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## The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XXVIII. The midnight watch

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## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE MIDNIGHT WATCH.

BOULOGNE had gone through many phases, in its own languid and sleepy way, whilst the great upheaval of a gigantic revolution shook other cities of France to their very foundations.

At first the little town had held somnolently aloof, and whilst Lyons and Tours conspired and rebelled, whilst Marseilles and Toulon opened their ports to the English, and Dunkirk was ready to surrender to the allied forces, she had gazed through half-closed eyes at all the turmoil, and then quietly turned over and gone to sleep again.

Boulogne fished and mended nets, built boats, and manufactured boots with placid content, whilst France murdered her king and butchered her citizens.

The initial noise of the great revolution was only wafted on the southerly breezes from Paris to the little sea-port towns of northern France, and lost much of its volume and power in this aerial transit: the fisher folk were too poor to worry about the dethronement

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of kings: the struggle for daily existence, the perils and hardships of deep-sea fishing engrossed all the faculties they possessed.

As for the burghers and merchants of the town, they were at first content with reading an occasional article in the "Gazette de Paris" or the "Gazette des Tribunaux," brought hither by one or other of the many travellers who crossed the city on their way to the harbour. They were interested in these articles, at times even comfortably horrified at the doings in Paris, the executions and the tumbrils, but on the whole they liked the idea that the country was in future to be governed by duly chosen representatives of the people, rather than be a prey to the despotism of kings, and they were really quite pleased to see the tricolour flag hoisted on the old Beffroi, there where the snow-white standard of the Bourbons had erstwhile flaunted its golden fleur de lys in the glare of the mid-day sun.

The worthy burgesses of Boulogne were ready to shout: "Vive la République!" with the same cheerful and raucous Normandy accent as they had lately shouted "Dieu protège le Roy!"

The first awakening from this happy torpor came when that tent was put up on the landing stage in the harbour. Officials, dressed in shabby uniforms and wearing tricolour cockades and scarves, were now quartered in the Town Hall, and repaired daily to that roughly-erected tent, accompanied by so many soldiers from the garrison.

There installed, they busied themselves with examining carefully the passports of all those who



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desired to leave or enter Boulogne. Fisher-folk who had dwelt in the city—father and son and grandfather, and many generations before that, and had come and gone in and out of their own boats as they pleased, were now stopped as they beached their craft and made to give an account of themselves to these officials from Paris.

It was, of a truth, more than ridiculous, that these strangers should ask of Jean-Marie who he was, or of Pierre what was his business, or of Désiré François whither he was going, when Jean-Marie and Pierre and Désiré François had plied their nets in the roads outside Boulogne harbour for more years than they would care to count.

It also caused no small measure of annoyance that fishermen were ordered to wear tricolour cockades on their caps. They had no special ill-feeling against tricolour cockades, but they did not care about them. Jean-Marie flatly refused to have one pinned on, and being admonished somewhat severely by one of the Paris officials, he became obstinate about the whole thing, and threw the cockade violently on the ground and spat upon it, not from any sentiment of anti-Republicanism, but just from a feeling of Norman doggedness.

He was arrested, shut up in Fort Gayole, tried as a traitor, and publicly guillotined.

The consternation in Boulogne was appalling.

The one little spark had found its way to a barrel of blasting powder, and caused a terrible explosion. Within twenty-four hours of Jean-Marie's execution the whole town was in the throes of the Revolution. What the death of King Louis, the arrest of Marie

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Antoinette, the massacres of September had failed to do, that the arrest and execution of an elderly fisherman accomplished in a trice.

People began to take sides in politics. Some families realised that they came from ancient lineage, and that their ancestors had helped to build up the throne of the Bourbons. Others looked up ancient archives, and remembered past oppressions at the hands of the aristocrats.

Thus some burghers of Boulogne became ardent reactionaries, whilst others secretly nursed enthusiastic royalist convictions: some were ready to throw in their lot with the anarchists, to deny the religion of their fathers, to scorn the priests and close the places of worship, others adhered strictly still to the usages and practices of the Church.

Arrests became frequent: the guillotine, erected in the Place de la Sënëchaussée, had plenty of work to do. Soon the cathedral was closed, the priests thrown into prison, whilst scores of families hoped to escape a similar fate by summary flight.

