The Way of the Scarlet Pimpernel

Baroness Orczy

More daring adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel

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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.

One

At an angle of the Rue de la Monnaie where it is intersected by the narrow Passage des Fèves there stood at this time a large three-storied house, which exuded an atmosphere of past luxury and grandeur. Money had obviously been lavished on its decoration: the balconies were ornamented with elaborately carved balustrades, and a number of legendary personages and pagan deities reclined in more or less graceful attitudes in the spandrels round the arches of the windows and of the monumental doorway. The house had once been the home of a rich Austrian banker who had shown the country a clean pair of heels as soon as he felt the first gust of the revolutionary storm blowing across the Rue de la Monnaie. That was early in ’89.

After that the mansion stood empty for a couple of years. Then, when the housing shortage became acute in Paris, the revolutionary government took possession of the building, erected partition walls in the great reception and ballrooms, turning them into small apartments and offices which it let to poor tenants and people in a small way of business. A *concierge* was put in charge. But during those two years for some reason or other the house had fallen into premature and rapid decay. Within a very few months an air of mustiness began to hang over the once palatial residence of the rich foreign financier. When he departed, bag and baggage, taking with him his family and his servants, his pictures and his furniture, it almost seemed as if he had left behind him an eerie trail of ghosts, who took to wandering in and out of the deserted rooms and up and down the monumental staircase, scattering an odour of

dry-rot and mildew in their wake. And although, after a time, the lower floors were all let as offices to business people, and several families elected to drag out their more or less miserable lives in the apartments up above, that air of emptiness and of decay never ceased to hang about the building, and its walls never lost their musty smell of damp mortar and mildew.

A certain amount of life did, of course, go on inside the house. People came and went about their usual avocations: in one compartment a child was born, a wedding feast was held in another, old women gossiped and young men courted: but they did all this in a silent and furtive manner, as if afraid of rousing dormant echoes; voices were never raised above a whisper, laughter never rang along the corridors, nor did light feet run pattering up and down the stairs.

Far be it from any searcher after truth to suggest that this atmosphere of silence and of gloom was peculiar to the house in the Rue de la Monnaie. Times were getting hard all over France – very hard for most people, and hard times whenever they occur give rise to great silences and engender the desire for solitude. In Paris all the necessities of life – soap, sugar, milk – were not only very dear but difficult to get. Luxuries of the past were unobtainable save to those who, by inflammatory speeches, had fanned the passions of the ignorant and the needy, with promises of happiness and equality for all. Three years of this social upheaval and of the rule of the proletariat had brought throughout the country more misery than happiness. True! the rich – a good many of them – had been dragged down to poverty or exile, but the poor were more needy than they had been before. To see the King dispossessed of his throne, and the nobles and bourgeois either fleeing the country or brought to penury might satisfy a desire for retribution, but it did not warm the body in winter, feed

the hungry or clothe the naked. The only equality that this glorious Revolution had brought about was that of wretchedness, and an ever-present dread of denunciation and of death. That is what people murmured in the privacy of their homes, but did not dare to speak of openly. No one dared speak openly these days, for there was always the fear that spies might be lurking about, that accusations of treason would follow, with their inevitable consequences of summary trial and the guillotine.

And so the women and the children suffered in silence, and the men suffered because they could do nothing to alleviate the misery of those they cared for. Some there were lucky enough to have got out of this hell upon earth, who had shaken the dust of their unfortunate country from their shoes in the early days of the Revolution, and had sought – if not happiness, at any rate peace and contentment in other lands. But there were countless others who had ties that bound them indissolubly to France – their profession, their business, or family ties – they could not go away: they were forced to remain in their native land and to watch hunger, penury and disease stalk the countryside, whilst the authors of all this misfortune lived a life of ease in their luxurious homes, sat round their well-filled tables, ate and drank their fill and spent their leisure hours in spouting of class-hatred and of their own patriotism and selflessness. The restaurants of the Rue St Honoré were thronged with merry-makers night after night. The members of the proletarian government sat in the most expensive seats at the Opéra and the Comédie Française and drove in their barouches to the Bois, while flaunting their democratic ideals by attending the sittings of the National Assembly stockingless and in ragged shirts and breeches. Danton kept open house at d’Arcy-sur-Aube: St Just and

Desmoulins wore jabots of Mechlin lace, and coats of the finest English cloth: Chabot had a sumptuous apartment in the Rue d'Anjou. They saw to it, these men, that privations and anxiety did not come nigh them. Privations were for the rabble, who was used to them, and for aristos and bourgeois, who had never known the meaning of want: but for them, who had hoisted the flag of Equality and Fraternity, who had freed the people of France from the tyranny of Kings and nobles, for them luxury had become a right, especially if it could be got at the expense of those who had enjoyed it in the past.

