



THE
ADVENTURES OF THE
SCARLET
PIMPERNEL
Baroness Orczy

*Collection
of Short Stories*



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The Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel

First published in 1929

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2011

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This edition published in 2011 by House of Stratus, an imprint of
Stratus Books Ltd., Lisandra House, Fore Street, Looe,
Cornwall, PL13 1AD, UK.

Typeset by House of Stratus.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library and the Library of Congress.

EAN	ISBN	Edition
0755116569	9780755116560	Print
0755111117	9780755111114	Print (alt)
0755126459	9780755126453	Pdf
0755119436	9780755119431	Kindle
0755126467	9780755126460	Epub

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About the Author



Emmuska Orczy was born in Tarnaörs, Heves, in Hungary, the daughter of a composer, Baron Felix Orczy, and Countess Emma Wass.

Her parents left Hungary in 1868, fearful of the threat of a peasant revolution. They lived in Budapest before moving to Brussels and then on to Paris. There, she studied music with limited success before the family moved on again; this time to London, at which point her interest turned to art. She studied at the West London School of Art, followed by Heatherley's School of Fine Art, where she met a young illustrator, Henry Montague MacLean Barstow, the son of an English clergyman who was to become her friend, lover, and husband in a happy marriage that lasted nearly fifty years. They were to have one son.

*"My marriage was for close on half a century
one of perfect happiness and understanding,
of perfect friendship and communion of*

thought. The great link in my chain of life which brought me everything that makes life worth the living."

To start with there was little money and the pair worked as translator (Orczy) and illustrator, before she embarked upon a writing career in 1899 which, to start with, was not a success. By 1901, however, she had produced a second novel and a string of detective stories for a magazine which were received a little more kindly. In 1903, in co-operation with her husband, she wrote a play about an English aristocrat, Sir Percy Blakeney, whose mission in life was to rescue French aristocrats from the extreme events affecting their class during the French Revolution.

The play got off to a shaky start, but soon developed a following and eventually ran for four years in the West End of London. It was translated and revised and performed in many other countries. In tandem with the play, Orczy novelized the story and this became a huge success. There followed over ten sequels which featured the central character, Blakeney, along with his family and other members of what was referred to as the *League of the Scarlet Pimpernel*. The first of these, *I Will Repay*, was published in 1906 and the last, *Mam'zelle Guillotine*, in 1940.

She also wrote many other novels, mainly romances, but also within another genre she mastered; detective fiction. *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* was one of the first novels to feature a female detective. *The Old Man in the Corner* stories are of particular significance, as they represented a new departure in fiction, with an 'armchair' detective literally attempting to reveal solutions based on logic alone.

Success brought financial reward and eventually she bought an estate, Villa Bijou in Monte Carlo, Monaco,

which was to become her home and where her beloved husband died in 1943. England, however, remained important to her and in addition to working tirelessly during the First World War in aid of the recruitment of male volunteers for the services, it was in Henley-on-Thames, near London, that she died in 1947.

Many film and TV adaptations of Orczy's work have been made, and her novels remain sought after and avidly digested by successive new generations of readers.

“Fie, Sir Percy!”

“You really are impossible, Sir Percy! Here are we ladies raving, simply raving, about this latest exploit of the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel, and you do naught but belittle his prowess. Lady Blakeney, I entreat, will you not add your voice to our chorus of praise, and drown Sir Percy’s scoffing in an ocean of eulogy?”

Lady Alicia Nugget was very arch. She tapped Sir Percy’s arm with her fan. She put up a jewelled finger and shook it at him with a great air of severity in her fine dark eyes. She turned an entreating glance on Marguerite Blakeney, and as that lady appeared engrossed in conversation with His Grace of Flint, Lady Alicia turned the battery of her glances on His Royal Highness.

“Your Highness,” she said appealingly.

The Prince laughed good-humouredly.

“Oh!” he said, “do not ask me to inculcate hero-worship into this *mauvais sujet*. If you ladies cannot convert him to your views, how can I...a mere man...?”

And His Highness shrugged his shoulders. There were few entertainments he enjoyed more than seeing his friend Sir Percy Blakeney badgered by the ladies on the subject of their popular and mysterious hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

“Your Highness,” Lady Alicia retorted with the pertness of a spoilt child of Society. “Your Highness can command Sir Percy to give us a true - a true - account of how that wonderful Scarlet Pimpernel snatched Monsieur le Comte de Tournon-d’Agenay with Madame la Comtesse and their three children out of the clutches of those abominable murderers in Paris, and drove

them triumphantly to Boulogne, where they embarked on board an English ship and were ultimately safely landed in Dover. Sir Percy vows that he knows all the facts..."

"And so I do, dear lady," Sir Percy now put in, with just a soupçon of impatience in his pleasant voice, "but, as I've already had the privilege to tell you, the facts are hardly worth retailing."