Vague rumours of a band of English adventurers soon reached the little sea-port town. The Scarlet Pimpernel—English spy or hero, as he was alternately called—had helped many a family with pronounced royalist tendencies to escape the fury of the blood-thirsty Terrorists.

Thus gradually the anti-revolutionaries had been weeded out of the city: some by death and imprisonment, others by flight. Boulogne became the hotbed of anarchism: the idlers and loafers inseparable from any town where there is a garrison and a harbour,



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practically ruled the city now. Denunciations were the order of the day. Every one who owned any money, or lived with any comfort, was accused of being a traitor and suspected of conspiracy. The fisher folk wandered about the city, surly and discontented: their trade was at a standstill, but there was a trifle to be earned by giving information: information which meant the arrest, oftentimes the death, of men, women, and even children who had tried to seek safety in flight, and to denounce whom—as they were trying to hire a boat anywhere along the coast—meant a good square meal for a starving family.

Then came the awful cataclysm.

A woman—a stranger—had been arrested and imprisoned in the Fort Gayole, and the town-crier publicly proclaimed that if she escaped from jail, one member of every family in the town—rich or poor, republican or royalist, Catholic or freethinker—would be summarily guillotined.

That member, the bread-winner!

"Why, then, with the Duvals it would be young François-Auguste. He keeps his old mother with his boot-making. . . ."

"And it would be Marie Lebon; she has her blind father dependent on her net-mending."

"And old Mother Laferrière, whose grandchildren were left penniless . . . she keeps them from starvation by her wash-tub."

"But François-Auguste is a real Republican; he belongs to the Jacobin Club."

"And look at Pierre; who never meets a *calotin* but he must needs spit on him."

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"Is there no safety anywhere? . . . are we to be butchered like so much cattle? . . ."

Somebody makes the suggestion:

"It is a threat . . . they would not dare! . . ."

"Would not dare?" . . .

'Tis old André Lemoine who has spoken, and he spits vigorously on the ground. André Lemoine has been a soldier, he was in the Vendée. He was wounded at Tours . . . and he knows!

"Would not dare?" . . . he says in a whisper. "I tell you, friends, that there's nothing the present government would not dare. There was the Plaine Saint Mauve. . . . Did you ever hear about that? . . . little children fusilladed by the score . . . little ones, I say, and women with babies at their breasts . . . weren't they innocent? . . . Five hundred innocent people butchered in La Vendée . . . until the headsman sank—worn out. . . . I could tell worse than that . . . for I know. . . . There's nothing they would not dare! . . ."

Consternation was so great that the matter could not even be discussed.

"We'll go to Gayole and see this woman, at any rate."

Angry, sullen crowds assembled in the streets. The proclamation had been read just as the men were leaving the public-houses, preparing to go home for the night.

They brought the news to the women, who, at home, were setting the soup and bread on the table for their husbands' supper. There was no thought of going to bed or of sleeping that night. The bread-winner in



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every family, and all those dependent on him for daily sustenance were trembling for their lives.

Resistance to the barbarous order would have been worse than useless, nor did the thought of it enter the heads of these humble and ignorant fisher folk, wearied out with the miserable struggle for existence. There was not sufficient spirit left in this half-starved population of a small provincial city to suggest open rebellion. A regiment of soldiers come up from the south was quartered in the Château, and the natives of Boulogne could not have mustered more than a score of disused blunderbusses between them.

Then they remembered tales which André Lemoine had told, the fate of Lyons, razed to the ground, of Toulon burnt to ashes, and they did not dare rebel.

But brothers, fathers, sons, trooped out towards Gayole, in order to have a good look at the frowning pile, which held the hostage for their safety. It looked dark and gloomy enough, save for one window which gave on the southern ramparts. This window was wide open, and a feeble light flickered from the room beyond, and as the men stood about, gazing at the walls in sulkily silence, they suddenly caught the sound of a loud laugh proceeding from within, and of a pleasant voice speaking quite gaily in a language which they did not understand, but which sounded like English.