In this year 1792 Maître Bastien de Croissy rented a small set of offices in the three-storied house in the Rue de la Monnaie. He was at this time verging on middle age, with hair just beginning to turn grey, and still an exceptionally handsome man, despite the lines of care and anxiety round his sensitive mouth and the settled look of melancholy in his deep-set, penetrating eyes. Bastien de Croissy had been at one time one of the most successful and most respected members of the Paris bar. He had reckoned royal personages among his clients. Men and women, distinguished in art, politics or literature, had waited on him at his sumptuous office on the Quai de la Mégisserie. Rich, good-looking, well-born, the young advocate had been fêted and courted wherever he went: the King entrusted him with important financial transactions: the duc d'Ayen was his most intimate friend: the Princesse de Lamballe was godmother to his boy, Charles-Léon. His marriage to Louise de Vandeleur, the only daughter of the distinguished general, had been one of the social events of that season in Paris. He had been a great man, a favourite of fortune until the Revolution deprived him of his patrimony and of his income. The

proletarian government laid ruthless hands on the former, by forcing him to farm out his lands to tenants who refused to pay him any rent. His income in a couple of years dwindled down to nothing. Most of his former clients had emigrated, all of them were now too poor to need legal or financial advice.

Maître de Croissy was forced presently to give up his magnificent house and sumptuous offices on the Quai. He installed his wife and child in a cheap apartment in the Rue Picpus, and carried on what legal business came his way in a set of rooms which had once been the private apartments of the Austrian banker's valet. Thither he trudged on foot every morning, whatever the weather, and here he interviewed needy bourgeois, groaning under taxation, or out-at-elbows tradesmen on the verge of bankruptcy. He was no longer Maître de Croissy, only plain Citizen Croissy, thankful that men like Chabot or Bazire reposed confidence in him, or that the great Danton deigned to put some legal business in his way. Where six clerks had scarcely been sufficient to aid him in getting through the work of the day, he had only one now – the faithful Reversac – who had obstinately refused to take his *congé*, when all the others were dismissed.

"You would not throw me out into the street to starve, would you, Maître?" had been the young man's earnest plea.

"But you can find other work, Maurice," de Croissy had argued, not without reason, for Maurice Reversac was a fully qualified lawyer, he was young and active and of a surety he could always have made a living for himself. "And I cannot afford to pay you an adequate salary."

"Give me board and lodging, Maître," Reversac had entreated with obstinacy: "I want nothing else. I have a

few louis put by: my clothes will last me three or four years, and by that time…”

“Yes! by that time…!” Maître de Croissy sighed. He had been hopeful once that sanity would return presently to the people of France, that this era of chaos and cruelty, of persecution and oppression, could not possibly last. But of late he had become more and more despondent, more and more hopeless. When Frenchmen, after having deposed their anointed King, began to talk of putting him on his trial like a common criminal, it must mean that they had become possessed of the demon of insanity, a tenacious demon who would not easily be exorcised.

But Maurice Reversac got his way. He had board and lodging in the apartment of the Rue Picpus, and in the mornings, whatever the weather, he trudged over to the Rue de la Monnaie and aired, dusted and swept the dingy office of the great advocate. In the evenings the two men would almost invariably walk back together to the Rue Picpus. The cheap, exiguous apartment meant home for both of them, and in it they found what measure of happiness their own hearts helped them to attain. For Bastien de Croissy happiness meant home-life, his love for his wife and child. For Maurice Reversac it meant living under the same roof with Josette, seeing her every day, walking with her in the evenings under the chestnut trees of Cour de la Reine.

