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## The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter I. Paris, 1793

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# THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL

## CHAPTER I.

PARIS: 1793.

THERE was not even a reaction.

On! ever on! in that wild, surging torrent; sowing the wind of anarchy, of terrorism, of lust of blood and hate, and reaping a hurricane of destruction and of horror.

On! ever on! France, with Paris and all her children still rushes blindly, madly on; defies the powerful coalition, Austria, England, Spain, Prussia, all joined together to stem the flow of carnage, defies the Universe and defies God!

Paris this September, 1793!—or shall we call it Vendémiaire, Year 1 of the Republic? Call it what we will! Paris! a city of bloodshed, of humanity in its lowest, most degraded aspect, France herself a gigantic self-devouring monster, her fairest cities

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destroyed, Lyons razed to the ground, Toulon, Marseilles, masses of blackened ruins, her bravest sons turned to lustful brutes or to abject cowards seeking safety at the cost of any humiliation.

That is thy reward, O mighty, holy Revolution! apotheosis of equality and fraternity! grand rival of decadent Christianity.

Five weeks now since Marat, the bloodthirsty Friend of the People, succumbed beneath the sheath-knife of a virgin patriot; a month since his murderess walked proudly, even enthusiastically, to the guillotine! There has been no reaction—only a great sigh! . . . Not of content or satisfied lust, but a sigh such as the man-eating tiger might heave after his first taste of long-coveted blood.

A sigh for more!

A king on the scaffold; a queen, degraded and abased, awaiting death, which lingers on the threshold of her infamous prison; eight hundred scions of ancient houses that have made the history of France; brave generals, Custine, Blanchelande, Houchard, Beauharnais; worthy patriots, noble-hearted women, misguided enthusiasts, all by the score and by the hundred, up the few wooden steps which lead to the guillotine.

An achievement, of a truth!

And still that sigh for more!

But for the moment—a few seconds only—Paris looked round her mighty self, and thought things over!

The man-eating tiger for the space of a sigh licked his powerful jaws and pondered!

Something new!—something wonderful!



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We have had a new Constitution, a new Justice, new Laws, a new Almanac!

What next?

Why, obviously! How comes it that great intellectual, æsthetic Paris never thought of such a wonderful thing before?

A new religion!!

Christianity is old and obsolete, priests are aristocrats, wealthy oppressors of the people, the Church but another form of wanton tyranny.

Let us by all means have a new religion.

Already something has been done to destroy the old! To destroy! always to destroy! Churches have been ransacked, altars spoliated, tombs desecrated, priests and curates murdered; but that is not enough.

There must be a new religion; and to attain that there must be a new God.

"Man is a born idol-worshipper."

Very well then! let the People have a new religion and a new God.

Stay!—Not a God this time! for God means Majesty, Power, Kingship! everything in fact which the mighty hand of the people of France has struggled and fought to destroy.

Not a God, but a goddess.

A goddess! an idol! a toy! since even the man-eating tiger must play sometimes.

Paris wanted a new religion, and a new toy, and grave men, ardent patriots, mad enthusiasts, sat in the Assembly of the Convention and seriously discussed the means of providing her with both these things which she asked for.

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Chaumette I think it was who first solved the difficulty—Procureur Chaumette, head of the Paris Municipality, he who had ordered that the cart, which bore the dethroned queen to the squalid prison of the Conciergerie, should be led slowly past her own late palace of the Tuileries, and should be stopped there just long enough for her to see and to feel, in one grand mental vision, all that she had been when she dwelt there, and all that she now was by the will of the People.

Chaumette, as you see, was refined, artistic; the torture of the fallen Queen's heart meant more to him than a blow of the guillotine on her neck.

No wonder, therefore, that it was Procureur Chaumette who first discovered exactly what type of new religion Paris wanted just now.

"Let us have a goddess of Reason," he said, "typified if you will by the most beautiful woman in Paris. Let us have a feast of the Goddess of Reason, let there be a pyre of all the gew-gaws which for centuries have been flaunted by over-bearing priests before the eyes of starving multitudes, let the people rejoice and dance around that funeral pile, and above it all let the new goddess tower smiling and triumphant. The Goddess of Reason! the only deity our new and regenerate France shall acknowledge throughout the centuries which are to come!"

Loud applause greeted the impassioned speech.

"A new goddess, by all means!" shouted the grave gentlemen of the National Assembly, "the Goddess of Reason!"

They were all eager that the People should have this toy; something to play with and to tease, round



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which to dance the mad carmagnole and sing the ever-recurring "Ça ira."

Something to distract the minds of the populace from the consequences of its own deeds, and the helplessness of its legislators.

Procureur Chaumette enlarged upon his original idea, like a true artist who sees the broad effect of a picture at a glance and then fills in the minute details; he was already busy elaborating his scheme.

"The goddess must be beautiful . . . not too young. . . . Reason can only go hand in hand with the riper age of second youth . . . she must be decked out in classical draperies, severe yet suggestive . . . she must be rouged and painted . . . for she is a mere idol . . . easily to be appeased with incense, music and laughter."

