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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XXIX. The national fete

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CHAPTER XXIX.

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"CITIZENS of Boulogne, awake!"

* They had not slept, only some of them had fallen into drowsy somnolence, heavy and nerve-racking, worse, indeed, than any wakefulness.

Within the houses the women, too, had kept the tedious vigil, listening for every sound, dreading every bit of news which the wind might waft in through the small, open windows.

If one prisoner escaped, every family in Boulogne would be deprived of the breadwinner. Therefore the women wept, and tried to remember those Paters and Aves which the tyranny of liberty, fraternity, and equality had ordered them to forget.

Broken rosaries were fetched out from neglected corners, and knees stiff with endless, thankless toil were bent once more in prayer.

"Oh, God! Good God! Do not allow that woman to flee!"

"Holy Virgin! Mother of God! make that she should not escape!"

Some of the women went out in the early dawn to take hot soup or coffee to their men, who were watching outside the prison.

"Has anything been seen?"

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"Have ye seen the woman?"

"Which room is she in?"

"Why won't they let us see her?"

"Are you sure she hath not already escaped?"

Questions and surmises went round in muffled whispers as the steaming cans were passed round. No one had a definite answer to give, although Désiré Melun declared that he had, once during the night, caught sight of a woman's face at one of the windows above: but as he could not describe the woman's face, nor locate with any degree of precision the particular window at which she was supposed to have appeared, it was unanimously decided that Désiré must have been dreaming.

"Citizens of Boulogne, awake!"

The cry came first from the Town Hall, and therefore from behind the crowd of men and women, whose faces had been so resolutely set for all these past hours towards the Gayole Prison.

They were all awake! but too tired and cramped to move as yet, and to turn in the direction whence arose that cry.

"Citizens of Boulogne, awake!"

It was just the voice of Auguste Moleux, the town crier of Boulogne, who, bell in hand, was trudging his way along the Rue Daumont, closely followed by two fellows of the municipal guard.

Auguste was in the very midst of the sullen crowd before the men even troubled about his presence here, but now, with many a vigorous "Allons donc!" and "Voyez-moi ça, fais donc place, voyons!" he elbowed his way through the throng.

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He was neither tired nor cramped, he served the Republic in comfort and ease, and had slept soundly on his paillasse in the little garret allotted to him in the Town Hall.

The crowd parted in silence to allow him to pass. Auguste was lean and powerful, the scanty and meagre food doled out to him by a paternal Government had increased his muscular strength whilst reducing his fat. He had very hard elbows, and soon he managed, by dint of pushing and cursing, to reach the gateway of Gayole.

"Voyons! enlevez-moi ça," he commanded in sten-torian tones, pointing to the proclamation.

The fellows of the municipal guard fell to and tore the parchment away from the door, whilst the crowd looked on with stupid amazement.

What did it all mean?

Then Auguste Moleux turned and faced the men.

"Mes enfants," he said, "my little cabbages! wake up! The Government of the Republic has decreed that to-day is to be a day of gaiety and public rejoicings!"

"Gaiety? . . . Public rejoicings, forsooth, when the breadwinner of every family. . . ."

"Hush! Hush! Be silent all of you," quoth Auguste impatiently. "You do not understand! . . . All that is at an end. . . . There is no fear that the woman shall escape. . . . You are all to dance and rejoice. . . . The Scarlet Pimpernel has been captured in Boulogne—last night. . . ."

"Qui ça the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

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"Mais! 'tis that mysterious English adventurer who rescued people from the guillotine!"

"A hero? quoi?"

"No! no! only an English spy, a friend of aristocrats . . . he would have cared nothing for the breadwinners of Boulogne. . . ."

"He would not have raised a finger to save them."

"Who knows?" sighed a feminine voice. "Perhaps he came to Boulogne to help them."

"And he has been caught, anyway," concluded Auguste Moleux sententiously; "and, my little cabbages, remember this, that so great is the pleasure of the all-powerful Committee of Public Safety at his capture, that because he has been caught in Boulogne, therefore Boulogne is to be specially rewarded!"