A little higher up the narrow Passage des Fèves there stood at this same time a small eating-house, frequented chiefly by the mechanics of the Government workshops close by. It bore the sign: “Aux Trois Singes.” Two steps down from the street level gave access to it through a narrow doorway. Food and drink were as cheap here as anywhere, and the landlord, a man named Furet, had the great merit of being rather deaf,

and having an impediment in his speech. Added to this there was the fact that he had never learned to read or write. These three attributes made of Furet an ideal landlord in a place where men with empty bellies and empty pockets were wont to let themselves go in the matter of grumbling at the present state of affairs, and to go sometimes to the length of pointing a finger of scorn at the device “Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité” which by order of the revolutionary government was emblazoned outside and in every building to which the public had access.

Furet being deaf could not spy: being mute he could not denounce. Figuratively speaking men loosened their belts when they sat at one of the trestle tables inside the Cabaret des Trois Singes, sipped their sour wine and munched their meal of stale bread and boiled beans. They loosened their belts and talked of the slave-driving that went on in the Government workshops, the tyranny of the overseers, the ever-increasing cost of living, and the paucity of their wages, certain that Furet neither heard what they said nor would be able to repeat the little that he heard.

Inside the cabaret there were two tables that were considered privileged. They were not tables properly speaking, but just empty wine-casks, standing on end, each in a recess to right and left of the narrow doorway. A couple of three-legged stools accommodated two customers and two only in each recess, and those who wished to avail themselves of the privilege of sitting there were expected to order a bottle of Furet’s best wine. This was one of those unwritten laws which no frequenter of the Three Monkeys ever thought of ignoring. Furet, though an ideal landlord in so many respects, could turn nasty when he chose.

On a sultry evening in the late August of ’92, two men were sitting in one of these privileged recesses in

the Cabaret des Trois Singes. They had talked earnestly for the past hour, always sinking their voices to a whisper. A bottle of Citizen Furet's best wine stood on the cask between them, but though they had been in the place for over an hour, the bottle was still more than half full. They seemed too deeply engrossed in conversation to waste time in drink.

One of the men was short and thick-set with dark hair and marked Levantine features. He spoke French fluently but with a throaty accent which betrayed his German origin. Whenever he wished to emphasise a point he struck the top of the wine-stained cask with the palm of his fleshy hand.

The other man was Bastien de Croissy. Earlier in the day he had received an anonymous message requesting a private meeting in the Cabaret des Trois Singes. The matter, the message averred, concerned the welfare of France and the safety of the King. Bastien was no coward, and the wording of the message was a sure passport to his confidence. He sent Maurice Reversac home early and kept the mysterious tryst.

His anonymous correspondent introduced himself as a representative of Baron de Batz, well known to Bastien as the agent of the Austrian Government and confidant of the Emperor, whose intrigues and schemes for the overthrow of the revolutionary government of France had been as daring in conception as they were futile in execution.

"But this time," the man had declared with complete self-assurance, "with your help, cher maître, we are bound to succeed."

And he had elaborated the plan conceived in Vienna by de Batz. A wonderful plan! Neither more nor less than bribing with Austrian gold some of the more venal members of their own party, and the restoration of the monarchy.

Bastien de Croissy was sceptical. He did not believe that any of the more influential Terrorists would risk their necks in so daring an intrigue… Other ways – surer ways – ought to be found, and found quickly, for the King's life was indeed in peril: not only the King's but the Queen's and the lives of all the Royal family. But the Austrian agent was obstinate.

"It is from inside the National Convention that M. le Baron wants help. That he must have. If he has the co-operation of half a dozen members of the Executive, he can do the rest, and guarantee success."

Then, as de Croissy still appeared to hesitate, he laid his fleshy hand on the advocate's arm.

"Voyons, cher maître," he said, "you have the overthrow of this abominable Government just as much at heart as M. le Baron, and we none of us question your loyalty to the dynasty."

"It is not want of loyalty," de Croissy retorted hotly, "that makes me hesitate."

"What then?"

"Prudence! lest by a false move we aggravate the peril of our King."

The other shrugged.

"Well! of course," he said, "we reckon that you, cher maître, know the men with whom we wish to deal."

"Yes!" Bastien admitted, "I certainly do."

