

EMMA ORCZY

EL DORADO: AN
ADVENTURE OF THE
SCARLET PIMPERNEL

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Orczy E.

El Dorado: An Adventure of the Scarlet Pimpernel / E. Orczy —
«Public Domain»,

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PART I

CHAPTER I. IN THE THEATRE NATIONAL

And yet people found the opportunity to amuse themselves, to dance and to go to the theatre, to enjoy music and open-air cafes and promenades in the Palais Royal.

New fashions in dress made their appearance, milliners produced fresh “creations,” and jewellers were not idle. A grim sense of humour, born of the very intensity of ever-present danger, had dubbed the cut of certain tunics “tete tranche,” or a favourite ragout was called “a la guillotine.”

On three evenings only during the past memorable four and a half years did the theatres close their doors, and these evenings were the ones immediately following that terrible 2nd of September the day of the butchery outside the Abbaye prison, when Paris herself was aghast with horror, and the cries of the massacred might have drowned the calls of the audience whose hands upraised for plaudits would still be dripping with blood.

On all other evenings of these same four and a half years the theatres in the Rue de Richelieu, in the Palais Royal, the Luxembourg, and others, had raised their curtains and taken money at their doors. The same audience that earlier in the day had whiled away the time by witnessing the ever-recurrent dramas of the Place de la Revolution assembled here in the evenings and filled stalls, boxes, and tiers, laughing over the satires of Voltaire or weeping over the sentimental tragedies of persecuted Romeos and innocent Juliets.

Death knocked at so many doors these days! He was so constant a guest in the houses of relatives and friends that those who had merely shaken him by the hand, those on whom he had smiled, and whom he, still smiling, had passed indulgently by, looked on him with that subtle contempt born of familiarity, shrugged their shoulders at his passage, and envisaged his probable visit on the morrow with lighthearted indifference.

Paris—despite the horrors that had stained her walls had remained a city of pleasure, and the knife of the guillotine did scarce descend more often than did the drop-scenes on the stage.

On this bitterly cold evening of the 27th Nivose, in the second year of the Republic—or, as we of the old style still persist in calling it, the 16th of January, 1794—the auditorium of the Theatre National was filled with a very brilliant company.

The appearance of a favourite actress in the part of one of Moliere’s volatile heroines had brought pleasure-loving Paris to witness this revival of “Le Misanthrope,” with new scenery, dresses, and the aforesaid charming actress to add piquancy to the master’s mordant wit.

The Moniteur, which so impartially chronicles the events of those times, tells us under that date that the Assembly of the Convention voted on that same day a new law giving fuller power to its spies, enabling them to effect domiciliary searches at their discretion without previous reference to the Committee of General Security, authorising them to proceed against all enemies of public happiness, to send them to prison at their own discretion, and assuring them the sum of thirty-five livres “for every piece of game thus beaten up for the guillotine.” Under that same date the Moniteur also puts it on record that the Theatre National was filled to its utmost capacity for the revival of the late citizen Moliere’s comedy.

The Assembly of the Convention having voted the new law which placed the lives of thousands at the mercy of a few human bloodhounds, adjourned its sitting and proceeded to the Rue de Richelieu.

Already the house was full when the fathers of the people made their way to the seats which had been reserved for them. An awed hush descended on the throng as one by one the men whose very names inspired horror and dread filed in through the narrow gangways of the stalls or took their places in the tiny boxes around.

Citizen Robespierre's neatly bewigged head soon appeared in one of these; his bosom friend St. Just was with him, and also his sister Charlotte. Danton, like a big, shaggy-coated lion, elbowed his way into the stalls, whilst Sauterre, the handsome butcher and idol of the people of Paris, was loudly acclaimed as his huge frame, gorgeously clad in the uniform of the National Guard, was sighted on one of the tiers above.

The public in the parterre and in the galleries whispered excitedly; the awe-inspiring names flew about hither and thither on the wings of the overheated air. Women craned their necks to catch sight of heads which mayhap on the morrow would roll into the gruesome basket at the foot of the guillotine.

In one of the tiny avant-scene boxes two men had taken their seats long before the bulk of the audience had begun to assemble in the house. The inside of the box was in complete darkness, and the narrow opening which allowed but a sorry view of one side of the stage helped to conceal rather than display the occupants.

The younger one of these two men appeared to be something of a stranger in Paris, for as the public men and the well-known members of the Government began to arrive he often turned to his companion for information regarding these notorious personalities.

"Tell me, de Batz," he said, calling the other's attention to a group of men who had just entered the house, "that creature there in the green coat—with his hand up to his face now—who is he?"

"Where? Which do you mean?"

"There! He looks this way now, and he has a playbill in his hand. The man with the protruding chin and the convex forehead, a face like a marmoset, and eyes like a jackal. What?"

The other leaned over the edge of the box, and his small, restless eyes wandered over the now closely-packed auditorium.

"Oh!" he said as soon as he recognised the face which his friend had pointed out to him, "that is citizen Fouquier-Tinville."

"The Public Prosecutor?"

"Himself. And Heron is the man next to him."

"Heron?" said the younger man interrogatively.

"Yes. He is chief agent to the Committee of General Security now."

"What does that mean?"

Both leaned back in their chairs, and their sombrely-clad figures were once more merged in the gloom of the narrow box. Instinctively, since the name of the Public Prosecutor had been mentioned between them, they had allowed their voices to sink to a whisper.

The older man—a stoutish, florid-looking individual, with small, keen eyes, and skin pitted with small-pox—shrugged his shoulders at his friend's question, and then said with an air of contemptuous indifference:

"It means, my good St. Just, that these two men whom you see down there, calmly conning the programme of this evening's entertainment, and preparing to enjoy themselves to-night in the company of the late M. de Moliere, are two hell-hounds as powerful as they are cunning."

"Yes, yes," said St. Just, and much against his will a slight shudder ran through his slim figure as he spoke. "Fouquier-Tinville I know; I know his cunning, and I know his power—but the other?"

“The other?” retorted de Batz lightly. “Heron? Let me tell you, my friend, that even the might and lust of that damned Public Prosecutor pale before the power of Heron!”

“But how? I do not understand.”

“Ah! you have been in England so long, you lucky dog, and though no doubt the main plot of our hideous tragedy has reached your ken, you have no cognisance of the actors who play the principal parts on this arena flooded with blood and carpeted with hate. They come and go, these actors, my good St. Just—they come and go. Marat is already the man of yesterday, Robespierre is the man of to-morrow. To-day we still have Danton and Fouquier-Tinville; we still have Pere Duchesne, and your own good cousin Antoine St. Just, but Heron and his like are with us always.”

“Spies, of course?”

“Spies,” assented the other. “And what spies! Were you present at the sitting of the Assembly to-day?”

“I was. I heard the new decree which already has passed into law. Ah! I tell you, friend, that we do not let the grass grow under our feet these days. Robespierre wakes up one morning with a whim; by the afternoon that whim has become law, passed by a servile body of men too terrified to run counter to his will, fearful lest they be accused of moderation or of humanity—the greatest crimes that can be committed nowadays.”

“But Danton?”

“Ah! Danton? He would wish to stem the tide that his own passions have let loose; to muzzle the raging beasts whose fangs he himself has sharpened. I told you that Danton is still the man of to-day; to-morrow he will be accused of moderation. Danton and moderation!—ye gods! Eh? Danton, who thought the guillotine too slow in its work, and armed thirty soldiers with swords, so that thirty heads might fall at one and the same time. Danton, friend, will perish to-morrow accused of treachery against the Revolution, of moderation towards her enemies; and curs like Heron will feast on the blood of lions like Danton and his crowd.”

He paused a moment, for he dared not raise his voice, and his whispers were being drowned by the noise in the auditorium. The curtain, timed to be raised at eight o'clock, was still down, though it was close on half-past, and the public was growing impatient. There was loud stamping of feet, and a few shrill whistles of disapproval proceeded from the gallery.

“If Heron gets impatient,” said de Batz lightly, when the noise had momentarily subsided, “the manager of this theatre and mayhap his leading actor and actress will spend an unpleasant day to-morrow.”

“Always Heron!” said St. Just, with a contemptuous smile.

“Yes, my friend,” rejoined the other imperturbably, “always Heron. And he has even obtained a longer lease of existence this afternoon.”

“By the new decree?”

“Yes. The new decree. The agents of the Committee of General Security, of whom Heron is the chief, have from to-day powers of domiciliary search; they have full powers to proceed against all enemies of public welfare. Isn't that beautifully vague? And they have absolute discretion; every one may become an enemy of public welfare, either by spending too much money or by spending too little, by laughing to-day or crying to-morrow, by mourning for one dead relative or rejoicing over the execution of another. He may be a bad example to the public by the cleanliness of his person or by the filth upon his clothes, he may offend by walking to-day and by riding in a carriage next week; the agents of the Committee of General Security shall alone decide what constitutes enmity against public welfare. All prisons are to be opened at their bidding to receive those whom they choose to denounce; they have henceforth the right to examine prisoners privately and without witnesses, and to send them to trial without further warrants; their duty is clear—they must 'beat up game for the guillotine.' Thus is the decree worded; they must furnish the Public Prosecutor with work to do, the tribunals with victims to condemn, the Place de la Revolution with death-scenes to amuse the people,

and for their work they will be rewarded thirty-five livres for every head that falls under the guillotine Ah! if Heron and his like and his myrmidons work hard and well they can make a comfortable income of four or five thousand livres a week. We are getting on, friend St. Just—we are getting on.”

He had not raised his voice while he spoke, nor in the recounting of such inhuman monstrosity, such vile and bloodthirsty conspiracy against the liberty, the dignity, the very life of an entire nation, did he appear to feel the slightest indignation; rather did a tone of amusement and even of triumph strike through his speech; and now he laughed good-humouredly like an indulgent parent who is watching the naturally cruel antics of a spoilt boy.

“Then from this hell let loose upon earth,” exclaimed St. Just hotly, “must we rescue those who refuse to ride upon this tide of blood.”

His cheeks were glowing, his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. He looked very young and very eager. Armand St. Just, the brother of Lady Blakeney, had something of the refined beauty of his lovely sister, but the features though manly—had not the latent strength expressed in them which characterised every line of Marguerite’s exquisite face. The forehead suggested a dreamer rather than a thinker, the blue-grey eyes were those of an idealist rather than of a man of action.

De Batz’s keen piercing eyes had no doubt noted this, even whilst he gazed at his young friend with that same look of good-humoured indulgence which seemed habitual to him.

“We have to think of the future, my good St. Just,” he said after a slight pause, and speaking slowly and decisively, like a father rebuking a hot-headed child, “not of the present. What are a few lives worth beside the great principles which we have at stake?”

“The restoration of the monarchy—I know,” retorted St. Just, still unsobered, “but, in the meanwhile—”

“In the meanwhile,” rejoined de Batz earnestly, “every victim to the lust of these men is a step towards the restoration of law and order—that is to say, of the monarchy. It is only through these violent excesses perpetrated in its name that the nation will realise how it is being fooled by a set of men who have only their own power and their own advancement in view, and who imagine that the only way to that power is over the dead bodies of those who stand in their way. Once the nation is sickened by these orgies of ambition and of hate, it will turn against these savage brutes, and gladly acclaim the restoration of all that they are striving to destroy. This is our only hope for the future, and, believe me, friend, that every head snatched from the guillotine by your romantic hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel, is a stone laid for the consolidation of this infamous Republic.”

“I’ll not believe it,” protested St. Just emphatically.

De Batz, with a gesture of contempt indicative also of complete self-satisfaction and unalterable self-belief, shrugged his broad shoulders. His short fat fingers, covered with rings, beat a tattoo upon the ledge of the box.

Obviously, he was ready with a retort. His young friend’s attitude irritated even more than it amused him. But he said nothing for the moment, waiting while the traditional three knocks on the floor of the stage proclaimed the rise of the curtain. The growing impatience of the audience subsided as if by magic at the welcome call; everybody settled down again comfortably in their seats, they gave up the contemplation of the fathers of the people, and turned their full attention to the actors on the boards.

CHAPTER II. WIDELY DIVERGENT AIMS

This was Armand S. Just's first visit to Paris since that memorable day when first he decided to sever his connection from the Republican party, of which he and his beautiful sister Marguerite had at one time been amongst the most noble, most enthusiastic followers. Already a year and a half ago the excesses of the party had horrified him, and that was long before they had degenerated into the sickening orgies which were culminating to-day in wholesale massacres and bloody hecatombs of innocent victims.

With the death of Mirabeau the moderate Republicans, whose sole and entirely pure aim had been to free the people of France from the autocratic tyranny of the Bourbons, saw the power go from their clean hands to the grimy ones of lustful demagogues, who knew no law save their own passions of bitter hatred against all classes that were not as self-seeking, as ferocious as themselves.

It was no longer a question of a fight for political and religious liberty only, but one of class against class, man against man, and let the weaker look to himself. The weaker had proved himself to be, firstly, the man of property and substance, then the law-abiding citizen, lastly the man of action who had obtained for the people that very same liberty of thought and of belief which soon became so terribly misused.

Armand St. Just, one of the apostles of liberty, fraternity, and equality, soon found that the most savage excesses of tyranny were being perpetrated in the name of those same ideals which he had worshipped.

His sister Marguerite, happily married in England, was the final temptation which caused him to quit the country the destinies of which he no longer could help to control. The spark of enthusiasm which he and the followers of Mirabeau had tried to kindle in the hearts of an oppressed people had turned to raging tongues of unquenchable flames. The taking of the Bastille had been the prelude to the massacres of September, and even the horror of these had since paled beside the holocausts of to-day.

Armand, saved from the swift vengeance of the revolutionaries by the devotion of the Scarlet Pimpernel, crossed over to England and enrolled himself under the banner of the heroic chief. But he had been unable hitherto to be an active member of the League. The chief was loath to allow him to run foolhardy risks. The St. Justs—both Marguerite and Armand—were still very well-known in Paris. Marguerite was not a woman easily forgotten, and her marriage with an English "aristo" did not please those republican circles who had looked upon her as their queen. Armand's secession from his party into the ranks of the emigres had singled him out for special reprisals, if and whenever he could be got hold of, and both brother and sister had an unusually bitter enemy in their cousin Antoine St. Just—once an aspirant to Marguerite's hand, and now a servile adherent and imitator of Robespierre, whose ferocious cruelty he tried to emulate with a view to ingratiating himself with the most powerful man of the day.

Nothing would have pleased Antoine St. Just more than the opportunity of showing his zeal and his patriotism by denouncing his own kith and kin to the Tribunal of the Terror, and the Scarlet Pimpernel, whose own slender fingers were held on the pulse of that reckless revolution, had no wish to sacrifice Armand's life deliberately, or even to expose it to unnecessary dangers.

Thus it was that more than a year had gone by before Armand St. Just—an enthusiastic member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel—was able to do aught for its service. He had chafed under the enforced restraint placed upon him by the prudence of his chief, when, indeed, he was longing to risk his life with the comrades whom he loved and beside the leader whom he revered.

At last, in the beginning of '94 he persuaded Blakeney to allow him to join the next expedition to France. What the principal aim of that expedition was the members of the League did not know

as yet, but what they did know was that perils—graver even than hitherto—would attend them on their way.

The circumstances had become very different of late. At first the impenetrable mystery which had surrounded the personality of the chief had been a full measure of safety, but now one tiny corner of that veil of mystery had been lifted by two rough pairs of hands at least; Chauvelin, ex-ambassador at the English Court, was no longer in any doubt as to the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, whilst Collot d'Herbois had seen him at Boulogne, and had there been effectually foiled by him.

Four months had gone by since that day, and the Scarlet Pimpernel was hardly ever out of France now; the massacres in Paris and in the provinces had multiplied with appalling rapidity, the necessity for the selfless devotion of that small band of heroes had become daily, hourly more pressing. They rallied round their chief with unbounded enthusiasm, and let it be admitted at once that the sporting instinct—inherent in these English gentlemen—made them all the more keen, all the more eager now that the dangers which beset their expeditions were increased tenfold.

At a word from the beloved leader, these young men—the spoilt darlings of society—would leave the gaieties, the pleasures, the luxuries of London or of Bath, and, taking their lives in their hands, they placed them, together with their fortunes, and even their good names, at the service of the innocent and helpless victims of merciless tyranny. The married men—Ffoulkes, my Lord Hastings, Sir Jeremiah Wallescourt—left wife and children at a call from the chief, at the cry of the wretched. Armand—unattached and enthusiastic—had the right to demand that he should no longer be left behind.

He had only been away a little over fifteen months, and yet he found Paris a different city from the one he had left immediately after the terrible massacres of September. An air of grim loneliness seemed to hang over her despite the crowds that thronged her streets; the men whom he was wont to meet in public places fifteen months ago—friends and political allies—were no longer to be seen; strange faces surrounded him on every side—sullen, glowering faces, all wearing a certain air of horrified surprise and of vague, terrified wonder, as if life had become one awful puzzle, the answer to which must be found in the brief interval between the swift passages of death.

