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The elusive Pimpernel

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London, 1908

Chapter II. A retrospect

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CHAPTER II.

A RETROSPECT.

THE room was close and dark, filled with the smoke from a defective chimney.

A tiny boudoir, once the dainty sanctum of imperious Marie Antoinette; a faint and ghostly odour, like unto the perfume of spectres, seemed still to cling to the stained walls, and to the torn Gobelin tapestries.

Everywhere lay the impress of a heavy and destroying hand: that of the great and glorious Revolution.

In the mud-soiled corners of the room a few chairs, with brocaded cushions rudely torn, leant broken and desolate against the walls. A small footstool, once gilt-legged and satin-covered, had been overturned and roughly kicked to one side, and there it lay on its back, like some little animal that had been hurt, stretching its broken limbs upwards, pathetic to behold.

From the delicately wrought Buhl table the silver

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inlay had been harshly stripped out of its bed of shell.

Across the Lunette, painted by Boucher and representing a chaste Diana surrounded by a bevy of nymphs, an uncouth hand had scribbled in charcoal the device of the Revolution: *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité ou la Mort*; whilst, as if to give a crowning point to the work of destruction and to emphasise its motto, someone had decorated the portrait of Marie Antoinette with a scarlet cap, and drawn a red and ominous line across her neck.

And at the table two men were sitting in close and eager conclave.

Between them a solitary tallow candle, unsnuffed and weirdly flickering, threw fantastic shadows upon the walls, and illumined with fitful and uncertain light the faces of the two men.

How different were these in character!

One, high cheek-boned, with coarse, sensuous lips, and hair elaborately and carefully powdered, the other pale and thin-lipped, with the keen eyes of a ferret and a high, intellectual forehead, from which the sleek brown hair was smoothly brushed away.

The first of these men was Robespierre, the ruthless and incorruptible demagogue, the other was Citizen Chauvelin, ex-ambassador of the Revolutionary Government at the English Court.

The hour was late, and the noises from the great, seething city preparing for sleep came to this remote little apartment in the now deserted Palace of the Tuileries merely as a faint and distant echo.

It was two days after the Fructidor Riots. Paul

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Déroulède and the woman, Juliette Marny, both condemned to death, had been literally spirited away out of the cart which was conveying them from the Hall of Justice to the Luxembourg Prison, and news had just been received by the Committee of Public Safety that at Lyons the Abbé du Mesnil, with the ci-devant Chevalier d'Egremont and the latter's wife and family, had effected a miraculous and wholly incomprehensible escape from the northern prison.

But this was not all. When Arras fell into the hands of the Revolutionary army, and a regular cordon was formed round the town so that not a single Royalist traitor might escape, some three-score women and children, twelve priests, the old aristocrats Chermeuil, Delleville and Galipaux, and many others, managed to pass the barriers and were never recaptured.

Raids were made in the suspected houses: in Paris chiefly, where the escaped prisoners might have found refuge—or, better still, where their helpers and rescuers might still be lurking. Fouquier Tinville, Public Prosecutor, led and conducted these raids, assisted by that bloodthirsty vampire, Merlin. They heard of a house in the Rue de l'Ancienne Comédie, where an Englishman was said to have lodged for two days.

They demanded admittance, and were taken to the rooms where the Englishman had stayed. These were bare and squalid, like hundreds of other rooms in the poorer quarters of Paris. The landlady, toothless and grimy, had not yet tidied up the one where

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the Englishman had slept; in fact, she did not know he had left for good.

He had paid for his room a week in advance, and came and went as he liked, she explained to Citizen Tinville. She never bothered about him, as he never took a meal in the house, and he was only there two days. She did not know her lodger was English until the day he left. She thought he was a Frenchman from the South, as he certainly had a peculiar accent when he spoke.

