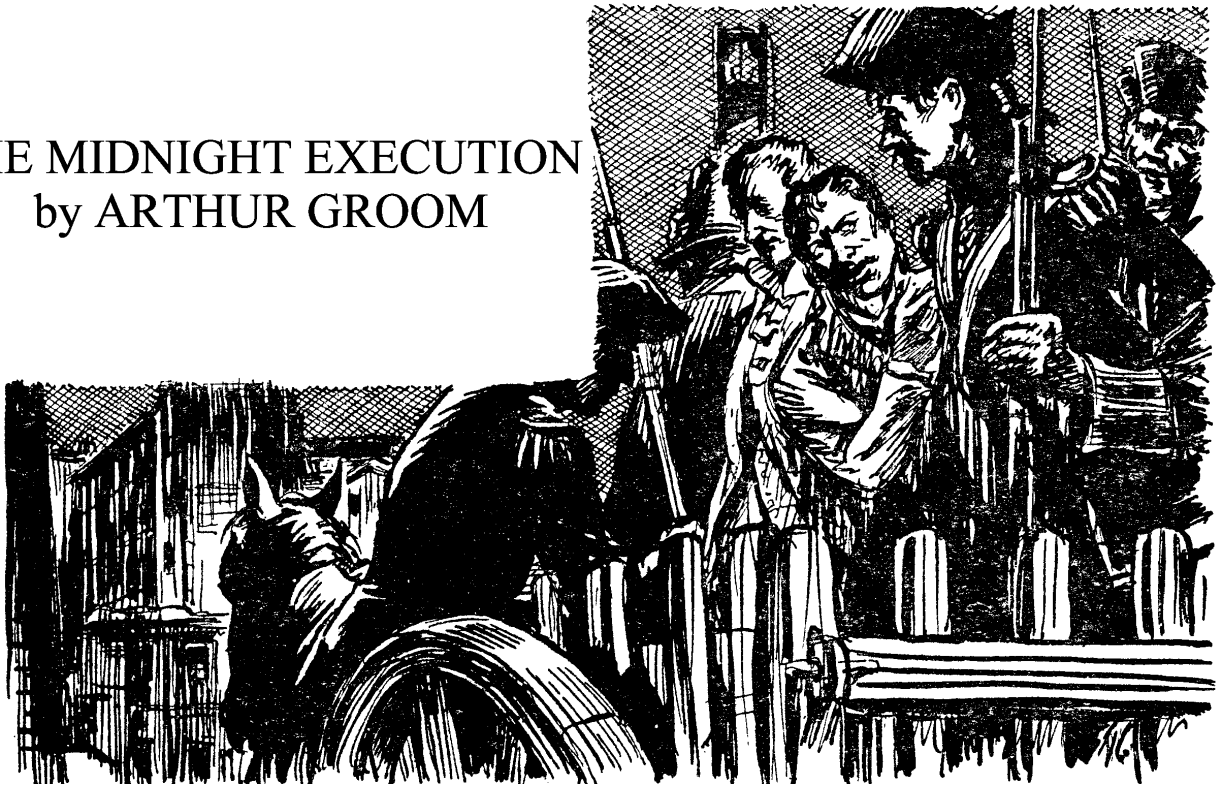


## THE MIDNIGHT EXECUTION by ARTHUR GROOM



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."