"The facts, Sir Percy," commanded the imperious beauty, "or we'll all think you are jealous."

"As usual you would be right, dear lady," Sir Percy rejoined blandly; "are not ladies always right in their estimate of us poor men? I *am* jealous of that demmed, elusive personage who monopolizes the thoughts and the conversation of these galaxies of beauty who would otherwise devote themselves exclusively to us. What says Your Highness? Will you deign to ban for this one night at least every reference to that begad shadow?"

"Not till we've had the facts," Lady Alicia protested.

"The facts! The facts!" the ladies cried in an insistent chorus.

"You'll have to do it, Blakeney," His Highness declared.

"Unless Sir Andrew Ffoulkes would oblige us with the tale," Marguerite Blakeney said, turning suddenly from His Grace of Flint, in order to give her lord an enigmatic smile, "he too knows the facts, I believe, and is an excellent raconteur."

"God forbid!" Sir Percy Blakeney exclaimed, with mock concern. "Once you start Ffoulkes on one of his interminable stories... Moreover," he added seriously, "Ffoulkes always gets his facts wrong. He would tell you, for instance, that the demmed Pimpernel rescued those unfortunate Tournon-d'Agenays single-handed; now I happen to know for a fact that three of the

bravest English gentlemen the world has ever known did all the work whilst he merely..."

"Well?" Lady Alicia queried eagerly. "What did that noble and gallant Scarlet Pimpernel merely do?"

"He merely climbed to the box-seat of the chaise which was conveying the Comte de Tournon-d'Agenay and his family under escort to Paris. And the chaise had been held up by three of the bravest..."

"Never mind about three of the bravest English gentlemen at the moment," Lady Alicia broke in impatiently, "you shall sing their praises to us anon. But if you do not tell us the whole story at once, we'll call on Sir Andrew Ffoulkes without further hesitation. Your Highness...!" she pleaded once more.

"My fair one," His Highness rejoined with a laugh, "I think that we shall probably get a truer account of this latest prowess of the Scarlet Pimpernel from Sir Andrew Ffoulkes. It was a happy thought of Lady Blakeney's," he added with a knowing smile directed at Marguerite, "and I for one do command our friend Ffoulkes forthwith to satisfy our curiosity."

In vain did Sir Percy protest. In vain did he cast surreptitious yet reproachful glances at his royal friend and at his beautiful wife. His Highness had commanded and the ladies, curious and eager, were like beautiful peacocks, spreading out their multi-coloured silks and satins, so as to look their best whilst Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, an avowed admirer of the Scarlet Pimpernel, was being hunted for through the crowded reception-rooms, so that he might comply with His Highness' commands.

The latest prowess of the Scarlet Pimpernel! The magic words flitted on the perfume-laden atmosphere from room to room, and ladies broke off their flirtations, men forsook the gaming tables, for it was murmured that young Ffoulkes had first-hand information as to

how the popular English hero had snatched M. le Comte de Tournon-d'Agenay and all his family out of the clutches of those murdering revolutionaries over in Paris.

In a moment Sir Andrew Ffoulkes found himself the centre of attraction. His Royal Highness bade him sit beside him on the sofa, and all around him silks were rustling, fans were waving, whilst half a hundred pairs of bright eyes were fixed eagerly upon him. Sir Andrew caught a glance from Marguerite Blakeney's luminous eyes, and a smile of encouragement from her perfect lips. He was indeed in his element; a worshipper of his beloved chief, he was called upon to sing the praises of the man whom he admired and loved best in all the world. Had the bevy of beauties around him known that he was recounting his own prowess as well as that of his leader and friend, they could not have hung more eagerly on his lips.

In the hubbub attendant on settling down, so as to hear Sir Andrew's narrative, even the popular Sir Percy Blakeney was momentarily forgotten. The idol of London Society, he nevertheless had to be set aside for the moment in favour of the mysterious hero who, as elusive as a shadow, was still the chief topic of conversation in the *salons* of two continents.

The ladies would have it that Sir Percy was jealous of the popularity of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Certain it is that as soon as Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had started to obey His Highness' commands by embarking on his narrative, Sir Percy retired to the sheltered alcove at the further end of the room and stretched out his long limbs upon a downy sofa, and promptly went to sleep.

"Is it a fact, my dear Ffoulkes," His Highness had asked, "that the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel and his lieutenants actually held up the chaise in which the

Comte de Tournon-d'Agenay and his family were being conveyed to Paris?"

