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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XXXIII. The English spy

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CHAPTER XXXIII.

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AND now at last the shades of evening were drawing in thick and fast. Within the walls of Fort Gayole the last rays of the setting sun had long ago ceased to shed their dying radiance, and through the thick stone embrasures and the dusty panes of glass the grey light of dusk soon failed to penetrate.

In the large ground-floor room, with its window opened upon the wide promenade of the southern ramparts, a silence reigned which was oppressive. The air was heavy with the fumes of the two tallow candles on the table, which smoked persistently.

Against the walls a row of figures in dark blue uniforms with scarlet facings, drab breeches, and heavy riding boots, silent and immovable, with fixed bayonets, like so many automatons lining the room all round; at some little distance from the central table and out of the immediate circle of light, a small group composed of five soldiers in the same blue and scarlet uniforms. One of these was Sergeant Hébert. In the centre of this group two persons were sitting: a woman and an old man.

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The Abbé Foucquet had been brought down from his prison cell a few minutes ago, and told to watch what would go on around him, after which he would be allowed to go to his old church, S. Joseph, and ring the Angelus once more before he and his family left Boulogne for ever.

The Angelus would be the signal for the opening of all the prison gates in the town. Everyone to-night could come and go as they pleased, and having rung the Angelus, the abbé would be at liberty to join François and Félicité and their old mother, his sister, outside the purlieu of the town.

The Abbé Foucquet did not quite understand all this, which was very rapidly and roughly explained to him. It was such a very little while ago that he had expected to see the innocent children mounting up those awful steps which lead to the guillotine, whilst he himself was looking death quite near in the face, that all this talk of amnesty and of pardon had not quite fully reached his brain.

But he was quite content that it had all been ordained by le bon Dieu, and very happy at the thought of ringing the dearly-loved Angelus in his own old church once again. So when he was peremptorily pushed into the room and found himself close to Marguerite, with four or five soldiers standing round them, he quietly pulled his old rosary from his pocket and began murmuring gentle Paters and Aves under his breath.

Beside him sat Marguerite, rigid as a statue; her cloak thrown over her shoulders, so that its hood might hide her face. She could not now have said

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how that awful day had passed, how she had managed to survive the terrible, nerve-racking suspense, the agonising doubt as to what was going to happen. But above all, what she had found most unendurable was the torturing thought that in this same grim and frowning building her husband was there . . . somewhere . . . how far or how near she could not say . . . but she knew that she was parted from him, and perhaps would not see him again, not even at the hour of death.

That Percy would never write that infamous letter and *live*, she knew. That he might write it in order to save her she feared was possible, whilst the look of triumph on Chauvelin's face had aroused her most agonising terrors.

When she was summarily ordered to go into the next room she realised at once that all hope now was more than futile. The walls lined with troops, the attitude of her enemies, and, above all, that table with paper, ink, and pens ready, as it were, for the accomplishment of the hideous and monstrous deed, all made her very heart numb, as if it were held within the chill embrace of death.

"If the woman moves, speaks, or screams gag her at once!" said Collot roughly the moment she sat down, and Sergeant Hébert stood over her, gag and cloth in hand, whilst two soldiers placed heavy hands on her shoulders.

But she neither moved, nor spoke, not even presently when a loud and cheerful voice came echoing from a distant corridor, and anon the door opened and her husband came in, accompanied by Chauvelin.

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The ex-ambassador was very obviously in a state of acute nervous tension, his hands were tightly clasped behind his back, and his movements were curiously irresponsible and jerky. But Sir Percy Blakeney looked a picture of calm unconcern: the lace bow at his throat was tied with scrupulous care, his eye-glass upheld at quite the correct angle, and his delicate-coloured caped coat was thrown back sufficiently to afford a glimpse of the dainty cloth suit and exquisitely embroidered waistcoat beneath.

