The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel

Baroness Orczy

More daring adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel

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The Leaugue 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.

Sir Percy Explains

It was not, Heaven help us all! a very uncommon occurrence these days: a woman almost unsexed by misery, starvation, and the abnormal excitement engendered by daily spectacles of revenge and of cruelty. They were to be met with every day, round every street corner, these harridans, more terrible far than were the men.

This one was still comparatively young, thirty at most; would have been good-looking too, for the features were really delicate, the nose chiselled, the brow straight, the chin round and small. But the mouth! Heavens, what a mouth! Hard and cruel and thin-lipped; and those eyes! sunken and rimmed with purple; eyes that told tales of sorrow and, yes! of degradation. The crowd stood round her, sullen and apathetic; poor, miserable wretches like herself, staring at her antics with lack-lustre eyes and an ever-recurrent contemptuous shrug of the shoulders.

The woman was dancing, contorting her body in the small circle of light formed by a flickering lanthorn which was hung across the street from house to house, striking the muddy pavement with those shoeless feet, all to the sound of a beribboned tambourine which she struck now and again with her small, grimy hand. From time to time she paused, held out the tambourine at arm’s length, and went the round of the spectators, asking for alms. But at her approach, the crowd seemed to disintegrate, to melt into the humid air; it was but rarely that a greasy token fell into the outstretched tambourine. Then as the woman started again to dance the crowd gradually reassembled, and stood, hands in

pockets, lips still sullen and contemptuous, but eyes watchful of the spectacle. There were such few spectacles these days, other than the monotonous processions of tumbrils with their load of aristocrats for the guillotine!

So the crowd watched, and the woman danced. The lanthorn overhead threw a weird light on red caps and tricolour cockades, on the sullen faces of the men and the shoulders of the women, on the dancer's weird antics and her flying, tattered skirts. She was obviously tired, as a poor, performing cur might be, or a bear prodded along to uncongenial buffoonery. Every time that she paused and solicited alms with her tambourine the crowd dispersed, and some of them laughed because she insisted.

'*Voyons,'* she said with a weird attempt at gaiety, 'a couple of sous for the entertainment, citizen! You have stood here half an hour. You can't have it all for nothing, what?'

The man – young, square shouldered, thick-lipped, with the look of a bully about his well-clad person – retorted with a coarse insult, which the woman resented. There were high words; the crowd for the most part ranged itself on the side of the bully. The woman back against the wall nearest to her, held feeble, emaciated hands up to her ears in a vain endeavour to shut out the hideous jeers and ribald jokes which were the natural weapons of this untamed crowd.

Soon blows began to rain; not a few fell upon the unfortunate woman. She screamed, and the more she screamed the louder did the crowd jeer, the uglier became its temper. Then suddenly it was all over. How it happened the woman could not tell. She had closed her eyes, feeling sick and dizzy; but she heard a loud call, words, spoken in English (a language which she

understood), a pleasant laugh, and a brief but violent scuffle. After that the hurried retreat of many feet, the click of sabots on the uneven pavement and patter of shoeless feet, and then silence.

She had fallen on her knees and was cowering against the wall, had lost consciousness for a minute of two. Then she heard the pleasant laugh again and the soft drawl of the English tongue.

‘I love to see those beggars scuttling off, like so many rats to their burrows, don’t you, Ffoulkes?’

‘They didn’t put up much fight, the cowards!’ came from another voice, also in English. ‘A dozen of them against this wretched woman. What had best be done with her?’

‘I’ll see to her,’ rejoined the first speaker. ‘You and Tony had best find the others. Tell them I shall be round directly.’

It all seemed like a dream. The woman dared not open her eyes lest reality – hideous and brutal – once more confronted her. Then all at once she felt that her poor, weak body, encircled by strong arms, was lifted off the ground, and that she was being carried down the street, away from the light projected by the lanthorn overhead, into the sheltering darkness of a yawning *porte cochère.* But she was not then fully conscious.

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When she reopened her eyes she was in what appeared to be the lodge of a *concierge*. She was lying on a horsehair sofa. There was a sense of warmth and security around her. No wonder that it still seemed like a dream. Before her stood a man, tall and straight, surely a being from another world – or so he appeared to the poor wretch who, since uncountable time, had set eyes on none but the most miserable dregs of struggling humanity, who had seen little else but rags, and faces either cruel or wretched. This man was clad in a huge-caped coat, which made his powerful figure seem preternaturally large. His hair was fair and slightly curly above his low, square brow; the eyes beneath their heavy lids looked down on her with unmistakable kindness.

The poor woman struggled to her feet. With a quick and pathetically humble gesture she drew her ragged, muddy skirts over her ankles and her tattered kerchief across her breast.

