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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XXIII. The hostage

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CHAPTER XXIII.

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CHAUVELIN, without speaking, extended his hand out towards the city, as if to invite Marguerite to gaze upon it.

She was quite unconscious what hour of the night it might be, but it must have been late, for the little town, encircled by the stony arms of its forts, seemed asleep. The moon, now slowly sinking in the west, edged the towers and spires with filmy lines of silver. To the right Marguerite caught sight of the frowning Beffroi, which even as she gazed out began tolling its heavy bell. It sounded like the tocsin, dull and muffled. After ten strokes it was still.

Ten o'clock! At this hour, in far-off England, in fashionable London, the play was just over, crowds of gaily-dressed men and women poured out of the open gates of the theatres, calling loudly for attendant or chaise. Thence to balls or routs, gaily fluttering like so many butterflies, brilliant and irresponsible. . . .

And in England also, in the beautiful gardens of her

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Richmond home, ofttimes at ten o'clock she had wandered alone with Percy, when he was at home, and the spirit of adventure in him was momentarily laid to rest. Then, when the night was very dark and the air heavy with the scent of roses and lilies, she lay quiescent in his arms in that little arbour beside the river. The rhythmic lapping of the waves was the only sound that stirred the balmy air. He seldom spoke then, for his voice would shake whenever he uttered a word: but his impenetrable armour of flippancy was pierced through, and he did not speak because his lips were pressed to hers, and his love had soared beyond the domain of speech.

A shudder of intense mental pain went through her now, as she gazed on the sleeping city, and sweet memories of the past turned to bitterness in this agonising present. One by one, as the moon gradually disappeared behind a bank of clouds, the towers of Boulogne were merged in the gloom. In front of her, far, far away, beyond the flat sand dunes, the sea seemed to be calling to her with a ghostly and melancholy moan.

The window was on the ground floor of the fort, and gave direct on to the wide and shady walk which runs along the crest of the city walls; from where she stood Marguerite was looking straight along the ramparts, some thirty mètres wide at this point, flanked on either side by the granite balustrade, and adorned with a double row of ancient elms, stunted and twisted into grotesque shapes by the persistent action of the wind.

"These wide ramparts are a peculiarity of this

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city . . ." said a voice close to her ear. "At times of peace they form an agreeable promenade under the shade of the trees, and a delightful meeting-place for lovers . . . or enemies . . ."

The sound brought her back to the ugly realities of the present: the rose-scented garden at Richmond, the lazily flowing river, the tender memories which for that brief moment had confronted her from out a happy past, suddenly vanished from her ken. Instead of these the brine-laden sea air struck her quivering nostrils, the echo of the old Beffroi died away in her ear, and now, from out one of the streets or open places of the sleeping city, there came the sound of a raucous voice, shouting in monotonous tones a string of words, the meaning of which failed to reach her brain.

Not many feet below the window the southern ramparts of the town stretched away into the darkness. She felt unaccountably cold, suddenly, as she looked down upon them, and, with aching eyes, tried to pierce the gloom. She was shivering, in spite of the mildness of this early autumnal night: her overwrought fancy was peopling the lonely walls with unearthly shapes, strolling along, discussing in spectral language a strange duel which was to take place here between a noted butcher of men and a mad Englishman overfond of adventure.

The ghouls seemed to pass and repass along in front of her and to be laughing audibly because that mad Englishman had been offered his life in exchange for his honour. They laughed and laughed, no doubt because he refused the bargain—Englishmen were

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always eccentric, and in these days of equality and other devices of a free and glorious Revolution, honour was such a very marketable commodity that it seemed ridiculous to prize it quite so highly. Then they strolled away again and disappeared, whilst Marguerite distinctly heard the scrunching of the path beneath their feet. She leant forward to peer still further into the darkness, for this sound had seemed so absolutely real, but immediately a detaining hand was placed upon her arm and a sarcastic voice murmured at her elbow :

“ The result, fair lady, would only be a broken leg or arm ; the height is not great enough for picturesque suicides, and, believe me, these ramparts are only haunted by ghosts.”

She drew back as if a viper had stung her : for the moment she had become oblivious of Chauvelin’s presence. However, she would not take notice of his taunt, and after a slight pause, he asked her if she could hear the town crier over in the public streets.

“ Yes,” she replied.

“ What he says at the present moment is of vast importance to your ladyship,” he remarked drily.

“ How so ? ”

“ Your ladyship is a precious hostage. We are taking measures to guard our valuable property securely.”