Armand St. Just, having settled his few simple belongings in the squalid lodgings which had been assigned to him, had started out after dark to wander somewhat aimlessly through the streets. Instinctively he seemed to be searching for a familiar face, some one who would come to him out of that merry past which he had spent with Marguerite in their pretty apartment in the Rue St. Honore.

For an hour he wandered thus and met no one whom he knew. At times it appeared to him as if he did recognise a face or figure that passed him swiftly by in the gloom, but even before he could fully make up his mind to that, the face or figure had already disappeared, gliding furtively down some narrow unlighted by-street, without turning to look to right or left, as if dreading fuller recognition. Armand felt a total stranger in his own native city.

The terrible hours of the execution on the Place de la Revolution were fortunately over, the tumbrils no longer rattled along the uneven pavements, nor did the death-cry of the unfortunate victims resound through the deserted streets. Armand was, on this first day of his arrival, spared the sight of this degradation of the once lovely city; but her desolation, her general appearance of shamefaced indigence and of cruel aloofness struck a chill in the young man's heart.

It was no wonder, therefore, when anon he was wending his way slowly back to his lodging he was accosted by a pleasant, cheerful voice, that he responded to it with alacrity. The voice, of a smooth, oily timbre, as if the owner kept it well greased for purposes of amiable speech, was like an echo of the past, when jolly, irresponsible Baron de Batz, erst-while officer of the Guard in the service of the late King, and since then known to be the most inveterate conspirator for the restoration of the monarchy, used to amuse Marguerite by his vapid, senseless plans for the overthrow of the newly-risen power of the people.

Armand was quite glad to meet him, and when de Batz suggested that a good talk over old times would be vastly agreeable, the younger man gladly acceded. The two men, though certainly not mistrustful of one another, did not seem to care to reveal to each other the place where they lodged. De Batz at once proposed the avant-scene box of one of the theatres as being the safest place where old friends could talk without fear of spying eyes or ears.

“There is no place so safe or so private nowadays, believe me, my young friend,” he said “I have tried every sort of nook and cranny in this accursed town, now riddled with spies, and I have come to the conclusion that a small avant-scene box is the most perfect den of privacy there is in the entire city. The voices of the actors on the stage and the hum among the audience in the house will effectually drown all individual conversation to every ear save the one for whom it is intended.”

It is not difficult to persuade a young man who feels lonely and somewhat forlorn in a large city to while away an evening in the companionship of a cheerful talker, and de Batz was essentially good company. His vapourings had always been amusing, but Armand now gave him credit for more seriousness of purpose; and though the chief had warned him against picking up acquaintances in Paris, the young man felt that that restriction would certainly not apply to a man like de Batz, whose hot partisanship of the Royalist cause and hare-brained schemes for its restoration must make him at one with the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Armand accepted the other’s cordial invitation. He, too, felt that he would indeed be safer from observation in a crowded theatre than in the streets. Among a closely packed throng bent on amusement the sombrely-clad figure of a young man, with the appearance of a student or of a journalist, would easily pass unperceived.

But somehow, after the first ten minutes spent in de Batz’ company within the gloomy shelter of the small avant-scene box, Armand already repented of the impulse which had prompted him to come to the theatre to-night, and to renew acquaintanceship with the ex-officer of the late King’s Guard. Though he knew de Batz to be an ardent Royalist, and even an active adherent of the monarchy, he was soon conscious of a vague sense of mistrust of this pompous, self-complacent individual, whose every utterance breathed selfish aims rather than devotion to a forlorn cause.

Therefore, when the curtain rose at last on the first act of Moliere’s witty comedy, St. Just turned deliberately towards the stage and tried to interest himself in the wordy quarrel between Philinte and Alceste.

But this attitude on the part of the younger man did not seem to suit his newly-found friend. It was clear that de Batz did not consider the topic of conversation by any means exhausted, and that it had been more with a view to a discussion like the present interrupted one that he had invited St. Just to come to the theatre with him to-night, rather than for the purpose of witnessing Mlle. Lange’s debut in the part of Celimene.

The presence of St. Just in Paris had as a matter of fact astonished de Batz not a little, and had set his intriguing brain busy on conjectures. It was in order to turn these conjectures into certainties that he had desired private talk with the young man.

He waited silently now for a moment or two, his keen, small eyes resting with evident anxiety on Armand’s averted head, his fingers still beating the impatient tattoo upon the velvet-covered cushion of the box. Then at the first movement of St. Just towards him he was ready in an instant to re-open the subject under discussion.

With a quick nod of his head he called his young friend’s attention back to the men in the auditorium.

“Your good cousin Antoine St. Just is hand and glove with Robespierre now,” he said. “When you left Paris more than a year ago you could afford to despise him as an empty-headed windbag; now, if you desire to remain in France, you will have to fear him as a power and a menace.”

“Yes, I knew that he had taken to herding with the wolves,” rejoined Armand lightly. “At one time he was in love with my sister. I thank God that she never cared for him.”

“They say that he herds with the wolves because of this disappointment,” said de Batz. “The whole pack is made up of men who have been disappointed, and who have nothing more to lose. When all these wolves will have devoured one another, then and then only can we hope for the restoration of the monarchy in France. And they will not turn on one another whilst prey for their greed lies ready to their jaws. Your friend the Scarlet Pimpernel should feed this bloody revolution of ours rather than starve it, if indeed he hates it as he seems to do.”

His restless eyes peered with eager interrogation into those of the younger man. He paused as if waiting for a reply; then, as St. Just remained silent, he reiterated slowly, almost in the tones of a challenge:

“If indeed he hates this bloodthirsty revolution of ours as he seems to do.”

The reiteration implied a doubt. In a moment St. Just’s loyalty was up in arms.

“The Scarlet Pimpernel,” he said, “cares naught for your political aims. The work of mercy that he does, he does for justice and for humanity.”

“And for sport,” said de Batz with a sneer, “so I’ve been told.”

“He is English,” assented St. Just, “and as such will never own to sentiment. Whatever be the motive, look at the result!

“Yes! a few lives stolen from the guillotine.”

“Women and children—innocent victims—would have perished but for his devotion.”

“The more innocent they were, the more helpless, the more pitiable, the louder would their blood have cried for reprisals against the wild beasts who sent them to their death.”

St. Just made no reply. It was obviously useless to attempt to argue with this man, whose political aims were as far apart from those of the Scarlet Pimpernel as was the North Pole from the South.

“If any of you have influence over that hot-headed leader of yours,” continued de Batz, unabashed by the silence of his friend, “I wish to God you would exert it now.”

“In what way?” queried St. Just, smiling in spite of himself at the thought of his or any one else’s control over Blakeney and his plans.

It was de Batz’ turn to be silent. He paused for a moment or two, then he asked abruptly:

“Your Scarlet Pimpernel is in Paris now, is he not?”

“I cannot tell you,” replied Armand.

“Bah! there is no necessity to fence with me, my friend. The moment I set eyes on you this afternoon I knew that you had not come to Paris alone.”

“You are mistaken, my good de Batz,” rejoined the young man earnestly; “I came to Paris alone.”

“Clever parrying, on my word—but wholly wasted on my unbelieving ears. Did I not note at once that you did not seem overpleased to-day when I accosted you?”

“Again you are mistaken. I was very pleased to meet you, for I had felt singularly lonely all day, and was glad to shake a friend by the hand. What you took for displeasure was only surprise.”

“Surprise? Ah, yes! I don’t wonder that you were surprised to see me walking unmolested and openly in the streets of Paris—whereas you had heard of me as a dangerous conspirator, eh?—and as a man who has the entire police of his country at his heels—on whose head there is a price—what?”

“I knew that you had made several noble efforts to rescue the unfortunate King and Queen from the hands of these brutes.”

“All of which efforts were unsuccessful,” assented de Batz imperturbably, “every one of them having been either betrayed by some d-d confederate or ferreted out by some astute spy eager for gain. Yes, my friend, I made several efforts to rescue King Louis and Queen Marie Antoinette from the scaffold, and every time I was foiled, and yet here I am, you see, unscathed and free. I walk about the streets boldly, and talk to my friends as I meet them.”

“You are lucky,” said St. Just, not without a tinge of sarcasm.

“I have been prudent,” retorted de Batz. “I have taken the trouble to make friends there where I thought I needed them most—the mammon of unrighteousness, you know-what?”

And he laughed a broad, thick laugh of perfect self-satisfaction.

“Yes, I know,” rejoined St. Just, with the tone of sarcasm still more apparent in his voice now. “You have Austrian money at your disposal.”

“Any amount,” said the other complacently, “and a great deal of it sticks to the grimy fingers of these patriotic makers of revolutions. Thus do I ensure my own safety. I buy it with the Emperor’s money, and thus am I able to work for the restoration of the monarchy in France.”

Again St. Just was silent. What could he say? Instinctively now, as the fleshy personality of the Gascon Royalist seemed to spread itself out and to fill the tiny box with his ambitious schemes and his far-reaching plans, Armand’s thoughts flew back to that other plotter, the man with the pure and simple aims, the man whose slender fingers had never handled alien gold, but were ever there ready stretched out to the helpless and the weak, whilst his thoughts were only of the help that he might give them, but never of his own safety.

De Batz, however, seemed blandly unconscious of any such disparaging thoughts in the mind of his young friend, for he continued quite amiably, even though a note of anxiety seemed to make itself felt now in his smooth voice:

“We advance slowly, but step by step, my good St. Just,” he said. “I have not been able to save the monarchy in the person of the King or the Queen, but I may yet do it in the person of the Dauphin.”

“The Dauphin,” murmured St. Just involuntarily.

That involuntary murmur, scarcely audible, so soft was it, seemed in some way to satisfy de Batz, for the keenness of his gaze relaxed, and his fat fingers ceased their nervous, intermittent tattoo on the ledge of the box.

“Yes! the Dauphin,” he said, nodding his head as if in answer to his own thoughts, “or rather, let me say, the reigning King of France—Louis XVII, by the grace of God—the most precious life at present upon the whole of this earth.”

“You are right there, friend de Batz,” assented Armand fervently, “the most precious life, as you say, and one that must be saved at all costs.”

“Yes,” said de Batz calmly, “but not by your friend the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

“Why not?”

Scarce were those two little words out of St. Just’s mouth than he repented of them. He bit his lip, and with a dark frown upon his face he turned almost defiantly towards his friend.

But de Batz smiled with easy bonhomie.

“Ah, friend Armand,” he said, “you were not cut out for diplomacy, nor yet for intrigue. So then,” he added more seriously, “that gallant hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel, has hopes of rescuing our young King from the clutches of Simon the cobbler and of the herd of hyenas on the watch for his attenuated little corpse, eh?”

“I did not say that,” retorted St. Just sullenly.

“No. But I say it. Nay! nay! do not blame yourself, my over-loyal young friend. Could I, or any one else, doubt for a moment that sooner or later your romantic hero would turn his attention to the most pathetic sight in the whole of Europe—the child-martyr in the Temple prison? The wonder were to me if the Scarlet Pimpernel ignored our little King altogether for the sake of his subjects. No, no; do not think for a moment that you have betrayed your friend’s secret to me. When I met you so luckily today I guessed at once that you were here under the banner of the enigmatical little red flower, and, thus guessing, I even went a step further in my conjecture. The Scarlet Pimpernel is in Paris now in the hope of rescuing Louis XVII from the Temple prison.”

“If that is so, you must not only rejoice but should be able to help.”

“And yet, my friend, I do neither the one now nor mean to do the other in the future,” said de Batz placidly. “I happen to be a Frenchman, you see.”

“What has that to do with such a question?”

“Everything; though you, Armand, despite that you are a Frenchman too, do not look through my spectacles. Louis XVII is King of France, my good St. Just; he must owe his freedom and his life to us Frenchmen, and to no one else.”

“That is sheer madness, man,” retorted Armand. “Would you have the child perish for the sake of your own selfish ideas?”

“You may call them selfish if you will; all patriotism is in a measure selfish. What does the rest of the world care if we are a republic or a monarchy, an oligarchy or hopeless anarchy? We work for ourselves and to please ourselves, and I for one will not brook foreign interference.”

“Yet you work with foreign money!”

“That is another matter. I cannot get money in France, so I get it where I can; but I can arrange for the escape of Louis XVII is King of France, my good St. Just; he must of France should belong the honour and glory of having saved our King.”

For the third time now St. Just allowed the conversation to drop; he was gazing wide-eyed, almost appalled at this impudent display of well-nigh ferocious selfishness and vanity. De Batz, smiling and complacent, was leaning back in his chair, looking at his young friend with perfect contentment expressed in every line of his pock-marked face and in the very attitude of his well-fed body. It was easy enough now to understand the remarkable immunity which this man was enjoying, despite the many foolhardy plots which he hatched, and which had up to now invariably come to naught.

A regular braggart and empty windbag, he had taken but one good care, and that was of his own skin. Unlike other less fortunate Royalists of France, he neither fought in the country nor braved dangers in town. He played a safer game—crossed the frontier and constituted himself agent of Austria; he succeeded in gaining the Emperor’s money for the good of the Royalist cause, and for his own most especial benefit.

Even a less astute man of the world than was Armand St. Just would easily have guessed that de Batz’ desire to be the only instrument in the rescue of the poor little Dauphin from the Temple was not actuated by patriotism, but solely by greed. Obviously there was a rich reward waiting for him in Vienna the day that he brought Louis XVII safely into Austrian territory; that reward he would miss if a meddling Englishman interfered in this affair. Whether in this wrangle he risked the life of the child-King or not mattered to him not at all. It was de Batz who was to get the reward, and whose welfare and prosperity mattered more than the most precious life in Europe.

CHAPTER III. THE DEMON CHANCE

St. Just would have given much to be back in his lonely squalid lodgings now. Too late did he realise how wise had been the dictum which had warned him against making or renewing friendships in France.

Men had changed with the times. How terribly they had changed! Personal safety had become a fetish with most—a goal so difficult to attain that it had to be fought for and striven for, even at the expense of humanity and of self-respect.

Selfishness—the mere, cold-blooded insistence for self-advancement—ruled supreme. De Batz, surfeited with foreign money, used it firstly to ensure his own immunity, scattering it to right and left to still the ambition of the Public Prosecutor or to satisfy the greed of innumerable spies.

What was left over he used for the purpose of pitting the bloodthirsty demagogues one against the other, making of the National Assembly a gigantic bear-den, wherein wild beasts could rend one another limb from limb.

In the meanwhile, what cared he—he said it himself—whether hundreds of innocent martyrs perished miserably and uselessly? They were the necessary food whereby the Revolution was to be satiated and de Batz' schemes enabled to mature. The most precious life in Europe even was only to be saved if its price went to swell the pockets of de Batz, or to further his future ambitions.

Times had indeed changed an entire nation. St. Just felt as sickened with this self-seeking Royalist as he did with the savage brutes who struck to right or left for their own delectation. He was meditating immediate flight back to his lodgings, with a hope of finding there a word for him from the chief—a word to remind him that men did live nowadays who had other aims besides their own advancement—other ideals besides the deification of self.

The curtain had descended on the first act, and traditionally, as the works of M. de Moliere demanded it, the three knocks were heard again without any interval. St. Just rose ready with a pretext for parting with his friend. The curtain was being slowly drawn up on the second act, and disclosed Alceste in wrathful conversation with Celimene.

Alceste's opening speech is short. Whilst the actor spoke it Armand had his back to the stage; with hand outstretched, he was murmuring what he hoped would prove a polite excuse for thus leaving his amiable host while the entertainment had only just begun.

De Batz—vexed and impatient—had not by any means finished with his friend yet. He thought that his specious arguments—delivered with boundless conviction—had made some impression on the mind of the young man. That impression, however, he desired to deepen, and whilst Armand was worrying his brain to find a plausible excuse for going away, de Batz was racking his to find one for keeping him here.

Then it was that the wayward demon Chance intervened. Had St. Just risen but two minutes earlier, had his active mind suggested the desired excuse more readily, who knows what unspeakable sorrow, what heartrending misery, what terrible shame might have been spared both him and those for whom he cared? Those two minutes—did he but know it—decided the whole course of his future life. The excuse hovered on his lips, de Batz reluctantly was preparing to bid him good-bye, when Celimene, speaking common-place words enough in answer to her quarrelsome lover, caused him to drop the hand which he was holding out to his friend and to turn back towards the stage.

It was an exquisite voice that had spoken—a voice mellow and tender, with deep tones in it that betrayed latent power. The voice had caused Armand to look, the lips that spoke forged the first tiny link of that chain which riveted him forever after to the speaker.

It is difficult to say if such a thing really exists as love at first sight. Poets and romancists will have us believe that it does; idealists swear by it as being the only true love worthy of the name.