"An absolute fact, Your Highness," Sir Andrew Ffoulkes replied, while a long drawn-out "Ah!" of excitement went the round of the brilliant company. "I have the story from Madame la Comtesse herself. The Scarlet Pimpernel, in the company of three of his followers, all of them disguised as footpads, did at the pistol-point hold up the chaise which was conveying the prisoners under heavy escort from their château of Agenay, where they had been summarily arrested, to Paris. It occurred on the very crest of that steep bit of road which intersects the forest between Mézières and Epone. The church clock at Mantes had struck seven when the chaise had rattled over the cobblestones of that city, so it must have been past eight o'clock when the attack was made. Inside the vehicle M. de Tournon-d'Agenay with his wife, his young son and two daughters, sat huddled up, half-numbed with terror. They had no idea who had denounced them, and on what charge they had been arrested, but they knew well enough what fate awaited them in Paris. The revolutionary wolves are fairly on the warpath just now. Robespierre and his satellites feel that their power is on the wane. They are hitting out to right and left, preaching the theory that moderation and human kindness are but the sign of weakness and want of patriotism. To prove their love for France, lovely France, whose white robes are stained with the blood of her innocent children, and to show their zeal in her cause, they commit the most dastardly crimes."

"And those poor Tournon-d'Agenays?" one of the ladies asked with a sympathetic sigh.

"Madame la Comtesse assured me," Sir Andrew replied, "that her husband, and in fact all the family, had kept clear of politics during these, the worst times

of the revolution. Though all of them are devoted royalists, they kept all show of loyalty hidden in their hearts. Only one thing had they forgotten to do and that was to take down from the wall in Madame's boudoir a small miniature of their unfortunate Queen."

"And for this they were arrested?"

"They were innocent of everything else. In the early dawn after their summary arrest they were dragged out of their home and were being conveyed for trial to Paris, where their chances of coming out alive were about equal to those of a rabbit when chased by a terrier."

"And that was when the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel interposed?" Lady Alicia put in with a sigh. "He knew M. le Tournon-d'Agenay and his family were being taken to Paris."

"I believe he had had an inkling of what was in the wind, some time before the arrest. It is wonderful how closely he is always in touch with those who one day may need his help. But I believe that at the last moment plans had to be formulated in a hurry. Fortunately, chance on this occasion chose to favour those plans. Day had broken without a gleam of sunshine; a thin drizzle was falling, and there was a sharp head wind on, which fretted the horses and forced the driver to keep his head down, with his broad-brimmed hat pulled well over his eyes. Nature, as you see, was helping all she could. The whole thing would undoubtedly have been more difficult had the morning been clear and fine. As it was, one can imagine the surprise attack. Vague forms looming suddenly out of the mist, and the sharp report of a pistol, twice in quick succession. The horses, who, sweating and panting, had fallen into a foot-pace, dragging the heavy coach up the steep incline, through the squelching mud of the road, came to a violent and sudden halt on the very crest of

the hill at the first report. At the second they reared and plunged wildly. The shouts of the officer in charge of the escort did, as a matter of fact, so I understand, add to the confusion. The whole thing was, I am assured, a matter of a couple of minutes. It was surprise and swiftness that won the upper hand, for the rescue party was outnumbered three to one. Had there been the slightest hesitation, the slightest slackening of quick action, the attack would of a certainty have failed. But during those few minutes of confusion, and under cover of the mist and the vague greyness of the morning, the Scarlet Pimpernel and his followers, down on their knees in the squelching mud, were not merely fighting, you understand? No! They were chiefly engaged in cutting the saddle girths under the bellies of eight fidgety and plunging horses, and cracking their pistols in order to keep up the confusion. Not an easy task, you will admit, though 'tis a form of attack well-known in the East, so I understand. At any rate, those had been the chief's orders, and they had to be carried out. For my part, I imagine that superstitious terror had upset the nerves of that small squad of Revolutionary guard. Hemmed in by the thicket on either side of the road, the men had not sufficient elbow-room for a good fight. No man likes being attacked by a foe whom he cannot well see, and in the *mêlée* that ensued the men were hindered from using their somewhat clumsy sabres too freely for fear of injuring their comrades' mounts, if not their own; and all they could do was to strive to calm their horses and, through the din, to hear the words of command uttered by their lieutenant.

"And all the while," Sir Andrew went on, amidst breathless silence on the part of his hearers, "I pray you picture to yourselves the confusion; the cracking of pistols, the horses snorting, the lieutenant shouting, the prisoners screaming. Then, at a given moment, the

Scarlet Pimpernel scrambled up the box-seat of the chaise. As no doubt all of you ladies know by now, he was the most wonderful hand with horses. In one instant he had snatched the reins out of the bewildered Jehu's hands, and with word of mouth and click of tongue had soothed the poor beasts' nerves. And suddenly he gave the order: '*Ca va!*' which was the signal agreed on between himself and his followers. For them it meant a scramble for cover under the veil of mist and rain, whilst he, the gallant chief, whipped up the team which plunged down the road now at break-neck speed.