Marguerite thought of the Abbé Fouquet, who no doubt was still quietly telling his beads, even if in his heart he had begun to wonder what had become of her. She thought of François, who was the breadwinner, and of Félicité, who was blind.

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"Methinks you and your colleagues have done that already," she said.

"Not as completely as we would wish. We know the daring of the Scarlet Pimpernel. We are not even ashamed to admit that we fear his luck, his impudence, and his marvellous ingenuity. . . . Have I not told you that I have the greatest possible respect for that mysterious English hero. . . . An old priest and two young children might be spirited away by that enigmatical adventurer, even whilst Lady Blakeney herself is made to vanish from our sight."

"Ah! I see your ladyship is taking my simple words as a confession of weakness," he continued, noting the swift sigh of hope which had involuntarily escaped her lips. "Nay! an it please you, you shall despise me for it. But a confession of weakness is the first sign of strength. The Scarlet Pimpernel is still at large, whilst we guard our hostage securely; he is bound to fall into our hands."

"Aye! still at large!" she retorted with impulsive defiance. "Think you that all your bolts and bars, the ingenuity of yourself and your colleagues, the collaboration of the devil himself, would succeed in outwitting the Scarlet Pimpernel, now that his purpose will be to try and drag *me* from out your clutches?"

She felt hopeful and proud. Now that she had the pure air of heaven in her lungs, that from afar she could smell the sea, and could feel that perhaps in a straight line of vision from where she stood the "Day Dream," with Sir Percy on board, might be lying out there in the roads, it seemed impossible that he should fail in freeing her and those poor people—an old man

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and two children—whose lives depended on her own.

But Chauvelin only laughed a dry, sarcastic laugh, and said:

“Hm! perhaps not! . . . It, of course, will depend on you and your personality . . . your feelings in such matters . . . and whether an English gentleman likes to save his own skin at the expense of others.”

Marguerite shivered as if from cold.

“Ah! I see,” resumed Chauvelin quietly, “that your ladyship has not quite grasped the position. That public crier is a long way off: the words have lingered on the evening breeze and have failed to reach your brain. Do you suppose that I and my colleagues do not know that all the ingenuity of which the Scarlet Pimpernel is capable will now be directed in piloting Lady Blakeney, and incidentally the Abbé Foucquet with his nephew and niece, safely across the Channel? Four people! . . . Bah! a bagatelle for this mighty conspirator, who but lately snatched twenty aristocrats from the prisons of Lyons. . . . Nay! nay! two children and an old man were not enough to guard our precious hostage, and I was not thinking of either the Abbé Foucquet or of the two children, when I said that an English gentleman would not save himself at the expense of others.”

“Of whom, then, were you thinking, Monsieur Chauvelin? Whom else have you set to guard the prize which you value so highly?”

“The whole city of Boulogne,” he replied simply.

“I do not understand.”

“Let me make my point clear. My colleague, Citizen Collot d’Herbois, rode over from Paris yester-

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day; like myself, he is a member of the Committee of Public Safety, whose duty it is to look after the welfare of France by punishing all those who conspire against her laws and the liberties of the people. Chief among these conspirators, whom it is our duty to punish, is, of course, that impudent adventurer who calls himself the Scarlet Pimpernel. He has given the Government of France a great deal of trouble through his attempts—mostly successful, as I have already admitted—at frustrating the just vengeance which an oppressed country has the right to wreak on those who have proved themselves to be tyrants and traitors."

"Is it necessary to recapitulate all this, Monsieur Chauvelin?" she asked impatiently.

"I think so," he replied blandly. "You see, my point is this. We feel that in a measure now the Scarlet Pimpernel is in our power. Within the next few hours he will land at Boulogne . . . Boulogne, where he has agreed to fight a duel with me . . . Boulogne, where Lady Blakeney happens to be at this present moment . . . as you see, Boulogne has a grave responsibility to bear: just now she is to a certain extent the proudest city in France since she holds within her gates a hostage for the appearance on our shores of her country's most bitter enemy. But she must not fall from that high estate. Her double duty is clear before her: she must guard Lady Blakeney and capture the Scarlet Pimpernel; if she fail in the former she must be punished, if she succeed in the latter she shall be rewarded."

He paused and leaned out of the window again,

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whilst she watched him, breathless and terrified. She was beginning to understand.

