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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XX. Triumph

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CHAPTER XX.

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THE day that Citizen Chauvelin's letter was received by the members of the Committee of Public Safety was, indeed, one of great rejoicing.

The "Moniteur" tells us that in the Séance of September 22nd, 1793, or Vendemiaire 1st of the Year I., it was decreed that sixty prisoners, not absolutely proved guilty of treason against the Republic—only suspected—were to be set free.

Sixty! . . . at the mere news of the possible capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel!

The Committee was inclined to be magnanimous. Ferocity yielded for the moment to the elusive joy of anticipatory triumph.

A glorious prize was about to fall into the hands of those who had the welfare of the people at heart.

Robespierre and his decemvirs rejoiced, and sixty persons had cause to rejoice with them. So be it! There were plans evolved already as to national fêtes

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and wholesale pardons, when that impudent and meddlesome Englishman at last got his deserts.

Wholesale pardons which could easily be rescinded afterwards. Even with those sixty it was a mere respite. Those of le Salut Public only loosened their hold for awhile, were nobly magnanimous for a day, quite prepared to be doubly ferocious the next.

In the meanwhile let us heartily rejoice!

The Scarlet Pimpernel is in France, or will be very soon, and on an appointed day he will present himself conveniently to the soldiers of the Republic for capture and for subsequent guillotine. England is at war with us, there is nothing, therefore, further to fear from her. We might hang every Englishman we can lay hands on, and England could do no more than she is doing at the present moment: bombard our ports, bluster and threaten, join hands with Flanders, and Austria, and Sardinia, and the devil if she choose.

Allons! vogue la galère! The Scarlet Pimpernel is, perhaps, on our shores at this very moment! Our most stinging, most irritating foe is about to be delivered into our hands.

Citizen Chauvelin's letter is very categorical:

"I guarantee to you, Citizen Robespierre, and to the Members of the Revolutionary Government, who have entrusted me with the delicate mission . . ."

Robespierre's sensuous lips curl into a sarcastic smile. Citizen Chauvelin's pen was ever florid in its style: *"entrusted me with the delicate mission,"* is hardly the way to describe an order given under penalty of death.

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But let it pass!

" . . . that four days from this date, at one hour after sunset, the man who goes by the mysterious name of the Scarlet Pimpernel will be on the southern ramparts of Boulogne, at the extreme southern corner of the town."

"Four days from this date" . . . and Citizen Chauvelin's letter is dated the nineteenth of September, 1793.

"Too much of an aristocrat—Monsieur le Marquis Chauvelin. . . ." sneers Merlin, the Jacobin. "He does not know that all good citizens had called that date the 28th Fructidor, Year 1 of the Republic."

"No matter," retorts Robespierre, with impatient frigidity, "whatever we may call the day, it was forty-eight hours ago, and in forty-eight hours more that damned Englishman will have run his head into a noose, from which, an I mistake not, he'll not find it easy to extricate himself."

"And you believe in Citizen Chauvelin's assertion," commented Danton, with a lazy shrug of the shoulders.

"Only because he asks for help from us," quoth Robespierre drily; "he is sure that the man will be there, but not sure if he can tackle him."

But many were inclined to think that Chauvelin's letter was an idle boast. They knew nothing of the circumstances which had caused that letter to be written: they could not conjecture how it was that the ex-ambassador could be so precise in naming the day and hour when the enemy of France would be at the mercy of those whom he had outraged and flouted.

Nevertheless, Citizen Chauvelin asks for help, and help must not be denied him. There must be no

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shadow of blame upon the actions of the Committee of Public Safety.

Chauvelin had been weak once, had allowed the prize to slip through his fingers; it must not occur again. He has a wonderful head for devising plans, but he needs a powerful hand to aid him, so that he may not fail again.

Collot d'Herbois, just home from Lyons and Tours, is the right man in an emergency like this. Citizen Collot is full of ideas; the inventor of the "Noyades" is sure to find a means of converting Boulogne into one gigantic prison, out of which the mysterious English adventurer will find it impossible to escape.

And whilst the deliberations go on, whilst this Committee of butchers is busy slaughtering in imagination the game which it has not yet succeeded in bringing down, there comes another messenger from Citizen Chauvelin.

He must have ridden hard on the other one's heels, and something very unexpected and very sudden must have occurred to cause the citizen to send this second note.

This time it is curt and to the point. Robespierre unfolds it and reads it to his colleagues.

"We have caught the woman—his wife—there may be murder attempted against my person, send me some one at once, who will carry out my instructions in case of my sudden death."

Robespierre's lips curl in satisfaction, showing a row of yellowish teeth, long and sharp like the fangs of a wolf. A murmur like unto the snarl of a pack of

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hyenas rises round the table, as Chauvelin's letter is handed round.

Every one has guessed the importance of this preliminary capture: "*the woman—his wife.*" Chauvelin evidently thinks much of it, for he anticipates an attempt against his life, nay! he is quite prepared for it, ready to sacrifice it for the sake of his revenge.

Who had accused him of weakness?

He only thinks of his duty, not of his life, he does not fear for himself, only that the fruits of his skill might be jeopardised through assassination.

Well! this English adventurer is capable of any act of desperation to save his wife and himself, and Citizen Chauvelin must not be left in the lurch.

Thus, Citizen Collot d'Herbois is despatched forthwith to Boulogne to be a helpmeet and counsellor to Citizen Chauvelin.

Everything that can humanly be devised must be done to keep the woman secure and to set the trap for that elusive Pimpernel.

Once he is caught the whole of France shall rejoice, and Boulogne, who has been instrumental in running the quarry to earth, must be specially privileged on that day.

A general amnesty for all prisoners the day the Scarlet Pimpernel is captured. A public holiday and a pardon for all natives of Boulogne who are under sentence of death: they shall be allowed to find their way to the various English boats—trading and smuggling craft—that always lie at anchor in the roads there.

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The Committee of Public Safety feel amazingly magnanimous towards Boulogne; a proclamation embodying the amnesty and the pardon is at once drawn up and signed by Robespierre and his blood-thirsty Council of Ten; it is entrusted to Citizen Collot d'Herbois to be read out at every corner of the ramparts as an inducement to the little town to do its level best. The Englishman and his wife—captured in Boulogne—will both be subsequently brought to Paris, formally tried on a charge of conspiring against the Republic, and guillotined as English spies, but Boulogne shall have the greater glory and shall reap the first and richest reward.

And armed with the magnanimous proclamation, the orders for general rejoicings and a grand local fête, armed also with any and every power over the entire city, its municipality, its garrison, its forts, for himself and his colleague Chauvelin, Citizen Collot d'Herbois starts for Boulogne forthwith.

Needless to tell him not to let the grass grow under his horse's hoofs. The capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, though not absolutely an accomplished fact, is, nevertheless, a practical certainty, and no one rejoices over this great event more than the man who is to be present and see all the fun.

Riding and driving, getting what relays of horses or waggons from roadside farms that he can, Collot is not like to waste much time on the way.

It is 157 miles to Boulogne by road, and Collot, burning with ambition to be in at the death, rides or drives as no messenger of good tidings has ever ridden or driven before.

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He does not stop to eat, but munches chunks of bread and cheese in the recess of the lumbering chaise or waggon that bears him along whenever his limbs refuse him service and he cannot mount a horse.

The chronicles tell us that twenty-four hours after he left Paris, half-dazed with fatigue, but ferocious and eager still, he is borne to the gates of Boulogne by an old cart horse requisitioned from some distant farm, and which falls down dead at the Porte Gayole, whilst its rider, with a last effort, loudly clamours for admittance into the town "in the name of the Republic."