"They are venal?"

"Yes!"

"Greedy?"

"Yes!"

"Ambitious?"

"For their own pockets, yes."

"Well then?"

There was a pause. A murmur of conversation was going on all round. Some of Furet's customers were munching noisily or drinking with a gurgling sound,

others were knocking dominoes about. There was no fear of eavesdropping in this dark and secluded recess where two men were discussing the destinies of France. One was the emissary of a foreign Power, the other an ardent royalist. Both had the same object in view: to save the King and his family from death, and to overthrow a government of assassins, who contemplated adding the crime of regicide to their many malefactions.

“M. le Baron,” the foreign agent resumed with increased persuasiveness after a slight pause, “I need not tell you what is their provenance. Our Emperor is not going to see his sister at the mercy of a horde of assassins. M. le Baron is in his council: he will pay twenty thousand louis each to any dozen men who will lend him a hand in this affair.”

“A dozen?” de Croissy exclaimed, then added with disheartened sigh: “Where to find them!”

“We are looking to you, cher maître.”

“I have no influence. Not now.”

“But you know the right men,” the agent argued, and added significantly: “You have been watched, you know.”

“I guessed.”

“We know that you have business relations with members of the Convention who can be very useful to us.”

“Which of them had you thought of?”

“Well! there is Chabot, for instance: the unfrocked friar.”

“God in Heaven!” de Croissy exclaimed: “what a tool.”

“The end will justify the means, my friend,” the other retorted dryly. Then he added: “And Chabot’s brother-in-law Bazire.”

“Both these men,” de Croissy admitted, “would sell their souls, if they possessed one.”

“Then there’s Fabre d’Eglantine, Danton’s friend.”

“You are well informed.”

“And what about Danton himself?”

The Austrian leaned over the table, eager, excited, conscious that the Frenchman was wavering. Clearly de Croissy’s scepticism was on the point of giving way before the other’s enthusiasm and certainty of success. It was such a wonderful vista that was being unfolded before him. France free from the tyranny of agitation! the King restored to his throne! the country once more happy and prosperous under a stable government as ordained by God! So thought de Croissy as he lent a more and more willing ear to the projects of de Batz. He himself mentioned several names of men who might prove useful in the scheme; names of men who might be willing to betray their party for Austrian gold. There were a good many of these: agitators who were corrupt and venal, who had incited the needy and the ignorant to all kinds of barbarous deeds, not from any striving after a humanitarian ideal, but for what they themselves could get out of the social upheaval and its attendant chaos.

“If I lend a hand in your scheme,” de Croissy said presently with earnest emphasis, “it must be understood that their first aim is the restoration of our King to his throne.”

“Of course, cher maître, of course,” the other asserted equally forcibly. “Surely you can believe in M. le Baron’s disinterested motives.

“What we’ll have to do,” he continued eagerly, “will be to promise the men whom you will have chosen for the purpose, a certain sum of money, to be paid to them as soon as all the members of the Royal family are safely out of France…we don’t want one of the

Royal Princesses to be detained as hostage, do we?… Then we can promise them a further and larger sum to be paid when their Majesties make their state re-entry into their capital."

There was no doubt by now that Maître de Croissy's enthusiasm was fully aroused. He was one of those men for whom dynasty and the right of Kings amounted to a religion. For him, all that he had suffered in the past in the way of privations and loss of wealth and prestige was as nothing compared with the horror which he felt at sight of the humiliations which miscreants had imposed upon his King. To save the King! to bring him back triumphant to the throne of his forbears, were thoughts and hopes that filled Bastien de Croissy's soul with intense excitement. It was only with half an ear that he listened to the foreign emissary's further scheme: the ultimate undoing of that herd of assassins. He did not care what happened once the great goal was attained. Let those corrupt knaves of whom the Austrian Emperor stood in need thrive and batten on their own villainy, Bastien de Croissy did not care.

"You see the idea, do you not, cher maître?" the emissary was saying.

"Yes! oh yes!" Bastien murmured vaguely.

"Get as much letter-writing as you can out of the blackguards. Let us have as much written proof of their venality as possible. Then if ever these jackals rear their heads again, we can proclaim their turpitude before the entire world, discredit them before their ignorant dupes, and see them suffer humiliation and die the shameful death which they had planned for their King."