Against the heavy oaken gateway, leading to the courtyard of the prison, the proclamation, written on stout parchment, had been pinned up. Beside it hung a tiny lantern, the dim light of which flickered in the evening breeze, and brought at times into sudden relief



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the bold writing and heavy signature, which stood out, stern and grim, against the yellowish background of the paper, like black signs of approaching death.

Facing the gateway and the proclamation, the crowd of men took its stand. The moon, from behind them, cast fitful, silvery glances at the weary heads bent in anxiety and watchful expectancy: on old heads and young heads, dark, curly heads, and heads grizzled with age, on backs bent with toil, and hands rough and gnarled like seasoned timber.

All night the men stood and watched.

Sentinels from the town guard were stationed at the gates, but these might prove inattentive or insufficient; they had not the same price at stake, so the entire able-bodied population of Boulogne watched the gloomy prison that night, lest anyone escaped by wall or window.

They were guarding the precious hostage, whose safety was the stipulation for their own.

There was dead silence among them, and dead silence all around, save for that monotonous tok-tok-tok of the parchment flapping in the breeze. The moon, who all along had been capricious and chary of her light, made a final retreat behind a gathering bank of clouds, and the crowd, the soldiers, and the great grim walls were all equally wrapped in gloom.

Only the little lantern on the gateway now made a ruddy patch of light, and tinged that fluttering parchment with the colour of blood. Every now and then an isolated figure would detach itself from out the watching throng, and go up to the heavy, oaken door, in order to gaze at the proclamation. Then the light

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of the lantern illumined a dark head or a grey one, for a moment or two: black or white locks were stirred gently in the wind, and a sigh of puzzlement and disappointment would be distinctly heard.

At times a group of three or four would stand there for awhile, not speaking, only sighing and casting eager, questioning glances at one another, whilst trying vainly to find some hopeful word, some turn of phrase or meaning that would be less direful, in that grim and ferocious proclamation. Then a rough word from the sentinel, a push from the butt-end of a bayonet would disperse the little group and send the men, sullen and silent, back into the crowd.

Thus they watched for hours whilst the bell of the Beffroi tolled all the hours of that tedious night. A thin rain began to fall in the small hours of the morning, a wetting, soaking drizzle which chilled the weary watchers to the bone.

But they did not care.

"We must not sleep, for the woman might escape."

Some of them squatted down in the muddy road, the luckier ones managed to lean their backs against the slimy walls.

Twice before the hour of midnight they heard that same quaint and merry laugh proceeding from the lighted room, through the open window. Once it sounded very loud and very prolonged, as if in response to a delightful joke.

Anon the heavy gateway of Gayole was opened from within, and half a dozen soldiers came walking out of the courtyard. They were dressed in the uniform of the town guard, but had evidently been picked



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out of the rank and file, for all six were exceptionally tall and stalwart, and towered above the sentinel, who saluted and presented arms as they marched out of the gate.

In the midst of them walked a slight, dark figure, clad entirely in black, save for the tricolour scarf round his waist.

The crowd of watchers gazed on the little party with suddenly-awakened interest.

"Who is it?" whispered some of the men.

"The citizen governor," suggested one.

"The new public executioner," ventured another.

"No! no!" quoth Pierre Maxime, the doyen of Boulogne fishermen, and a great authority on every matter, public or private, within the town, "no, no, he is the man who has come down from Paris, the friend of Robespierre. He makes the laws now, the citizen governor even must obey him. 'Tis he who made the law that if the woman up yonder should escape . . ."

"Hush! . . . sh! . . . sh! . . ." came in frightened accents from the crowd.

"Hush, Pierre Maxime! . . . the citizen might hear thee," whispered the man who stood closest to the old fisherman, "the citizen might hear thee, and think that we rebelled . . ."

"What are these people doing here?" queried Chauvelin, as he passed out into the street.

"They are watching the prison, citizen," replied the sentinel, whom he had thus addressed, "lest the female prisoner should attempt to escape."

With a satisfied smile, Chauvelin turned towards the

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Town Hall, closely surrounded by his escort. The crowd watched him and the soldiers as they quickly disappeared in the gloom, then they resumed the stolid, wearisome vigil of the night.

The old Beffroi now tolled the midnight hour, the one solitary light in the old fort was extinguished, and after that the frowning pile remained dark and still.