He was getting deeply interested in his subject, seeking minutiae of detail, with which to render his theme more and more attractive.

But patience was never the characteristic of the revolutionary government of France. The National Assembly soon tired of Chaumette's dithyrambic utterances. Up aloft on the Mountain, Danton was yawning like a gigantic leopard.

Soon Henriot was on his feet. He had a far finer scheme than that of the Procureur to place before his colleagues. A grand national fête, semi-religious in character, but of the new religion which destroyed and desecrated and never knelt in worship.

Citizen Chaumette's Goddess of Reason by all means—Henriot conceded that the idea was a good one—but the goddess merely as a figure-head: around

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her a procession of unfrocked and apostate priests, typifying the destruction of ancient hierarchy, mules carrying loads of sacred vessels, the spoils of ten thousand churches of France, and ballet girls in bacchanalian robes, dancing the carmagnole around the new deity.

Public Prosecutor, Fouquier Tinville, thought all these schemes very tame. Why should the people of France be led to think that the era of a new religion would mean an era of milk and water, of pageants and of fireworks? Let every man, woman and child know that this was an era of blood, of blood and again of blood.

"Oh!" he exclaimed in passionate accents, "would that all the traitors in France had but one head, that it might be cut off with one blow of the guillotine!"

He approved of the National fête, but he desired an apotheosis of the guillotine; he undertook to find ten thousand traitors to be beheaded on one grand and glorious day: ten thousand heads to adorn the Place de la Revolution on a great, never-to-be-forgotten evening, after the guillotine had accomplished this record work.

But Collot d'Herbois would also have his say. Collot lately hailed from the South, with a reputation for ferocity unparalleled throughout the whole of this horrible decade. He would not be outdone by Tinville's bloodthirsty schemes.

He was the inventor of the "Noyades," which had been so successful at Lyons and Marseilles. "Why not give the inhabitants of Paris one of these exhilarating spectacles?" he asked with a coarse, brutal laugh.



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Then he explained his invention of which he was inordinately proud. Some two or three hundred traitors, men, women and children, tied securely together with ropes, in great, human bundles, and thrown upon a barge in the middle of the river: the barge with a hole in her bottom! not too large! only sufficient to cause her to sink slowly, very slowly in sight of the crowd of delighted spectators.

The cries of the women and children, and even of the men, as they felt the waters rising and gradually enveloping them, as they felt themselves powerless even for a fruitless struggle, had proved most exhilarating, so Citizen Collot declared, to the hearts of the true patriots of Lyons.

Thus the discussion continued.

This was the era when every man had but one desire, that of outdoing others in ferocity and brutality, and but one care, that of saving his own head by threatening that of his neighbour.

The great duel between the Titanic leaders of these turbulent parties, the conflict between hot-headed Danton on the one side and cold-blooded Robespierre on the other, had only just begun, the great, all-devouring monsters had dug their claws into one another, but the issue of the combat was still at stake.

Neither of these two giants had taken part in these deliberations anent the new religion and the new goddess. Danton gave signs now and then of the greatest impatience, and muttered something about a new form of tyranny, a new kind of oppression.

On the left, Robespierre in immaculate sea-green coat and carefully gauffered linen, was quietly polish-



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ing the nails of his right hand against the palm of his left.

But nothing escaped him of what was going on. His ferocious egoism, his unbounded ambition was even now calculating what advantages to himself might accrue from this idea of the new religion and of the National fête, what personal aggrandisement he could derive therefrom.

The matter outwardly seemed trivial enough, but already his keen and calculating mind had seen various side issues which might tend to place him—Robespierre—on a yet higher and more unassailable pinnacle.

Surrounded by those who hated him, those who envied and those who feared him, he ruled over them all by the strength of his own cold-blooded savagery, by the resistless power of his merciless cruelty.

He cared about nobody but himself, about nothing but his own exaltation: every action of his career, since he gave up his small practice in a quiet provincial town in order to throw himself into the wild vortex of revolutionary politics, every word he ever uttered had but one aim—Himself.

He saw his colleagues and comrades of the old Jacobin Clubs ruthlessly destroyed around him: friends he had none, and all left him indifferent; and now he had hundreds of enemies in every assembly and club in Paris, and these, too, one by one were being swept up in that wild whirlpool which they themselves had created.

Impassive, serene, always ready with a calm answer when passions raged most hotly round him, Robes-

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pierre, the most ambitious, most self-seeking demagogue of his time, had acquired the reputation of being incorruptible and selfless, an enthusiastic servant of the Republic.

The sea-green Incorruptible!

And thus whilst others talked and argued, waxed hot over schemes for processions and pageantry, or loudly denounced the whole matter as the work of a traitor, he, of the sea-green coat, sat quietly polishing his nails.

But he had already weighed all these discussions in the balance of his mind, placed them in the crucible of his ambition, and turned them into something that would benefit him and strengthen his position.

Aye! the feast should be brilliant enough! gay or horrible, mad or fearful, but through it all the people of France must be made to feel that there was a guiding hand which ruled the destinies of all, a head which framed the new laws, which consolidated the new religion and established its new goddess: the Goddess of Reason.

Robespierre, her prophet!