The meeting between the two men lasted well into the night. In the dingy apartment of the Rue Picpus Louise de Croissy sat up, waiting anxiously for her husband.

Maurice Reversac, whom she questioned repeatedly, could tell her nothing of Maître de Croissy's whereabouts, beyond the fact that he was keeping a business appointment, made by a new client who desired to remain anonymous. When Bastien finally came home, he looked tired, but singularly excited. Never since the first dark days of the Revolution three years ago had Louise seen him with such flaming eyes, or heard such cheerful, not to say optimistic words from his lips. But he said nothing to her about his interview with the agent of Baron de Batz, he only talked of the brighter outlook in the future. God, he said, would soon tire of the wickedness of men: the present terrible conditions could not possibly last. The King would soon come into his own again.

Louise was quickly infused with some of his enthusiasm, but she did not worry him with questions. Hers was one of those easy-going dispositions that are willing to accept things as they come without probing into the whys and wherefores of events. She had a profound admiration for and deep trust in her clever husband: he appeared hopeful for the future – more hopeful than he had been for a long time, and that was enough for Louise. It was only to the faithful Maurice Reversac that de Croissy spoke of his interview with the Austrian emissary, and the young man tried very hard to show some enthusiasm over the scheme, and to share his employer's optimism and hopes for the future. Maurice Reversac, though painstaking and a very capable lawyer, was not exactly brilliant: against that his love for his employer and his employer's family was so genuine and so great that it gave him what amounted to intuition, almost a foreknowledge of any change, good or evil, that destiny had in store for them. And as he listened to Maître de Croissy's earnest talk, he felt a strange foreboding that all would not be well

with this scheme: that somehow or other it would lead to disaster, and all the while that he sat at his desk that day copying the letters which the advocate had dictated to him – letters which were in the nature of tentacles, stretched out to catch a set of knaves – he felt an overwhelming temptation to throw himself at his employer’s feet and beg him not to sully his hands by contact with this foreign intrigue.

But the temptation had to be resisted. Bastien de Croissy was not the type of man who could be swayed from his purpose by the vapourings of his young clerk, however devoted he might be. And so the letters were written – half a score in all – requests by Citizen Croissy of the Paris bar for private interviews with various influential members of the Convention on matters of urgency to the State.

Two

More than a year had gone by since then, and Bastien de Croissy had seen all his fondly cherished hopes turn to despair one by one. There had been no break in the dark clouds of chaos and misery that enveloped the beautiful land of France. Indeed they had gathered, darker and more stormy than before. And now had come what appeared to be the darkest days of all – the autumn of 1793. The King, condemned to death by a majority of 48 in an Assembly of over 700 members, had paid with his life for all the errors, the weaknesses, the misunderstandings of the past: the unfortunate Queen, separated from her children and from all those she cared for, accused of the vilest crimes that distorted minds could invent, was awaiting trial and inevitable death.

The various political parties – the factions and the clubs – were vying with one another in ruthlessness and cruelty. Danton the lion and Robespierre the jackal were at one another's throats; it still meant the mere spin of a coin as to which would succeed in destroying the other. The houses of detention were filled to overflowing, while the guillotine did its grim work day by day, hour by hour, without distinction of rank or sex, or of age. The Law of the Suspect had just been passed, and it was no longer necessary for an unfortunate individual to do or say anything that the Committee of Public Safety might deem counter-revolutionary, it was sufficient to be suspected of such tendencies for denunciation to follow, then arrest and finally death with but the mockery of a trial, without pleading or defence. And while the Terrorists were intent on

destroying one another the country was threatened by foes without and within. Famine and disease stalked in the wake of persecution. The countryside was devastated, there were not enough hands left to till the ground and the cities were a prey to epidemics. On the frontier the victorious allied armies were advancing on the sacred soil of France. The English were pouring in from Belgium, the Prussians came across the Rhine, the Spaniards crossed the gorges of the Pyrenees, whilst the torch of civil war was blazing anew in La Vendée.