He was the perfect presentation of a London dandy, and might have been entering a royal drawing-room in company with an honoured guest. Marguerite's eyes were riveted on him as he came well within the circle of light projected by the candles, but not even with that acute sixth sense of a passionate and loving woman could she detect the slightest tremor in the aristocratic hand which held the gold-rimmed eyeglass, nor the faintest quiver of the firmly-moulded lips.

This had occurred just as the bell of the old Beffroi chimed three-quarters after six. Now it was close on seven, and in the centre of the room, and with his face and figure well lighted up by the candles, at the table, pen in hand, sat Sir Percy writing.

At his elbow, just behind him, stood Chauvelin on the one side and Collot d'Herbois on the other, both watching with fixed and burning eyes the writing of that letter.

Sir Percy seemed in no hurry. He wrote slowly and deliberately, carefully copying the draft of the

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letter which was propped up in front of him. The spelling of some of the French words seemed to have troubled him at first, for when he began he made many facetious and self-deprecatory remarks anent his own want of education, and carelessness in youth in acquiring the gentle art of speaking so elegant a language.

Presently, however, he appeared more at his ease, or perhaps less inclined to talk, since he only received curt, monosyllabic answers to his pleasant sallies. Five minutes had gone by without any other sound, save the spasmodic creak of Sir Percy's pen upon the paper, the while Chauvelin and Collot watched every word he wrote.

But gradually from afar there had risen in the stillness of evening a distant, rolling noise like that of surf breaking against the cliffs. Nearer and louder it grew, and as it increased in volume, so it gained now in diversity. The monotonous roll like far-off thunder was just as continuous as before, but now shriller notes broke out from amongst the more remote sounds, a loud laugh seemed ever and anon to pierce the distance and to rise above the persistent hubbub, which became the mere accompaniment to these isolated tones.

The merry-makers of Boulogne having started from the Place de la Sénéchaussée, were making the round of the town by the wide avenue which tops the ramparts. They were coming past the Fort Gayole, shouting, singing, brass trumpets in front, big drum ahead, drenched, hot, and hoarse, but supremely happy.

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Sir Percy looked up for a moment as the noise drew nearer, then turned to Chauvelin, and, pointing to the letter, he said :

“ I have nearly finished ! ”

The suspense in the smoke-laden atmosphere of this room was becoming unendurable, and four hearts at least were beating wildly with overpowering anxiety. Marguerite's eyes were fixed with tender intensity on the man she so passionately loved. She did not understand his actions or his motives, but she felt a wild longing in her to drink in every line of that loved face, as if with this last long look she was bidding an eternal farewell to all hopes of future earthly happiness.

The old priest had ceased to tell his beads. Feeling in his kindly heart the echo of the appalling tragedy which was being enacted before him, he had put out a fatherly, tentative hand towards Marguerite, and given her icy fingers a comforting pressure.

And in the hearts of Chauvelin and his colleague there was satisfied revenge, eager, exultant triumph, and that terrible nerve-tension which immediately precedes the long-expected climax.

But who can say what went on within the heart of that bold adventurer about to be brought to the lowest depths of humiliation which it is in the power of man to endure ? What behind that smooth, unruffled brow still bent laboriously over the page of writing ?

The crowd was now on the Place Daumont ; some of the foremost in the ranks were ascending the stone steps which lead to the southern ramparts. The

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noise had become incessant; Pierrots and Pierrettes, Harlequins and Columbines had worked themselves up into a veritable intoxication of shouts and laughter.

Now, as they all swarmed up the steps and caught sight of the open window, almost on a level with the ground, and of the large, dimly-lighted room, they gave forth one terrific and voluminous "Hurrah!" for the paternal government up in Paris, who had given them cause for all this joy. Then they recollected how the amnesty, the pardon, the national fête, this brilliant procession had come about, and somebody in the crowd shouted:

"Allons! let us have a look at that English spy. . . ."

"Let us see the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

"Yes! yes! let us see what he is like!"

They shouted and stamped and swarmed round the open window, swinging their lanthorns and demanding, in a loud tone of voice, that the English spy be shown to them.