‘I had best go now, Monsieur…citizen,’ she murmured, while a hot flush rose to the roots of her unkempt hair. ‘I must not stop here… I–’

‘You are not going, Madame,’ he broke in, speaking now in perfect French and with a great air of authority, as one who is accustomed to being implicitly obeyed, ‘until you have told me how, a lady of culture and of refinement, comes to be masquerading as a street-dancer. The game is a dangerous one, as you have experienced tonight.’

‘It is no game, Monsieur…citizen,’ she stammered; ‘nor yet a masquerade. I have been a street-dancer all my life, and–’

By the way of an answer he took her hand, always with that air of authority which she never thought to resent.

‘This is not a street-dancer’s hand, Madame,’ he said quietly. ‘Nor is your speech that of the people.’

She drew her hand away quickly, and the flush on her haggard face deepened.

‘If you will honour me with your confidence, Madame,’ he insisted.

The kindly words, the courtesy of the man, went to the poor creature’s heart. She fell back upon the sofa and with her face buried in her arms she sobbed out her heart for a minute or two. The man waited quite patiently. He had seen many women weep these days, and had dried many a tear through deeds of valour and of self-sacrifice, which were for ever recorded in the hearts of those whom he had succoured.

When this poor woman had succeeded in recovering some semblance of self-control, she turned her wan, tear-stained face to him and said simply: ‘My name is Madeleine Lannoy, Monsieur. My husband was killed during the *émeutes* at Versailles, whilst defending the persons of the Queen and of the royal children against the fury of the mob. When I was a girl I had the misfortune to attract the attentions of a young doctor named Jean Paul Marat. You have heard of him, Monsieur?’

The other nodded.

‘You know him, perhaps,’ she continued, ‘for what he is: the most cruel and revengeful of men. A few years ago he threw up his lucrative appointment as Court physician to Monseigneur le Comte d’Artois, and gave up the profession of medicine for that of journalist and politician. Politician! Heaven help him! He belongs to the most bloodthirsty section of revolutionary brigands. His creed is pillage, murder, and revenge; and he

chooses to declare that it is I who, by rejecting his love, drove him to these foul extremities. May God forgive him that abominable lie! The evil we do, Monsieur, is within us; it does not come from circumstances. I, in the meanwhile, was a happy wife. My husband, M. de Lannoy, who was an officer in the army, idolised me. We had one child, a boy–'

She paused, with another catch in her throat. Then she resumed, with calmness that, in view of the tale she told, sounded strangely weird: 'In June last year my child was stolen from me – stolen by Marat in hideous revenge for the supposed wrong I had done him. The details of that execrable outrage are of no importance. I was decoyed from home one day through the agency of a forged message purporting to come from a very dear friend whom I knew to be in grave trouble at the time. Oh! the whole thing was thoroughly well thought out, I can assure you!' she continued, with a harsh laugh which ended in a heart-rending sob. 'The forged message, the suborned servant, the threats of terrible reprisals if anyone in the village gave me the slightest warning or clue. When the whole miserable business was accomplished, I was just like a trapped animal inside a cage, held captive by immovable bars of obstinate silence and cruel indifference. No one would help me. No one ostensibly knew anything; no one had seen anything, heard anything. The child was gone! My servants, the people in the village – some of whom I could have sworn were true and sympathetic – only shrugged their shoulders. *"Que voulez-vous, Madame?* Children of bourgeois as well as of aristos were often taken up by the State to be brought up as true patriots and no longer pampered like so many lap dogs."

'Three days later I received a letter from that inhuman monster, Jean Paul Marat. He told me that he had taken my child away from me not from any idea of

revenge for my disdain in the past, but from a spirit of pure patriotism. My boy, he said, should not be brought up with the same ideas of bourgeois effeteness and love of luxury which had disgraced the nation for centuries. No! he should be reared amongst men who had realised the true value of fraternity and equality and the ideal of complete liberty for the individual to lead his own life, unfettered by senseless prejudices of education and refinement. Which means, Monsieur,' the poor woman went on with passionate misery, 'that my child is to be reared up in the company of all that is most vile and most degraded in the disease-haunted slums of indigent Paris; that, with the connivance of that execrable fiend Marat, my only son will, mayhap, come back to me one day a potential thief, a criminal probably, a drink-sodden reprobate at best. Such things are done every day in this glorious Revolution of ours – done in the sacred name of France and of Liberty. And the moral murder of my child is to be my punishment for daring to turn a deaf ear to indign passion of a brute!'

Once more she paused, and when the melancholy echo of her broken voice had died away in the narrow room, not another murmur broke the stillness of this far away corner of the great city.

The man did not move. He stood looking down upon the poor woman before him, a world of pity expressed in his deep-set eyes. Through the absolute silence around there came the sound as of a gentle flutter, the current of cold air, mayhap, sighing through the ill-fitting shudders, or the soft, weird soughing made by unseen things. The man's heart was full of pity, and it seemed as if the Angel of Compassion had come at his bidding and enfolded the sorrowing woman with his wings.