Danton's cry: "To arms!" and "*La Patrie* is in danger!" resounded from end to end of the land. It echoed through the deserted cities and over the barren fields, while three hundred thousand "Soldiers of Liberty" marched to the frontiers, ill-clothed, ill-shod, ill-fed, to drive back the foreign invader from the gates of France. An epic, what? Worthy of a holier cause.

Those who were left behind, who were old, or weak, or indispensable, had to bear their share in the defence of *La Patrie*. France was transformed into an immense camp of fighters and workers. The women sewed shirts and knitted socks, salted meat and stitched breeches, and looked after their children and their homes as best they could. France came first, the home was a bad second.

It was then that little Charles-Léon fell ill. That was the beginning of the tragedy. He had always been delicate, which was not to be wondered at, seeing that he was born during the days immediately preceding the Revolution, at the time when the entire world, such as Louise de Croissy had known it, was crumbling to dust at her feet. She never thought he would live, the dear, puny mite, the precious son, whom she and Bastien had longed for, prayed for, hoped for for five years. But he was growing sturdier year by year until this awful winter

when food became scarce and poor, and milk was almost unobtainable.

Kind old Doctor Larousse said it was nothing serious, but the child must have change of air. Paris was too unhealthy these days for delicate children. Change of air? Heavens above! how was it to be got? Louise questioned old Citizen Larousse: “Can you get me a permit, doctor? We still have a small house in the Isère district, not far from Grenoble. I could take my boy there.”

“Yes. I can get you a permit for the child – at least, I think so – under the circumstances.”

“And one for me?”

“Yes, one for you – to last a week.”

“How do you mean to last a week?”

“Well, you can get the diligence to Grenoble. It takes a couple of days. Then you can stay in your house, say, forty-eight hours to see the child installed. Two days to come back by diligence…”

“But I couldn’t come back.”

“I am afraid you’ll have to. No one is allowed to be absent from permanent domicile more than seven days. You know that, Citizeness, surely.”

“But I couldn’t leave Charles-Léon.”

“Why not? There is not very much the matter with him. And country air…”

Louise was losing her patience. How obtuse men are, even the best of them!

“But there is no one over there to look after him,” she argued.

“Surely a respectable woman from the village would…”

This time she felt her temper rising. “And you suppose that I would leave this sick baby in the care of a stranger?”

“Haven’t you a relation who would look after him? Mother? Sister?”

“My mother is dead. I have no sisters. Nor would I leave Charles-Léon in anyone’s care but mine.”

The doctor shrugged. He was very kind, but he had seen this sort of thing so often lately, and he was powerless to help.

“I am afraid…” he said.

“Citizen Larousse,” Louise broke in firmly, “you must give me a certificate that my child is too ill to be separated from his mother.”

“Impossible, Citizeness.”

“Won’t you try?”

“I have tried – for others – often, but it’s no use. You know what the decrees of the Convention are these days…no one dares…”

“And I am to see my child perish for want of a scrap of paper?”

Again the old man shrugged. He was a busy man and there were others. Presently he took his leave: there was nothing that he could do, so why should he stay? Louise hardly noticed his going. She stood there like a block of stone, a carved image of despair. The wan cheeks of the sick child seemed less bloodless than hers.

“Louise!”

Josette Gravier had been standing beside the cot all this time. Charles-Léon’s tiny hand had fastened round one of her fingers and she didn’t like to move, but she had lost nothing of what was going on. Her eyes, those lovely deep blue eyes of hers that seemed to shine, to emit light when she was excited, were fixed on Louise de Croissy. She had loved her and served her ever since Louise’s dying mother, Madame de Vandeleur, confided the care of her baby daughter to Madame Gravier, the

farmer’s wife, Josette’s mother, who had just lost her own new-born baby, the same age as Louise. Josette, Ma’me Gravier’s first-born, was three years old at the time and, oh! how she took the little newcomer to her heart! She and Louise grew up together like sisters. They shared childish joys and tears. The old farmhouse used to ring with their laughter and the patter of their tiny feet. Papa Gravier taught them to ride and to milk the nanny-goats; they had rabbits of their own, chickens and runner-ducks.