I do not know if I am prepared to admit their theory with regard to Armand St. Just. Mlle. Lange's exquisite voice certainly had charmed him to the extent of making him forget his mistrust of de Batz and his desire to get away. Mechanically almost he sat down again, and leaning both elbows on the edge of the box, he rested his chin in his hand, and listened. The words which the late M. de Moliere puts into the mouth of Celimene are trite and flippant enough, yet every time that Mlle. Lange's lips moved Armand watched her, entranced.

There, no doubt, the matter would have ended: a young man fascinated by a pretty woman on the stage—'tis a small matter, and one from which there doth not often spring a weary trail of tragic circumstances. Armand, who had a passion for music, would have worshipped at the shrine of Mlle. Lange's perfect voice until the curtain came down on the last act, had not his friend de Batz seen the keen enchantment which the actress had produced on the young enthusiast.

Now de Batz was a man who never allowed an opportunity to slip by, if that opportunity led towards the furtherance of his own desires. He did not want to lose sight of Armand just yet, and here the good demon Chance had given him an opportunity for obtaining what he wanted.

He waited quietly until the fall of the curtain at the end of Act II.; then, as Armand, with a sigh of delight, leaned back in his chair, and closing his eyes appeared to be living the last half-hour all over again, de Batz remarked with well-assumed indifference:

"Mlle. Lange is a promising young actress. Do you not think so, my friend?"

"She has a perfect voice—it was exquisite melody to the ear," replied Armand. "I was conscious of little else."

"She is a beautiful woman, nevertheless," continued de Batz with a smile. "During the next act, my good St. Just, I would suggest that you open your eyes as well as your ears."

Armand did as he was bidden. The whole appearance of Mlle. Lange seemed in harmony with her voice. She was not very tall, but eminently graceful, with a small, oval face and slender, almost childlike figure, which appeared still more so above the wide hoops and draped panniers of the fashions of Moliere's time.

Whether she was beautiful or not the young man hardly knew. Measured by certain standards, she certainly was not so, for her mouth was not small, and her nose anything but classical in outline. But the eyes were brown, and they had that half-veiled look in them—shaded with long lashes that seemed to make a perpetual tender appeal to the masculine heart: the lips, too, were full and moist, and the teeth dazzling white. Yes!—on the whole we might easily say that she was exquisite, even though we did not admit that she was beautiful.

Painter David has made a sketch of her; we have all seen it at the Musee Carnavalet, and all wondered why that charming, if irregular, little face made such an impression of sadness.

There are five acts in "Le Misanthrope," during which Celimene is almost constantly on the stage. At the end of the fourth act de Batz said casually to his friend:

"I have the honour of personal acquaintanceship with Mlle. Lange. An you care for an introduction to her, we can go round to the green room after the play."

Did prudence then whisper, "Desist"? Did loyalty to the leader murmur, "Obey"? It were indeed difficult to say. Armand St. Just was not five-and-twenty, and Mlle. Lange's melodious voice spoke louder than the whisperings of prudence or even than the call of duty.

He thanked de Batz warmly, and during the last half-hour, while the misanthropical lover spurned repentant Celimene, he was conscious of a curious sensation of impatience, a tingling of his nerves, a wild, mad longing to hear those full moist lips pronounce his name, and have those large brown eyes throw their half-veiled look into his own.

CHAPTER IV. MADEMOISELLE LANGE

The green-room was crowded when de Batz and St. Just arrived there after the performance. The older man cast a hasty glance through the open door. The crowd did not suit his purpose, and he dragged his companion hurriedly away from the contemplation of Mlle. Lange, sitting in a far corner of the room, surrounded by an admiring throng, and by innumerable floral tributes offered to her beauty and to her success.

De Batz without a word led the way back towards the stage. Here, by the dim light of tallow candles fixed in sconces against the surrounding walls, the scene-shifters were busy moving drop-scenes, back cloths and wings, and paid no heed to the two men who strolled slowly up and down silently, each wrapped in his own thoughts.

Armand walked with his hands buried in his breeches pockets, his head bent forward on his chest; but every now and again he threw quick, apprehensive glances round him whenever a firm step echoed along the empty stage or a voice rang clearly through the now deserted theatre.

“Are we wise to wait here?” he asked, speaking to himself rather than to his companion.

He was not anxious about his own safety; but the words of de Batz had impressed themselves upon his mind: “Heron and his spies we have always with us.”

From the green-room a separate foyer and exit led directly out into the street. Gradually the sound of many voices, the loud laughter and occasional snatches of song which for the past half-hour had proceeded from that part of the house, became more subdued and more rare. One by one the friends of the artists were leaving the theatre, after having paid the usual banal compliments to those whom they favoured, or presented the accustomed offering of flowers to the brightest star of the night.

The actors were the first to retire, then the older actresses, the ones who could no longer command a court of admirers round them. They all filed out of the greenroom and crossed the stage to where, at the back, a narrow, rickety wooden stairs led to their so-called dressing-rooms—tiny, dark cubicles, ill-lighted, unventilated, where some half-dozen of the lesser stars tumbled over one another while removing wigs and grease-paint.

Armand and de Batz watched this exodus, both with equal impatience. Mlle. Lange was the last to leave the green-room. For some time, since the crowd had become thinner round her, Armand had contrived to catch glimpses of her slight, elegant figure. A short passage led from the stage to the green-room door, which was wide open, and at the corner of this passage the young man had paused from time to time in his walk, gazing with earnest admiration at the dainty outline of the young girl's head, with its wig of powdered curls that seemed scarcely whiter than the creamy brilliance of her skin.

De Batz did not watch Mlle. Lange beyond casting impatient looks in the direction of the crowd that prevented her leaving the green-room. He did watch Armand, however—noted his eager look, his brisk and alert movements, the obvious glances of admiration which he cast in the direction of the young actress, and this seemed to afford him a considerable amount of contentment.

The best part of an hour had gone by since the fall of the curtain before Mlle. Lange finally dismissed her many admirers, and de Batz had the satisfaction of seeing her running down the passage, turning back occasionally in order to bid gay “good-nights” to the loiterers who were loath to part from her. She was a child in all her movements, quite unconscious of self or of her own charms, but frankly delighted with her success. She was still dressed in the ridiculous hoops and panniers pertaining to her part, and the powdered peruke hid the charm of her own hair; the costume gave a certain stilted air to her unaffected personality, which, by this very sense of contrast, was essentially fascinating.

In her arms she held a huge sheaf of sweet-scented narcissi, the spoils of some favoured spot far away in the South. Armand thought that never in his life had he seen anything so winsome or so charming.

Having at last said the positively final adieu, Mlle. Lange with a happy little sigh turned to run down the passage.

She came face to face with Armand, and gave a sudden little gasp of terror. It was not good these days to come on any loiterer unawares.

But already de Batz had quickly joined his friend, and his smooth, pleasant voice, and podgy, beringed hand extended towards Mlle. Lange, were sufficient to reassure her.

“You were so surrounded in the green-room, mademoiselle,” he said courteously, “I did not venture to press in among the crowd of your admirers. Yet I had the great wish to present my respectful congratulations in person.”

“Ah! c’est ce cher de Batz!” exclaimed mademoiselle gaily, in that exquisitely rippling voice of hers. “And where in the world do you spring from, my friend?”

“Hush-sh-sh!” he whispered, holding her small bemitted hand in his, and putting one finger to his lips with an urgent entreaty for discretion; “not my name, I beg of you, fair one.”

“Bah!” she retorted lightly, even though her full lips trembled now as she spoke and belied her very words. “You need have no fear whilst you are in this part of the house. It is an understood thing that the Committee of General Security does not send its spies behind the curtain of a theatre. Why, if all of us actors and actresses were sent to the guillotine there would be no play on the morrow. Artistes are not replaceable in a few hours; those that are in existence must perforce be spared, or the citizens who govern us now would not know where to spend their evenings.”

But though she spoke so airily and with her accustomed gaiety, it was easily perceived that even on this childish mind the dangers which beset every one these days had already imprinted their mark of suspicion and of caution.

“Come into my dressing-room,” she said. “I must not tarry here any longer, for they will be putting out the lights. But I have a room to myself, and we can talk there quite agreeably.”

She led the way across the stage towards the wooden stairs. Armand, who during this brief colloquy between his friend and the young girl had kept discreetly in the background, felt undecided what to do. But at a peremptory sign from de Batz he, too, turned in the wake of the gay little lady, who ran swiftly up the rickety steps, humming snatches of popular songs the while, and not turning to see if indeed the two men were following her.

She had the sheaf of narcissi still in her arms, and the door of her tiny dressing-room being open, she ran straight in and threw the flowers down in a confused, sweet-scented mass upon the small table that stood at one end of the room, littered with pots and bottles, letters, mirrors, powder-puffs, silk stockings, and cambric handkerchiefs.

Then she turned and faced the two men, a merry look of unalterable gaiety dancing in her eyes.

“Shut the door, mon ami,” she said to de Batz, “and after that sit down where you can, so long as it is not on my most precious pot of unguent or a box of costliest powder.”

While de Batz did as he was told, she turned to Armand and said with a pretty tone of interrogation in her melodious voice:

“Monsieur?”

“St. Just, at your service, mademoiselle,” said Armand, bowing very low in the most approved style obtaining at the English Court.

“St. Just?” she repeated, a look of puzzlement in her brown eyes. “Surely—”

“A kinsman of citizen St. Just, whom no doubt you know, mademoiselle,” he exclaimed.

“My friend Armand St. Just,” interposed de Batz, “is practically a new-comer in Paris. He lives in England habitually.”

“In England?” she exclaimed. “Oh! do tell me all about England. I would love to go there. Perhaps I may have to go some day. Oh! do sit down, de Batz,” she continued, talking rather volubly, even as a delicate blush heightened the colour in her cheeks under the look of obvious admiration from Armand St. Just’s expressive eyes.

She swept a handful of delicate cambric and silk from off a chair, making room for de Batz' portly figure. Then she sat upon the sofa, and with an inviting gesture and a call from the eyes she bade Armand sit down next to her. She leaned back against the cushions, and the table being close by, she stretched out a hand and once more took up the bunch of narcissi, and while she talked to Armand she held the snow-white blooms quite close to her face—so close, in fact, that he could not see her mouth and chin, only her dark eyes shone across at him over the heads of the blossoms.

"Tell me all about England," she reiterated, settling herself down among the cushions like a spoiled child who is about to listen to an oft-told favourite story.

Armand was vexed that de Batz was sitting there. He felt he could have told this dainty little lady quite a good deal about England if only his pompous, fat friend would have had the good sense to go away.

As it was, he felt unusually timid and gauche, not quite knowing what to say, a fact which seemed to amuse Mlle. Lange not a little.

"I am very fond of England," he said lamely; "my sister is married to an Englishman, and I myself have taken up my permanent residence there."

"Among the society of emigres?" she queried.

Then, as Armand made no reply, de Batz interposed quickly:

"Oh! you need not fear to admit it, my good Armand; Mademoiselle Lange, has many friends among the emigres—have you not, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, of course," she replied lightly; "I have friends everywhere. Their political views have nothing to do with me. Artistes, I think, should have naught to do with politics. You see, citizen St. Just, I never inquired of you what were your views. Your name and kinship would proclaim you a partisan of citizen Robespierre, yet I find you in the company of M. de Batz; and you tell me that you live in England."

"He is no partisan of citizen Robespierre," again interposed de Batz; "in fact, mademoiselle, I may safely tell you, I think, that my friend has but one ideal on this earth, whom he has set up in a shrine, and whom he worships with all the ardour of a Christian for his God."

"How romantic!" she said, and she looked straight at Armand. "Tell me, monsieur, is your ideal a woman or a man?"

His look answered her, even before he boldly spoke the two words:

"A woman."

She took a deep draught of sweet, intoxicating scent from the narcissi, and his gaze once more brought blushes to her cheeks. De Batz' good-humoured laugh helped her to hide this unwonted access of confusion.

"That was well turned, friend Armand," he said lightly; "but I assure you, mademoiselle, that before I brought him here to-night his ideal was a man."

"A man!" she exclaimed, with a contemptuous little pout. "Who was it?"

"I know no other name for him but that of a small, insignificant flower—the Scarlet Pimpernel," replied de Batz.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel!" she ejaculated, dropping the flowers suddenly, and gazing on Armand with wide, wondering eyes. "And do you know him, monsieur?"

He was frowning despite himself, despite the delight which he felt at sitting so close to this charming little lady, and feeling that in a measure his presence and his personality interested her. But he felt irritated with de Batz, and angered at what he considered the latter's indiscretion. To him the very name of his leader was almost a sacred one; he was one of those enthusiastic devotees who only care to name the idol of their dreams with bated breath, and only in the ears of those who would understand and sympathise.

Again he felt that if only he could have been alone with mademoiselle he could have told her all about the Scarlet Pimpernel, knowing that in her he would find a ready listener, a helping and a loving heart; but as it was he merely replied tamely enough:

“Yes, mademoiselle, I do know him.”

“You have seen him?” she queried eagerly; “spoken to him?”

“Yes.”

“Oh! do tell me all about him. You know quite a number of us in France have the greatest possible admiration for your national hero. We know, of course, that he is an enemy of our Government—but, oh! we feel that he is not an enemy of France because of that. We are a nation of heroes, too, monsieur,” she added with a pretty, proud toss of the head; “we can appreciate bravery and resource, and we love the mystery that surrounds the personality of your Scarlet Pimpernel. But since you know him, monsieur, tell me what is he like?”

Armand was smiling again. He was yielding himself up wholly to the charm which emanated from this young girl’s entire being, from her gaiety and her unaffectedness, her enthusiasm, and that obvious artistic temperament which caused her to feel every sensation with superlative keenness and thoroughness.

“What is he like?” she insisted.

“That, mademoiselle,” he replied, “I am not at liberty to tell you.”

“Not at liberty to tell me!” she exclaimed; “but monsieur, if I command you—”

“At risk of falling forever under the ban of your displeasure, mademoiselle, I would still remain silent on that subject.”

She gazed on him with obvious astonishment. It was quite an unusual thing for this spoilt darling of an admiring public to be thus openly thwarted in her whims.

“How tiresome and pedantic!” she said, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders and a moue of discontent. “And, oh! how ungallant! You have learnt ugly, English ways, monsieur; for there, I am told, men hold their womenkind in very scant esteem. There!” she added, turning with a mock air of hopelessness towards de Batz, “am I not a most unlucky woman? For the past two years I have used my best endeavours to catch sight of that interesting Scarlet Pimpernel; here do I meet monsieur, who actually knows him (so he says), and he is so ungallant that he even refuses to satisfy the first cravings of my just curiosity.”

“Citizen St. Just will tell you nothing now, mademoiselle,” rejoined de Batz with his good-humoured laugh; “it is my presence, I assure you, which is setting a seal upon his lips. He is, believe me, aching to confide in you, to share in your enthusiasm, and to see your beautiful eyes glowing in response to his ardour when he describes to you the exploits of that prince of heroes. En tete-a-tete one day, you will, I know, worm every secret out of my discreet friend Armand.”

Mademoiselle made no comment on this—that is to say, no audible comment—but she buried the whole of her face for a few seconds among the flowers, and Armand from amongst those flowers caught sight of a pair of very bright brown eyes which shone on him with a puzzled look.

She said nothing more about the Scarlet Pimpernel or about England just then, but after awhile she began talking of more indifferent subjects: the state of the weather, the price of food, the discomforts of her own house, now that the servants had been put on perfect equality with their masters.

Armand soon gathered that the burning questions of the day, the horrors of massacres, the raging turmoil of politics, had not affected her very deeply as yet. She had not troubled her pretty head very much about the social and humanitarian aspect of the present seething revolution. She did not really wish to think about it at all. An artiste to her finger-tips, she was spending her young life in earnest work, striving to attain perfection in her art, absorbed in study during the day, and in the expression of what she had learnt in the evenings.

The terrors of the guillotine affected her a little, but somewhat vaguely still. She had not realised that any dangers could assail her whilst she worked for the artistic delectation of the public.

It was not that she did not understand what went on around her, but that her artistic temperament and her environment had kept her aloof from it all. The horrors of the Place de la Revolution made her shudder, but only in the same way as the tragedies of M. Racine or of Sophocles which she had studied caused her to shudder, and she had exactly the same sympathy for poor Queen Marie Antoinette as she had for Mary Stuart, and shed as many tears for King Louis as she did for Polyucte.