"Of course, the guard, and above all the lieutenant, grasped the situation soon enough, and immediately gave chase. But they were not trick-riders any of them, and with severed saddle-girths could not go far. Be that as it may, the Scarlet Pimpernel drove his team without a halt as far as Molay, where he had arranged for relays. Once well away from the immediate influence of Paris, with all its terrors and tyrannical measures, the means of escape for the prisoners became comparatively easy, thanks primarily to the indomitable pluck of their rescuer and also to a long purse. And that, ladies and noble lords," Sir Andrew concluded, "is all I can tell you of the latest exploit of our hero. The story is exactly as I had it from Madame la Comtesse de Tournon-d'Agenay, whose only sorrow, now that she and those she loves are safe at last in England, is that she never once caught a glimpse of her rescuer. He proved as elusive to her as to all of us, and we find ourselves repeating the delightful doggerel invented on that evasive personage by our prince of dandies, Sir Percy Blakeney."

"Marvellous!" "Enchanting!" "Palpitating!" "I nearly fainted with excitement, my dear!" These were some of the ejaculations uttered by dainty, well-rouged lips

while the men, more or less, were silent, pondering, vaguely longing to shake the enigmatical hero once at least by the hand.

His Highness was questioning Sir Andrew Ffoulkes more closely about certain details connected with the story. It was softly whispered, and not for the first time either, that His Highness could, and he would, solve the riddle of the identity of that mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel.

Dainty, sweet, and gracious as usual, Lady Ffoulkes, née Suzanne de Tournay, had edged up to Lady Blakeney, and the two young wives of such gallant men held one another for one instant closely by the hand, a token of mutual understanding, of pride and of happiness.

One or two of the ladies were trying to recall the exact words of the famous doggerel, which, it was averred, had on more than one occasion given those revolutionary wolves over in Paris a wholesome scare:

*“We seek him here,
We seek him there!”*

“How does it go on, my dear?” Lady Alicia sighed. “I vow I have forgotten.”

Then she looked in dainty puzzlement about her. “Sir Percy!” she exclaimed. “Where is the immortal author of the deathless rhyme?”

“Sir Percy! Where is Sir Percy?”

And the call was like the chirruping of birds on a sunny spring morning. It stilled all further chattering for the moment.

“Where is Sir Percy?” And silence alone echoed, “Where?”

Until a real material sound came in response. A long drawn-out sound that caused the ladies to snigger and

the men to laugh. It was the sound of a loud and prolonged snore. The groups of gay Society butterflies, men and women, parted disclosing the alcove at the further end of the room, where on the sofa, with handsome head resting against rose-coloured cushions, Sir Percy Blakeney was fast asleep.

2

But in Paris the news of the invasion of the ci-devant Comte et Comtesse de Tournon-d'Agenay with their son and two daughters was received in a very different spirit. Members of the Committees of Public Safety and of General Security, both official and unofficial, professional and amateur, were more irate than they cared to admit. Everyone was blaming everyone else, and the unfortunate lieutenant who had been in command of the escort was already on his way to Toulon, carrying orders to young Captain Bonaparte to put him in the thickest of the fight, so that he might, by especial bravery, redeem his tarnished honour.

Citoyen Lauzet, Chief of Section in the rural division of the department Seine et Oise, was most particularly worried by the incident which, it must be remembered, occurred in his district. The hand of the well-known English spy, known throughout France as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, could obviously be traced in the daring and impudent attack on an armed escort, and the subsequent driving of the chaise through three hundred kilometres of country where only shameless bribery and unparalleled audacity could have saved them from being traced, followed, and brought to justice. Citoyen Lauzet, a faithful servant of the State, felt that the situation was altogether beyond his capacity for dealing with; those English spies were so

different to the ordinary traitors and aristos whom one suspected, arrested and sent to the guillotine all in the turn of a hand. But how was one to deal with men whom one had never seen and was never likely to see, if rumour spoke correctly? Citoyen Lauzet scratched his bald pate and perspired freely in his endeavour to find a solution to his difficulty, but he found none.

It was in the midst of his perturbations that he bethought him of his friend Armand Chauvelin. Now Lauzet was quite aware of the fact that that same friend of his was under a cloud just now; that he had lost that high position he once held on the Committee of Public Safety, for reasons which had never been made public. Nevertheless, Lauzet had reasons for knowing that in the matter of tracking down spies Armand Chauvelin had few, if any, equals; and he also knew that for some unexplained cause Chauvelin would give several years of his life, and everything he possessed in the world, to get his long, thin fingers round the throat of that enigmatical personage known as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

And so in his difficulty, Citoyen Lauzet sent an urgent message to his friend Chauvelin to come at once to Mantes if possible - a request which delighted Chauvelin and with which he forthwith complied. And thus, three days after the sensational rescue of the Tournon-d'Agenay family, those two men - Lauzet and Chauvelin - both intent on the capture of one of the most bitter enemies of the revolutionary government of France, were sitting together in the office of the rural commissariat at Mantes. Lauzet had very quickly put his friend in possession of the facts connected with that impudent escapade, and Chauvelin, over an excellent glass of Fine, had put his undoubted gifts and subtle brain at the service of the official.