Together they went to the Convent school of the Visitation to learn everything that was desirable for young ladies to know, sewing and embroidery, calligraphy and recitation, a smattering of history and geography, and the art of letter-writing. For there was to be no difference in the education of Louise de Vandeleur, the motherless daughter of the distinguished general, aide-de-camp to His Majesty, and of Josette Gravier, the farmer’s daughter.

When, in the course of time, Louise married Bastien de Croissy, the eminent advocate at the Paris bar, Josette nearly broke her heart at parting from her lifelong friend.

Then came the dark days of ’89. Papa Gravier was killed during the revolutionary riots in Grenoble; maman died of a broken heart, and Louise begged Josette to come and live with her. The farm was sold, the girl had a small competence; she went up to Paris and continued to love and serve Louise as she had done in the past. She was her comfort and her help during those first terrible days of the Revolution: she was her moral support now that the shadow of the guillotine lay menacing over the household of the once successful lawyer. *La Patrie* in danger claimed so many hours of her day; she, too, had to sew shirts and stitch breeches for the “Soldiers of Liberty,” but her evenings, her

nights, her early mornings were her own, and these she devoted to the service of Louise and of Charles-Léon.

She had a tiny room in the apartment of the Rue Picpus, but to her loving little heart that room was paradise, for here, when she was at home, she had Charles-Léon to play with, she had his little clothes to wash and to iron, she saw his great dark eyes, so like his mother's, fixed upon her while she told him tales of romance and of chivalry. The boy was only five at this time, but he was strangely precocious where such tales were concerned, he seemed to understand and appreciate the mighty deeds of Hector and Achilles, of Bayard and Joan of Arc, the stories of the Crusades, of Godfrey de Bouillon and Richard of the Lion-heart. Perhaps it was because he felt himself to be weak and puny and knew with the unexplainable instinct of childhood that he would never be big enough or strong enough to emulate those deeds of valour, that he loved to hear Josette recount them to him with a wealth of detail supplied by her romantic imagination.

But if Charles-Léon loved to hear these stories of the past, far more eagerly did he listen to those of today, and in the recounting of heroic adventures which not only had happened recently, but went on almost every day, Josette's storehouse of hair-raising narratives was well-nigh inexhaustible. Through her impassioned rhetoric he first heard of the heroic deeds of that amazing Englishman who went by the curious name of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Josette told him about a number of gallant gentlemen who had taken such compassion on the sufferings of the innocent that they devoted their lives to rescuing those who were persecuted and oppressed by the tyrannical Government of the day. She told him how women and children, old or feeble men, dragged before a tribunal that knew of no issue save the sentence of death, were spirited away out of

prison walls or from the very tumbrils that were taking them to the guillotine, spirited away as if by a miracle, and through the agency of this mysterious hero whose identity had always remained unknown, but whose deeds of self-sacrifice were surely writ large in the book of the Recording Angel.

And while Josette unfolded these tales of valour, and the boy listened to her awed and silent, her eyes would shine with unshed tears, and her lips quiver with enthusiasm. She had made a fetish of the Scarlet Pimpernel: had enshrined him in her heart like a demi-god, and this hero-worship grew all the more fervent within her as she found no response to her enthusiasm in the bosom of her adopted family, only in Charles-Léon. She was too gentle and timid to speak openly of this hero-worship to Maître de Croissy, and Louise, whom she adored, was wont to grow slightly sarcastic at the expense of Josette's imaginary hero. She did not believe in his existence at all, and thought that all the tales of miraculous rescues set down to his agency were either mere coincidence or just the product of a romantic girl's fantasy. As for Maurice Reversac – well! little Josette thought him too dull and unimaginative to appreciate the almost legendary personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel, so, whenever a fresh tale got about the city of how a whole batch of innocent men, women and children had escaped out of France on the very eve of their arrest or condemnation to death, Josette kept the tale to herself, until she and Charles-Léon were alone in her little room, and she found response to her enthusiasm in the boy's glowing eyes and his murmur of passionate admiration.

When Charles-Léon's chronic weakness turned to actual, serious anaemia, all the joy seemed to go out of Josette's life. Real joy, that is; for she went about outwardly just as gay as before, singing, crooning to the

little invalid, cheering Louise and comforting Bastien, who spoke of her now as the angel in the house. Every minute that she could spare she spent by the side of Charles-Léon’s little bed, and when no one was listening she would whisper into his ear some of the old stories which he loved. Then if the ghost of a smile came round the child’s pallid lips, Josette would feel almost happy, even though she felt ready to burst into tears.

