

## SOLANGE

*Dr. Ledru's story of the reign of terror*

*By Alexandre Dumas*

Leaving l'Abbaye, I walked straight across the Place Turenne to the Rue Tournon, where I had lodgings, when I heard a woman scream for help.

It could not be an assault to commit robbery, for it was hardly ten o'clock in the evening. I ran to the corner of the place whence the sounds proceeded, and by the light of the moon, just then breaking through the clouds, I beheld a woman in the midst of a patrol of sans-culottes.

The lady observed me at the same instant, and seeing, by the character of my dress, that I did not belong to the common order of people, she ran toward me, exclaiming:

"There is M. Albert! He knows me! He will tell you that I am the daughter of Mme. Ledieu, the laundress."

With these words the poor creature, pale and trembling with excitement, seized my arm and clung to me as a shipwrecked sailor to a spar.

"No matter whether you are the daughter of Mme. Ledieu or some one else, as you have no pass, you must go with us to the guard-house."

The young girl pressed my arm. I perceived in this pressure the expression of her great distress of mind. I understood it.

"So it is you, my poor Solange?" I said. "What are you doing here?"

"There, messieurs!" she exclaimed in tones of deep anxiety; "do you believe me now?"

"You might at least say 'citizens!'"

"Ah, sergeant, do not blame me for speaking that way," said the pretty young girl; "my mother has many customers among the great people, and taught me to be polite. That's how I acquired this bad habit--the habit of the aristocrats; and, you know, sergeant, it's so hard to shake off old habits!"

This answer, delivered in trembling accents, concealed a delicate irony that was lost on all save me. I asked myself, who is this young woman? The mystery seemed complete. This alone was clear; she was not the daughter of a laundress.

"How did I come here, Citizen Albert?" she asked. "Well, I will tell you. I went to deliver some washing. The lady was not at home, and so I waited; for in these hard times every one needs what little money is coming to him. In that way it grew dark, and so I fell among these gentlemen--beg pardon, I would say citizens. They asked for my pass. As I did not have it with me, they were going to take me to the guard-house. I cried out in terror, which brought you to the scene; and as luck would have it, you are a friend. I said to myself, as M. Albert knows my name to be Solange Ledieu, he will vouch for me; and that you will, will you not, M. Albert?"

"Certainly, I will vouch for you."

"Very well," said the leader of the patrol; "and who, pray, will vouch for you, my friend?"

"Danton! Do you know him? Is he a good patriot?"

"Oh, if Danton will vouch for you, I have nothing to say."

"Well, there is a session of the Cordeliers to-day. Let us go there."

"Good," said the leader. "Citizens, let us go to the Cordeliers."

The club of the Cordeliers met at the old Cordelier monastery in the Rue l'Observance. We arrived there after scarce a minute's walk. At the door I tore a page from my note-book, wrote a few words upon it with a lead pencil, gave it to the sergeant, and requested him to hand it to Danton, while I waited outside with the men.

The sergeant entered the clubhouse and returned with Danton.

"What!" said he to me; "they have arrested you, my friend? You, the friend of Camilles--you, one of the most loyal republicans? Citizens," he continued, addressing the sergeant, "I vouch for him. Is that sufficient?"

"You vouch for him. Do you also vouch for her?" asked the stubborn sergeant.

"For her? To whom do you refer?"

"This girl."

"For everything; for everybody who may be in his company. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes," said the man; "especially since I have had the privilege of seeing you."

With a cheer for Danton, the patrol marched away. I was about to thank Danton, when his name was called repeatedly within.

"Pardon me, my friend," he said; "you hear? There is my hand; I must leave you--the left. I gave my right to the sergeant. Who knows, the good patriot may have scrofula?"

"I'm coming!" he exclaimed, addressing those within in his mighty voice with which he could pacify or arouse the masses. He hastened into the house.

I remained standing at the door, alone with my unknown.

"And now, my lady," I said, "whither would you have me escort you? I am at your disposal."