"Hark!" he said, looking straight at her. "Do you hear the crier now? He is proclaiming the punishment and the reward. He is making it clear to the citizens of Boulogne that on the day when the Scarlet Pimpernel falls into the hands of the Committee of Public Safety a general amnesty will be granted to all natives of Boulogne who are under arrest at the present time, and a free pardon to all those who, born within these city walls, are to-day under sentence of death. . . . A noble reward, eh? Well deserved, you'll admit? . . . Should you wonder, then, if the whole town of Boulogne were engaged just now in finding that mysterious hero and delivering him into our hands? . . . How many mothers, sisters, wives, think you, at the present moment, would fail to lay hands on the English adventurer, if a husband's or son's life or freedom happened to be at stake? . . . I have some records there," he continued, pointing in the direction of the table, "which tell me that there are five-and-thirty natives of Boulogne in the local prisons, a dozen more in the prisons of Paris; of these at least twenty have been tried already and are condemned to death. Every hour that the Scarlet Pimpernel succeeds in evading his captors, so many deaths lie at his door. If he succeeds in once more reaching England safely, three-score lives mayhap will be the price of his escape. . . . Nay! but I see your ladyship is shivering with cold . . ." he added with a dry little laugh. "Shall I close the window? or do you wish to hear what punishment will be meted out to Boulogne, if, on

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the day that the Scarlet Pimpernel is captured, Lady Blakeney happens to have left the shelter of these city walls?"

"I pray you proceed, Monsieur," she rejoined with perfect calm.

"The Committee of Public Safety," he resumed, "would look upon this city as a nest of traitors, if on the day that the Scarlet Pimpernel becomes our prisoner Lady Blakeney herself, the wife of that notorious English spy, had already quitted Boulogne. The whole town knows by now that you are in our hands—you, the most precious hostage we can hold for the ultimate capture of the man whom we all fear and detest. Virtually the town crier is at the present moment proclaiming to the inhabitants of this city: 'We want that man, but we already have his wife; see to it, citizens, that she does not escape! For if she do, we shall summarily shoot the breadwinner in every family in the town!'"

A cry of horror escaped Marguerite's parched lips.

"Are you devils, then, all of you," she gasped, "that you should think of such things?"

"Aye! some of us are devils, no doubt," said Chauvelin drily; "but why should you honour us in this case with so flattering an epithet? We are mere men, striving to guard our property, and mean no harm to the citizens of Boulogne. We have threatened them, true! but is it not for you and that elusive Pimpernel to see that the threat is never put into execution?"

"You would not do it!" she repeated, horror-stricken.

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"Nay! I pray you, fair lady, do not deceive yourself. At present the proclamation sounds like a mere threat, I'll allow, but let me assure you that if we fail to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel, and if you, on the other hand, are spirited out of this fortress by that mysterious adventurer, we shall undoubtedly shoot or guillotine every able-bodied man and woman in this town."

He had spoken quietly and emphatically, neither with bombast nor with rage, and Marguerite saw in his face nothing but a calm and ferocious determination, the determination of an entire nation embodied in this one man, to be revenged at any cost. She would not let him see the depth of her despair, nor would she let him read in her face the unutterable hopelessness which filled her soul. It were useless to make an appeal to him: she knew full well that from him she could obtain neither gentleness nor mercy.

"I hope that at last I have made the situation quite clear to your ladyship?" he was asking quite pleasantly now. "See how easy is your position: you have but to remain quiescent in room No. 6, and if any chance of escape be offered you ere the Scarlet Pimpernel is captured, you need but to think of all the families of Boulogne, who would be deprived of their breadwinner—fathers and sons mostly, but there are girls, too, who support their mothers or sisters: the fish-curers of Boulogne are mostly women, and there are the net-makers and the seamstresses: all would suffer if your ladyship were no longer to be found in No. 6 room of this ancient fort; whilst all would

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be included in the amnesty if the Scarlet Pimpernel fell into our hands . . . ”

He gave a low, satisfied chuckle, which made Marguerite think of the evil spirits in hell exulting over the torments of unhappy lost souls.

“ I think, Lady Blakeney,” he added drily, and making her an ironical bow, “ that your humble servant hath outwitted the elusive hero at last.”

Quietly he turned on his heel and went back into the room, Marguerite remaining motionless beside the open window, where the soft, brine-laden air, the distant murmur of the sea, the occasional cry of a sea-mew, all seemed to mock her agonising despair.

The voice of the town crier came nearer and nearer now: she could hear the words he spoke quite distinctly: something about “ amnesty ” and pardon, the reward for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, the lives of men, women and children in exchange for his.

Oh! she knew what all that meant!—that Percy would not hesitate one single instant to throw his life into the hands of his enemies, in exchange for that of others. Others! others! always others! the sigh that had made her heart ache so often in England, what terrible significance it bore now.