“Now listen to me, my dear Lauzet,” he said after a prolonged silence, during which the Chief of Section had been able to trace on his friend’s face the inner workings of a mastermind concentrated on one all-engrossing object. “Listen to me. I need not tell you, I think, that I have had some experience of that audacious Scarlet Pimpernel and his gang; popular rumour will have told you that. It will also have told you, no doubt, that in all my endeavours for the capture of that detestable spy, I was invariably foiled by persistent ill-luck on the one side, and the man’s boundless impudence on the other. It is because I did fail to lay the audacious rascal by the heels that you see me now, a disgraced and disappointed man, after half a lifetime devoted to the service of my country. But, in the lexicon of our glorious revolution, my good Lauzet, there is no such word as fail; and many there are who deem me lucky because my head still happens to be on my shoulders, after certain episodes at Calais, Boulogne, or Paris of which you have, I doubt not, heard more than one garbled version.”

Lauzet nodded his bald head in sympathy. He also passed a moist, hot finger around the turn of his cravat. This allusion to failure in connection with the desired capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel had started an unpleasant train of thought.

“I’ve only told you all this, my good Lauzet,” Chauvelin went on, with a sarcastic curl of his thin lips, “in order to make you realize the value which, in spite of my avowed failures, the Committee of Public Safety still set upon my advice. They have disgraced me, it is true, but only outwardly. And this they have only done in order to leave me a wider scope for my activities, particularly in connection with the tracking down of spies. As an actual member of the Committee I was obviously an important personage whose every

movement was in the public eye; now, as an outwardly obscure agent, I come and go in secret. I can lay plans. I can help and I can advise without arousing attention. Above all, I can remain the guiding head prepared to use such patriots as you are yourself, in the great cause which we all have at heart, the bringing to justice of a band of English spies, together with their elusive chief, the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Well spoken, friend Chauvelin," Citoyen Lauzet rejoined, with a tone of perplexity in his husky voice, "and, believe me, it was because I had a true inkling of what you've just said that, in my anxiety, I begged you to come and give me the benefit of your experience. Now tell me," he went on eagerly, "how do you advise me to proceed?"

Chauvelin, before he replied to this direct question, had another drink of Fine. Then he smacked his lips, set down his glass, and finally said with slow deliberation: "To begin with, my good Lauzet, try and bethink yourself of some family in your district whose position, shall we say, approaches most nearly to that of the *ci-devant* Tournon-d'Agenays before their arrest. That is to say, what you want is a family who at one time professed loyalty to tyrants and who keeps up some kind of cult - however inoffensive - for the Bourbon dynasty. That family should consist of at least one woman or, better still, one or two young children, or even an old man or an imbecile. Anything, in fact, to arouse specially that old-fashioned weakness which, for want of a better word, we will call sympathy. Now can you think of a family of that kind living anywhere in your district?"

Lauzet pondered for a moment or two.

"I don't for the moment," he said slowly, "but when I look through the files I dare say I might..."

“You must,” Chauvelin broke in decisively. “That kind of brood swarms in every district. All you have to do is to open your eyes. Anyway, having settled on a family, which will become our tool for the object we have in view, you will order a summary perquisition to be made by your *gendarmerie* in their house. You will cause the head of the family to be brought before you and you will interrogate him first, and detain him under suspicion. A second perquisition will then not come amiss; in fact you will have it bruited all over the neighbourhood that this particular family has been denounced as ‘suspect’ and that their arrest and subsequent trial in Paris, on a charge of treason, is only a matter of days. You understand?”

“I do,” Lauzet replied, in a tone that sounded decidedly perplexed and unconvinced. “But...”

“There is no but about it,” Chauvelin retorted brusquely. “You have asked my help and I give you my orders. All you have to do is to obey...and not to argue. Is that clear?”

“Quite, quite clear, my good friend,” Lauzet hastened to assure him. “In fact, I already have someone in my mind...”

“Which is all to the good,” Chauvelin broke in curtly. “On the balance of your zeal your reward will presently be weighed. Now listen further to me. Having followed my instructions as to perquisitions and so on, you will arrange as sensational an arrest of your family as you can. The more it is talked about in the neighbourhood the better for our purpose. You understand?”

“I do, I do,” Lauzet said eagerly. “I see your whole scheme now. You want to induce the English spies to exert themselves on behalf of this family, so that...”

“Exactly! Therefore the more sympathy you can evoke for them the better; a pretty girl, an invalid, a cripple; anything like that will rouse the so-called

chivalry of those spies. Then, having effected your arrest, you arrange to convey the family to Paris, and do so, apparently under rather feeble escort, say not more than four men. You will choose for your purpose the early dawn of a day when a thick mist lies over the land, or when a driving rain or tearing wind makes observation difficult.”