Once de Batz mentioned the Dauphin, but mademoiselle put up her hand quickly and said in a trembling voice, whilst the tears gathered in her eyes:

“Do not speak of the child to me, de Batz. What can I, a lonely, hard-working woman, do to help him? I try not to think of him, for if I did, knowing my own helplessness, I feel that I could hate my countrymen, and speak my bitter hatred of them across the footlights; which would be more than foolish,” she added naively, “for it would not help the child, and I should be sent to the guillotine. But oh sometimes I feel that I would gladly die if only that poor little child-martyr were restored to those who love him and given back once more to joy and happiness. But they would not take my life for his, I am afraid,” she concluded, smiling through her tears. “My life is of no value in comparison with his.”

Soon after this she dismissed her two visitors. De Batz, well content with the result of this evening’s entertainment, wore an urbane, bland smile on his rubicund face. Armand, somewhat serious and not a little in love, made the hand-kiss with which he took his leave last as long as he could.

“You will come and see me again, citizen St. Just?” she asked after that preliminary leave-taking.

“At your service, mademoiselle,” he replied with alacrity.

“How long do you stay in Paris?”

“I may be called away at any time.”

“Well, then, come to-morrow. I shall be free towards four o’clock. Square du Roule. You cannot miss the house. Any one there will tell you where lives citizeness Lange.”

“At your service, mademoiselle,” he replied.

The words sounded empty and meaningless, but his eyes, as they took final leave of her, spoke the gratitude and the joy which he felt.

CHAPTER V. THE TEMPLE PRISON

It was close on midnight when the two friends finally parted company outside the doors of the theatre. The night air struck with biting keenness against them when they emerged from the stuffy, overheated building, and both wrapped their caped cloaks tightly round their shoulders. Armand—more than ever now—was anxious to rid himself of de Batz. The Gascon's platitudes irritated him beyond the bounds of forbearance, and he wanted to be alone, so that he might think over the events of this night, the chief event being a little lady with an enchanting voice and the most fascinating brown eyes he had ever seen.

Self-reproach, too, was fighting a fairly even fight with the excitement that had been called up by that same pair of brown eyes. Armand for the past four or five hours had acted in direct opposition to the earnest advice given to him by his chief; he had renewed one friendship which had been far better left in oblivion, and he had made an acquaintance which already was leading him along a path that he felt sure his comrade would disapprove. But the path was so profusely strewn with scented narcissi that Armand's sensitive conscience was quickly lulled to rest by the intoxicating fragrance.

Looking neither to right nor left, he made his way very quickly up the Rue Richelieu towards the Montmartre quarter, where he lodged.

De Batz stood and watched him for as long as the dim lights of the street lamps illumined his slim, soberly-clad figure; then he turned on his heel and walked off in the opposite direction.

His florid, pock-marked face wore an air of contentment not altogether unmixed with a kind of spiteful triumph.

"So, my pretty Scarlet Pimpernel," he muttered between his closed lips, "you wish to meddle in my affairs, to have for yourself and your friends the credit and glory of snatching the golden prize from the clutches of these murderous brutes. Well, we shall see! We shall see which is the wiliest—the French ferret or the English fox."

He walked deliberately away from the busy part of the town, turning his back on the river, stepping out briskly straight before him, and swinging his gold-beaded cane as he walked.

The streets which he had to traverse were silent and deserted, save occasionally where a drinking or an eating house had its swing-doors still invitingly open. From these places, as de Batz strode rapidly by, came sounds of loud voices, rendered raucous by outdoor oratory; volleys of oaths hurled irreverently in the midst of impassioned speeches; interruptions from rowdy audiences that vied with the speaker in invectives and blasphemies; wordy war-fares that ended in noisy vituperations; accusations hurled through the air heavy with tobacco smoke and the fumes of cheap wines and of raw spirits.

De Batz took no heed of these as he passed, anxious only that the crowd of eating-house politicians did not, as often was its wont, turn out pele-mele into the street, and settle its quarrel by the weight of fists. He did not wish to be embroiled in a street fight, which invariably ended in denunciations and arrests, and was glad when presently he had left the purlieu of the Palais Royal behind him, and could strike on his left toward the lonely Faubourg du Temple.

From the dim distance far away came at intervals the mournful sound of a roll of muffled drums, half veiled by the intervening hubbub of the busy night life of the great city. It proceeded from the Place de la Revolution, where a company of the National Guard were on night watch round the guillotine. The dull, intermittent notes of the drum came as a reminder to the free people of France that the watchdog of a vengeful revolution was alert night and day, never sleeping, ever wakeful, "beating up game for the guillotine," as the new decree framed to-day by the Government of the people had ordered that it should do.

From time to time now the silence of this lonely street was broken by a sudden cry of terror, followed by the clash of arms, the inevitable volley of oaths, the call for help, the final moan of

anguish. They were the ever-recurring brief tragedies which told of denunciations, of domiciliary search, of sudden arrests, of an agonising desire for life and for freedom—for life under these same horrible conditions of brutality and of servitude, for freedom to breathe, if only a day or two longer, this air, polluted by filth and by blood.

De Batz, hardened to these scenes, paid no heed to them. He had heard it so often, that cry in the night, followed by death-like silence; it came from comfortable bourgeois houses, from squalid lodgings, or lonely cul-de-sac, wherever some hunted quarry was run to earth by the newly-organised spies of the Committee of General Security.

Five and thirty livres for every head that falls trunkless into the basket at the foot of the guillotine! Five and thirty pieces of silver, now as then, the price of innocent blood. Every cry in the night, every call for help, meant game for the guillotine, and five and thirty livres in the hands of a Judas.

And de Batz walked on unmoved by what he saw and heard, swinging his cane and looking satisfied. Now he struck into the Place de la Victoire, and looked on one of the open-air camps that had recently been established where men, women, and children were working to provide arms and accoutrements for the Republican army that was fighting the whole of Europe.

The people of France were up in arms against tyranny; and on the open places of their mighty city they were encamped day and night forging those arms which were destined to make them free, and in the meantime were bending under a yoke of tyranny more complete, more grinding and absolute than any that the most despotic kings had ever dared to inflict.

Here by the light of resin torches, at this late hour of the night, raw lads were being drilled into soldiers, half-naked under the cutting blast of the north wind, their knees shaking under them, their arms and legs blue with cold, their stomachs empty, and their teeth chattering with fear; women were sewing shirts for the great improvised army, with eyes straining to see the stitches by the flickering light of the torches, their throats parched with the continual inhaling of smoke-laden air; even children, with weak, clumsy little fingers, were picking rags to be woven into cloth again all, all these slaves were working far into the night, tired, hungry, and cold, but working unceasingly, as the country had demanded it: “the people of France in arms against tyranny!” The people of France had to set to work to make arms, to clothe the soldiers, the defenders of the people’s liberty.

And from this crowd of people—men, women, and children—there came scarcely a sound, save raucous whispers, a moan or a sigh quickly suppressed. A grim silence reigned in this thickly-peopled camp; only the crackling of the torches broke that silence now and then, or the flapping of canvas in the wintry gale. They worked on sullen, desperate, and starving, with no hope of payment save the miserable rations wrung from poor tradespeople or miserable farmers, as wretched, as oppressed as themselves; no hope of payment, only fear of punishment, for that was ever present.

The people of France in arms against tyranny were not allowed to forget that grim taskmaster with the two great hands stretched upwards, holding the knife which descended mercilessly, indiscriminately on necks that did not bend willingly to the task.

A grim look of gratified desire had spread over de Batz’ face as he skirted the open-air camp. Let them toil, let them groan, let them starve! The more these clouts suffer, the more brutal the heel that grinds them down, the sooner will the Emperor’s money accomplish its work, the sooner will these wretches be clamoring for the monarchy, which would mean a rich reward in de Batz’ pockets.

To him everything now was for the best: the tyranny, the brutality, the massacres. He gloated in the holocausts with as much satisfaction as did the most bloodthirsty Jacobin in the Convention. He would with his own hands have wielded the guillotine that worked too slowly for his ends. Let that end justify the means, was his motto. What matter if the future King of France walked up to his throne over steps made of headless corpses and rendered slippery with the blood of martyrs?

The ground beneath de Batz’ feet was hard and white with the frost. Overhead the pale, wintry moon looked down serene and placid on this giant city wallowing in an ocean of misery.

There, had been but little snow as yet this year, and the cold was intense. On his right now the Cimetiere des SS. Innocents lay peaceful and still beneath the wan light of the moon. A thin covering of snow lay evenly alike on grass mounds and smooth stones. Here and there a broken cross with chipped arms still held pathetically outstretched, as if in a final appeal for human love, bore mute testimony to senseless excesses and spiteful desire for destruction.

But here within the precincts of the dwelling of the eternal Master a solemn silence reigned; only the cold north wind shook the branches of the yew, causing them to send forth a melancholy sigh into the night, and to shed a shower of tiny crystals of snow like the frozen tears of the dead.

And round the precincts of the lonely graveyard, and down narrow streets or open places, the night watchmen went their rounds, lanthorn in hand, and every five minutes their monotonous call rang clearly out in the night:

“Sleep, citizens! everything is quiet and at peace!”

We may take it that de Batz did not philosophise over-much on what went on around him. He had walked swiftly up the Rue St. Martin, then turning sharply to his right he found himself beneath the tall, frowning walls of the Temple prison, the grim guardian of so many secrets, such terrible despair, such unspeakable tragedies.

Here, too, as in the Place de la Revolution, an intermittent roll of muffled drums proclaimed the ever-watchful presence of the National Guard. But with that exception not a sound stirred round the grim and stately edifice; there were no cries, no calls, no appeals around its walls. All the crying and wailing was shut in by the massive stone that told no tales.

Dim and flickering lights shone behind several of the small windows in the facade of the huge labyrinthine building. Without any hesitation de Batz turned down the Rue du Temple, and soon found himself in front of the main gates which gave on the courtyard beyond. The sentinel challenged him, but he had the pass-word, and explained that he desired to have speech with citizen Heron.

With a surly gesture the guard pointed to the heavy bell-pull up against the gate, and de Batz pulled it with all his might. The long clang of the brazen bell echoed and re-echoed round the solid stone walls. Anon a tiny judas in the gate was cautiously pushed open, and a peremptory voice once again challenged the midnight intruder.

De Batz, more peremptorily this time, asked for citizen Heron, with whom he had immediate and important business, and a glimmer of a piece of silver which he held up close to the judas secured him the necessary admittance.

The massive gates slowly swung open on their creaking hinges, and as de Batz passed beneath the archway they closed again behind him.

The concierge's lodge was immediately on his left. Again he was challenged, and again gave the pass-word. But his face was apparently known here, for no serious hindrance to proceed was put in his way.

A man, whose wide, lean frame was but ill-covered by a threadbare coat and ragged breeches, and with soleless shoes on his feet, was told off to direct the citizen to citizen Heron's rooms. The man walked slowly along with bent knees and arched spine, and shuffled his feet as he walked; the bunch of keys which he carried rattled ominously in his long, grimy hands; the passages were badly lighted, and he also carried a lanthorn to guide himself on the way.

Closely followed by de Batz, he soon turned into the central corridor, which is open to the sky above, and was spectrally alight now with flag-stones and walls gleaming beneath the silvery sheen of the moon, and throwing back the fantastic elongated shadows of the two men as they walked.

On the left, heavily barred windows gave on the corridor, as did here and there the massive oaken doors, with their gigantic hinges and bolts, on the steps of which squatted groups of soldiers wrapped in their cloaks, with wild, suspicious eyes beneath their capotes, peering at the midnight visitor as he passed.

There was no thought of silence here. The very walls seemed alive with sounds, groans and tears, loud wails and murmured prayers; they exuded from the stones and trembled on the frost-laden air.

Occasionally at one of the windows a pair of white hands would appear, grasping the heavy iron bar, trying to shake it in its socket, and mayhap, above the hands, the dim vision of a haggard face, a man's or a woman's, trying to get a glimpse of the outside world, a final look at the sky, before the last journey to the place of death to-morrow. Then one of the soldiers, with a loud, angry oath, would struggle to his feet, and with the butt-end of his gun strike at the thin, wan fingers till their hold on the iron bar relaxed, and the pallid face beyond would sink back into the darkness with a desperate cry of pain.

A quick, impatient sigh escaped de Batz' lips. He had skirted the wide courtyard in the wake of his guide, and from where he was he could see the great central tower, with its tiny windows lighted from within, the grim walls behind which the descendant of the world's conquerors, the bearer of the proudest name in Europe, and wearer of its most ancient crown, had spent the last days of his brilliant life in abject shame, sorrow, and degradation. The memory had swiftly surged up before him of that night when he all but rescued King Louis and his family from this same miserable prison: the guard had been bribed, the keeper corrupted, everything had been prepared, save the reckoning with the one irresponsible factor—chance!

He had failed then and had tried again, and again had failed; a fortune had been his reward if he had succeeded. He had failed, but even now, when his footsteps echoed along the flagged courtyard, over which an unfortunate King and Queen had walked on their way to their last ignominious Calvary, he hugged himself with the satisfying thought that where he had failed at least no one else had succeeded.

Whether that meddlesome English adventurer, who called himself the Scarlet Pimpernel, had planned the rescue of King Louis or of Queen Marie Antoinette at any time or not—that he did not know; but on one point at least he was more than ever determined, and that was that no power on earth should snatch from him the golden prize offered by Austria for the rescue of the little Dauphin.

“I would sooner see the child perish, if I cannot save him myself,” was the burning thought in this man's tortuous brain. “And let that accursed Englishman look to himself and to his d-d confederates,” he added, muttering a fierce oath beneath his breath.

A winding, narrow stone stair, another length or two of corridor, and his guide's shuffling footsteps paused beside a low iron-studded door let into the solid stone. De Batz dismissed his ill-clothed guide and pulled the iron bell-handle which hung beside the door.

The bell gave forth a dull and broken clang, which seemed like an echo of the wails of sorrow that peopled the huge building with their weird and monotonous sounds.

De Batz—a thoroughly unimaginative person—waited patiently beside the door until it was opened from within, and he was confronted by a tall stooping figure, wearing a greasy coat of snuff-brown cloth, and holding high above his head a lanthorn that threw its feeble light on de Batz' jovial face and form.

“It is even I, citizen Heron,” he said, breaking in swiftly on the other's ejaculation of astonishment, which threatened to send his name echoing the whole length of corridors and passages, until round every corner of the labyrinthine house of sorrow the murmur would be borne on the wings of the cold night breeze: “Citizen Heron is in parley with ci-devant Baron de Batz!”

A fact which would have been equally unpleasant for both these worthies.

“Enter!” said Heron curtly.

He banged the heavy door to behind his visitor; and de Batz, who seemed to know his way about the place, walked straight across the narrow landing to where a smaller door stood invitingly open.

He stepped boldly in, the while citizen Heron put the lanthorn down on the floor of the couloir, and then followed his nocturnal visitor into the room.

CHAPTER VI. THE COMMITTEE'S AGENT

It was a narrow, ill-ventilated place, with but one barred window that gave on the courtyard. An evil-smelling lamp hung by a chain from the grimy ceiling, and in a corner of the room a tiny iron stove shed more unpleasant vapour than warm glow around.

There was but little furniture: two or three chairs, a table which was littered with papers, and a corner-cupboard—the open doors of which revealed a miscellaneous collection—bundles of papers, a tin saucepan, a piece of cold sausage, and a couple of pistols. The fumes of stale tobacco-smoke hovered in the air, and mingled most unpleasantly with those of the lamp above, and of the mildew that penetrated through the walls just below the roof.

Heron pointed to one of the chairs, and then sat down on the other, close to the table, on which he rested his elbow. He picked up a short-stemmed pipe, which he had evidently laid aside at the sound of the bell, and having taken several deliberate long-drawn puffs from it, he said abruptly:

“Well, what is it now?”

In the meanwhile de Batz had made himself as much at home in this uncomfortable room as he possibly could. He had deposited his hat and cloak on one rickety rush-bottomed chair, and drawn another close to the fire. He sat down with one leg crossed over the other, his podgy be-ringed hand wandering with loving gentleness down the length of his shapely calf.

He was nothing if not complacent, and his complacency seemed highly to irritate his friend Heron.

“Well, what is it?” reiterated the latter, drawing his visitor's attention roughly to himself by banging his fist on the table. “Out with it! What do you want? Why have you come at this hour of the night to compromise me, I suppose—bring your own d—d neck and mine into the same noose—what?”

“Easy, easy, my friend,” responded de Batz imperturbably; “waste not so much time in idle talk. Why do I usually come to see you? Surely you have had no cause to complain hitherto of the unprofitableness of my visits to you?”

“They will have to be still more profitable to me in the future,” growled the other across the table. “I have more power now.”

“I know you have,” said de Batz suavely. “The new decree? What? You may denounce whom you please, search whom you please, arrest whom you please, and send whom you please to the Supreme Tribunal without giving them the slightest chance of escape.”

“Is it in order to tell me all this that you have come to see me at this hour of the night?” queried Heron with a sneer.