"Why, to Mme. Ledieu," she said with a laugh. "I told you she was my mother."

"And where does Mme. Ledieu reside?"

"Rue Ferou, 24."

"Then, let us proceed to Rue Ferou, 24."

On the way neither of us spoke a word. But by the light of the moon, enthroned in serene glory in the sky, I was able to observe her at my leisure. She was a charming girl of twenty or twenty-two--brunette, with large blue eyes, more expressive of intelligence than melancholy--a finely chiseled nose, mocking lips, teeth of pearl, hands like a queen's, and feet like a child's; and all these, in spite of her costume of a laundress, betokened an aristocratic air that had aroused the sergeant's suspicions not without justice.

Arrived at the door of the house, we looked at each other a moment in silence.

"Well, my dear M. Albert, what do you wish?" my fair unknown asked with a smile.

"I was about to say, my dear Mlle. Solange, that it was hardly worth while to meet if we are to part so soon."

"Oh, I beg ten thousand pardons! I find it was well worth the while; for if I had not met you, I should have been dragged to the guard-house, and there it would have been discovered that I am not the daughter of Mme. Ledieu--in fact, it would have developed that I am an aristocrat, and in all likelihood they would have cut off my head."

"You admit, then, that you are an aristocrat?"

"I admit nothing."

"At least you might tell me your name."

"Solange."

"I know very well that this name, which I gave you on the inspiration of the moment, is not your right name."

"No matter; I like it, and I am going to keep it--at least for you."

"Why should you keep it for me? if we are not to meet again?"

"I did not say that. I only said that if we should meet again it will not be necessary for you to know my name any more than that I should know yours. To me you will be known as Albert, and to you I shall always be Solange."

"So be it, then; but I say, Solange," I began.

"I am listening, Albert," she replied.

"You are an aristocrat--that you admit."

"If I did not admit it, you would surmise it, and so my admission would be divested of half its merit."

"And you were pursued because you were suspected of being an aristocrat?"

"I fear so."

"And you are hiding to escape persecution?"

"In the Rue Ferou, No. 24, with Mme. Ledieu, whose husband was my father's coachman. You see, I have no secret from you."

"And your father?"

"I shall make no concealment, my dear Albert, of anything that relates to me. But my father's secrets are not my own. My father is in hiding, hoping to make his escape. That is all I can tell you."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Go with my father, if that be possible. If not, allow him to depart without me until the opportunity offers itself to me to join him."

"Were you coming from your father when the guard arrested you to-night?"

"Yes."

"Listen, dearest Solange."

"I am all attention."

"You observed all that took place to-night?"

"Yes. I saw that you had powerful influence."

"I regret my power is not very great. However, I have friends."

"I made the acquaintance of one of them."

"And you know he is not one of the least powerful men of the times."

"Do you intend to enlist his influence to enable my father to escape?"

"No, I reserve him for you."

"But my father?"

"I have other ways of helping your father."

"Other ways?" exclaimed Solange, seizing my hands and studying me with an anxious expression.

"If I serve your father, will you then sometimes think kindly of me?"

"Oh, I shall all my life hold you in grateful remembrance!"

She uttered these words with an enchanting expression of devotion. Then she looked at me beseechingly and said:

"But will that satisfy you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Ah, I was not mistaken. You are kind, generous. I thank you for my father and myself. Even if you should fail, I shall be grateful for what you have already done!"

"When shall we meet again, Solange?"

"When do you think it necessary to see me again?"

"To-morrow, when I hope to have good news for you."

"Well, then, to-morrow."

"Where?"

"Here."

"Here in the street?"

"Well, mon Dieu!" she exclaimed. "You see, it is the safest place. For thirty minutes, while we have been talking here, not a soul has passed."

"Why may I not go to you, or you come to me?"

"Because it would compromise the good people if you should come to me, and you would incur serious risk if I should go to you."

"Oh, I would give you the pass of one of my relatives."

"And send your relative to the guillotine if I should be accidentally arrested!"

"True. I will bring you a pass made out in the name of Solange."