“But...”

“Not more than four men, remember,” Chauvelin reiterated with slow emphasis, “as *visible* escort.”

“I understand.”

“Instead of the usual chaise for conveying your prisoners to Paris, you will use the local diligence and, having disposed of the prisoners inside the vehicle, you will have it further packed with half a dozen or more picked men from your local *gendarmerie*, armed with pistols; and you will take a leaf out of the Scarlet Pimpernel’s own book, because that half-dozen picked men will be disguised as other aristos in distress, women, cripples, old men or what you will. You can then go even a little further in your trickery, and arrange a breakdown for your diligence in the loneliest bit of road in the forest of Mézières, and choose the twilight for your *mise-en-scène*. Then...”

But Lauzet could no longer restrain his enthusiasm.

“Oh, then! I see it all!” he exclaimed eagerly. “The band of English spies will have been on the watch for the diligence. They will attack it, thinking that it is but feebly guarded. But this time we shall be ready for them and...”

But suddenly his enthusiasm failed. His round, fat face lost its glow of excitement, and his small, round eyes stared in comic perplexity at his friend.

“But suppose,” he murmured, “they think better of it, and allow the diligence to proceed in peace. Or suppose

that they are engaged in their nefarious deeds in some other department of France.”

“Then,” Chauvelin rejoined coolly, “all you’d have to do would be to continue your journey to Paris and set your family down in the Conciergerie, ready to await trial and the inevitable guillotine. No harm will have been done. There’ll be a family of traitors less in your district, anyway, and you must begin the setting of your comedy all over again. Sooner or later, if you set your trap in the way I have outlined for you, that cursed Scarlet Pimpernel will fall into it. Sooner or later,” he reiterated emphatically, “I am sure of it. My only regret is that I didn’t think of this plan before now. It has been vaguely moving in my mind, ever since I heard of the escape of the Tournon-d’Agenays, and I wish to Heaven I had matured it then and there; we could have got that Scarlet Pimpernel as easily as possible. However, there’s nothing lost, and all I can do now, my friend, is to wish you success. If you succeed you are a made man. And you will succeed,” Chauvelin concluded, rising and holding out his hand to his colleague, “if you follow my instructions to the last letter.”

“You may be sure I’ll do that,” Lauzet said with earnest emphasis.

And the two sleuth-hounds shook hands on their project, and drank a glass of Fine to its success. But before Chauvelin finally took leave of his friend, he turned to him with renewed earnestness and solemnity.

“And above all, my good Lauzet,” he said slowly, “remember that in all this your watchword must be: ‘Silence and discretion’. Breathe but a word of your intentions to a living soul, and you are bound to fail. The English spies have their spies who serve them well. They have a long purse which will alternatively purchase help from their friends and treachery from ours. Breathe not of your project to any living soul,

friend Lauzet, or your head will pay the price of your indiscretion.”

Lauzet was only too ready to give the required promise, and the two friends then parted on a note of mutual confidence and esteem.

3

A fortnight later the whole of the little city of Moisson was in a ferment owing to the arrest of one of its most respected tradesmen. Citizen Desèze who, anyone would have thought, was absolutely above suspicion, had been put to the indignity of a summary perquisition in his house. He had protested – as was only natural under the circumstances – and in consequence of this very moderate protest he had been dragged before the Chief of Section at Mantes and had had to submit to a most rigorous and most humiliating interrogatory. Nay more! He was detained for two whole days, while his invalid wife and pretty little daughter were wellnigh distraught with anxiety.

Then on the top of that, there followed another perquisition: just as if anyone could suspect the Desèze family of treason against their country. They certainly had never been very hotly in favour of the extreme measures taken by the revolutionary government – such as the execution of the erstwhile King and of Marie-Antoinette, ci-devant Queen of France – but Citizen Desèze had always abstained from politics. He had been wont to say that God, not men, ruled the destinies of countries, and that no doubt what was happening these days in France occurred by the will of God, or they could never occur at all. He for his part was content to sell good vintage wines from Macon or Nuits, just as his father had done before him, and his

grandfather before that, for the house of Desèze, wine merchants of Moisson in the department of Seine et Oise, had been established for three generations and more, and had always been a pattern of commercial integrity and lofty patriotism.

And now these perquisitions! these detentions! and finally the arrest, not only of good Citizen Desèze himself, but of his invalid wife and pretty little daughter. If one dared, one would protest, call a meeting, anything. It was almost unbelievable, so unexpected was it. What had the Desèze family done? No one knew. Inquiries at the commissariat of the section elicited no information. There were vague rumours that the poor invalid citizeness had always remained very pious. She had been taught piety by her parents, no doubt, and had been brought up in a convent school besides. But what would you? Piety was reckoned a sin these days, and who would dare protest?