"Holy Virgin, who'd have thought it?"

"Sh . . . Jeannette, dost not know that there's no Holy Virgin now?"

"And dost know, Auguste, how we are to be rewarded?"

It is a difficult matter for the human mind to turn very quickly from despair to hope, and the fishermen of Boulogne had not yet grasped the fact that they were to make merry, and that thoughts of anxiety must be abandoned for those of gaiety.

Auguste Moleux took out a parchment from the capacious pocket of his coat; he put on his most solemn air of officialdom, and, pointing with extended forefinger to the parchment, he said:

"A general amnesty to all natives of Boulogne who are under arrest at the present moment: a free pardon to all natives of Boulogne who are under sentence of

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death: permission to all natives of Boulogne to quit the town with their families, to embark on any vessel they please, in or out of the harbour, and to go whithersoever they choose, without passports, formalities, or questions of any kind."

Dead silence followed this announcement. Hope was just beginning to crowd anxiety and sullenness out of the way.

"Then poor André Legrand will be pardoned," whispered a voice suddenly; "he was to have been guillotined to-day."

"And Denise Latour! She was innocent enough, the gentle pigeon."

"And they'll let poor Abbé Foucquet out of prison, too."

"And François!"

"And poor Félicité, who is blind!"

"M. l'Abbé would be wise to leave Boulogne, with the children."

"He will, too: thou canst be sure of that!"

"It is not good to be a priest just now!"

"Bah! calotins are best dead than alive."

But some in the crowd were silent; others whispered eagerly:

"Thinkest thou it would be safer for us to get out of the country whilst we can?" said one of the men in a muffled tone, and clutching nervously at a woman's wrist.

"Aye! aye! it might leak out about that boat we procured for . . ."

"Sh . . . I was thinking of that. . . ."

"We can go to my Aunt Lebrun in Belgium. . . ."

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Others talked in whispers of England, or the New Land across the seas: they were those who had something to hide—money received from refugee aristocrats, boats sold to would-be émigrés, information withheld, denunciations shirked: the amnesty would not last long, 'twas best to be safely out of the way.

"In the meanwhile, my cabbages," quoth Auguste sententiously, "are you not grateful to Citizen Robespierre, who has sent this order specially down from Paris?"

"Aye! aye!" assented the crowd cheerfully.

"Hurrah for Citizen Robespierre!"

"Vive la République!"

"And you will enjoy yourselves to-day?"

"That we will!"

"Processions?"

"Aye! with music and dancing."

Out there, far away, beyond the harbour, the grey light of dawn was yielding to the crimson glow of morning. The rain had ceased, and heavy, slaty clouds parted here and there, displaying glints of delicate turquoise sky and tiny ethereal vapours, in the dim and remote distance of infinity, flecked with touches of rose and gold.

The towers and pinnacles of old Boulogne detached themselves, one by one, from the misty gloom of night. The old bell of the Beffroi tolled the hour of six. Soon the massive cupola of Notre Dame was clothed in purple hues, and the gilt cross on S. Joseph threw back across the square a blinding ray of gold.

The town sparrows began to twitter, and from far

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out at sea, in the direction of Dunkirk, there came the muffled boom of cannon.

"And remember, my pigeons," admonished Auguste Moleux solemnly, "that in this order which Robespierre has sent from Paris, it also says that from to-day onwards *le bon Dieu* has ceased to be!"

Many faces were turned towards the east just then, for the rising sun, tearing with one gigantic sweep the banks of cloud asunder, now displayed his magnificence in a gorgeous immensity of flaming crimson. The sea, in response, turned to liquid fire beneath the glow, whilst the whole sky was irradiated with the first blush of morning.

Le bon Dieu has ceased to be!!!

"There is only one religion in France now," explained Auguste Moleux, "the religion of Reason! We are all citizens!! We are all free and all able to think for ourselves. Citizen Robespierre has decreed that there is no good God. *Le bon Dieu* was a tyrant and an aristocrat, and, like all tyrants and aristocrats, He has been deposed. There is no good God, there is no Holy Virgin, and no Saints—only Reason, who is a goddess, and whom we all honour."