"Charming! You observe Solange is my real name."



"And the hour?"

"The same at which we met to-night--ten o'clock, if you please."

"All right; ten o'clock. And how shall we meet?"

"That is very simple. Be at the door at five minutes of ten, and at ten I will come down."

"Then, at ten to-morrow, dear Solange."

"To-morrow at ten, dear Albert."

I wanted to kiss her hand; she offered me her brow.

The next day I was in the street at half past nine. At a quarter of ten Solange opened the door. We were both ahead of time.

With one leap I was by her side.

"I see you have good news," she said.

"Excellent! First, here is a pass for you."

"First my father!"

She repelled my hand.

"Your father is saved, if he wishes."

"Wishes, you say? What is required of him?"

"He must trust me."

"That is assured."

"Have you seen him?"

"Yes."

"You have discussed the situation with him?"

"It was unavoidable. Heaven will help us."

"Did you tell your father all?"

"I told him you had saved my life yesterday, and that you would perhaps save his to-morrow."

"To-morrow! Yes, quite right; to-morrow I shall save his life, if it is his will."

"How? What? Speak! Speak! If that were possible, how fortunately all things have come to pass!"

"However--" I began hesitatingly.

"Well?"

"It will be impossible for you to accompany him."

"I told you I was resolute."

"I am quite confident, however, that I shall be able later to procure a passport for you."

"First tell me about my father; my own distress is less important."

"Well, I told you I had friends, did I not?"

"Yes."

"To-day I sought out one of them."

"Proceed."

"A man whose name is familiar to you; whose name is a guarantee of courage and honor."

"And this man is?"

"Marceau."

"General Marceau?"

"Yes."

"True, he will keep a promise."

"Well, he has promised."

"Mon Dieu! How happy you make me! What has he promised? Tell me all."

"He has promised to help us."

"In what manner?"

"In a very simple manner. Kléber has just had him promoted to the command of the western army. He departs to-morrow night."

"To-morrow night! We shall have no time to make the smallest preparation."

"There are no preparations to make."

"I do not understand."

"He will take your father with him."

"My father?"

"Yes, as his secretary. Arrived in the Vendée, your father will pledge his word to the general to undertake nothing against France. From there he will escape to Brittany, and from Brittany to England. When he arrives in London, he will inform you; I shall obtain a passport for you, and you will join him in London."

"To-morrow," exclaimed Solange; "my father departs tomorrow!"

"There is no time to waste."

"My father has not been informed."

"Inform him."

"To-night?"

"To-night."

"But how, at this hour?"

"You have a pass and my arm."

"True. My pass."

I gave it to her. She thrust it into her bosom.

"Now? your arm?"

I gave her my arm, and we walked away. When we arrived at the Place Turenne--that is, the spot where we had met the night before--she said: "Await me here."

I bowed and waited.

She disappeared around the corner of what was formerly the Hôtel Malignon. After a lapse of fifteen minutes she returned.

"Come," she said, "my father wishes to receive and thank you."

She took my arm and led me up to the Rue St. Guillaume, opposite the Hôtel Mortemart. Arrived here, she took a bunch of keys from her pocket, opened a small, concealed door, took me by the hand, conducted me up two flights of steps, and knocked in a peculiar manner.

A man of forty-eight or fifty years opened the door. He was dressed as a working man and appeared to be a bookbinder. But at the first utterance that burst from his lips, the evidence of the seigneur was unmistakable.

"Monsieur," he said, "Providence has sent you to us. I regard you an emissary of fate. Is it true that you can save me, or, what is more, that you wish to save me?"

I admitted him completely to my confidence. I informed him that Marceau would take him as his secretary, and would exact no promise other than that he would not take up arms against France.

"I cheerfully promise it now, and will repeat it to him."

"I thank you in his name as well as in my own."

"But when does Marceau depart?"

"To-morrow."

"Shall I go to him to-night?"

"Whenever you please; he expects you."

Father and daughter looked at each other.

"I think it would be wise to go this very night," said Solange.

