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## The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XVII. Boulogne

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## CHAPTER XVII.

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DURING the journey Marguerite had not much leisure to think. The discomforts and petty miseries incidental on cheap travelling had the very welcome effect of making her forget, for the time being, the soul-rending crisis through which she was now passing.

For, of necessity, she had to travel at the cheap rate, among the crowd of poorer passengers who were herded aft the packet boat, leaning up against one another, sitting on bundles and packages of all kinds; that part of the deck, reeking with the smell of tar and sea-water, damp, squally, and stuffy, was an abomination of hideous discomfort to the dainty, fastidious lady of fashion, yet she almost welcomed the intolerable propinquity, the cold douches of salt water, which every now and then wetted her through and through, for it was the consequent sense of physical wretchedness that helped her to forget the intolerable anguish of her mind.

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'And among these poorer travellers she felt secure from observation. No one took much notice of her. She looked just like one of the herd, and in the huddled-up little figure in the dark, bedraggled clothes, no one would for a moment have recognised the dazzling personality of Lady Blakeney.

Drawing her hood well over her head, she sat in a secluded corner of the deck, upon the little black valise which contained the few belongings she had brought with her. Her cloak and dress, now mud-stained and dank with splashings of salt water, attracted no one's attention. There was a keen north-easterly breeze, cold and penetrating, but favourable to a rapid crossing. Marguerite, who had gone through several hours of weary travelling by coach before she had embarked at Dover in the late afternoon, was unspeakably tired. She had watched the golden sunset out at sea until her eyes were burning with pain, and as the dazzling crimson and orange and purple gave place to the soft grey tones of evening, she descried the round cupola of the church of Our Lady of Boulogne against the dull background of the sky.

After that her mind became a blank. A sort of torpor fell over her senses: she was wakeful and yet half-asleep, unconscious of everything around her, seeing nothing but the distant massive towers of old Boulogne churches gradually detaching themselves one by one from out the fast-gathering gloom.

The town seemed like a dream city, a creation of some morbid imagination, presented to her mind's eye as the city of sorrow and of death.

When the boat finally scraped her sides along the

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rough wooden jetty, Marguerite felt as if she were being forcibly awakened. She was numb and stiff and thought she must have fallen asleep during the last half-hour of the journey.

Everything round her was dark. The sky was overcast, and the night seemed unusually sombre. Figures were moving all around her; there was noise and confusion of voices, and a general pushing and shouting, which seemed strangely weird in this gloom. Here, among the poorer passengers, there had not been thought any necessity for a light: one solitary lantern fixed to a mast only enhanced the intense blackness of everything around. Now and then a face would come within range of this meagre streak of yellow light, looking strangely distorted, with great, elongated shadows across the brow and chin, a grotesque, ghostly apparition, which quickly vanished again, scurrying off like some frightened gnome, giving place to other forms, other figures, all equally grotesque and equally weird.

Marguerite watched them all half-stupidly and motionlessly for awhile. She did not quite know what she ought to do, and did not like to ask any questions: she was dazed and the darkness blinded her. Then gradually things began to detach themselves more clearly. On looking straight before her, she began to discern the landing-place, the little wooden bridge across which the passengers walked, one by one, from the boat on to the jetty. The first-class passengers were evidently all alighting now: the crowd, of which Marguerite formed a unit, had been pushed back in a more compact herd, out of the way for the moment,

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so that their betters might get along more comfortably.

Beyond the landing-stage a little booth had been erected, a kind of tent, open in front and lighted up within by a couple of lanthorns. Under this tent there was a table, behind which sat a man dressed in some sort of official-looking clothes, and wearing the tri-colour scarf across his chest.

All the passengers from the boat had apparently to file past this tent. Marguerite could see them now quite distinctly, the profiles of the various faces, as they paused for a moment in front of the table, being brilliantly illuminated by one of the lanterns. Two sentinels, wearing the uniform of the National Guard, stood each side of the table. The passengers, one by one, took out their passport as they went by, handed it to the man in the official dress, who examined it carefully, very lengthily, then signed it, and returned the paper to its owner: but at times he appeared doubtful, folded the passport, and put it down in front of him: the passenger would protest; Marguerite could not hear what was said, but she could see that some argument was attempted, quickly dismissed by a peremptory order from the official. The doubtful passport was obviously put on one side for further examination, and the unfortunate owner thereof detained, until he or she had been able to give more satisfactory references to the representatives of the Committee of Public Safety stationed at Boulogne.

This process of examination necessarily took a long time. Marguerite was getting horribly tired, her feet ached, and she scarcely could hold herself upright: yet she watched all these people mechanically, making

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absurd little guesses in her weary mind as to whose passport would find favour in the eyes of the official and whose would be found suspect and inadequate.

Suspect! a terrible word these times! since Merlin's terrible law decreed now that every man, woman, or child, who was suspected by the Republic of being a traitor, was a traitor in fact.