A moment or two later she was able to finish her pathetic narrative.

‘Do you marvel, Monsieur,’ she said, ‘that I am still sane – still alive? But I only live to find my child. I try and keep my reason in order to fight the devilish cunning of a brute on his own ground. Up to now all my inquiries have been in vain. At first I squandered money, tried judicial means, set an army of sleuth-hounds on the track. I tried bribery, corruption. I went to the wretch himself and abased myself in the dust before him. He only laughed at me and told me that his love for me had died long ago; he now was lavishing his treasures upon the faithful friend and companion – that awful woman, Simonne Evrard – who had stood by him in the darkest hours of his misfortunes. Then it was that I decided to adopt different tactics. Since my child was to be reared in the midst of murderers and thieves, I, too, would haunt their abodes. I became a street-singer, dancer, what you will. I wear rags now and solicit alms. I haunt the most disreputable cabarets in the lowest slums of Paris. I listen and I spy; I question every man, woman, and child who might afford some clue, give me some indication. There is hardly a house in these parts that I have not visited and whence I have not been kicked out as an importunate beggar or worse. Gradually I am narrowing the circle of my investigations. Presently I shall get a clue. I shall! I know I shall! God cannot allow this monstrous thing to go on!’

Again there was silence. The poor woman had completely broken down. Shame, humiliation, passionate grief, had made of her a mere miserable wreckage of humanity.

The man waited awhile until she was composed, then he said simply: ‘You have suffered terribly, Madame; but chiefly, I think, because you have been alone in your

grief. You have brooded over it until it has threatened your reason. Now, if you will allow me to act as your friend, I will pledge you my word that I will find your son for you. Will you trust me sufficiently to give up your present methods and place yourself entirely in my hands? There are more than a dozen gallant gentlemen, who are my friends, and who will help me in my search. But for this I must have a free hand, and only help from you when I require it. I can find you lodgings where you will be quite safe under the protection of my wife, who is as like an angel as any man or woman I have ever met on this earth. When your son is once more in your arms, you will, I hope, accompany us to England, where so many of your friends have already found a refuge. If this meets with your approval, Madame, you may command me, for with your permission I mean to be your most devoted servant.'

Dante, in his wild imaginations of hell and of purgatory and fleeting glimpses of paradise, never put before us the picture of a soul that was lost and found heaven, after a cycle of despair. Nor could Madeleine Lannoy ever explain her feelings at that moment, even to herself. To begin with, she could not quite grasp the reality of this ray of hope, which came to her at the darkest hour of her misery. She stared at the man before her as she would on an ethereal vision; she fell on her knees and buried her face in her hands.

What happened afterwards she hardly knew; she was in a state of semi-consciousness. When she once more woke to reality, she was in comfortable lodgings; she moved and talked and ate and lived like a human being. She was no longer a pariah, an outcast, a poor, half-demented creature, insentient save for an infinite capacity for suffering. She suffered still, but she no longer despaired. There had been such marvellous power and confidence in that man's voice when he

said: ‘I pledge you my word.’ Madeleine Lannoy lived now in hope and a sweet sense of perfect mental and bodily security. Around her there was an influence, too, a presence which she did not often see, but always felt to be there: a woman, tall and graceful and sympathetic, who was always ready to cheer, to comfort, and to help. Her name was Marguerite. Madame Lannoy never knew her by any other. The man had spoken of her as being as like an angel as could be met on this earth, and poor Madeleine Lannoy fully agreed with him.

Even that bloodthirsty tiger, Jean Paul Marat, has had his apologists. His friends have called him a martyr, a selfless and incorruptible exponent of social and political ideals. We may take it that Simonne Evrard loved him, for a more impassioned obituary speech was, mayhap, never spoken than the one which she delivered before the National Assembly in honour of that sinister demagogue, whose writings and activities will for ever sully some of the really fine pages of that revolutionary era.

But with those apologists we have naught to do. History has talked its fill of the inhuman monster. With the more intimate biographists alone has this true chronicle any concern. It is one of these who tells us that on or about the eighteenth day of Messidor, in the year I of the Republic (a date which corresponds with the sixth of July, 1793, of our own calendar), Jean Paul Marat took an additional man into his service, at the instance of Jeannette Maréchal, his cook and maid-of-all-work. Marat was at this time a martyr to an unpleasant form of skin disease, brought on by the terrible privations which he had endured during the few years preceding his association with Simonne Evrard, the faithful friend and housekeeper, whose small fortune subsequently provided him with some degree of comfort.