And the townsfolk of Boulogne, with eyes still fixed on the gorgeous east, shouted with sullen obedience:

"Hurrah! for the Goddess of Reason!"

"Hurrah for Robespierre!"

Only the women, trying to escape the town crier's prying eyes, or the soldiers' stern gaze, hastily crossed themselves behind their husbands' backs, terrified lest *le bon Dieu* had, after all, not altogether ceased to exist at the bidding of Citizen Robespierre.

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Thus the worthy natives of Boulogne, forgetting their anxieties and fears, were ready enough to enjoy the national fête ordained for them by the Committee of Public Safety, in honour of the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel. They were even willing to accept this new religion which Robespierre had invented: a religion which was only a mockery, with an actress to represent its supreme deity.

Mais que voulez-vous? Boulogne had long ago ceased to have faith in God: the terrors of the Revolution, which culminated in that agonising watch of last night, had smothered all thoughts of worship and of prayer.

The Scarlet Pimpernel must indeed be a dangerous spy, that his arrest should cause so much joy in Paris!

Even Boulogne had learned by experience that the Committee of Public Safety did not readily give up a prey, once its vulture-like claws had closed upon it. The proportion of condemnations as against acquittals was as a hundred to one.

But because this one man was taken, scores to-day were to be set free!

In the evening, at a given hour—seven o'clock had Auguste Moleux, the town crier, understood—the boom of the cannon would be heard, the gates of the town would be opened, the harbour would become a free port.

The inhabitants of Boulogne were ready to shout: "Vive the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

Whatever he was—hero or spy—he was undoubtedly the primary cause of all their joy.

By the time Auguste Moleux had cried out the news

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throughout the town, and pinned the new proclamation of mercy up on every public building, all traces of fatigue and anxiety had vanished. In spite of the fact that wearisome vigils had been kept in every home that night, and that hundreds of men and women had stood about for hours in the vicinity of the Gayole Fort, no sooner was the joyful news known than all lassitude was forgotten, and everyone set to with a right merry will to make the great fête-day a complete success.

There is in every native of Normandy, be he peasant or gentleman, an infinite capacity for enjoyment, and at the same time a marvellous faculty for co-ordinating and systematising his pleasures.

In a trice the surly crowds had vanished. Instead of these, there were groups of gaily-visaged men pleasantly chattering outside every eating and drinking place in the town. The national holiday had come upon these people quite unawares, so the early part of it had to be spent in thinking out a satisfactory programme for it. Sipping their beer or coffee, or munching their cherries à l'eau-de-vie, the townsfolk of Boulogne, so lately threatened with death, were quietly organising processions.

There was to be a grand muster on the Place de la Sénéchaussée, then a torchlight and lanthornlight march right round the ramparts, culminating in a gigantic assembly outside the Town Hall, where the Citizen Chauvelin, representing the Committee of Public Safety, would receive an address of welcome from the entire population of Boulogne.

The procession was to be in costume! There were

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to be Pierrots and Pierrettes, Harlequins and English clowns, aristocrats and goddesses! All day the women and girls were busy contriving travesties of all sorts, and the little tumble-down shops in the Rue du Château and the Rue Frédéric Sauvage—kept chiefly by Jews and English traders—were ransacked for old bits of finery, and for remnants of costumes, worn in the days when Boulogne was still a gay city and carnivals were held every year.

And then, of course, there would be the Goddess of Reason, in her triumphal car!—the apotheosis of the new religion, which was to make everybody happy, rich, and free.

Forgotten were the anxieties of the night, the fears of death, the great and glorious Revolution, which for this one day would cease her perpetual demand for the toll of blood.

Nothing was remembered save the pleasures and joy of the moment, and at times the name of that Englishman—spy, hero, or adventurer—the cause of all this bounty: the Scarlet Pimpernel.