"It was the day of the riots," she continued; "he would go out, and I told him I did not think that the streets would be safe for a foreigner like him: for he always wore such very fine clothes, and I made sure that the starving men and women of Paris would strip them off his back when their tempers were roused. But he only laughed. He gave me a bit of paper and told me that if he did not return I might conclude that he had been killed, and if the Committee of Public Safety asked me questions about him, I was just to show the bit of paper and there would be no further trouble."

She had talked volubly, more than a little terrified at Merlin's scowls, and the attitude of Citizen Tinville, who was known to be very severe if anyone committed any blunders.

But the Citizeness—her name was Brogard, and her husband's brother kept an inn in the neighbourhood of Calais—the Citizeness Brogard had a clear conscience. She held a licence from the Committee of Public Safety for letting apartments, and she had always given due notice to the Committee of the

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arrival and departure of her lodgers. The only thing was that if any lodger paid her more than ordinarily well for the accommodation, and he so desired it, she would send in the notice conveniently late, and conveniently vaguely worded as to the description, status, and nationality of her more liberal patrons.

This had occurred in the case of her recent English visitor.

But she did not explain it quite like that to Citizen Fouquier Tinville or to Citizen Merlin.

However, she was rather frightened, and produced the scrap of paper which the Englishman had left with her, together with the assurance that when she showed it there would be no further trouble.

Tinville took it roughly out of her hand, but would not glance at it. He crushed it into a ball and then Merlin snatched it from him with a coarse laugh, smoothed out the creases on his knee, and studied it for a moment.

There were four lines of what looked like poetry, written in a language which Merlin did not understand. English, no doubt.

But what was perfectly clear, and easily comprehended by anyone, was the little drawing in the corner, done in red ink, and representing a small, star-shaped flower.

Then Tinville and Merlin both cursed loudly and volubly, and, bidding their men follow them, turned away from the house in the Rue de l'Ancienne Comédie and left its toothless landlady on her own doorstep still volubly protesting her patriotism and her desire to serve the Government of the Republic.

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Tinville and Merlin, however, took the scrap of paper to Citizen Robespierre, who smiled grimly as he in his turn crushed the offensive little document in the palm of his well-washed hand.

Robespierre did not swear. He never wasted either words or oaths ; but he slipped the bit of paper inside the double lid of his silver snuff-box, and then he sent a special messenger to Citizen Chauvelin in the Rue Corneille, bidding him come that same evening, after ten o'clock, to room No. 16 in the ci-devant Palace of the Tuileries.

It was now half-past ten, and Chauvelin and Robespierre sat opposite one another in the ex-boudoir of Queen Marie Antoinette, and between them on the table, just below the tallow candle, was a much-creased, exceedingly grimy bit of paper.

It had passed through several unclean hands before Citizen Robespierre's immaculately white fingers had smoothed it out and placed it before the eyes of ex-ambassador Chauvelin.

The latter, however, was not looking at the paper, he was not even looking at the pale, cruel face before him. He had closed his eyes, and for a moment had lost sight of the small, dark room, of Robespierre's ruthless gaze, of the mud-stained walls, and greasy floor. He was seeing, as in a bright and sudden vision, the brilliantly lighted salons of the Foreign Office in London, with beautiful Marguerite Blakeney gliding queen-like on the arm of the Prince of Wales.

He heard the flutter of many fans, the frou-frou of silk dresses, and above all the din and sound of dance music he heard an inane laugh and an affected voice

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repeating the doggerel rhyme that was even now written on that dirty piece of paper which Robespierre had placed before him:—

“We seek him here, we seek him there,
Those Frenchies seek him everywhere!
Is he in heaven, is he in hell,
That demmed elusive Pimpernel?”

It was a mere flash! One of memory's swiftly effaced pictures, when she shows us for the fraction of a second indelible pictures from out our past. Chauvelin, in that same second, while his own eyes were closed and Robespierre's fixed upon him, also saw the lonely cliffs of Calais, heard the same voice singing “God save the King!” the volley of musketry, the despairing cries of Marguerite Blakeney; and once again he felt the keen and bitter pang of complete humiliation and defeat.