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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XIX. The strength of the weak

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE STRENGTH OF THE WEAK.

"**M.** L'ABBÉ! . . ." said Marguerite gravely.
"Yes, mon enfant."

The old man looked up from his breviary and saw Marguerite's great earnest eyes fixed with obvious calm and trust upon him. She had finished her toilet as well as she could, had shaken up and tidied the paillasse, and was now sitting on the edge of it, her hands clasped between her knees. There was something which still puzzled her, and, impatient and impulsive as she was, she had watched the abbé as he calmly went on reading the Latin prayers for the last five minutes, and now she could contain her questionings no longer.

"You said just now that they set you to watch over me. . . ."

"So they did, my child, so they did . . ." he replied with a sigh, as he quietly closed his book and slipped

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it back into his pocket. "Ah! they are very cunning . . . and we must remember that they have the power. No doubt," added the old man, with his own quaint philosophy, "no doubt *le bon Dieu* meant them to have the power, or they would not have it, would they?"

"By 'they' you mean the Terrorists and anarchists of France, M. l'Abbé. . . . The Committee of Public Safety who pillage and murder, outrage women, and desecrate religion. . . . Is that not so?"

"Alas! my child!" he sighed.

"And it is 'they' who have set you to watch over me? . . . I confess I don't understand. . . ."

She laughed, quite involuntarily indeed, for, in spite of the re-assurance in her heart, her brain was still in a whirl of passionate anxiety.

"You don't look at all like one of 'them,' M. l'Abbé," she said.

"The good God forbid!" ejaculated the old man, raising protesting hands up towards the very distant, quite invisible sky. "How could I, a humble priest of the Lord, range myself with those who would flout and defy Him."

"Yet I am a prisoner of the Republic and you are my jailer, M. l'Abbé."

"Ah, yes!" he sighed. "But I am very helpless. This was my cell. I had been here with François and Félicité, my sister's children, you know. Innocent lambs, whom those fiends would lead to slaughter. Last night," he continued, speaking volubly, "the soldiers came in and dragged François and Félicité out of this room, where, in spite of the danger before

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us, in spite of what we suffered, we had contrived to be quite happy together. I could read the Mass, and the dear children would say their prayers night and morning at my knee."

He paused awhile. The unshed tears in his mild, blue eyes struggled for freedom now, and one or two flowed slowly down his wrinkled cheeks. Marguerite, though heart-sore and full of agonising sorrow herself, felt her whole noble soul go out to this kind old man, so pathetic, so high and simple-minded in his grief.

She said nothing, however, and the abbé continued, after a few seconds' silence.

"When the children had gone, they brought you in here, mon enfant, and laid you on the paillassé where Félicité used to sleep. You looked very white, and stricken down, like one of God's lambs attacked by the ravening wolf. Your eyes were closed and you were blissfully unconscious. I was taken before the governor of the prison, and he told me that you would share the cell with me for a time, and that I was to watch you night and day, because . . ."

The old man paused again. Evidently what he had to say was very difficult to put into words. He groped in his pockets and brought out a large bandana handkerchief, red and yellow and green, with which he began to mop his moist forehead. The quaver in his voice and the trembling of his hands became more apparent and pronounced.

"Yes, M. l'Abbé? Because? . . ." queried Marguerite gently.

"They said that if I guarded you well, Félicité and François would be set free," replied the old man after

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a while, during which he made vigorous efforts to overcome his nervousness, "and that if you escaped the children and I would be guillotined the very next day."

There was silence in the little room now. The abbé was sitting quite still, clasping his trembling fingers, and Marguerite neither moved nor spoke. What the old man had just said was very slowly finding its way to the innermost cells of her brain. Until her mind had thoroughly grasped the meaning of it all, she could not trust herself to make a single comment.

It was some seconds before she fully understood it all, before she realised what it meant not only to her, but indirectly to her husband. Until now she had not been fully conscious of the enormous wave of hope which almost in spite of herself had risen triumphant above the dull, gray sea of her former despair; only now, when it had been shattered against this deadly rock of almost superhuman devilry and cunning, did she understand what she had hoped, and what she must now completely forswear.

No bolts and bars, no fortified towers or inaccessible fortresses could prove so effectual a prison for Marguerite Blakeney as the dictum which morally bound her to her cell.

"If you escape, the children and I would be guillotined the very next day."

This meant that even if Percy knew, even if he could reach her, he could never set her free, since her safety meant death to two innocent children and to this simple-hearted man.