Faces, wet with rain and perspiration, tried to peep in at the window. Collot gave brief orders to the soldiers to close the shutters at once and to push away the crowd, but the crowd would not be pushed. It would not be gainsaid, and when the soldiers tried to close the window twenty angry fists broke the panes of glass.

"I can't finish this writing in your lingo, Sir, whilst this demmed row is going on," said Sir Percy placidly.

"You have not much more to write, Sir Percy,"

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urged Chauvelin, with nervous impatience; "I pray you finish the matter now, and get you gone from out this city."

"Send that demmed lot away then," rejoined Sir Percy, calmly.

"They won't go. . . . They want to see you. . . ."

Sir Percy paused a moment, pen in hand, as if in deep reflection.

"They want to see me," he said, with a laugh. "Why, demn it all . . . then, why not let 'em? . . ."

And with a few rapid strokes of the pen he quickly finished the letter, adding his signature with a bold flourish, whilst the crowd, pushing, jostling, shouting and cursing the soldiers, still loudly demanded to see the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Chauvelin felt as if his heart would veritably burst with the wildness of its beating.

Then Sir Percy, with one hand lightly pressed on the letter, pushed his chair away, and with his pleasant, ringing voice, said once again:

"Well! demn it . . . let 'em see me! . . ."

With that he sprang to his feet and up to his full height, and as he did so he seized the two massive pewter candlesticks, one in each hand, and with powerful arms well outstretched he held them high above his head.

"The letter . . ." murmured Chauvelin, in a hoarse whisper.

But even as he was quickly reaching out a hand, which shook with the intensity of his excitement, towards the letter on the table, Blakeney, with one loud and sudden shout, threw the heavy candlesticks

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on to the floor. They rattled down with a terrific crash, the lights were extinguished, and the whole room was immediately plunged in utter darkness.

The crowd gave a wild yell of fear: they had only caught sight for one instance of that gigantic figure—which, with arms outstretched, had seemed supernaturally tall—weirdly illumined by the flickering light of the tallow candles, and the next moment disappearing into utter darkness before their very gaze. Overcome with sudden superstitious fear, Pierrots and Pierrettes, drummer and trumpeters, turned and fled in every direction.

Within the room all was wild confusion. The soldiers had heard a cry:

“La fenêtre! La fenêtre!”

Who gave it no one knew, no one could afterwards recollect; certain it is that with one accord the majority of the men made a rush for the open window, driven thither partly by the wild instinct of the chase after an escaping enemy, and partly by the same superstitious terror which had caused the crowd to flee. They clambered over the sill and dropped down on to the ramparts below, then started in wild pursuit.

But when the crash came, Chauvelin had given one frantic shout:

“The letter!!! . . . Collot!! . . . A moi . . . In his hand. . . . The letter! . . .”

There was the sound of a heavy thud, of a terrible scuffle there on the floor in the darkness, and then a yell of victory from Collot d’Herbois.

“I have the letter! A Paris!”

“Victory!” echoed Chauvelin, exultant and

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panting, "victory!! The Angelus, friend Hébert! Take the calotin to ring the Angelus!!!"

It was instinct which caused Collot d'Herbois to find the door; he tore it open, letting in a feeble ray of light from the corridor. He stood in the doorway one moment, his slouchy, ungainly form distinctly outlined against the lighter background beyond, a look of exultant and malicious triumph, of deadly hate and cruelty distinctly imprinted on his face, and with upraised hand wildly flourishing the precious document, the brand of dishonour for the enemy of France.

"A Paris!" shouted Chauvelin to him excitedly. "Into Robespierre's hands. . . . The letter! . . ."

Then he fell back panting, exhausted on the nearest chair.

Collot, without looking again behind him, called wildly for the men who were to escort him to Paris. They were picked troopers, stalwart veterans from the old municipal guard. They had not broken their ranks throughout the turmoil, and fell into line in perfect order as they followed Citizen Collot out of the room.

Less than five minutes later there was the noise of stamping and champing of bits in the courtyard below, a shout from Collot, and the sound of a cavalcade galloping at break-neck speed towards the distant Paris gate.