How sorry she felt for those whose passports were detained: who tried to argue—so needlessly!—and who were finally led off by a soldier, who had stepped out from somewhere in the dark, and had to await further examination, probably imprisonment, and often death.

As to herself, she felt quite safe: the passport given to her by Chauvelin's own accomplice was sure to be quite *en règle*.

Then suddenly her heart seemed to give a sudden leap and then to stop in its beating for a second or two. In one of the passengers, a man who was just passing in front of the tent, she had recognised the form and profile of Chauvelin.

He had no passport to show, but evidently the official knew who he was, for he stood up and saluted, and listened deferentially whilst the ex-ambassador apparently gave him a few instructions. It seemed to Marguerite that these instructions related to two women who were close behind Chauvelin at the time, and who presently seemed to file past without going through the usual formalities of showing their passports. But of this she could not be quite sure. The women were closely hooded and veiled, and her own

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attention had been completely absorbed by this sudden appearance of her deadly enemy.

Yet what more natural than that Chauvelin should be here now. His object accomplished, he had no doubt posted to Dover, just as she had done. There was no difficulty in that, and a man of his type and importance would always have unlimited means and money at his command to accomplish any journey he might desire to undertake.

There was nothing strange or even unexpected in the man's presence here; and yet somehow it had made the whole, awful reality more tangible, more wholly unforgettable. Marguerite remembered his abject words to her, when first she had seen him at the Richmond fête: he said that he had fallen into disgrace, that, having failed in his service to the Republic, he had been relegated to a subordinate position, pushed aside with contumely to make room for better, abler men.

Well! all that was a lie, of course, a cunning method of gaining access into her house; of that she had already been convinced, when Candeille provoked the esclandre which led to the challenge.

That on French soil he seemed in anything but a subsidiary position, that he appeared to rule rather than to obey, could in no way appear to Marguerite in the nature of surprise.

As the actress had been a willing tool in the cunning hands of Chauvelin, so were probably all these people around her. Where others cringed in the face of officialism, the ex-ambassador had stepped forth as a master: he had shown a badge, spoken a word may-

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hap, and the man in the tent, who had made other people tremble, stood up deferentially and obeyed all commands.

It was all very simple and very obvious: but Marguerite's mind had been asleep, and it was the sight of the sable-clad little figure which had roused it from its happy torpor.

In a moment now her brain was active and alert, and presently it seemed to her as if another figure—taller than those around—had crossed the barrier immediately in the wake of Chauvelin. Then she chided herself for her fancies!

It could not be her husband. Not yet! He had gone by water, and would scarce be in Boulogne before the morning!

Ah! now at last came the turn of the second-class passengers! There was a general bousculade, and the human bundle began to move. Marguerite lost sight of the tent and its awe-inspiring appurtenances: she was a mere unit again in this herd on the move. She, too, progressed along slowly, one step at a time; it was wearisome and she was deadly tired. She was beginning to form plans now that she had arrived in France. All along she had made up her mind that she would begin by seeking out the Abbé Foucquet, for he would prove a link 'twixt her husband and herself. She knew that Percy would communicate with the abbé; had he not told her that the rescue of the devoted old man from the clutches of the Terrorists would be one of the chief objects of his journey? It had never occurred to her what she would do if she found the Abbé Foucquet gone from Boulogne.

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"Hé! la mère! your passport!"

The rough words roused her from her meditations. She had moved forward, quite mechanically, her mind elsewhere, her thoughts not following the aim of her feet. Thus she must have crossed the bridge along with some of the crowd, must have landed on the jetty, and reached the front of the tent, without really knowing what she was doing.

Ah, yes! her passport! She had quite forgotten that! But she had it by her, quite in order, given to her in a fit of tardy remorse by Demoiselle Candeille, the intimate friend of one of the most influential members of the Revolutionary Government of France.

She took the passport from the bosom of her dress and handed it to the man in the official dress.

"Your name?" he asked peremptorily.

"Céline Dumont," she replied unhesitatingly, for had she not rehearsed all this in her mind dozens of times, until her tongue could rattle off the borrowed name as easily as it could her own; "servitor to Citizeness Désirée Candeille!"

The man, who had very carefully been examining the paper the while, placed it down on the table deliberately in front of him, and said:

"Céline Dumont! Eh! la mère! what tricks are you up to now?"

"Tricks? I don't understand!" she said quietly, for she was not afraid. The passport was *en règle*: she knew she had nothing to fear.

"Oh! but I think you do!" retorted the official with a sneer; "and 'tis a mighty clever one, I'll allow. Céline Dumont, *ma foi!* Not badly imagined, *ma*

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petite mère : and all would have passed off splendidly ; unfortunately, Céline Dumont, servitor to Citizeness Candeille, passed through these barriers along with her mistress not half an hour ago."