It would require more than the ingenuity of the

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Scarlet Pimpernel himself to untie this Gordian knot.

"I don't mind for myself, of course," the old man went on with gentle philosophy. "I have lived my life. What matters if I die to-morrow, or if I linger on until my earthly span is legitimately run out. I am ready to go home whenever my Father calls me. But it is the children, you see. I have to think of them. François is his mother's only son, the bread-winner of the household, a good lad and studious, too, and Félicité has always been very delicate. She is blind from birth, and . . . "

"Oh! don't . . . for pity's sake, don't . . ." moaned Marguerite in an agony of helplessness. "I understand . . . you need not fear for your children, M. l'Abbé: no harm shall come to them through me."

"It is as the good God wills!" replied the old man quietly.

Then, as Marguerite had once more relapsed into silence, he fumbled for his beads, and his gentle voice began droning the Paters and Aves, wherein no doubt his childlike heart found peace and solace.

He understood that the poor woman would not wish to speak, he knew as well as she did the overpowering strength of his helpless appeal. Thus the minutes sped on, the jailer and the captive tied to one another by the strongest bonds that hand of man can forge, had nothing to say to one another: he, the old priest, imbued with the traditions of his calling, could pray and resign himself to the will of the Almighty, but she was young and ardent and passionate, she loved and was beloved, and an impassable barrier was built up between her and the man she worshipped!

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A barrier fashioned by the weak hands of children, one of whom was delicate and blind. Outside was air and freedom, re-union with her husband, an agony of happy remorse, a kiss from his dear lips, and trembling hands held her back from it all, because of François who was the bread-winner and of Félicité who was blind.

Mechanically, now, Marguerite rose again, and like an automaton—lifeless and thoughtless—she began putting the dingy and squalid room to rights. The abbé helped her to demolish the improvised screen; with the same gentle delicacy of thought which had caused him to build it up, he refrained from speaking to her now: he would not intrude himself on her grief and her despair.

Later on, she forced herself to speak again, and asked the old man his name.

"My name is Foucquet," he replied, "Jean Baptiste Marie Foucquet, late parish priest of the Church of S. Joseph, the patron saint of Boulogne."

Foucquet! This was l'Abbé Foucquet! the faithful friend and servant of the de Marny family.

Marguerite gazed at him with great, questioning eyes.

What a wealth of memories crowded in on her mind at sound of that name! Her beautiful home at Richmond, her brilliant array of servants and guests, His Royal Highness at her side! life in free, joyous, happy England—how infinitely remote it now seemed. Her ears were filled with the sound of a voice, drawly and quaint and gentle, a voice and a laugh half shy, wholly mirthful, and oh! so infinitely dear:

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"I think a little sea voyage and English country air would suit the Abbé Foucquet, m'dear, and I only mean to ask him to cross the Channel with me. . . ."

Oh! the joy and confidence expressed in those words! the daring! the ambition! the pride! and the soft, languorous air of the old-world garden round her then, the passion of his embrace! the heavy scent of late roses and of heliotrope, which caused her to swoon in his arms!

And now a narrow prison cell, and that pathetic, tender little creature there, with trembling hands and tear-dimmed eyes, the most powerful and most relentless jailer which the ferocious cunning of her deadly enemies could possibly have devised.

Then she talked to him of Juliette Marny.

The abbé did not know that Mlle. de Marny had succeeded in reaching England safely, and was overjoyed to hear it.

He recounted to Marguerite the story of the Marny jewels: how he had put them safely away in the crypt of his little church, until the Assembly of the Convention had ordered the closing of the churches, and placed before every minister of le bon Dieu the alternative of apostasy or death.

"With me it has only been prison so far," continued the old man simply, "but prison has rendered me just as helpless as the guillotine would have done, for the enemies of le bon Dieu have ransacked the church of Saint Joseph and stolen the jewels which I should have guarded with my life."

But it was obvious joy for the abbé to talk of Juliette Marny's happiness. Vaguely, in his remote little pro-

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vincial cure, he had heard of the prowess and daring of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and liked to think that Juliette owed her safety to him.

"The good God will reward him and those whom he cares for," added Abbé Foucquet with that earnest belief in divine interference which seemed so strangely pathetic under these present circumstances.

Marguerite sighed, and for the first time in this terrible soul-stirring crisis through which she was passing so bravely, she felt a beneficent moisture in her eyes: the awful tension of her nerves relaxed. She went up to the old man, took his wrinkled hand in hers, and falling on her knees beside him, she eased her overburdened heart in a flood of tears.