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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XVIII. No. 6

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CHAPTER XVIII.

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CONSCIOUSNESS returned very slowly, very painfully.

It was night when last Marguerite had clearly known what was going on around her ; it was daylight before she realised that she still lived, that she still knew and suffered.

Her head ached intolerably : that was the first conscious sensation which came to her ; then she vaguely perceived a pale ray of sunshine, very hazy and narrow, which came from somewhere in front of her, and struck her in the face. She kept her eyes tightly shut, for that filmy light caused her an increase of pain.

She seemed to be lying on her back, and her fingers wandering restlessly around felt a hard paillasse beneath their touch, then a rough pillow, and her own cloak laid over her : thought had not yet returned, only the sensation of great suffering and of infinite fatigue.

Anon she ventured to open her eyes, and gradually

one or two objects detached themselves from out the haze which still obscured her vision.

Firstly, the narrow aperture—scarcely a window—filled in with tiny squares of coarse, unwashed glass, through which the rays of the morning sun were making kindly efforts to penetrate, then the cloud of dust illumined by those same rays and made up—so it seemed to the poor tired brain that strove to perceive—of myriads of abnormally large molecules, over-abundant, and over-active, for they appeared to be dancing a kind of wild saraband before Marguerite's aching eyes, advancing and retreating, forming themselves into groups and taking on funny shapes of weird masques and grotesque faces, which grinned at the unconscious figure lying helpless on the rough paillasse.

Through and beyond them Marguerite gradually became aware of three walls of a narrow room, dank and gray, half covered with whitewash and half with greenish mildew! Yes! and there, opposite to her and immediately beneath that semblance of a window was another paillasse, and on it something dark, that moved.

The words: "Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité ou la Mort!" stared out at her from somewhere beyond those active molecules of dust, but she also saw just above the other paillasse the vague outline of a dark crucifix.

It seemed a terrible effort to co-ordinate all these things, and to try and realise what the room was, and what was the meaning of the paillasse, the narrow window and the stained walls, too much altogether for

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the aching head to take in save very slowly, very gradually.

Marguerite was content to wait and to let memory creep back as reluctantly as it would.

"Do you think, my child, you could drink a little of this now?"

It was a gentle, rather tremulous voice which struck upon her ear. She opened her eyes, and noticed that the dark something which had previously been on the opposite paillasse was no longer there, and that there appeared to be a presence close to her only vaguely defined, someone kindly and tender who had spoken to her in French, with that soft sing-song accent peculiar to the Normandy peasants, and who now seemed to be pressing something cool and soothing to her lips.

"They gave me this for you!" continued the tremulous voice close to her ear; "I think it would do you good, if you tried to take it."

A hand and arm were thrust underneath the rough pillow, causing her to raise her head a little. A glass was held to her lips and she drank.

The hand that held the glass was all wrinkled, brown and dry, and trembled slightly, but the arm which supported her head was firm and very kind.

"There! I am sure you feel better now. Close your eyes and try to go to sleep."

She did as she was bid, and was ready enough to close her eyes. It seemed to her presently as if something had been interposed between her aching head and that trying ray of white September sun.

Perhaps she slept peacefully for a little while after

that, for though her head was still very painful, her mouth and throat felt less parched and dry. Through this sleep, or semblance of sleep, she was conscious of the same pleasant voice softly droning Paters and Aves close to her ear.

Thus she lay during the greater part of that day. Not quite fully conscious, not quite awake to the awful memories which anon would crowd upon her thick and fast.

From time to time the same kind and trembling hands would with gentle pressure force a little liquid food through her unwilling lips: some warm soup, or anon a glass of milk. Beyond the pain in her head, she was conscious of no physical ill; she felt at perfect peace, and an extraordinary sense of quiet and repose seemed to pervade this small room, with its narrow window, through which the rays of the sun came gradually in more golden splendour as the day drew towards noon, and then they vanished altogether.

The drony voice close beside her acted as a soporific upon her nerves. In the afternoon she fell into a real and beneficent sleep. . . .

But after that she woke to full consciousness!

Oh! the horror, the folly of it all!

It came back to her with all the inexorable force of an appalling certainty.

She was a prisoner in the hands of those who long ago had sworn to bring the Scarlet Pimpernel to death!

She! his wife, a hostage in their hands! her freedom and safety offered to him as the price of his own!

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Here there was no question of dreams or of nightmares : no illusions as to the ultimate intentions of her husband's enemies. It was all a reality, and even now, before she had the strength fully to grasp the whole nature of this horrible situation, she knew that, by her own act of mad and passionate impulse, she had hopelessly jeopardised the life of the man she loved.

For with that sublime confidence in him begotten of her love, she never for a moment doubted which of the two alternatives he would choose, when once they were placed before him. He would sacrifice himself for her ; he would prefer to die a thousand deaths so long as they set her free.

For herself, her own sufferings, her danger or humiliation she cared nothing ! Nay ! at this very moment she was conscious of a wild, passionate desire for death. . . . In this sudden onrush of memory and of thought she wished with all her soul and heart and mind to die here suddenly, on this hard pailleasse, in this lonely and dark prison . . . so that she should be out of the way once and for all . . . so that she should *not* be the hostage to be bartered against his precious life and freedom.