And with long, grimy finger he pointed to an entry in the large book which lay open before him, and wherein he had apparently been busy making notes of the various passengers who had filed past him.

Then he looked up with a triumphant leer at the calm face of Marguerite. She still did not feel really frightened, only puzzled and perturbed ; but all the blood had rushed away from her face, leaving her cheeks ashen white, and pressing against her heart, until it almost choked her.

" You are making a mistake, citizen," she said very quietly. " I am Citizeness Candeille's maid. She gave me the passport herself, just before I left England ; if you will ask her the question, she will confirm what I say, and she assured me that it was quite en règle."

But the man only shrugged his shoulders and laughed derisively. The incident evidently amused him, yet he must have seen so many of the same sort : in the far corner of the tent Marguerite seemed to discern a few moving forms, soldiers, she thought, for she caught sight of a glint like that of steel. One or two men stood close behind the official at the desk, and the sentinels were to the right and left of the tent.

With an instinctive sense of appeal, Marguerite looked round from one face to the other : but each looked absolutely impassive and stolid, quite uninterested in this little scene, the exact counterpart of a

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dozen others, enacted on this very spot within the last hour.

"Hé! là! là! petite mère!" said the official in the same tone of easy persiflage which he had adopted all along; "but we do know how to concoct a pretty lie, aye!—and so circumstantially too! Unfortunately it was Citizeness Désirée Candeille herself who happened to be standing just where you are at the present moment, along with her maid, Céline Dumont, both of whom were specially signed for and recommended as perfectly trustworthy by no less a person than Citoyen Chauvelin of the Committee of Public Safety."

"But I assure you that there is a mistake," pleaded Marguerite earnestly. "'Tis the other woman who lied; I have my passport and . . . ."

"A truce on this," retorted the man peremptorily. "If everything is as you say, and if you have nothing to hide, you'll be at liberty to continue your journey to-morrow, after you have explained yourself before the Citizen Governor. Next one now, quick!"

Marguerite tried another protest, just as those others had done, whom she had watched so mechanically before. But already she knew that that would be useless, for she had felt that a heavy hand was being placed on her shoulder, and that she was being roughly led away.

In a flash she had understood and seen the whole sequel of the awful trap, which had all along been destined to engulf her as well as her husband.

What a clumsy, blind fool she had been!

What a miserable antagonist to the subtle schemes of a past master of intrigue as was Chauvelin. To

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have enticed the Scarlet Pimpernel to France was a great thing! The challenge was clever, the acceptance of it by the bold adventurer a foregone conclusion, but the master stroke of the whole plan was done, when she, the wife, was enticed over, too, with the story of Candeille's remorse and the offer of the passport

Fool! fool that she was!

And how well did Chauvelin know feminine nature! How cleverly he had divined her thoughts, her feelings, the impulsive way in which she would act; how easily he had guessed that, knowing her husband's danger, she, Marguerite, would immediately follow him.

Now the trap had closed on her—and she saw it all, when it was too late.

Percy Blakeney in France! his wife a prisoner! her freedom and safety in exchange for his life!

The hopelessness of it all struck her with appalling force, and her senses reeled with the awful finality of the disaster.

Yet instinct in her still struggled for freedom. Ahead of her, and all around, beyond the tent and in the far distance, there was a provocative, alluring darkness: if she only could get away, only could reach the shelter of that remote and sombre distance, she would hide, and wait, not blunder again—oh, no! she would be prudent and wary, if only she could get away!

One woman's struggles against five men! It was pitiable, sublime, absolutely useless.

The man in the tent seemed to be watching her with much amusement for a moment or two, as her whole, graceful body stiffened for that absurd and unequal

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physical contest. He seemed vastly entertained at the sight of this good-looking young woman striving to pit her strength against five sturdy soldiers of the Republic.

"Allons! that will do, now!" he said at last, roughly. "We have no time to waste! Get the jade away, and let her cool her temper in No. 6, until the Citizen Governor gives further orders."

"Take her away!" he shouted more loudly, banging a grimy fist down on the table before him, as Marguerite still struggled on with the blind madness of despair. "Pardi! can none of you rid us of that turbulent baggage?"

The crowd behind were pushing forward: the guard within the tent were jeering at those who were striving to drag Marguerite away: these latter were cursing loudly and volubly, until one of them, tired out, furious and brutal, raised his heavy fist and with an obscene oath brought it crashing down upon the unfortunate woman's head.

Perhaps, though it was the work of a savage and cruel creature, the blow proved more merciful than it had been intended: it had caught Marguerite full between the eyes; her aching senses, wearied and reeling already, gave way beneath this terrible violence; her useless struggles ceased, her arms fell inert by her side, and, losing consciousness completely, her proud, unbendable spirit was spared the humiliating knowledge of her final removal by the rough soldiers, and of the complete wreckage of her last, lingering hopes.