The servants at the substantial house inhabited by the Desèze family were speechless with tears. The perquisitions, and then the arrest, had come as a thunderbolt. And now they were all under orders to quit the house, for it would be shut and ultimately sold for the benefit of the State. Oh, these were terrible times! The same tragedy had occurred not far away from Moisson in the case of the Tournon-d'Agenays, whom no one was allowed to call Comte and Comtesse these days. They too had been summarily arrested, and were being dragged to Paris for their trial when, by some unforeseen miracle, they had been rescued and conveyed in safety to England. No one knew how, nor who the gallant rescuers were; but rumours were rife and some were very wild. The superstitious believed in direct Divine interference, though they dared not say this openly; but in their hearts they prayed that God

might interfere in the same way on behalf of good Citizen Desèze and his family.

Poor Hector Desèze himself had not much hope on that score. He was a pious man, it is true, but his piety consisted in resignation to the will of God. Nor would he have cared much if God had only chosen to strike at him; it was the fate of his invalid wife that wrung his heart, and the future of his young daughter that terrified him. He had known the Citizen Commissary practically all his life. Lauzet was not a bad man, really. Perhaps he had got his head rather turned through his rapid accession from his original situation as packer in the Desèze house of business, with a bed underneath the counter in the back shop, to that of Chief of Section in the rural division of the department of Seine et Oise, with an official residence in Mantes, a highly important post, considering its proximity to Paris. But all the same Lauzet was not a bad man, and must have kept some gratitude in his heart for all the kindness shown to him by the Desèze family when he was a lad in their employ.

But in spite of every appeal Lauzet remained stony-hearted. "If I did anything for you, Citizen, on my own responsibility," he said to Desèze during the course of an interrogatory, "I should not only lose my position, but probably my head into the bargain. I have no ill-will towards you, but I am not prepared to take such a risk on your behalf."

"But my poor wife," Desèze protested, putting his pride in his pocket and stooping to appeal to the man who had once been a menial in his pay. "She is almost bedridden now and has not long to live. Could you not exercise some benevolent authority for her sake?"

Lauzet shook his head. "Impossible," he said decisively.

"And my daughter," moaned the distracted father, "my little Madeleine is not yet thirteen. What will be her

fate? My God, Lauzet! Have you no bowels of compassion ? Have not you got a daughter of your own?"

"I have," Lauzet retorted curtly, "and therefore I have taken special care to keep on the right side of the government and never to express an opinion on anything that is done for the good of the State. And I should advise you, Citizen Desèze, to do likewise, so that you may earn for yourself and your family some measure of mercy for your transgressions."

And with this grandiloquent phrase, Lauzet indicated that the interview was now at an end. He also ordered the prisoner to be taken back to Moisson, and there to be kept in the cells until the following day, when arrangements would be complete for conveying the Desèze family under escort to Paris.

4

The following day was market-day in Moisson, and at first Lauzet had been doubtful whether it would not be best to wait another twenty-four hours before carrying through his friend Chauvelin's project. The dawn, however, broke with ideal conditions for it: a leaden sky, a tearing wind, and torrents of rain, alternating with a thin drizzle. On the whole, Nature had ranged herself on the side of all those who worked their nefarious deeds under cover of semi-darkness. Lauzet, gazing out on the mournful, autumnal aspect of weather and sky, felt that if the Scarlet Pimpernel did indeed meditate mischief he would choose such a day as this.

Thus it was that in the early dawn of this market-day the citizens of Moisson had a sad scene to witness. Soon after seven o'clock a small crowd collected round

the big old-fashioned diligence which had drawn up outside the Desèze house in the Rue des Pipots. To right and left of the vehicle were soldiers on horseback, two on each side, mounting guard, and the man who held the reins was also in the uniform of the rural *gendarmerie*. Everyone in the city knew this man. Charles-Marie was his name, and he had begun life as a baker's assistant - a weak, anaemic-looking youth, who had been sent out of the Army because he was no use as a fighting man, so timorous and slow-witted was he.

Lately he had obtained a position as ostler at the posting inn in Mantes because, it seems, he did know something about horses; but why he should have been chosen to drive the diligence to Paris today, nobody could conjecture. He must have had a friend in high places to be so exalted above his capabilities. Anyway, there he sat on the box, looking neither to right nor left, but straight between the ears of his off-leader, and not a word would he say in response to the questions, the jeers and the taunts which came to him from his friends in the crowd.

Soon, however, excitement centred round the *portecochère* of the Desèze house. It had suddenly been thrown wide open, and in the doorway appeared poor Citizeness Desèze escorted by two officers of *gendarmerie*, and closely followed by Madeleine, her little daughter, also under guard. It was pitiable to see the poor invalid, who could scarcely stand on her half-paralysed limbs, thus being dragged away from the home where she had lived as a happy wife and mother for close on a quarter of a century. A murmur of sympathy for the two women and of execration for the brutality of this arrest rose from the crowd. But it was quickly enough suppressed. Who would dare to murmur openly these days, when spies of the revolutionary government lurked at every street corner?