And how he would suffer in his heart and in his pride, because of her whom he could not even attempt to save, since it would mean the death of others!—of others, always of others!

She wondered if he had already landed in Boulogne! Again she remembered the vision on the landing-stage: his massive figure, the glimpse she had of the loved form, in the midst of the crowd!

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The moment he entered the town he would hear the proclamation read, see it posted up no doubt on every public building, and realise that she had been foolish enough to follow him, that she was a prisoner, and that he could do nothing to save her.

What would he do? Marguerite, at the thought, instinctively pressed her hands to her heart: the agony of it all had become physically painful. She hoped that perhaps this pain meant approaching death! Oh! how easy would this simple solution be!

The moon peered out from beneath the bank of clouds which had obscured her for so long; smiling, she drew her pencilled silver lines along the edges of towers and pinnacles, the frowning Beffroi, and those stony walls which seemed to Marguerite as if they encircled a gigantic graveyard.

The town crier had evidently ceased to read the proclamation. One by one the windows in the public square were lighted up from within. The citizens of Boulogne wanted to think over the strange events which had occurred without their knowledge, yet which were apparently to have such direful or such joyous consequences for them.

A man to be captured!—the mysterious English adventurer of whom they had all heard, but whom nobody had seen. And a woman—his wife—to be guarded until the man was safely under lock and key!

Marguerite felt as if she could almost hear them talking it over and vowing that she should not escape, and that the Scarlet Pimpernel should soon be captured.

A gentle wind stirred the old gnarled trees on the

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southern ramparts, a wind that sounded like the sigh of swiftly dying hope.

What could Percy do now? His hands were tied, and he was inevitably destined to endure the awful agony of seeing the woman he loved die a terrible death beside him.

Having captured him, they would not keep him long: no necessity for a trial, for detention, for formalities of any kind. A summary execution at dawn on the public place, a roll of drums, a public holiday to mark the joyful event, and a brave man will have ceased to live, a noble heart have stilled its beatings for ever, whilst a whole nation gloried over the deed.

“Sleep, citizens of Boulogne! all is still!”

The night watchman had replaced the town crier. All was quiet within the city walls: the inhabitants could sleep in peace, a beneficent Government was wakeful and guarding their rest.

But many of the windows in the town remained lighted up, and at a little distance below her, round the corner so that she could not see it, a small crowd must have collected in front of the gateway which led into the courtyard of the Gayole Fort. Marguerite could hear a persistent murmur of voices, mostly angry and threatening, and once there were loud cries of: “English spies,” and “à la lanterne!”

“The citizens of Boulogne are guarding the treasures of France!” commented Chauvelin drily, as he laughed again, that cruel, mirthless laugh of his.

Then she roused herself from her torpor: she did not know how long she had stood beside the open window, but the fear seized her that that man must

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have seen and gloated over the agony of her mind. She straightened her graceful figure, threw back her proud head defiantly, and quietly walked up to the table, where Chauvelin seemed once more absorbed in the perusal of his papers.

"Is this interview over?" she asked quietly, and without the slightest tremor in her voice. "May I go now?"

"As soon as you wish," he replied with gentle irony.

He regarded her with obvious delight, for truly she was beautiful: grand in this attitude of defiant despair. The man, who had spent the last half-hour in martyrising her, gloried over the misery which he had wrought, and which all her strength of will could not entirely banish from her face.

"Will you believe me, Lady Blakeney," he added, "that there is no personal animosity in my heart towards you or your husband? Have I not told you that I do not wish to compass his death?"

"Yet you propose to send him to the guillotine as soon as you have laid hands on him."

"I have explained to you the measures which I have taken in order to make sure that we *do* lay hands on the Scarlet Pimpernel. Once he is in our power, it will rest with him to walk to the guillotine or to embark with you on board his yacht."

"You propose to place an alternative before Sir Percy Blakeney?"

"Certainly."

"To offer him his life?"

"And that of his charming wife."

"In exchange for what?"

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“His honour.”

“He will refuse, Monsieur.”

“We shall see.”

Then he touched a handbell which stood on the table, and within a few seconds the door was opened and the soldier who had led Marguerite hither re-entered the room.

The interview was at an end. It had served its purpose. Marguerite knew now that she must not even think of escape for herself, or hope for safety for the man she loved. Of Chauvelin's talk of a bargain which would touch Percy's honour she would not even think: and she was too proud to ask anything further from him.

Chauvelin stood up and made her a deep bow, as she crossed the room and finally went out of the door. The little company of soldiers closed in around her, and she was once more led along the dark passages, back to her own prison cell.