"I am ready; but if I should be arrested, seeing that I have no permit?"

"Here is mine."

"But you?"

"Oh, I am known."

"Where does Marceau reside?"

"Rue de l'Université, 40, with his sister, Mlle. Dégraviers-Marceau."

"Will you accompany me?"

"I shall follow you at a distance, to accompany mademoiselle home when you are gone."

"How will Marceau know that I am the man of whom you spoke to him?"

"You will hand him this tri-colored cockade; that is the sign of identification."

"And how shall I reward my liberator?"

"By allowing him to save your daughter also."

"Very well."

He put on his hat and extinguished the lights, and we descended by the gleam of the moon which penetrated the stair-windows.

At the foot of the steps he took his daughter's arm, and by way of the Rue des Saints Pères we reached Rue de l'Université. I followed them at a distance of ten paces. We arrived at No. 40 without having met any one. I rejoined them there.

"That is a good omen," I said; "do you wish me to go up with you?"

"No. Do not compromise yourself any further. Await my daughter here."

I bowed.

"And now, once more, thanks and farewell," he said, giving me his hand. "Language has no words to express my gratitude. I pray that heaven may some day grant me the opportunity of giving fuller expression to my feelings."

I answered him with a pressure of the hand.

He entered the house. Solange followed him; but she, too, pressed my hand before she entered.

In ten minutes the door was reopened.

"Well?" I asked.

"Your friend," she said, "is worthy of his name; he is as kind and considerate as yourself. He knows that it will contribute to my happiness to remain with my father until the moment of departure. His sister has ordered a bed placed in her room. To-morrow at three o'clock my father will be out of danger. To-morrow evening at ten I shall expect you in the Rue Ferou, if the gratitude of a daughter who owes her father's life to you is worth the trouble."

"Oh, be sure I shall come. Did your father charge you with any message for me?"

"He thanks you for your pass, which he returns to you, and begs you to join him as soon as possible."

"Whenever it may be your desire to go," I said, with a strange sensation at my heart.

"At least, I must know where I am to join him," she said. "Ah, you are not yet rid of me!"

I seized her hand and pressed it against my heart, but she offered me her brow, as on the previous evening, and said: "Until to-morrow."

I kissed her on the brow; but now I no longer strained her hand against my breast, but her heaving bosom, her throbbing heart.

I went home in a state of delirious ecstasy such as I had never experienced. Was it the consciousness of a generous action, or was it love for this adorable creature? I know not whether I slept or woke. I only know that all the harmonies of nature were singing within me; that the night seemed endless, and the day eternal; I know that though I wished to speed the time, I did not wish to lose a moment of the days still to come.



The next day I was in the Rue Ferou at nine o'clock. At half-past nine Solange made her appearance.

She approached me and threw her arms around my neck.

"Saved!" she said; "my father is saved! And this I owe you. Oh, how I love you!"

Two weeks later Solange received a letter announcing her father's safe arrival in England.

The next day I brought her a passport.

When Solange received it she burst into tears.

"You do not love me!" she exclaimed.

"I love you better than my life," I replied; "but I pledged your father my word, and I must keep it."

"Then, I will break mine," she said. "Yes, Albert; if you have the heart to let me go, I have not the courage to leave you."

Alas, she remained!

Three months had passed since that night on which we talked of her escape, and in all that time not a word of parting had passed her lips.

Solange had taken lodgings in the Rue Turenne. I had rented them in her name. I knew no other, while she always addressed me as Albert. I had found her a place as teacher in a young ladies' seminary solely to withdraw her from the espionage of the revolutionary police, which had become more scrutinizing than ever.

Sundays we passed together in the small dwelling, from the bedroom of which we could see the spot where we had first met. We exchanged letters daily, she writing to me under the name of Solange, and I to her under that of Albert.

Those three months were the happiest of my life.