Hostile glances, however, were shot at Citizen Lauzet, who had come over that morning from Mantes and now stood by, somewhat detached from the crowd, watching the proceedings in the company of his friend Chauvelin.

“Is this in accordance with your idea?” he asked in a whisper when, presently, Chauvelin completed a quick and comprehensive examination of the diligence.

Chauvelin’s only reply was a curt and peremptory “Hush”, and a furtive glance about him to see that there were no likely eavesdroppers within hearing. He knew from experience that the famous League of the Scarlet Pimpernel also had spies lurking in every corner; spies not so numerous perhaps as those in the pay of the Committee of Public Safety, but a great deal more astute, and he also knew – none better – that the case of the Desèze family was just one that would appeal to the sporting or chivalrous instincts of that band of English adventurers.

But he was satisfied with the *mise-en-scène* organized, under his supervision, by Chief of Section Lauzet. Prominence had been given all over the department to the arrest of the Desèze family, to the worth and integrity of its head, the sickness of the wife, the charm and modesty of the daughter. Half a dozen picked men of the *gendarmerie* of Mantes, armed to the teeth, would join the diligence at Mantes, but they would ride inside disguised as passengers, whilst it was left for anybody to see that the coach was travelling under a feeble guard of four men, an officer and three troopers, and was driven by a lout who was known to have no fight in him.

Lauzet had been inspired when he chose this day; a typical day in late October, with that pitiless rain lashed by a south-easterly wind that would score the roads and fret the horses. Down in the forest, the diligence would

have to go almost at foot-pace, for the outline of every tree on the roadside would be blurred, and objects would loom like ghosts out of the mist.

Yes! the scene was well set for the comedy invented by Chauvelin for the capture of his arch enemy. It only remained for the principal actors to play their rôles to his satisfaction. Already the female prisoners had been hustled into the diligence amidst the sighs and tears of their sympathizers in the crowd. Poor Madame Desèze had sunk half-fainting with exhaustion into the arms of her young daughter, and the two women sat huddled in the extreme corner of the vehicle, more dead than alive. And now, amidst much jolting and creaking, some shouting and cursing, too, with cracking of whip and jingling of spurs, the awkward, lumbering diligence was started on its way. Some two hundred metres further on, it came to a halt once more, outside the commissariat, and here the male prisoner, Citizen Desèze himself, was made to join his family in the airless, creaking vehicle. Resigned to his own fate, he set himself the task of making the painful journey as endurable as may be to his invalid wife. Hardly realizing yet the extent of their misfortune and the imminence of their doom, the three victims of Lauzet's cupidity and Chauvelin's vengeance suffered their martyrdom in silence and with resignation.

The final start from Moisson had been made at eight o'clock. By this time, the small city was filling with the neighbouring farmers and drovers, with their cattle and their carts and vehicles of every kind, all tending either to the Place du Marché, or to the various taverns for refreshment. Lauzet, accompanied by Chauvelin, had ridden back to Mantes. Just before nine o'clock the diligence rattled over the cobblestones of that city, and a halt was called at the posting inn. It was part of the programme to spend some hours in Mantes, where the

extra men of the *gendarmérie* would be picked up, and only to make a fresh start when the shades of evening were beginning to draw in. It was not to be supposed that the English brigands would launch their attack in broad daylight, and the weather did not look as if it were going to mend.

Chauvelin, of course, was there, seeing to every arrangement, with his friend Lauzet close at his elbow. He had himself picked out the six men of the *gendarmérie* who were to ride in disguise inside the diligence; he had inspected their disguises, added an artistic or realistic touch here and there before he pronounced them to be good.

Finally he turned to the young officer who was in command of the party.

“Now,” he said very earnestly to him, “you know just what you are going to do ? You realize the importance of the mission which is being entrusted to you?”

The officer nodded in reply. He was a young man and ambitious. The task which had been allotted to him had fired his enthusiasm. Indeed, in these days, the capture of that elusive English spy known as the Scarlet Pimpernel was a goal for which every young officer of *gendarmérie* was wont to strive; not only because of the substantial monetary reward in prospect, but because of the glory attached to the destruction of so bitter an enemy of revolutionary France.

“I will tell you, Citizen,” the young man said to Chauvelin, “how I have finally laid my plans, and you shall tell me if you approve. About a kilometre and half before the road emerges out of the wood, the ground rises gradually, and there are one or two sharp bends in the road until it reaches the crest of the hill. That part of the forest is very lonely, and at a point just before the ground begins to rise I intend to push my mount on for a metre or two ahead of the men, and pretend to