He would suffer acutely, terribly at her loss, because he loved her above everything else on earth ; he would suffer in every fibre of his passionate and ardent nature, but he would not then have to endure the humiliations, the awful alternatives, the galling impotence and miserable death, the relentless "either—or" which his enemies were even now preparing for him.

And then came a revulsion of feeling. Marguerite's was essentially a buoyant and active nature, a keen brain which worked and schemed and planned, rather than one ready to accept the inevitable.

Hardly had these thoughts of despair and of death formulated themselves in her mind, than, with brilliant swiftness, a new train of ideas began to take root.

What if matters were not so hopeless after all?

Already her mind had flown instinctively to thoughts of escape. Had she the right to despair? She, the wife and intimate companion of the man who had astonished the world with his daring, his prowess, his amazing good luck, she to imagine for a moment that in this all-supreme moment of his adventurous life the Scarlet Pimpernel would fail!

Was not English society peopled with men, women, and children whom his ingenuity had rescued from plights quite as seemingly hopeless as was her own, and would not all the resources of that inventive brain be brought to bear upon this rescue which touched him nearer and more deeply than any which he had attempted hitherto?

Now Marguerite was chiding herself for her doubts and for her fears. Already she remembered that amidst the crowd on the landing stage she had perceived a figure—unusually tall—following in the wake of Chauvelin and his companions. Awakened hope had already assured her that she had not been mistaken, that Percy, contrary to her own surmises, had reached Boulogne last night: he always acted so differently to what anyone might expect, that it was quite possible that he had crossed over in the packet-boat after all,

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unknown to Marguerite as well as to his enemies.

Oh yes! the more she thought about it all, the more sure was she that Percy was already in Boulogne, and that he knew of her capture and her danger.

What right had she to doubt, even for a moment, that he would know how to reach her, how—when the time came—to save himself and her?

A warm glow began to fill her veins, she felt excited and alert, absolutely unconscious now of pain or fatigue, in this radiant joy of re-awakened hope.

She raised herself slightly, leaning on her elbow: she was still very weak, and the slight movement had made her giddy, but soon she would be strong and well . . . she must be strong and well and ready to do his bidding, when the time for escape will have come.

"Ah! you are better, my child, I see . . ." said that quaint, tremulous voice again, with its soft sing-song accent. "But you must not be so venturesome, you know. The physician said that you had received a cruel blow. The brain has been rudely shaken . . . and you must lie quite still all to-day, or your poor little head will begin to ache again."

Marguerite turned to look at the speaker, and, in spite of her excitement, of her sorrow, and of her anxieties, she could not help smiling at the whimsical little figure which sat opposite to her, on a very rickety chair, solemnly striving with slow and measured movement of hand and arm, and a large supply of breath, to get up a polish on the worn-out surface of an ancient pair of buckled shoes.

The figure was slender and almost wizened, the thin

shoulders round with an habitual stoop, the lean shanks were encased in a pair of much-darned, coarse black stockings. It was the figure of an old man, with a gentle, clear-cut face furrowed by a forest of wrinkles, and surmounted by scanty white locks above a smooth forehead, which looked yellow and polished like an ancient piece of ivory.

He had looked across at Marguerite as he spoke, and a pair of innately kind and mild blue eyes were fixed with tender reproach upon her. Marguerite thought that she had never seen quite so much goodness and simple-heartedness portrayed on any face before. It literally beamed out of those pale blue eyes, which seemed quite full of unshed tears.

The old man wore a tattered garment, a miracle of shining cleanliness, which had once been a soutane of smooth black cloth, but was now a mass of patches and threadbare at shoulders and knees. He seemed deeply intent in the task of polishing his shoes, and having delivered himself of his little admonition, he very solemnly and earnestly resumed his work.

Marguerite's first and most natural instinct had, of course, been one of dislike and mistrust of any one who appeared to be in some way on guard over her. But when she took in every detail of the quaint figure of the old man, his scrupulous tidiness of apparel, the resigned stoop of his shoulders, and met in full the gaze of those moist eyes, she felt that the whole aspect of the man, as he sat there polishing his shoes, was infinitely pathetic, and, in its simplicity, commanding of respect.

"Who are you?" asked Lady Blakeney at last, for

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the old man, after looking at her with a kind of appealing wonder, seemed to be waiting for her to speak.

"A priest of the good God, my dear child," replied the old man with a deep sigh and a shake of his scanty locks, "who is not allowed to serve his divine Master any longer. A poor old fellow, very harmless and very helpless, who has been set here to watch over you."

"You must not look upon me as a jailer because of what I say, my child," he added with a quaint air of deference and apology. "I am very old and very small, and only take up a very little room. I can make myself very scarce, you shall hardly know that I am here. . . . They forced me to it, much against my will. . . . But they are strong and I am weak, how could I deny them since they put me here. After all," he concluded naively, "perhaps it is the will of le bon Dieu, and He knows best, my child, He knows best."