In the meantime I was making some interesting experiments suggested by one of the guillotiniere. I had obtained permission to make certain scientific tests with the bodies and heads of those who perished on the scaffold. Sad to say, available subjects were not wanting. Not a day passed but thirty or forty persons were guillotined, and blood flowed so copiously on the Place de la Révolution that it became necessary to dig a trench three feet deep around the scaffolding. This trench was covered with deals. One of them loosened under the feet of an eight-year-old lad, who fell into the abominable pit and was drowned.

For self-evident reasons I said nothing to Solange of the studies that occupied my attention during the day. In the beginning my occupation had inspired me with pity and loathing, but as time wore on I said: "These studies are for the good of humanity," for I hoped to convince the lawmakers of the wisdom of abolishing capital punishment.

The Cemetery of Clamart had been assigned to me, and all the heads and trunks of the victims of the executioner had been placed at my disposal. A small chapel in one corner of the cemetery had been converted into a kind of laboratory for my benefit. You know, when the queens were driven from the palaces, God was banished from the churches.

Every day at six the horrible procession filed in. The bodies were heaped together in a wagon, the heads in a sack. I chose some bodies and heads in a haphazard fashion, while the remainder were thrown into a common grave.

In the midst of this occupation with the dead, my love for Solange increased from day to day; while the poor child reciprocated my affection with the whole power of her pure soul.

Often I had thought of making her my wife; often we had mutually pictured to ourselves the happiness of such a union. But in order to become my wife, it would be necessary for Solange to reveal her name; and this name, which was that of an emigrant, an aristocrat, meant death.

Her father had repeatedly urged her by letter to hasten her departure, but she had informed him of our engagement. She had requested his consent, and he had given it, so that all had gone well to this extent.

The trial and execution of the queen, Marie Antoinette, had plunged me, too, into deepest sadness. Solange was all tears, and we could not rid ourselves of a strange feeling of despondency, a presentiment of approaching danger, that compressed our hearts. In vain I tried to whisper courage to Solange. Weeping, she reclined in my arms, and I could not comfort her, because my own words lacked the ring of confidence.

We passed the night together as usual, but the night was even more depressing than the day. I recall now that a dog, locked up in a room below us, howled till two o'clock in the morning. The next day we were told that the dog's master had gone away with the key in his pocket, had been arrested on the way, tried at three, and executed at four.

The time had come for us to part. Solange's duties at the school began at nine o'clock in the morning. Her school was in the vicinity of the Botanic Gardens. I hesitated long to let her go; she, too, was loath to part from me. But it must be. Solange was prone to be an object of unpleasant inquiries.

I called a conveyance and Accompanied her as far as the Rue des Fosses-Saint-Bernard, where I got out and left her to pursue her way alone. All the way we lay mutely wrapped in each other's arms, mingling tears with our kisses.

After leaving the carriage, I stood as if rooted to the ground. I heard Solange call me, but I dared not go to her, because her face, moist with tears, and her hysterical manner were calculated to attract attention.

Utterly wretched, I returned home, passing the entire day in writing to Solange. In the evening I sent her an entire volume of love-pledges.

My letter had hardly gone to the post when I received one from her.

She had been sharply reprimanded for coming late; had been subjected to a severe cross-examination, and threatened with forfeiture of her next holiday. But she vowed to join me even at the cost of her place. I thought I should go mad at the prospect of being parted from her a whole week. I was more depressed because a letter which had arrived from her father appeared to have been tampered with.

I passed a wretched night and a still more miserable day.

The next day the weather was appalling. Nature seemed to be dissolving in a cold, ceaseless rain--a rain like that which announces the approach of winter. All the way to the laboratory my ears were tortured with the criers announcing the names of the condemned, a large number of men, women, and children. The bloody harvest was over-rich. I should not lack subjects for my investigations that day.

The day ended early. At four o'clock I arrived at Clamart; it was almost night.

The view of the cemetery, with its large, new-made graves; the sparse, leafless trees that swayed in the wind, was desolate, almost appalling.

A large, open pit yawned before me. It was to receive to-day's harvest from the Place de la Révolution. An exceedingly large number of victims was expected, for the pit was deeper than usual.