“No; I came at this hour of the night because I surmised that in the future you and your hell-hounds would be so busy all day ‘beating up game for the guillotine’ that the only time you would have at the disposal of your friends would be the late hours of the night. I saw you at the theatre a couple of hours ago, friend Heron; I didn't think to find you yet abed.”

“Well, what do you want?”

“Rather,” retorted de Batz blandly, “shall we say, what do YOU want, citizen Heron?”

“For what?”

“For my continued immunity at the hands of yourself and your pack?”

Heron pushed his chair brusquely aside and strode across the narrow room deliberately facing the portly figure of de Batz, who with head slightly inclined on one side, his small eyes narrowed till they appeared mere slits in his pockmarked face, was steadily and quite placidly contemplating this inhuman monster who had this very day been given uncontrolled power over hundreds of thousands of human lives.

Heron was one of those tall men who look mean in spite of their height. His head was small and narrow, and his hair, which was sparse and lank, fell in untidy strands across his forehead. He stooped slightly from the neck, and his chest, though wide, was hollow between the shoulders. But his legs were big and bony, slightly bent at the knees, like those of an ill-conditioned horse.

The face was thin and the cheeks sunken; the eyes, very large and prominent, had a look in them of cold and ferocious cruelty, a look which contrasted strangely with the weakness and petty greed apparent in the mouth, which was flabby, with full, very red lips, and chin that sloped away to the long thin neck.

Even at this moment as he gazed on de Batz the greed and the cruelty in him were fighting one of those battles the issue of which is always uncertain in men of his stamp.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "that I am prepared to treat with you any longer. You are an intolerable bit of vermin that has annoyed the Committee of General Security for over two years now. It would be excessively pleasant to crush you once and for all, as one would a buzzing fly."

"Pleasant, perhaps, but immeasurably foolish," rejoined de Batz coolly; "you would only get thirty-five livres for my head, and I offer you ten times that amount for the self-same commodity."

"I know, I know; but the whole thing has become too dangerous."

"Why? I am very modest. I don't ask a great deal. Let your hounds keep off my scent."

"You have too many d—d confederates."

"Oh! Never mind about the others. I am not bargaining about them. Let them look after themselves."

"Every time we get a batch of them, one or the other denounces you."

"Under torture, I know," rejoined de Batz placidly, holding his podgy hands to the warm glow of the fire. "For you have started torture in your house of Justice now, eh, friend Heron? You and your friend the Public Prosecutor have gone the whole gamut of devilry—eh?"

"What's that to you?" retorted the other gruffly.

"Oh, nothing, nothing! I was even proposing to pay you three thousand five hundred livres for the privilege of taking no further interest in what goes on inside this prison!"

"Three thousand five hundred!" ejaculated Heron involuntarily, and this time even his eyes lost their cruelty; they joined issue with the mouth in an expression of hungry avarice.

"Two little zeros added to the thirty-five, which is all you would get for handing me over to your accursed Tribunal," said de Batz, and, as if thoughtlessly, his hand wandered to the inner pocket of his coat, and a slight rustle as of thin crisp paper brought drops of moisture to the lips of Heron.

"Leave me alone for three weeks and the money is yours," concluded de Batz pleasantly.

There was silence in the room now. Through the narrow barred window the steely rays of the moon fought with the dim yellow light of the oil lamp, and lit up the pale face of the Committee's agent with its lines of cruelty in sharp conflict with those of greed.

"Well! is it a bargain?" asked de Batz at last in his usual smooth, oily voice, as he half drew from out his pocket that tempting little bundle of crisp printed paper. "You have only to give me the usual receipt for the money and it is yours."

Heron gave a vicious snarl.

"It is dangerous, I tell you. That receipt, if it falls into some cursed meddler's hands, would send me straight to the guillotine."

"The receipt could only fall into alien hands," rejoined de Batz blandly, "if I happened to be arrested, and even in that case they could but fall into those of the chief agent of the Committee of General Security, and he hath name Heron. You must take some risks, my friend. I take them too. We are each in the other's hands. The bargain is quite fair."

For a moment or two longer Heron appeared to be hesitating whilst de Batz watched him with keen intentness. He had no doubt himself as to the issue. He had tried most of these patriots in his

own golden crucible, and had weighed their patriotism against Austrian money, and had never found the latter wanting.

He had not been here to-night if he were not quite sure. This inveterate conspirator in the Royalist cause never took personal risks. He looked on Heron now, smiling to himself the while with perfect satisfaction.

“Very well,” said the Committee’s agent with sudden decision, “I’ll take the money. But on one condition.”

“What is it?”

“That you leave little Capet alone.”

“The Dauphin!”

“Call him what you like,” said Heron, taking a step nearer to de Batz, and from his great height glowering down in fierce hatred and rage upon his accomplice; “call the young devil what you like, but leave us to deal with him.”

“To kill him, you mean? Well, how can I prevent it, my friend?”

“You and your like are always plotting to get him out of here. I won’t have it. I tell you I won’t have it. If the brat disappears I am a dead man. Robespierre and his gang have told me as much. So you leave him alone, or I’ll not raise a finger to help you, but will lay my own hands on your accursed neck.”

He looked so ferocious and so merciless then, that despite himself, the selfish adventurer, the careless self-seeking intriguer, shuddered with a quick wave of unreasoning terror. He turned away from Heron’s piercing gaze, the gaze of a hyena whose prey is being snatched from beneath its nails. For a moment he stared thoughtfully into the fire.

He heard the other man’s heavy footsteps cross and re-cross the narrow room, and was conscious of the long curved shadow creeping up the mildewed wall or retreating down upon the carpetless floor.

Suddenly, without any warning he felt a grip upon his shoulder. He gave a start and almost uttered a cry of alarm which caused Heron to laugh. The Committee’s agent was vastly amused at his friend’s obvious access of fear. There was nothing that he liked better than that he should inspire dread in the hearts of all those with whom he came in contact.

“I am just going on my usual nocturnal round,” he said abruptly. “Come with me, citizen de Batz.”

A certain grim humour was apparent in his face as he proffered this invitation, which sounded like a rough command. As de Batz seemed to hesitate he nodded peremptorily to him to follow. Already he had gone into the hall and picked up his lanthorn. From beneath his waistcoat he drew forth a bunch of keys, which he rattled impatiently, calling to his friend to come.

“Come, citizen,” he said roughly. “I wish to show you the one treasure in this house which your d—d fingers must not touch.”

Mechanically de Batz rose at last. He tried to be master of the terror which was invading his very bones. He would not own to himself even that he was afraid, and almost audibly he kept murmuring to himself that he had no cause for fear.

Heron would never touch him. The spy’s avarice, his greed of money were a perfect safeguard for any man who had the control of millions, and Heron knew, of course, that he could make of this inveterate plotter a comfortable source of revenue for himself. Three weeks would soon be over, and fresh bargains could be made time and again, while de Batz was alive and free.

Heron was still waiting at the door, even whilst de Batz wondered what this nocturnal visitation would reveal to him of atrocity and of outrage. He made a final effort to master his nervousness, wrapped his cloak tightly around him, and followed his host out of the room.

CHAPTER VII. THE MOST PRECIOUS LIFE IN EUROPE

Once more he was being led through the interminable corridors of the gigantic building. Once more from the narrow, barred windows close by him he heard the heart-breaking sighs, the moans, the curses which spoke of tragedies that he could only guess.

Heron was walking on ahead of him, preceding him by some fifty metres or so, his long legs covering the distances more rapidly than de Batz could follow them. The latter knew his way well about the old prison. Few men in Paris possessed that accurate knowledge of its intricate passages and its network of cells and halls which de Batz had acquired after close and persevering study.

He himself could have led Heron to the doors of the tower where the little Dauphin was being kept imprisoned, but unfortunately he did not possess the keys that would open all the doors which led to it. There were sentinels at every gate, groups of soldiers at each end of every corridor, the great—now empty—courtyards, thronged with prisoners in the daytime, were alive with soldiery even now. Some walked up and down with fixed bayonet on shoulder, others sat in groups on the stone copings or squatted on the ground, smoking or playing cards, but all of them were alert and watchful.

Heron was recognised everywhere the moment he appeared, and though in these days of equality no one presented arms, nevertheless every guard stood aside to let him pass, or when necessary opened a gate for the powerful chief agent of the Committee of General Security.

Indeed, de Batz had no keys such as these to open the way for him to the presence of the martyred little King.

Thus the two men wended their way on in silence, one preceding the other. De Batz walked leisurely, thought-fully, taking stock of everything he saw—the gates, the barriers, the positions of sentinels and warders, of everything in fact that might prove a help or a hindrance presently, when the great enterprise would be hazarded. At last—still in the wake of Heron—he found himself once more behind the main entrance gate, underneath the archway on which gave the guichet of the concierge.

Here, too, there seemed to be an unnecessary number of soldiers: two were doing sentinel outside the guichet, but there were others in a file against the wall.

Heron rapped with his keys against the door of the concierge's lodge, then, as it was not immediately opened from within, he pushed it open with his foot.

“The concierge?” he queried peremptorily.

From a corner of the small panelled room there came a grunt and a reply:

“Gone to bed, quoi!”

The man who previously had guided de Batz to Heron's door slowly struggled to his feet. He had been squatting somewhere in the gloom, and had been roused by Heron's rough command. He slouched forward now still carrying a boot in one hand and a blacking brush in the other.

“Take this lanthorn, then,” said the chief agent with a snarl directed at the sleeping concierge, “and come along. Why are you still here?” he added, as if in after-thought.

“The citizen concierge was not satisfied with the way I had done his boots,” muttered the man, with an evil leer as he spat contemptuously on the floor; “an aristo, quoi? A hell of a place this... twenty cells to sweep out every day... and boots to clean for every aristo of a concierge or warder who demands it.... Is that work for a free born patriot, I ask?”

“Well, if you are not satisfied, citizen Dupont,” retorted Heron dryly, “you may go when you like, you know there are plenty of others ready to do your work...”

“Nineteen hours a day, and nineteen sous by way of payment.... I have had fourteen days of this convict work...”

He continued to mutter under his breath, whilst Heron, paying no further heed to him, turned abruptly towards a group of soldiers stationed outside.

“En avant, corporal!” he said; “bring four men with you... we go up to the tower.”

The small procession was formed. On ahead the lanthorn-bearer, with arched spine and shaking knees, dragging shuffling footsteps along the corridor, then the corporal with two of his soldiers, then Heron closely followed by de Batz, and finally two more soldiers bringing up the rear.

Heron had given the bunch of keys to the man Dupont. The latter, on ahead, holding the lanthorn aloft, opened one gate after another. At each gate he waited for the little procession to file through, then he re-locked the gate and passed on.

Up two or three flights of winding stairs set in the solid stone, and the final heavy door was reached.

De Batz was meditating. Heron's precautions for the safe-guarding of the most precious life in Europe were more complete than he had anticipated. What lavish liberality would be required! what superhuman ingenuity and boundless courage in order to break down all the barriers that had been set up round that young life that flickered inside this grim tower!

Of these three requisites the corpulent, complacent intriguer possessed only the first in a considerable degree. He could be exceedingly liberal with the foreign money which he had at his disposal. As for courage and ingenuity, he believed that he possessed both, but these qualities had not served him in very good stead in the attempts which he had made at different times to rescue the unfortunate members of the Royal Family from prison. His overwhelming egotism would not admit for a moment that in ingenuity and pluck the Scarlet Pimpernel and his English followers could outdo him, but he did wish to make quite sure that they would not interfere with him in the highly remunerative work of saving the Dauphin.

Heron's impatient call roused him from these meditations. The little party had come to a halt outside a massive iron-studded door.

At a sign from the chief agent the soldiers stood at attention. He then called de Batz and the lanthorn-bearer to him.

He took a key from his breeches pocket, and with his own hand unlocked the massive door. He curtly ordered the lanthorn-bearer and de Batz to go through, then he himself went in, and finally once more re-locked the door behind him, the soldiers remaining on guard on the landing outside.

Now the three men were standing in a square antechamber, dank and dark, devoid of furniture save for a large cupboard that filled the whole of one wall; the others, mildewed and stained, were covered with a greyish paper, which here and there hung away in strips.

Heron crossed this ante-chamber, and with his knuckles rapped against a small door opposite.

"Hola!" he shouted, "Simon, mon vieux, tu es la?"

From the inner room came the sound of voices, a man's and a woman's, and now, as if in response to Heron's call, the shrill tones of a child. There was some shuffling, too, of footsteps, and some pushing about of furniture, then the door was opened, and a gruff voice invited the belated visitors to enter.

The atmosphere in this further room was so thick that at first de Batz was only conscious of the evil smells that pervaded it; smells which were made up of the fumes of tobacco, of burning coke, of a smoky lamp, and of stale food, and mingling through it all the pungent odour of raw spirits.

Heron had stepped briskly in, closely followed by de Batz. The man Dupont with a mutter of satisfaction put down his lanthorn and curled himself up in a corner of the antechamber. His interest in the spectacle so favoured by citizen Heron had apparently been exhausted by constant repetition.

De Batz looked round him with keen curiosity with which disgust was ready enough to mingle.

The room itself might have been a large one; it was almost impossible to judge of its size, so crammed was it with heavy and light furniture of every conceivable shape and type. There was a monumental wooden bedstead in one corner, a huge sofa covered in black horsehair in another. A large table stood in the centre of the room, and there were at least four capacious armchairs round it. There were wardrobes and cabinets, a diminutive washstand and a huge pier-glass, there were

innumerable boxes and packing-cases, cane-bottomed chairs and what-nots every-where. The place looked like a depot for second-hand furniture.

In the midst of all the litter de Batz at last became conscious of two people who stood staring at him and at Heron. He saw a man before him, somewhat fleshy of build, with smooth, mouse-coloured hair brushed away from a central parting, and ending in a heavy curl above each ear; the eyes were wide open and pale in colour, the lips unusually thick and with a marked downward droop. Close beside him stood a youngish-looking woman, whose unwieldy bulk, however, and pallid skin revealed the sedentary life and the ravages of ill-health.

Both appeared to regard Heron with a certain amount of awe, and de Batz with a vast measure of curiosity.

Suddenly the woman stood aside, and in the far corner of the room there was displayed to the Gascon Royalist's cold, calculating gaze the pathetic figure of the uncrowned King of France.

"How is it Capet is not yet in bed?" queried Heron as soon as he caught sight of the child.

"He wouldn't say his prayers this evening," replied Simon with a coarse laugh, "and wouldn't drink his medicine. Bah!" he added with a snarl, "this is a place for dogs and not for human folk."

"If you are not satisfied, mon vieux," retorted Heron curtly, "you can send in your resignation when you like. There are plenty who will be glad of the place."

The ex-cobbler gave another surly growl and expectorated on the floor in the direction where stood the child.

"Little vermin," he said, "he is more trouble than man or woman can bear."

The boy in the meanwhile seemed to take but little notice of the vulgar insults put upon him by his guardian. He stood, a quaint, impassive little figure, more interested apparently in de Batz, who was a stranger to him, than in the three others whom he knew. De Batz noted that the child looked well nourished, and that he was warmly clad in a rough woollen shirt and cloth breeches, with coarse grey stockings and thick shoes; but he also saw that the clothes were indescribably filthy, as were the child's hands and face. The golden curls, among which a young and queenly mother had once loved to pass her slender perfumed fingers, now hung bedraggled, greasy, and lank round the little face, from the lines of which every trace of dignity and of simplicity had long since been erased.

There was no look of the martyr about this child now, even though, mayhap, his small back had often smarted under his vulgar tutor's rough blows; rather did the pale young face wear the air of sullen indifference, and an abject desire to please, which would have appeared heart-breaking to any spectator less self-seeking and egotistic than was this Gascon conspirator.

Madame Simon had called him to her while her man and the citizen Heron were talking, and the child went readily enough, without any sign of fear. She took the corner of her coarse dirty apron in her hand, and wiped the boy's mouth and face with it.

"I can't keep him clean," she said with an apologetic shrug of the shoulders and a look at de Batz. "There now," she added, speaking once more to the child, "drink like a good boy, and say your lesson to please maman, and then you shall go to bed."

She took a glass from the table, which was filled with a clear liquid that de Batz at first took to be water, and held it to the boy's lips. He turned his head away and began to whimper.

"Is the medicine very nasty?" queried de Batz.

"Mon Dieu! but no, citizen," exclaimed the woman, "it is good strong eau de vie, the best that can be procured. Capet likes it really—don't you, Capet? It makes you happy and cheerful, and sleep well of nights. Why, you had a glassful yesterday and enjoyed it. Take it now," she added in a quick whisper, seeing that Simon and Heron were in close conversation together; "you know it makes papa angry if you don't have at least half a glass now and then."

The child wavered for a moment longer, making a quaint little grimace of distaste. But at last he seemed to make up his mind that it was wisest to yield over so small a matter, and he took the glass from Madame Simon.