The shoes evidently refused to respond any further to the old man's efforts at polishing them. He contemplated them now, with a whimsical look of regret on his furrowed face, then set them down on the floor and slipped his stockinged feet into them.

Marguerite was silently watching him, still leaning on her elbow. Evidently her brain was still numb and fatigued, for she did not seem able to grasp all that the old man said. She smiled to herself, too, as she watched him. How could she look upon him as a jailer? He did not seem at all like a Jacobin or a Terrorist, there was nothing of the dissatisfied democrat, of the snarling anarchist ready to lend his hand to

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any act of ferocity directed against a so-called aristocrat, about this pathetic little figure in the ragged soutane and worn shoes.

He seemed singularly bashful, too, and ill at ease, and loth to meet Marguerite's great, ardent eyes, which were fixed questioningly upon him.

"You must forgive me, my daughter," he said shyly, "for concluding my toilet before you. I had hoped to be quite ready before you woke, but I had some trouble with my shoes; except for a little water and soap, the prison authorities will not provide us poor captives with any means of cleanliness and tidiness, and *le bon Dieu* does love a tidy body as well as a clean soul."

"But there, there," he added fussily, "I must not continue to gossip like this. You would like to get up, I know, and refresh your face and hands with a little water. Oh! you will see how well I have thought it out. I need not interfere with you at all, and when you make your little bit of toilette, you will feel quite alone . . . just as if the old man was not there."

He began busying himself about the room, dragging the rickety, rush-bottomed chairs forward. There were four of these in the room, and he began forming a kind of bulwark with them, placing two side by side, then piling the two others up above.

"You will see, my child, you will see!" he kept repeating at intervals as the work of construction progressed. It was no easy matter, for he was of low stature, and his hands were unsteady from apparently uncontrollable nervousness.

Marguerite leaning slightly forward, her chin

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resting in her hand, was too puzzled and anxious to grasp the humour of this comical situation. She certainly did not understand. This old man had in some sort of way, and for a hitherto unexplained reason, been set as a guard over her; it was not an unusual device on the part of the inhuman wretches who now ruled over France to add to the miseries and terrors of captivity where a woman of refinement was concerned, the galling outrage of never leaving her alone for a moment.

That peculiar form of mental torture, surely the invention of brains rendered mad by their own ferocious cruelty, was even now being inflicted on the hapless, dethroned Queen of France. Marguerite, in far-off England, had shuddered when she heard of it, and in her heart had prayed, as indeed every pure-minded woman did then, that proud, unfortunate Marie Antoinette might soon find release from such torments in death.

There was evidently some similar intention with regard to Marguerite herself in the minds of those who now held her prisoner. But this old man seemed so feeble and so helpless, his very delicacy of thought as he built up a screen to divide the squalid room into two, proved him to be singularly inefficient for the task of a watchful jailer.

When the four chairs appeared fairly steady, and in comparatively little danger of toppling, he dragged the pailasse forward and propped it up against the chairs. Finally he drew the table along, which held the cracked ewer and basin, and placed it against this improvised partition: then he surveyed the whole

construction with evident gratification and delight.

"There now!" he said, turning a face beaming with satisfaction to Marguerite, "I can continue my prayers on the other side of the fortress. Oh! it is quite safe . . ." he added, as with a fearsome hand he touched his engineering feat with gingerly pride, "and you will be quite private. . . . Try and forget that the old abbé is in the room. . . . He does not count . . . really he does not count . . . he has ceased to be of any moment these many months, now that Saint Joseph is closed, and he may no longer say Mass."

He was obviously prattling on in order to hide his nervous bashfulness. He ensconced himself behind his own finely constructed bulwark, drew a breviary from his pocket, and having found a narrow ledge on one of the chairs, on which he could sit, without much danger of bringing the elaborate screen on to the top of his head, he soon became absorbed in his orisons.

Marguerite watched him for a little while longer: he was evidently endeavouring to make her think that he had become oblivious of her presence, and his transparent little manœuvres amused and puzzled her not a little.

He looked so comical with his fussy and shy ways, yet withal so gentle and so kindly that she felt completely reassured and quite calm.

She tried to raise herself still further, and found the process astonishingly easy. Her limbs still ached, and the violent, intermittent pain in her head certainly made her feel sick and giddy at times, but otherwise she was not ill. She sat up on the paillasse, then put

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her feet to the ground, and presently walked up to the improvised dressing-room and bathed her face and hands. The rest had done her good, and she felt quite capable of co-ordinating her thoughts, of moving about without too much pain and of preparing herself both mentally and physically for the grave events which she knew must be imminent.

While she busied herself with her toilet her thoughts dwelt on the one all-absorbing theme: Percy was in Boulogne; he knew that she was here, in prison; he would reach her without fail; in fact, he might communicate with her at any moment now, and had without a doubt already evolved a plan of escape for her, more daring and ingenious than any which he had conceived hitherto; therefore, she must be ready, and prepared for any eventuality, she must be strong and eager, in no way despondent, for if he were here, would he not chide her for her want of faith.

By the time she had smoothed her hair and tidied her dress, Marguerite caught herself singing quite cheerfully.

So full of buoyant hope was she.