Mechanically I approached the grave. At the bottom the water had gathered in a pool; my feet slipped; I came within an inch of falling in. My hair stood on end. The rain had drenched me to the skin. I shuddered and hastened into the laboratory.

It was, as I have said, an abandoned chapel. My eyes searched--I know not why--to discover if some traces of the holy purpose to which the edifice had once been devoted did not still adhere to the walls or to the altar; but the walls were bare, the altar empty.

I struck a light and deposited the candle on the operating-table on which lay scattered a miscellaneous assortment of the strange instruments I employed. I sat down and fell into a reverie. I thought of the poor queen, whom I had seen in her beauty, glory, and happiness, yesterday carted to the scaffold, pursued by the execrations of a people, to-day lying headless on the common sinners' bier--she who had slept beneath the gilded canopy of the throne of the Tuileries and St. Cloud.

As I sat thus, absorbed in gloomy meditation, wind and rain without redoubled in fury. The rain-drops dashed against the window-panes, the storm swept with melancholy moaning through the branches of the trees. Anon there mingled with the violence of the elements the sound of wheels.

It was the executioner's red hearse with its ghastly freight from the Place de la Révolution.

The door of the little chapel was pushed ajar, and two men, drenched with rain, entered, carrying a sack between them.

"There, M. Ledru," said the guillotiner; "there is what your heart longs for! Be in no hurry this night! We'll leave you to enjoy their society alone. Orders are not to cover them up till to-morrow, and so they'll not take cold."

With a horrible laugh, the two executioners deposited the sack in a corner, near the former altar, right in front of me. Thereupon they sauntered out, leaving open the door, which swung furiously on its hinges till my candle flashed and flared in the fierce draft.

I heard them unharness the horse, lock the cemetery, and go away.

I was strangely impelled to go with them, but an indefinable power fettered me in my place. I could not repress a shudder. I had no fear; but the violence of the storm, the splashing of the rain, the whistling sounds of the lashing branches, the shrill vibration of the atmosphere, which made my candle tremble--all this filled me with a vague terror that began at the roots of my hair and communicated itself to every part of my body.

Suddenly I fancied I heard a voice! A voice at once soft and plaintive; a voice within the chapel, pronouncing the name of "Albert!"

I was startled.

"Albert!"

But one person in all the world addressed me by that name!

Slowly I directed my weeping eyes around the chapel, which, though small, was not completely lighted by the feeble rays of the candle,

leaving the nooks and angles in darkness, and my look remained fixed on the blood-soaked sack near the altar with its hideous contents.

At this moment the same voice repeated the same name, only it sounded fainter and more plaintive.

"Albert!"

I bolted out of my chair, frozen with horror.

The voice seemed to proceed from the sack!

I touched myself to make sure that I was awake; then I walked toward the sack with my arms extended before me, but stark and staring with horror. I thrust my hand into it. Then it seemed to me as if two lips, still warm, pressed a kiss upon my fingers!

I had reached that stage of boundless terror where the excess of fear turns into the audacity of despair. I seized the head and collapsing in my chair, placed it in front of me.

Then I gave vent to a fearful scream. This head, with its lips still warm, with the eyes half closed, was the head of Solange!

I thought I should go mad.

Three times I called:

"Solange! Solange! Solange!"

At the third time she opened her eyes and looked at me. Tears trickled down her cheeks; then a moist glow darted from her eyes, as if the soul were passing, and the eyes closed, never to open again.

I sprang to my feet a raving maniac, I wanted to fly; I knocked against the table; it fell. The candle was extinguished; the head rolled upon the floor, and I fell prostrate, as if a terrible fever had stricken me down--an icy-shudder convulsed me, and, with a deep sigh, I swooned.

The following morning at six the grave-diggers found me, cold as the flagstones on which I lay.

Solange, betrayed by her father's letter, had been arrested the same day, condemned, and executed.

The head that had called me, the eyes that had looked at me, were the head, the eyes, of Solange!