piron again sat over their wine and the deputy smiled coldly as his subordinate leant across the table, his voice and features animated alike.

“It is the chance of a lifetime, Citizen,” Piron assured him, “your greatest opportunity of serving Robespierre and France; and—and—I want you to have it rather than myself in token of gratitude!”

The delicately penciled eyebrows rose slightly.

"Gratitude, Citizen Piron?"

"Aye! . . . My master, you have taught me all—you have done all for me"—his voice sank—"you have saved me for France!"

Meurière smiled a little.

"You mean the she-aristocrat of a month ago?"

Piron nodded vigorously.

"Even that woman! But for you I should be on my way to the Sainte Guillotine by now, with her! You saw this, Citizen, when I could not. I, fond imbecile, believed that she might be turned Jacobin and become one with us. You, O fountain of wisdom, you saw that naught but death could come of it—you saw what the Incorruptible would think of a citizen of France who allied himself to an aristocrat bitch! Oh, you saw—and I was blind!"

Meurière nodded gravely.

"It is well. And now, this *Vicomte de Fournal*—you tell me he will speak? He knows of this plot against Citizen Robespierre?"

"He will speak on promise of his life!"

Meurière smiled.

"He shall have his *promise*, my Piron!"

Piron saw the point and chuckled.

"Then, my master, I suggest that we go to the prison at once. It is dusk—eh? It is better that our visit be——?"

"Precisely! The less known about it the better. We will go at once. Forward, Piron!"

MEURIÈRE led the way down a maze of dark stone corridors, past iron doors from behind some of which came moans and mutterings; though for the most part the prisoners were silent.

"Here?" he asked, pausing.

"Here!" assented Piron. "You may go!" he added to the jailer, a filthy, half-naked wretch with a

week's growth of beard and a clay pipe. "I shall return your keys as we go out."

A nod from Meurière reassured the man, who departed, growling.

Piron stealthily unlocked and threw wide the door, standing back respectfully for his chief.

Taking a couple of paces into the cell, Meurière halted, astonished . . . for a moment he half believed he was looking into a mirror; for in the blue twilight from the grated window he saw a man who differed from himself in scarcely one particular, save his clothes. These, the tattered remnants of a once magnificent silk and velvet suit, alone contrasted with the trim figure of the deputy. The face, though haggard and pale, was otherwise the counterpart of his own.

At that moment something happened to Meurière—what it was he could not afterward remember—and he sank down, down, down into an unfathomable abyss of reddish-black darkness, flecked with swirling stars.

WHEN Meurière came to there was a cold, white beam of sunlight playing from the high, barred window onto the grimy stone floor where he lay. He felt decidedly ill; a sickly smell in his nostrils and throat made him feel uncommonly like being physically so. His head ached and he was dizzy and weak.

For some time he lay half stupefied, watching idly the shadow of the three iron bars creep across the flagstone it had been touching when he first regained consciousness; then he turned over, found himself stiff in every joint, but otherwise a free man.

After a while he sat up and it began to dawn on him that he was not in his bedroom. In front of him was the shadowy outline of an iron door. The place smelt vilely of decay and damp.

He shivered and rose painfully to his feet, and the next moment

started backward with a cry of alarm as his gaze fell on his own legs. . . . Whose clothes were these he was wearing? Whose the torn, dirty white breeches and unpolished top-boots? Top-boots! He had never possessed a pair in his life!

Quickly Meurière extended his arms, to discover the sleeves of a "zebra" fashion silk tail-coat—another garment he had never worn!

What did it mean? Where was he? What had happened?

Then he laughed. Of course, he was dreaming! The affair was too fantastic, impossible, unreal. Soon he would wake up in his own bed with his own clothes on the chair beside him!

But—*morbleu*—he must have mixed his drinks the night before!

He chuckled icily.

He—the great, the incorruptible Meurière—the pupil of the Sea-green one of Paris—drunk!

But didn't that prove all the more that it was a dream? Drunk? He? Never in his life!

Well, well—it would soon be over, this quaint nightmare, and the best thing to do was to humor it while it lasted. In an hour or two he would be telling it jocularly to Piron over chocolate and rolls prior to his departure for Paris. . . .

Paris? Yes, to be sure! He had been bound for Paris to make a report in person to Robespierre—a carriage had been ordered for 9:30, and—yes, surely there was something else? Something Piron had been telling him?

Settling himself at full length on a wooden bench which seemed uncommonly hard and real for a mere incident in a dream, he cudged his brains.

What had Piron been telling him? Something—something about somebody in the prison, wasn't it?

Ah! There lay the explanation of the whole affair! An unwise supper, some business or other to do with

the prison—and here he was dreaming himself a prisoner in one of his own cells! Absurd! Positively comical! But, that business—what had it been?

The effort of thinking caused his head to throb afresh, and Meurière gave himself up to sleep.

"NUMBER thirty-seven!" The voice was thick, coarse, lustful. "Tumble out there, number thirty-seven—your blasted carriage is waiting!"

Meurière sat up and blinked. "You addressed me, fellow?"

"Oh no, your Royal Excellence!" the jailor guffawed; then, sharply, "tumble out there and be sharp about it! D'you expect to dine here?"

Meurière saw before him a tall, muscular brute of a man, naked from the waist up save for a greasy red cap on which the tricolor rosette's colors were merged and smeared into one another with grime. He had a week's growth of beard, a flat, negroid nose, and little red eyes like those of a boar from the forests.

"Name of the devil!" snapped Meurière. "Who are you?"

The man's teeth flashed in a leer of enjoyment at his annoyance. Otherwise not a muscle of him moved.