And thus did de Batz see the descendant of St. Louis quaffing a glass of raw spirit at the bidding of a rough cobbler's wife, whom he called by the fond and foolish name sacred to childhood, *maman!*

Selfish egoist though he was, de Batz turned away in loathing.

Simon had watched the little scene with obvious satisfaction. He chuckled audibly when the child drank the spirit, and called Heron's attention to him, whilst a look of triumph lit up his wide, pale eyes.

"And now, *mon petit*," he said jovially, "let the citizen hear you say your prayers!"

He winked toward de Batz, evidently anticipating a good deal of enjoyment for the visitor from what was coming. From a heap of litter in a corner of the room he fetched out a greasy red bonnet adorned with a tricolour cockade, and a soiled and tattered flag, which had once been white, and had golden fleur-de-lys embroidered upon it.

The cap he set on the child's head, and the flag he threw upon the floor.

"Now, *Capet*—your prayers!" he said with another chuckle of amusement.

All his movements were rough, and his speech almost ostentatiously coarse. He banged against the furniture as he moved about the room, kicking a footstool out of the way or knocking over a chair. De Batz instinctively thought of the perfumed stillness of the rooms at Versailles, of the army of elegant high-born ladies who had ministered to the wants of this child, who stood there now before him, a cap on his yellow hair, and his shoulder held up to his ear with that gesture of careless indifference peculiar to children when they are sullen or uncared for.

Obediently, quite mechanically it seemed, the boy trod on the flag which Henri IV had borne before him at Ivry, and *le Roi Soleil* had flaunted in the face of the armies of Europe. The son of the Bourbons was spitting on their flag, and wiping his shoes upon its tattered folds. With shrill cracked voice he sang the *Carmagnole*, "*Ca ira! ca ira! les aristos a la lanterne!*" until de Batz himself felt inclined to stop his ears and to rush from the place in horror.

Louis XVII, whom the hearts of many had proclaimed King of France by the grace of God, the child of the Bourbons, the eldest son of the Church, was stepping a vulgar dance over the flag of St. Louis, which he had been taught to defile. His pale cheeks glowed as he danced, his eyes shone with the unnatural light kindled in them by the intoxicating liquor; with one slender hand he waved the red cap with the tricolour cockade, and shouted "*Vive la Republique!*"

Madame Simon was clapping her hands, looking on the child with obvious pride, and a kind of rough maternal affection. Simon was gazing on Heron for approval, and the latter nodded his head, murmuring words of encouragement and of praise.

"Thy catechism now, *Capet*—thy catechism," shouted Simon in a hoarse voice.

The boy stood at attention, cap on head, hands on his hips, legs wide apart, and feet firmly planted on the fleur-de-lys, the glory of his forefathers.

"Thy name?" queried Simon.

"Louis Capet," replied the child in a clear, high-pitched voice.

"What art thou?"

"A citizen of the Republic of France."

"What was thy father?"

"Louis Capet, *ci-devant* king, a tyrant who perished by the will of the people!"

"What was thy mother?"

"A —"

De Batz involuntarily uttered a cry of horror. Whatever the man's private character was, he had been born a gentleman, and his every instinct revolted against what he saw and heard. The scene had positively sickened him. He turned precipitately towards the door.

"How now, citizen?" queried the Committee's agent with a sneer. "Are you not satisfied with what you see?"

“Mayhap the citizen would like to see Capet sitting in a golden chair,” interposed Simon the cobbler with a sneer, “and me and my wife kneeling and kissing his hand—what?”

“‘Tis the heat of the room,” stammered de Batz, who was fumbling with the lock of the door; “my head began to swim.”

“Spit on their accursed flag, then, like a good patriot, like Capet,” retorted Simon gruffly. “Here, Capet, my son,” he added, pulling the boy by the arm with a rough gesture, “get thee to bed; thou art quite drunk enough to satisfy any good Republican.”

By way of a caress he tweaked the boy’s ear and gave him a prod in the back with his bent knee. He was not wilfully unkind, for just now he was not angry with the lad; rather was he vastly amused with the effect Capet’s prayer and Capet’s recital of his catechism had had on the visitor.

As to the lad, the intensity of excitement in him was immediately followed by an overwhelming desire for sleep. Without any preliminary of undressing or of washing, he tumbled, just as he was, on to the sofa. Madame Simon, with quite pleasing solicitude, arranged a pillow under his head, and the very next moment the child was fast asleep.

“‘Tis well, citoyen Simon,” said Heron in his turn, going towards the door. “I’ll report favourably on you to the Committee of Public Security. As for the citoyenne, she had best be more careful,” he added, turning to the woman Simon with a snarl on his evil face. “There was no cause to arrange a pillow under the head of that vermin’s spawn. Many good patriots have no pillows to put under their heads. Take that pillow away; and I don’t like the shoes on the brat’s feet; sabots are quite good enough.”

Citoyenne Simon made no reply. Some sort of retort had apparently hovered on her lips, but had been checked, even before it was uttered, by a peremptory look from her husband. Simon the cobbler, snarling in speech but obsequious in manner, prepared to accompany the citizen agent to the door.

De Batz was taking a last look at the sleeping child; the uncrowned King of France was wrapped in a drunken sleep, with the last spoken insult upon his dead mother still hovering on his childish lips.

CHAPTER VIII. ARCADES AMBO

“That is the way we conduct our affairs, citizen,” said Heron gruffly, as he once more led his guest back into his office.

It was his turn to be complacent now. De Batz, for once in his life cowed by what he had seen, still wore a look of horror and disgust upon his florid face.

“What devils you all are!” he said at last.

“We are good patriots,” retorted Heron, “and the tyrant’s spawn leads but the life that hundreds of thousands of children led whilst his father oppressed the people. Nay! what am I saying? He leads a far better, far happier life. He gets plenty to eat and plenty of warm clothes. Thousands of innocent children, who have not the crimes of a despot father upon their conscience, have to starve whilst he grows fat.”

The leer in his face was so evil that once more de Batz felt that eerie feeling of terror creeping into his bones. Here were cruelty and bloodthirsty ferocity personified to their utmost extent. At thought of the Bourbons, or of all those whom he considered had been in the past the oppressors of the people, Heron was nothing but a wild and ravenous beast, hungering for revenge, longing to bury his talons and his fangs into the body of those whose heels had once pressed on his own neck.

And de Batz knew that even with millions or countless money at his command he could not purchase from this carnivorous brute the life and liberty of the son of King Louis. No amount of bribery would accomplish that; it would have to be ingenuity pitted against animal force, the wiliness of the fox against the power of the wolf.

Even now Heron was darting savagely suspicious looks upon him.

“I shall get rid of the Simons,” he said; “there’s something in that woman’s face which I don’t trust. They shall go within the next few hours, or as soon as I can lay my hands upon a better patriot than that mealy-mouthed cobbler. And it will be better not to have a woman about the place. Let me see—to-day is Thursday, or else Friday morning. By Sunday I’ll get those Simons out of the place. Methought I saw you ogling that woman,” he added, bringing his bony fist crashing down on the table so that papers, pen, and inkhorn rattled loudly; “and if I thought that you—”

De Batz thought it well at this point to finger once more nonchalantly the bundle of crisp paper in the pocket of his coat.

“Only on that one condition,” reiterated Heron in a hoarse voice; “if you try to get at Capet, I’ll drag you to the Tribunal with my own hands.”

“Always presuming that you can get me, my friend,” murmured de Batz, who was gradually regaining his accustomed composure.

Already his active mind was busily at work. One or two things which he had noted in connection with his visit to the Dauphin’s prison had struck him as possibly useful in his schemes. But he was disappointed that Heron was getting rid of the Simons. The woman might have been very useful and more easily got at than a man. The avarice of the French bourgeoisie would have proved a promising factor. But this, of course, would now be out of the question. At the same time it was not because Heron raved and stormed and uttered cries like a hyena that he, de Batz, meant to give up an enterprise which, if successful, would place millions into his own pocket.

As for that meddling Englishman, the Scarlet Pimpernel, and his crack-brained followers, they must be effectually swept out of the way first of all. De Batz felt that they were the real, the most likely hindrance to his schemes. He himself would have to go very cautiously to work, since apparently Heron would not allow him to purchase immunity for himself in that one matter, and whilst he was laying his plans with necessary deliberation so as to ensure his own safety, that accursed Scarlet Pimpernel would mayhap snatch the golden prize from the Temple prison right under his very nose.

When he thought of that the Gascon Royalist felt just as vindictive as did the chief agent of the Committee of General Security.

While these thoughts were coursing through de Batz' head, Heron had been indulging in a volley of vituperation.

"If that little vermin escapes," he said, "my life will not be worth an hour's purchase. In twenty-four hours I am a dead man, thrown to the guillotine like those dogs of aristocrats! You say I am a night-bird, citizen. I tell you that I do not sleep night or day thinking of that brat and the means to keep him safely under my hand. I have never trusted those Simons—"

"Not trusted them!" exclaimed de Batz; "surely you could not find anywhere more inhuman monsters!"

"Inhuman monsters?" snarled Heron. "Bah! they don't do their business thoroughly; we want the tyrant's spawn to become a true Republican and a patriot—aye! to make of him such a one that even if you and your cursed confederates got him by some hellish chance, he would be no use to you as a king, a tyrant to set above the people, to set up in your Versailles, your Louvre, to eat off golden plates and wear satin clothes. You have seen the brat! By the time he is a man he should forget how to eat save with his fingers, and get roaring drunk every night. That's what we want!—to make him so that he shall be no use to you, even if you did get him away; but you shall not! You shall not, not if I have to strangle him with my own hands."

He picked up his short-stemmed pipe and pulled savagely at it for awhile. De Batz was meditating.

"My friend," he said after a little while, "you are agitating yourself quite unnecessarily, and gravely jeopardising your prospects of getting a comfortable little income through keeping your fingers off my person. Who said I wanted to meddle with the child?"

"You had best not," growled Heron.

"Exactly. You have said that before. But do you not think that you would be far wiser, instead of directing your undivided attention to my unworthy self, to turn your thoughts a little to one whom, believe me, you have far greater cause to fear?"

"Who is that?"

"The Englishman."

"You mean the man they call the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"Himself. Have you not suffered from his activity, friend Heron? I fancy that citizen Chauvelin and citizen Collot would have quite a tale to tell about him."

"They ought both to have been guillotined for that blunder last autumn at Boulogne."

"Take care that the same accusation be not laid at your door this year, my friend," commented de Batz placidly.

"Bah!"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel is in Paris even now."

"The devil he is!"

"And on what errand, think you?"

There was a moment's silence, and then de Batz continued with slow and dramatic emphasis:

"That of rescuing your most precious prisoner from the Temple."

"How do you know?" Heron queried savagely.

"I guessed."

"How?"

"I saw a man in the Theatre National to-day..."

"Well?"

"Who is a member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"D— him! Where can I find him?"

“Will you sign a receipt for the three thousand five hundred livres, which I am pining to hand over to you, my friend, and I will tell you?”

“Where’s the money?”

“In my pocket.”

Without further words Heron dragged the inkhorn and a sheet of paper towards him, took up a pen, and wrote a few words rapidly in a loose, scrawly hand. He strewed sand over the writing, then handed it across the table to de Batz.

“Will that do?” he asked briefly.

The other was reading the note through carefully.

“I see you only grant me a fortnight,” he remarked casually.

“For that amount of money it is sufficient. If you want an extension you must pay more.”

“So be it,” assented de Batz coolly, as he folded the paper across. “On the whole a fortnight’s immunity in France these days is quite a pleasant respite. And I prefer to keep in touch with you, friend Heron. I’ll call on you again this day fortnight.”

He took out a letter-case from his pocket. Out of this he drew a packet of bank-notes, which he laid on the table in front of Heron, then he placed the receipt carefully into the letter-case, and this back into his pocket.

Heron in the meanwhile was counting over the banknotes. The light of ferocity had entirely gone from his eyes; momentarily the whole expression of the face was one of satisfied greed.

“Well!” he said at last when he had assured himself that the number of notes was quite correct, and he had transferred the bundle of crisp papers into an inner pocket of his coat—“well, what about your friend?”

“I knew him years ago,” rejoined de Batz coolly; “he is a kinsman of citizen St. Just. I know that he is one of the confederates of the Scarlet Pimpernel.”

“Where does he lodge?”

“That is for you to find out. I saw him at the theatre, and afterwards in the green-room; he was making himself agreeable to the citizeness Lange. I heard him ask for leave to call on her to-morrow at four o’clock. You know where she lodges, of course!”

He watched Heron while the latter scribbled a few words on a scrap of paper, then he quietly rose to go. He took up his cloak and once again wrapped it round his shoulders. There was nothing more to be said, and he was anxious to go.

The leave-taking between the two men was neither cordial nor more than barely courteous. De Batz nodded to Heron, who escorted him to the outside door of his lodging, and there called loudly to a soldier who was doing sentinel at the further end of the corridor.

“Show this citizen the way to the guichet,” he said curtly. “Good-night, citizen,” he added finally, nodding to de Batz.

Ten minutes later the Gascon once more found himself in the Rue du Temple between the great outer walls of the prison and the silent little church and convent of St. Elizabeth. He looked up to where in the central tower a small grated window lighted from within showed the place where the last of the Bourbons was being taught to desecrate the traditions of his race, at the bidding of a mender of shoes—a naval officer cashiered for misconduct and fraud.

Such is human nature in its self-satisfied complacency that de Batz, calmly ignoring the vile part which he himself had played in the last quarter of an hour of his interview with the Committee’s agent, found it in him to think of Heron with loathing, and even of the cobbler Simon with disgust.

Then with a self-righteous sense of duty performed, and an indifferent shrug of the shoulders, he dismissed Heron from his mind.

“That meddling Scarlet Pimpernel will find his hands over-full to-morrow, and mayhap will not interfere in my affairs for some time to come,” he mused; “meseems that that will be the first

time that a member of his precious League has come within the clutches of such unpleasant people as the sleuth-hounds of my friend Heron!”

CHAPTER IX. WHAT LOVE CAN DO

“Yesterday you were unkind and ungallant. How could I smile when you seemed so stern?”

“Yesterday I was not alone with you. How could I say what lay next my heart, when indifferent ears could catch the words that were meant only for you?”

“Ah, monsieur, do they teach you in England how to make pretty speeches?”

“No, mademoiselle, that is an instinct that comes into birth by the fire of a woman’s eyes.”

Mademoiselle Lange was sitting upon a small sofa of antique design, with cushions covered in faded silks heaped round her pretty head. Armand thought that she looked like that carved cameo which his sister Marguerite possessed.

He himself sat on a low chair at some distance from her. He had brought her a large bunch of early violets, for he knew that she was fond of flowers, and these lay upon her lap, against the opalescent grey of her gown.

She seemed a little nervous and agitated, his obvious admiration bringing a ready blush to her cheeks.

The room itself appeared to Armand to be a perfect frame for the charming picture which she presented. The furniture in it was small and old; tiny tables of antique Vernis-Martin, softly faded tapestries, a pale-toned Aubusson carpet. Everything mellow and in a measure pathetic. Mademoiselle Lange, who was an orphan, lived alone under the duennaship of a middle-aged relative, a penniless hanger-on of the successful young actress, who acted as her chaperone, housekeeper, and maid, and kept unseemly or over-bold gallants at bay.

She told Armand all about her early life, her childhood in the backshop of Maitre Meziere, the jeweller, who was a relative of her mother’s; of her desire for an artistic career, her struggles with the middle-class prejudices of her relations, her bold defiance of them, and final independence.

She made no secret of her humble origin, her want of education in those days; on the contrary, she was proud of what she had accomplished for herself. She was only twenty years of age, and already held a leading place in the artistic world of Paris.

Armand listened to her chatter, interested in everything she said, questioning her with sympathy and discretion. She asked him a good deal about himself, and about his beautiful sister Marguerite, who, of course, had been the most brilliant star in that most brilliant constellation, the Comedie Francaise. She had never seen Marguerite St. Just act, but, of course, Paris still rang with her praises, and all art-lovers regretted that she should have married and left them to mourn for her.

Thus the conversation drifted naturally back to England. Mademoiselle professed a vast interest in the citizen’s country of adoption.

“I had always,” she said, “thought it an ugly country, with the noise and bustle of industrial life going on everywhere, and smoke and fog to cover the landscape and to stunt the trees.”

“Then, in future, mademoiselle,” he replied, “must you think of it as one carpeted with verdure, where in the spring the orchard trees covered with delicate blossom would speak to you of fairyland, where the dewy grass stretches its velvety surface in the shadow of ancient monumental oaks, and ivy-covered towers rear their stately crowns to the sky.”

“And the Scarlet Pimpernel? Tell me about him, monsieur.”

“Ah, mademoiselle, what can I tell you that you do not already know? The Scarlet Pimpernel is a man who has devoted his entire existence to the benefit of suffering mankind. He has but one thought, and that is for those who need him; he hears but one sound the cry of the oppressed.”