And now, as soon as the old doctor had gone, Josette disengaged her hand from the sick child’s grasp and put her arms round Louise’s shoulders.

“We must not lose heart, Louise chérie,” she said. “There must be a way out of this impasse.”

“A way out?” Louise murmured. “Oh, if I only knew!”

“Sit down here, chérie, and let me talk to you.”

There was a measure of comfort even in Josette’s voice. It was low and a trifle husky; such a voice as some women have whose mission in life is to comfort and to soothe. She made Louise sit down in the big armchair; then she knelt down in front of her, her little hands clasped together and resting in Louise’s lap.

“Listen, Louise chérie,” she said with great excitement.

Louise looked down on the beautiful eager face of her friend; the soft red lips were quivering with excitement; the large luminous eyes were aglow with a strange enthusiasm. She felt puzzled, for it was not in Josette’s nature to show so much emotion. She was always deemed quiet and sensible. She never spoke at random, and never made a show of her fantastic dreams.

“Well, darling?” Louise said listlessly: “I am listening. What is it?”

Josette looked up, wide-eyed and eager, straight into her friend’s face.

“What we must do, chérie,” she said with earnest emphasis, “is to get in touch with those wonderful Englishmen. You know who I mean. They have already accomplished miracles on behalf of innocent men, women and children, of people who were in a worse plight than we are now.”

Louise frowned. She knew well enough what Josette meant: she had often laughed at the girl’s enthusiasm over this imaginary hero, who seemed to haunt her dreams. But just now she felt that there was something flippant and unseemly in talking such fantastic rubbish: dreams seemed out of place when reality was so heart-breaking. She tried to rise and so push Josette away, but the girl clung to her and would not let her go.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Josette,” Louise said coldly at last. “This is not the time for jest, or for talking of things that only exist in your imagination.”

Josette shook her head.

“Why do you say that, Louise chérie? Why should you deliberately close your eyes and ears to facts – hard, sober, solid facts that everybody knows, that everybody admits to be true? I should have thought,” the girl went on in her earnest, persuasive way, “that with this terrible thing hanging over you – Charles-Léon getting more and more ill, till there’s no hope of his recovery…”

“Josette!! Don’t!” Louise cried out in an agony of reproach.

“I must,” Josette insisted with quiet force: “it is my duty to make you look straight at facts as they are; and I say, that with this terrible thing hanging over us, you must cast off foolish prejudices and open your mind to what is the truth and will be your salvation.”

Louise looked down at the beautiful, eager face turned up to hers. She felt all of a sudden strangely moved. Of course Josette was talking nonsense. Dear,

sensible, quiet little Josette! She was simple and not at all clever, but it was funny, to say the least of it, how persuasive she could be when she had set her mind on anything. Even over small things she would sometimes wax so eloquent that there was no resisting her. No! she was not clever, but she was extraordinarily shrewd where the welfare of those she loved was in question. And she adored Louise and worshipped Charles-Léon.

Since the doctor's visit Louise had felt herself floundering in such a torrent of grief that she was ready to clutch at any straw that would save her from despair. Josette was talking nonsense, of course. All the family were wont to chaff her over her adoration of the legendary hero, so much so, in fact, that the girl had ceased altogether to talk about him. But now her eyes were positively glowing with enthusiasm, and it seemed to Louise, as she gazed into them, that they radiated hope and trust. And Louise was so longing for a ray of hope.

"I suppose," she said with a wan smile, "that you are harping on your favourite string."

"I am," Josette admitted with fervour.

Then as Louise, still obstinate and unbelieving, gave a slight shrug and a sigh, the girl continued: "Surely, Louise chérie, you have heard other people besides me – clever, distinguished, important people – talk of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"I have," Louise admitted: "but only in a vague way."

"And what he did for the Maillys?"

"The general's widow, you mean?"

"Yes. She and her sister and the two children were simply snatched away from under the very noses of the guard who were taking them to execution."

"I did hear something about that," was Louise's dry comment; "but…"