"I asked who the devil you were? What do you want? *Sacré imbecile*, don't you know me?"

The man still leered and kept motionless.

A slow smile turned up the corners of Meurière's thin lips.

"Bah! Another phantom! I am still dreaming, it appears. Well, well; be off with you, my friend, and leave me to sleep it out. I have a long journey today!"

The leer broadened.

"A long journey?" sneered the jailor. "That's right, by the guillotine—we know all about that, Citizen! . . . A long journey, in truth, and the time has come to set about it!"

Meurière frowned. It struck him

that here was another ramification of this unpleasant dream. The journey to Paris had got mixed up with it, now! *Parbleu*, but he must inquire carefully into his last night's menu . . . a repetition of this sort of thing was not to be desired!

Meanwhile, as he had observed before, the wisest thing to do was to humor the nightmare till it had run its course.

"Very well, my friend," answered Meurière. "Lead the way; I am ready!"

The man grunted and, having seen him out of the door, followed him down the passage.

A moment later he arrived at a gate where a sentry stood with fixed bayonet. Broad daylight smote him in the face.

Meurière blinked. . . .

He was in the Rue de Maubrun—he recognized the houses opposite—there were soldiers standing round the gate who could have mustered one complete set of uniform between them, and behind these were huddled the very riff-raff of Dauvignon, hunger and hatred in their eyes.

"Up with you!" snarled the jailer at his elbow, and, glancing round, he became for the first time aware of a rough cart, driven by a filthy apparition in rags and a red cap, and already loaded with four passengers—a woman and three men.

"Stay, my friend!" said the deputy firmly. "This is going *too far*—I shall have to pinch myself and wake up! *Peste*, another half-hour of this dream and—"

"Get up into that cart, will you? You won't? Then curse you and to hell with you for a filthy aristocrat!"

A great vise of a hand seized his coat collar and he was flung in the direction of the cart. The next moment a soldier gripped him below the knees and he was tossed up like a sack of flour amid screams of high-pitched laughter from the crowd. Some projection on the floor of the

tumbril grazed his forehead, blood ran down his face, and as he stumbled onto his feet Citizen Meurière finally awoke. . . .

The crowd still jeered. The soldiers chanted an obscene song. Back at the gateway his huge jailer stood, arms akimbo, his naked body a-quiver with laughter. Only the one woman and three men, his fellow passengers, were silent and unmoved.

Meurière awoke to the realization that it was all true: he, a deputy of France, the friend and pupil of Robespierre, was in a tumbril, en route for the guillotine!

For some moments he was speechless—it took a little while for the facts to soak in. Then he screamed aloud. It seemed that the dancing, gibbering mob echoed his screams back to him. A hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Calm yourself, *Monsieur*—have you not observed we have a lady with us?"

He glared wildly into the face of an old man whose tarnished finery bespoke him a condemned aristocrat.

"*Monsieur* must be calm!" reiterated this other; "it is better to cheat these *sansculottes* of their sport, is that not so? Besides, a lady's presence should restrain—"

"Curse you, fool!" spluttered Meurière. "You don't understand! There has been a mistake!"

The old gentleman shrugged his shoulders.

"A mistake, I tell you!" fumed the Jacobin. "Stop them! Call the officer in charge! I am Meurière and—"

His sentence was drowned by a burst of laughter from the mob in which the soldiers joined readily. They turned a corner and the *Grande Place* came in view, the black posts and triangular blade of the guillotine towering above the seething humanity, which filled it.

"Fools! Imbeciles! *Canaille!*" stormed the deputy. "I tell you I am Meurière! Send for Citizen Piron

immediately—he will know your own deputy, if you don't, you insane children of hell!"

"*Monsieur, Monsieur!*" whispered the old aristocrat reprovingly; "can you not contain yourself for these few—these very few moments that are left to us? Think, *Monsieur*, in a little while from now we shall be as if we had never been—and what use will be all your fuming and fretting, then? Come, *Monsieur!* Nothing can save us—would you give these carrion crows the one thing they can not take away from you—your gentleman's dignity?"

Meurière stared into his face, speechless.

THE tumbrel halted with a jerk and a sergeant roughly ordered the victims to dismount.

Meurière eluteded at him.

"Piron—Citizen Piron—I entreat you! Call Citizen Piron! There has been a mistake—you know not what you do—would you not avert a terrible miscarriage of justice? Oh, my God!"—atheist though he was, the oath slipped from him in his extremity—"will no one call Citizen Piron?" . . .

"Number thirty-three!"

Meurière's heart and tongue stood still.

A dull crash—a pause.

"Number thirty-four! . . . Number thirty-five!"

Suddenly he gave a scream in which terror, joy and relief were mingled and struggled with his guards. "Piron!" he cried. "Piron! To me, my old Piron, to me—it is Meurière!"

"Number thirty-six!"

As the knife fell Piron rode through the crowd.

"Number——"

Piron raised his hand.

"Well?" he asked bluntly, leaning forward in his stirrups.

"Piron"—the tears ran down Meurière's cheeks—"oh, my Piron—in the nick of time—you see? You see? Tell them who I am—bid these fools release me! Oh, to think that a moment later! . . . tell them I am Meurière and that there has been a terrible mistake!"

Piron smiled.

"The mistake is yours, Monsieur le Vicomte de Fournal. As for Citizen Meurière, he left the town at 9:30 this morning. It is now 10 o'clock and I rule in his place. . . . Continue!"

"Number thirty-seven!"

As they forced Meurière down on the board he saw a wooden collar, reeking with new blood and loathsome to the touch. A hand wrenched off his neck-cloth . . . the top half of the collar was shut down. . . .