“But they do say, monsieur, that philanthropy plays but a sorry part in your hero’s schemes. They aver that he looks on his own efforts and the adventures through which he goes only in the light of sport.”

“Like all Englishmen, mademoiselle, the Scarlet Pimpernel is a little ashamed of sentiment. He would deny its very existence with his lips, even whilst his noble heart brimmed over with it. Sport? Well! mayhap the sporting instinct is as keen as that of charity—the race for lives, the tussle for the rescue of human creatures, the throwing of a life on the hazard of a die.”

“They fear him in France, monsieur. He has saved so many whose death had been decreed by the Committee of Public Safety.”

“Please God, he will save many yet.”

“Ah, monsieur, the poor little boy in the Temple prison!”

“He has your sympathy, mademoiselle?”

“Of every right-minded woman in France, monsieur. Oh!” she added with a pretty gesture of enthusiasm, clasping her hands together, and looking at Armand with large eyes filled with tears, “if your noble Scarlet Pimpernel will do aught to save that poor innocent lamb, I would indeed bless him in my heart, and help him with all my humble might if I could.”

“May God’s saints bless you for those words, mademoiselle,” he said, whilst, carried away by her beauty, her charm, her perfect femininity, he stooped towards her until his knee touched the carpet at her feet. “I had begun to lose my belief in my poor misguided country, to think all men in France vile, and all women base. I could thank you on my knees for your sweet words of sympathy, for the expression of tender motherliness that came into your eyes when you spoke of the poor forsaken Dauphin in the Temple.”

She did not restrain her tears; with her they came very easily, just as with a child, and as they gathered in her eyes and rolled down her fresh cheeks they in no way marred the charm of her face. One hand lay in her lap fingering a diminutive bit of cambric, which from time to time she pressed to her eyes. The other she had almost unconsciously yielded to Armand.

The scent of the violets filled the room. It seemed to emanate from her, a fitting attribute of her young, wholly unsophisticated girlhood. The citizen was goodly to look at; he was kneeling at her feet, and his lips were pressed against her hand.

Armand was young and he was an idealist. I do not for a moment imagine that just at this moment he was deeply in love. The stronger feeling had not yet risen up in him; it came later when tragedy encompassed him and brought passion to sudden maturity. Just now he was merely yielding himself up to the intoxicating moment, with all the abandonment, all the enthusiasm of the Latin race. There was no reason why he should not bend the knee before this exquisite little cameo, that by its very presence was giving him an hour of perfect pleasure and of aesthetic joy.

Outside the world continued its hideous, relentless way; men butchered one another, fought and hated. Here in this small old-world salon, with its faded satins and bits of ivory-tinted lace, the outer universe had never really penetrated. It was a tiny world—quite apart from the rest of mankind, perfectly peaceful and absolutely beautiful.

If Armand had been allowed to depart from here now, without having been the cause as well as the chief actor in the events that followed, no doubt that Mademoiselle Lange would always have remained a charming memory with him, an exquisite bouquet of violets pressed reverently between the leaves of a favourite book of poems, and the scent of spring flowers would in after years have ever brought her dainty picture to his mind.

He was murmuring pretty words of endearment; carried away by emotion, his arm stole round her waist; he felt that if another tear came like a dewdrop rolling down her cheek he must kiss it away at its very source. Passion was not sweeping them off their feet—not yet, for they were very young, and life had not as yet presented to them its most unsolvable problem.

But they yielded to one another, to the springtime of their life, calling for Love, which would come presently hand in hand with his grim attendant, Sorrow.

Even as Armand’s glowing face was at last lifted up to hers asking with mute lips for that first kiss which she already was prepared to give, there came the loud noise of men’s heavy footsteps

tramping up the old oak stairs, then some shouting, a woman's cry, and the next moment Madame Belhomme, trembling, wide-eyed, and in obvious terror, came rushing into the room.

"Jeanne! Jeanne! My child! It is awful! It is awful! Mon Dieu—mon Dieu! What is to become of us?"

She was moaning and lamenting even as she ran in, and now she threw her apron over her face and sank into a chair, continuing her moaning and her lamentations.

Neither Mademoiselle nor Armand had stirred. They remained like graven images, he on one knee, she with large eyes fixed upon his face. They had neither of them looked on the old woman; they seemed even now unconscious of her presence. But their ears had caught the sound of that measured tramp of feet up the stairs of the old house, and the halt upon the landing; they had heard the brief words of command:

"Open, in the name of the people!"

They knew quite well what it all meant; they had not wandered so far in the realms of romance that reality—the grim, horrible reality of the moment—had not the power to bring them back to earth.

That peremptory call to open in the name of the people was the prologue these days to a drama which had but two concluding acts: arrest, which was a certainty; the guillotine, which was more than probable. Jeanne and Armand, these two young people who but a moment ago had tentatively lifted the veil of life, looked straight into each other's eyes and saw the hand of death interposed between them: they looked straight into each other's eyes and knew that nothing but the hand of death would part them now. Love had come with its attendant, Sorrow; but he had come with no uncertain footsteps. Jeanne looked on the man before her, and he bent his head to imprint a glowing kiss upon her hand.

"Aunt Marie!"

It was Jeanne Lange who spoke, but her voice was no longer that of an irresponsible child; it was firm, steady and hard. Though she spoke to the old woman, she did not look at her; her luminous brown eyes rested on the bowed head of Armand St. Just.

"Aunt Marie!" she repeated more peremptorily, for the old woman, with her apron over her head, was still moaning, and unconscious of all save an overmastering fear.

"Open, in the name of the people!" came in a loud harsh voice once more from the other side of the front door.

"Aunt Marie, as you value your life and mine, pull yourself together," said Jeanne firmly.

"What shall we do? Oh! what shall we do?" moaned Madame Belhomme. But she had dragged the apron away from her face, and was looking with some puzzlement at meek, gentle little Jeanne, who had suddenly become so strange, so dictatorial, all unlike her habitual somewhat diffident self.

"You need not have the slightest fear, Aunt Marie, if you will only do as I tell you," resumed Jeanne quietly; "if you give way to fear, we are all of us undone. As you value your life and mine," she now repeated authoritatively, "pull yourself together, and do as I tell you."

The girl's firmness, her perfect quietude had the desired effect. Madame Belhomme, though still shaken up with sobs of terror, made a great effort to master herself; she stood up, smoothed down her apron, passed her hand over her ruffled hair, and said in a quaking voice:

"What do you think we had better do?"

"Go quietly to the door and open it."

"But—the soldiers—"

"If you do not open quietly they will force the door open within the next two minutes," interposed Jeanne calmly. "Go quietly and open the door. Try and hide your fears, grumble in an audible voice at being interrupted in your cooking, and tell the soldiers at once that they will find mademoiselle in the boudoir. Go, for God's sake!" she added, whilst suppressed emotion suddenly made her young voice vibrate; "go, before they break open that door!"

Madame Belhomme, impressed and cowed, obeyed like an automaton. She turned and marched fairly straight out of the room. It was not a minute too soon. From outside had already come the third and final summons:

“Open, in the name of the people!”

After that a crowbar would break open the door.

Madame Belhomme’s heavy footsteps were heard crossing the ante-chamber. Armand still knelt at Jeanne’s feet, holding her trembling little hand in his.

“A love-scene,” she whispered rapidly, “a love-scene—quick—do you know one?”

And even as he had tried to rise she held him back, down on his knees.

He thought that fear was making her distracted.

“Mademoiselle—” he murmured, trying to soothe her.

“Try and understand,” she said with wonderful calm, “and do as I tell you. Aunt Marie has obeyed. Will you do likewise?”

“To the death!” he whispered eagerly.

“Then a love-scene,” she entreated. “Surely you know one. Rodrigue and Chimene! Surely—surely,” she urged, even as tears of anguish rose into her eyes, “you must—you must, or, if not that, something else. Quick! The very seconds are precious!”

They were indeed! Madame Belhomme, obedient as a frightened dog, had gone to the door and opened it; even her well-feigned grumblings could now be heard and the rough interrogations from the soldiery.

“Citizeness Lange!” said a gruff voice.

“In her boudoir, quoi!”

Madame Belhomme, braced up apparently by fear, was playing her part remarkably well.

“Bothering good citizens! On baking day, too!” she went on grumbling and muttering.

“Oh, think—think!” murmured Jeanne now in an agonised whisper, her hot little hand grasping his so tightly that her nails were driven into his flesh. “You must know something, that will do—anything—for dear life’s sake.... Armand!”

His name—in the tense excitement of this terrible moment—had escaped her lips.

All in a flash of sudden intuition he understood what she wanted, and even as the door of the boudoir was thrown violently open Armand—still on his knees, but with one hand pressed to his heart, the other stretched upwards to the ceiling in the most approved dramatic style, was loudly declaiming:

“Pour venger son honneur il perdit son amour,
Pour venger sa maitresse il a quitte le jour!”

Whereupon Mademoiselle Lange feigned the most perfect impatience.

“No, no, my good cousin,” she said with a pretty moue of disdain, “that will never do! You must not thus emphasise the end of every line; the verses should flow more evenly, as thus....”

Heron had paused at the door. It was he who had thrown it open—he who, followed by a couple of his sleuth-hounds, had thought to find here the man denounced by de Batz as being one of the followers of that irrepressible Scarlet Pimpernel. The obviously Parisian intonation of the man kneeling in front of citizeness Lange in an attitude no ways suggestive of personal admiration, and coolly reciting verses out of a play, had somewhat taken him aback.

“What does this mean?” he asked gruffly, striding forward into the room and glaring first at mademoiselle, then at Armand.

Mademoiselle gave a little cry of surprise.

“Why, if it isn’t citizen Heron!” she cried, jumping up with a dainty movement of coquetry and embarrassment. “Why did not Aunt Marie announce you?... It is indeed remiss of her, but she is so ill-tempered on baking days I dare not even rebuke her. Won’t you sit down, citizen Heron?”

And you, cousin,” she added, looking down airily on Armand, “I pray you maintain no longer that foolish attitude.”

The febrileness of her manner, the glow in her cheeks were easily attributable to natural shyness in face of this unexpected visit. Heron, completely bewildered by this little scene, which was so unlike what he expected, and so unlike those to which he was accustomed in the exercise of his horrible duties, was practically speechless before the little lady who continued to prattle along in a simple, unaffected manner.

“Cousin,” she said to Armand, who in the meanwhile had risen to his knees, “this is citizen Heron, of whom you have heard me speak. My cousin Belhomme,” she continued, once more turning to Heron, “is fresh from the country, citizen. He hails from Orleans, where he has played leading parts in the tragedies of the late citizen Corneille. But, ah me! I fear that he will find Paris audiences vastly more critical than the good Orleanese. Did you hear him, citizen, declaiming those beautiful verses just now? He was murdering them, say I—yes, murdering them—the gaby!”

Then only did it seem as if she realised that there was something amiss, that citizen Heron had come to visit her, not as an admirer of her talent who would wish to pay his respects to a successful actress, but as a person to be looked on with dread.

She gave a quaint, nervous little laugh, and murmured in the tones of a frightened child:

“La, citizen, how glum you look! I thought you had come to compliment me on my latest success. I saw you at the theatre last night, though you did not afterwards come to see me in the green-room. Why! I had a regular ovation! Look at my flowers!” she added more gaily, pointing to several bouquets in vases about the room. “Citizen Danton brought me the violets himself, and citizen Santerre the narcissi, and that laurel wreath—is it not charming?—that was a tribute from citizen Robespierre himself.”

She was so artless, so simple, and so natural that Heron was completely taken off his usual mental balance. He had expected to find the usual setting to the dramatic episodes which he was wont to conduct—screaming women, a man either at bay, sword in hand, or hiding in a linen cupboard or up a chimney.

Now everything puzzled him. De Batz—he was quite sure—had spoken of an Englishman, a follower of the Scarlet Pimpernel; every thinking French patriot knew that all the followers of the Scarlet Pimpernel were Englishmen with red hair and prominent teeth, whereas this man....

Armand—who deadly danger had primed in his improvised role—was striding up and down the room declaiming with ever-varying intonations:

“Joignez tous vos efforts contre un espoir si doux
Pour en venir a bout, c’est trop peu que de vous.”

“No! no!” said mademoiselle impatiently; “you must not make that ugly pause midway in the last line: ‘pour en venir a bout, c’est trop peu que de vous!’”

She mimicked Armand’s diction so quaintly, imitating his stride, his awkward gesture, and his faulty phraseology with such funny exaggeration that Heron laughed in spite of himself.

“So that is a cousin from Orleans, is it?” he asked, throwing his lanky body into an armchair, which creaked dismally under his weight.

“Yes! a regular gaby—what?” she said archly. “Now, citizen Heron, you must stay and take coffee with me. Aunt Marie will be bringing it in directly. Hector,” she added, turning to Armand, “come down from the clouds and ask Aunt Marie to be quick.”

This certainly was the first time in the whole of his experience that Heron had been asked to stay and drink coffee with the quarry he was hunting down. Mademoiselle’s innocent little ways, her desire for the prolongation of his visit, further addled his brain. De Batz had undoubtedly spoken of an Englishman, and the cousin from Orleans was certainly a Frenchman every inch of him.

Perhaps had the denunciation come from any one else but de Batz, Heron might have acted and thought more circumspectly; but, of course, the chief agent of the Committee of General Security was more suspicious of the man from whom he took a heavy bribe than of any one else in France. The thought had suddenly crossed his mind that mayhap de Batz had sent him on a fool's errand in order to get him safely out of the way of the Temple prison at a given hour of the day.

The thought took shape, crystallised, caused him to see a rapid vision of de Batz sneaking into his lodgings and stealing his keys, the guard being slack, careless, inattentive, allowing the adventurer to pass barriers that should have been closed against all comers.

Now Heron was sure of it; it was all a conspiracy invented by de Batz. He had forgotten all about his theories that a man under arrest is always safer than a man that is free. Had his brain been quite normal, and not obsessed, as it always was now by thoughts of the Dauphin's escape from prison, no doubt he would have been more suspicious of Armand, but all his worst suspicions were directed against de Batz. Armand seemed to him just a fool, an actor *quoi?* and so obviously not an Englishman.

He jumped to his feet, curtly declining mademoiselle's offers of hospitality. He wanted to get away at once. Actors and actresses were always, by tacit consent of the authorities, more immune than the rest of the community. They provided the only amusement in the intervals of the horrible scenes around the scaffolds; they were irresponsible, harmless creatures who did not meddle in politics.

Jeanne the while was gaily prattling on, her luminous eyes fixed upon the all-powerful enemy, striving to read his thoughts, to understand what went on behind those cruel, prominent eyes, the chances that Armand had of safety and of life.

She knew, of course, that the visit was directed against Armand—some one had betrayed him, that odious de Batz mayhap—and she was fighting for Armand's safety, for his life. Her armoury consisted of her presence of mind, her cool courage, her self-control; she used all these weapons for his sake, though at times she felt as if the strain on her nerves would snap the thread of life in her. The effort seemed more than she could bear.

But she kept up her part, rallying Heron for the shortness of his visit, begging him to tarry for another five minutes at least, throwing out—with subtle feminine intuition—just those very hints anent little Capet's safety that were most calculated to send him flying back towards the Temple.

"I felt so honoured last night, citizen," she said coquettishly, "that you even forgot little Capet in order to come and watch my debut as *Celimene*."

"Forget him!" retorted Heron, smothering a curse, "I never forget the vermin. I must go back to him; there are too many cats nosing round my mouse. Good day to you, citizeness. I ought to have brought flowers, I know; but I am a busy man—a harassed man."

"*Je te crois*," she said with a grave nod of the head; "but do come to the theatre to-night. I am playing *Camille*—such a fine part! one of my greatest successes."

"Yes, yes, I'll come—mayhap, mayhap—but I'll go now—glad to have seen you, citizeness. Where does your cousin lodge?" he asked abruptly.

"Here," she replied boldly, on the spur of the moment.

"Good. Let him report himself to-morrow morning at the *Conciergerie*, and get his certificate of safety. It is a new decree, and you should have one, too."

"Very well, then. Hector and I will come together, and perhaps Aunt Marie will come too. Don't send us to *maman guillotine* yet awhile, citizen," she said lightly; "you will never get such another *Camille*, nor yet so good a *Celimene*."

She was gay, artless to the last. She accompanied Heron to the door herself, chaffing him about his escort.

"You are an aristo, citizen," she said, gazing with well-feigned admiration on the two sleuth-hounds who stood in wait in the anteroom; "it makes me proud to see so many citizens at my door."

Come and see me play Camille—come to-night, and don't forget the green-room door—it will always be kept invitingly open for you.”

She bobbed him a curtsy, and he walked out, closely followed by his two men; then at last she closed the door behind them. She stood there for a while, her ear glued against the massive panels, listening for their measured tread down the oak staircase. At last it rang more sharply against the flagstones of the courtyard below; then she was satisfied that they had gone, and went slowly back to the boudoir.

CHAPTER X. SHADOWS

The tension on her nerves relaxed; there was the inevitable reaction. Her knees were shaking under her, and she literally staggered into the room.

But Armand was already near her, down on both his knees this time, his arms clasping the delicate form that swayed like the slender stems of narcissi in the breeze.

“Oh! you must go out of Paris at once—at once,” she said through sobs which no longer would be kept back.

“He’ll return—I know that he will return—and you will not be safe until you are back in England.”

But he could not think of himself or of anything in the future. He had forgotten Heron, Paris, the world; he could only think of her.

“I owe my life to you!” he murmured. “Oh, how beautiful you are—how brave! How I love you!”

It seemed that he had always loved her, from the moment that first in his boyish heart he had set up an ideal to worship, and then, last night, in the box of the theatre—he had his back turned toward the stage, and was ready to go—her voice had called him back; it had held him spellbound; her voice, and also her eyes.... He did not know then that it was Love which then and there had enchained him. Oh, how foolish he had been! for now he knew that he had loved her with all his might, with all his soul, from the very instant that his eyes had rested upon her.

He babbled along—incoherently—in the intervals of covering her hands and the hem of her gown with kisses. He stooped right down to the ground and kissed the arch of her instep; he had become a devotee worshipping at the shrine of his saint, who had performed a great and a wonderful miracle.

Armand the idealist had found his ideal in a woman. That was the great miracle which the woman herself had performed for him. He found in her all that he had admired most, all that he had admired in the leader who hitherto had been the only personification of his ideal. But Jeanne possessed all those qualities which had roused his enthusiasm in the noble hero whom he revered. Her pluck, her ingenuity, her calm devotion which had averted the threatened danger from him!

What had he done that she should have risked her own sweet life for his sake?

But Jeanne did not know. She could not tell. Her nerves now were somewhat unstrung, and the tears that always came so readily to her eyes flowed quite unchecked. She could not very well move, for he held her knees imprisoned in his arms, but she was quite content to remain like this, and to yield her hands to him so that he might cover them with kisses.

Indeed, she did not know at what precise moment love for him had been born in her heart. Last night, perhaps... she could not say ... but when they parted she felt that she must see him again... and then today... perhaps it was the scent of the violets... they were so exquisitely sweet... perhaps it was his enthusiasm and his talk about England... but when Heron came she knew that she must save Armand’s life at all cost... that she would die if they dragged him away to prison.

Thus these two children philosophised, trying to understand the mystery of the birth of Love. But they were only children; they did not really understand. Passion was sweeping them off their feet, because a common danger had bound them irrevocably to one another. The womanly instinct to save and to protect had given the young girl strength to bear a difficult part, and now she loved him for the dangers from which she had rescued him, and he loved her because she had risked her life for him.

The hours sped on; there was so much to say, so much that was exquisite to listen to. The shades of evening were gathering fast; the room, with its pale-toned hangings and faded tapestries, was sinking into the arms of gloom. Aunt Marie was no doubt too terrified to stir out of her kitchen; she did not bring the lamps, but the darkness suited Armand’s mood, and Jeanne was glad that the gloaming effectually hid the perpetual blush in her cheeks.

In the evening air the dying flowers sent their heady fragrance around. Armand was intoxicated with the perfume of violets that clung to Jeanne's fingers, with the touch of her satin gown that brushed his cheek, with the murmur of her voice that quivered through her tears.

No noise from the ugly outer world reached this secluded spot. In the tiny square outside a street lamp had been lighted, and its feeble rays came peeping in through the lace curtains at the window. They caught the dainty silhouette of the young girl, playing with the loose tendrils of her hair around her forehead, and outlining with a thin band of light the contour of neck and shoulder, making the satin of her gown shimmer with an opalescent glow.

Armand rose from his knees. Her eyes were calling to him, her lips were ready to yield.

"Tu m'aimes?" he whispered.

And like a tired child she sank upon his breast.

He kissed her hair, her eyes, her lips; her skin was fragrant as the flowers of spring, the tears on her cheeks glistened like morning dew.

Aunt Marie came in at last, carrying the lamp. She found them sitting side by side, like two children, hand in hand, mute with the eloquence which comes from boundless love. They were under a spell, forgetting even that they lived, knowing nothing except that they loved.

The lamp broke the spell, and Aunt Marie's still trembling voice:

"Oh, my dear! how did you manage to rid yourself of those brutes?"

But she asked no other question, even when the lamp showed up quite clearly the glowing cheeks of Jeanne and the ardent eyes of Armand. In her heart, long since atrophied, there were a few memories, carefully put away in a secret cell, and those memories caused the old woman to understand.

Neither Jeanne nor Armand noticed what she did; the spell had been broken, but the dream lingered on; they did not see Aunt Marie putting the room tidy, and then quietly tiptoeing out by the door.

But through the dream, reality was struggling for recognition. After Armand had asked for the hundredth time: "Tu m'aimes?" and Jeanne for the hundredth time had replied mutely with her eyes, her fears for him suddenly returned.

Something had awakened her from her trance—a heavy footstep, mayhap, in the street below, the distant roll of a drum, or only the clash of steel saucepans in Aunt Marie's kitchen. But suddenly Jeanne was alert, and with her alertness came terror for the beloved.

"Your life," she said—for he had called her his life just then, "your life—and I was forgetting that it is still in danger... your dear, your precious life!"

"Doubly dear now," he replied, "since I owe it to you."

"Then I pray you, I entreat you, guard it well for my sake—make all haste to leave Paris... oh, this I beg of you!" she continued more earnestly, seeing the look of demur in his eyes; "every hour you spend in it brings danger nearer to your door."

"I could not leave Paris while you are here."

"But I am safe here," she urged; "quite, quite safe, I assure you. I am only a poor actress, and the Government takes no heed of us mimes. Men must be amused, even between the intervals of killing one another. Indeed, indeed, I should be far safer here now, waiting quietly for awhile, while you make preparations to go... My hasty departure at this moment would bring disaster on us both."

There was logic in what she said. And yet how could he leave her? now that he had found this perfect woman—this realisation of his highest ideals, how could he go and leave her in this awful Paris, with brutes like Heron forcing their hideous personality into her sacred presence, threatening that very life he would gladly give his own to keep inviolate?

"Listen, sweetheart," he said after awhile, when presently reason struggled back for first place in his mind. "Will you allow me to consult with my chief, with the Scarlet Pimpernel, who is in Paris at the present moment? I am under his orders; I could not leave France just now. My life, my entire

person are at his disposal. I and my comrades are here under his orders, for a great undertaking which he has not yet unfolded to us, but which I firmly believe is framed for the rescue of the Dauphin from the Temple.”

She gave an involuntary exclamation of horror.

“No, no!” she said quickly and earnestly; “as far as you are concerned, Armand, that has now become an impossibility. Some one has betrayed you, and you are henceforth a marked man. I think that odious de Batz had a hand in Heron’s visit of this afternoon. We succeeded in putting these spies off the scent, but only for a moment... within a few hours—less perhaps—Heron will repent him of his carelessness; he’ll come back—I know that he will come back. He may leave me, personally, alone; but he will be on your track; he’ll drag you to the Conciergerie to report yourself, and there your true name and history are bound to come to light. If you succeed in evading him, he will still be on your track. If the Scarlet Pimpernel keeps you in Paris now, your death will be at his door.”

Her voice had become quite hard and trenchant as she said these last words; womanlike, she was already prepared to hate the man whose mysterious personality she had hitherto admired, now that the life and safety of Armand appeared to depend on the will of that elusive hero.

“You must not be afraid for me, Jeanne,” he urged. “The Scarlet Pimpernel cares for all his followers; he would never allow me to run unnecessary risks.”

She was unconvinced, almost jealous now of his enthusiasm for that unknown man. Already she had taken full possession of Armand; she had purchased his life, and he had given her his love. She would share neither treasure with that nameless leader who held Armand’s allegiance.

“It is only for a little while, sweetheart,” he reiterated again and again. “I could not, anyhow, leave Paris whilst I feel that you are here, maybe in danger. The thought would be horrible. I should go mad if I had to leave you.”

Then he talked again of England, of his life there, of the happiness and peace that were in store for them both.

“We will go to England together,” he whispered, “and there we will be happy together, you and I. We will have a tiny house among the Kentish hills, and its walls will be covered with honeysuckle and roses. At the back of the house there will be an orchard, and in May, when the fruit-blossom is fading and soft spring breezes blow among the trees, showers of sweet-scented petals will envelop us as we walk along, falling on us like fragrant snow. You will come, sweetheart, will you not?”

“If you still wish it, Armand,” she murmured.

Still wish it! He would gladly go to-morrow if she would come with him. But, of course, that could not be arranged. She had her contract to fulfil at the theatre, then there would be her house and furniture to dispose of, and there was Aunt Marie.... But, of course, Aunt Marie would come too.... She thought that she could get away some time before the spring; and he swore that he could not leave Paris until she came with him.

It seemed a terrible deadlock, for she could not bear to think of him alone in those awful Paris streets, where she knew that spies would always be tracking him. She had no illusions as to the impression which she had made on Heron; she knew that it could only be a momentary one, and that Armand would henceforth be in daily, hourly danger.

At last she promised him that she would take the advice of his chief; they would both be guided by what he said. Armand would confide in him to-night, and if it could be arranged she would hurry on her preparations and, mayhap, be ready to join him in a week.

“In the meanwhile, that cruel man must not risk your dear life,” she said. “Remember, Armand, your life belongs to me. Oh, I could hate him for the love you bear him!”

“Sh—sh—sh!” he said earnestly. “Dear heart, you must not speak like that of the man whom, next to your perfect self, I love most upon earth.”

“You think of him more than of me. I shall scarce live until I know that you are safely out of Paris.”

Though it was horrible to part, yet it was best, perhaps, that he should go back to his lodgings now, in case Heron sent his spies back to her door, and since he meant to consult with his chief. She had a vague hope that if the mysterious hero was indeed the noble-hearted man whom Armand represented him to be, surely he would take compassion on the anxiety of a sorrowing woman, and release the man she loved from bondage.

This thought pleased her and gave her hope. She even urged Armand now to go.

“When may I see you to-morrow?” he asked.

“But it will be so dangerous to meet,” she argued.

“I must see you. I could not live through the day without seeing you.”

“The theatre is the safest place.”

“I could not wait till the evening. May I not come here?”

“No, no. Heron’s spies may be about.”

“Where then?”

She thought it over for a moment.

“At the stage-door of the theatre at one o’clock,” she said at last. “We shall have finished rehearsal. Slip into the guichet of the concierge. I will tell him to admit you, and send my dresser to meet you there; she will bring you along to my room, where we shall be undisturbed for at least half an hour.”

He had perforce to be content with that, though he would so much rather have seen her here again, where the faded tapestries and soft-toned hangings made such a perfect background for her delicate charm. He had every intention of confiding in Blakeney, and of asking his help for getting Jeanne out of Paris as quickly as may be.

Thus this perfect hour was past; the most pure, the fullest of joy that these two young people were ever destined to know. Perhaps they felt within themselves the consciousness that their great love would rise anon to yet greater, fuller perfection when Fate had crowned it with his halo of sorrow. Perhaps, too, it was that consciousness that gave to their kisses now the solemnity of a last farewell.

CHAPTER XI. THE LEAGUE OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

Armand never could say definitely afterwards whither he went when he left the Square du Roule that evening. No doubt he wandered about the streets for some time in an absent, mechanical way, paying no heed to the passers-by, none to the direction in which he was going.

His mind was full of Jeanne, her beauty, her courage, her attitude in face of the hideous bloodhound who had come to pollute that charming old-world boudoir by his loathsome presence. He recalled every word she uttered, every gesture she made.

He was a man in love for the first time—wholly, irremediably in love.

I suppose that it was the pangs of hunger that first recalled him to himself. It was close on eight o'clock now, and he had fed on his imaginings—first on anticipation, then on realisation, and lastly on memory—during the best part of the day. Now he awoke from his day-dream to find himself tired and hungry, but fortunately not very far from that quarter of Paris where food is easily obtainable.

He was somewhere near the Madeleine—a quarter he knew well. Soon he saw in front of him a small eating-house which looked fairly clean and orderly. He pushed open its swing-door, and seeing an empty table in a secluded part of the room, he sat down and ordered some supper.

The place made no impression upon his memory. He could not have told you an hour later where it was situated, who had served him, what he had eaten, or what other persons were present in the dining-room at the time that he himself entered it.

Having eaten, however, he felt more like his normal self—more conscious of his actions. When he finally left the eating-house, he realised, for instance, that it was very cold—a fact of which he had for the past few hours been totally unaware. The snow was falling in thin close flakes, and a biting north-easterly wind was blowing those flakes into his face and down his collar. He wrapped his cloak tightly around him. It was a good step yet to Blakeney's lodgings, where he knew that he was expected.

He struck quickly into the Rue St. Honore, avoiding the great open places where the grim horrors of this magnificent city in revolt against civilisation were displayed in all their grim nakedness—on the Place de la Revolution the guillotine, on the Carrousel the open-air camps of workers under the lash of slave-drivers more cruel than the uncivilised brutes of the Far West.

And Armand had to think of Jeanne in the midst of all these horrors. She was still a petted actress to-day, but who could tell if on the morrow the terrible law of the “suspect” would not reach her in order to drag her before a tribunal that knew no mercy, and whose sole justice was a condemnation?

The young man hurried on; he was anxious to be among his own comrades, to hear his chief's pleasant voice, to feel assured that by all the sacred laws of friendship Jeanne henceforth would become the special care of the Scarlet Pimpernel and his league.

Blakeney lodged in a small house situated on the Quai de l'Ecole, at the back of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, from whence he had a clear and uninterrupted view across the river, as far as the irregular block of buildings of the Chatelet prison and the house of Justice.

The same tower-clock that two centuries ago had tolled the signal for the massacre of the Huguenots was even now striking nine. Armand slipped through the half-open porte cochere, crossed the narrow dark courtyard, and ran up two flights of winding stone stairs. At the top of these, a door on his right allowed a thin streak of light to filtrate between its two folds. An iron bell handle hung beside it; Armand gave it a pull.

Two minutes later he was amongst his friends. He heaved a great sigh of content and relief. The very atmosphere here seemed to be different. As far as the lodging itself was concerned, it was as bare, as devoid of comfort as those sort of places—so-called *chambres garnies*—usually were in these days. The chairs looked rickety and uninviting, the sofa was of black horsehair, the carpet was

threadbare, and in places in actual holes; but there was a certain something in the air which revealed, in the midst of all this squalor, the presence of a man of fastidious taste.

To begin with, the place was spotlessly clean; the stove, highly polished, gave forth a pleasing warm glow, even whilst the window, slightly open, allowed a modicum of fresh air to enter the room. In a rough earthenware jug on the table stood a large bunch of Christmas roses, and to the educated nostril the slight scent of perfumes that hovered in the air was doubly pleasing after the fetid air of the narrow streets.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was there, also my Lord Tony, and Lord Hastings. They greeted Armand with whole-hearted cheeriness.

“Where is Blakeney?” asked the young man as soon as he had shaken his friends by the hand.

“Present!” came in loud, pleasant accents from the door of an inner room on the right.

And there he stood under the lintel of the door, the man against whom was raised the giant hand of an entire nation—the man for whose head the revolutionary government of France would gladly pay out all the savings of its Treasury—the man whom human bloodhounds were tracking, hot on the scent—for whom the nets of a bitter revenge and relentless reprisals were constantly being spread.

Was he unconscious of it, or merely careless? His closest friend, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, could not say. Certain it is that, as he now appeared before Armand, picturesque as ever in perfectly tailored clothes, with priceless lace at throat and wrists, his slender fingers holding an enamelled snuff-box and a handkerchief of delicate cambric, his whole personality that of a dandy rather than a man of action, it seemed impossible to connect him with the foolhardy escapades which had set one nation glowing with enthusiasm and another clamouring for revenge.

But it was the magnetism that emanated from him that could not be denied; the light that now and then, swift as summer lightning, flashed out from the depths of the blue eyes usually veiled by heavy, lazy lids, the sudden tightening of firm lips, the setting of the square jaw, which in a moment—but only for the space of a second—transformed the entire face, and revealed the born leader of men.

Just now there was none of that in the debonnair, easy-going man of the world who advanced to meet his friend. Armand went quickly up to him, glad to grasp his hand, slightly troubled with remorse, no doubt, at the recollection of his adventure of to-day. It almost seemed to him that from beneath his half-closed lids Blakeney had shot a quick inquiring glance upon him. The quick flash seemed to light up the young man’s soul from within, and to reveal it, naked, to his friend.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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