The man whom Jeannette Maréchal, the cook, introduced into the household of No. 30, Rue des Cordeliers, that worthy woman had literally picked one day out of the gutter where he was grabbing for scraps of food like some wretched starving cur. He appeared to be known to the police of the section, his identity book proclaiming him to be one Paul Molé, who had served

his time in gaol for larceny. He professed himself willing to do any work required of him, for the merest pittance and some kind of roof over his head. Simonne Evrard allowed Jeannette to take him in, partly out of compassion and partly with a view to easing the woman's own burden, the only other domestic in the house – a man named Bas – being more interested in politics and the meetings of the Club des Jacobins than he was in his master's ailments. The man Molé, moreover, appeared to know something of medicine and of herbs and how to prepare the warm baths which alone eased the unfortunate Marat from pain. He was powerfully built, too, and though he muttered and grumbled a great deal, and indulged in prolonged fits of sulkiness, when he would not open his mouth to anyone, he was, on the whole, helpful and good-tempered.

There must also have been something about his whole wretched personality which made a strong appeal to the 'Friend of the People,' for it is quite evident that within a few days Paul Molé had won no small measure of his master's confidence.

Marat, sick, fretful, and worried, had taken an unreasoning dislike to his servant Bas. He was thankful to have a stranger about him, a man who was as miserable as himself had been a very little while ago; who, like himself, had lived in cellars and in underground burrows, and lived on the scraps of food which even street-curs had disdained.

On the seventh day following Molé's entry into the household, and while the latter was preparing his employer's bath, Marat said abruptly to him: 'You'll go as far as the Chemin de Pantin today for me, citizen. You know your way?'

'I can find it, what?' muttered Molé, who appeared to be in one of his surly moods.

‘You will have to go very circumspectly,’ Marat went on, in his cracked and feeble voice. ‘And see to it that no one spies upon your movements. I have many enemies, citizen…one especially…a woman… She is always prying and spying on me… So beware of any woman you see lurking about at your heels.’

Molé gave a half-audible grunt in reply.

‘You had best go after dark,’ the other rejoined after a while. ‘Come back to me after nine o’clock. It is not far to the Chemin de Pantin – just where it intersects the Route de Meaux. You can get there and back before midnight. The people will admit you. I will give you a ring – the only thing I possess… It has little or no value,’ he added with a harsh, grating laugh. ‘It will not be worth your while to steal it. You will have to see a brat and report to me on his condition – his appearance, what?… Talk to him a bit… See what he says and let me know. It is not difficult.’

‘No, citizen.’

Molé helped the suffering wretch into his bath. Not a movement, not a quiver of the eyelid betrayed one single emotion which he may have felt – neither loathing nor sympathy, only placid indifference. He was just a half-starved menial, thankful to accomplish any task for the sake of satisfying a craving stomach. Marat stretched out his shrunken limbs in the herbal water with a sigh of well-being.

‘And the ring, citizen?’ Molé suggested presently.

The demagogue held up his left hand – it was emaciated and disfigured by disease. A cheap-looking metal ring, set with a false stone, glistened upon the fourth finger.

‘Take it off,’ he said curtly.

The ring must have all along been too small for the bony hand of the once-famous Court physician. Even

now it appeared embedded in the flabby skin and refused to slide over the knuckle.

‘The water will loosen it,’ remarked Molé quietly.

Marat dipped his hand back into the water, and the other stood beside him, silent and stolid, his broad shoulders bent, his face naught but a mask, void and expressionless beneath its coating of grime.

One or two seconds went by. The air was heavy with steam and a medley of evil-smelling fumes, which hung in the close atmosphere of the narrow room. The sick man appeared to be drowsy, his head rolled over to one side, his eyes closed. He had evidently forgotten all about the ring.

A woman’s voice, shrill and peremptory, broke the silence which had become oppressive: ‘Here, citizen Molé, I want you! There’s not a bit of wood chopped up for my fire, and how am I to make the coffee without firing I should like to know?’

‘The ring, citizen,’ Molé urged gruffly.

Marat had been roused by the woman’s sharp voice. He cursed her for a noisy harridan; then he said fretfully: ‘It will do presently – when you are ready to start. I said nine o’clock…it is only four now. I am tired… Tell citizeness Evrard to bring me some hot coffee in an hour’s time… You can go and fetch me the *Moniteur* now, and take back these proofs to citizen Dufour. You will find him at the “Cordeliers”, or else at the printing works… Come back at nine o’clock… I am tired now… too tired to tell you where to find the house which is off the Chemin de Pantin. Presently will do…’

Even while he spoke he appeared to drop into a fitful sleep. His two hands were hidden under the sheet which covered the bath. Molé watched him in silence for a moment or two, then he turned on his heel and shuffled off through the anteroom into the kitchen beyond, where presently he sat down, squatting in an

angle by the stove, and started with his usual stolidness to chop wood for the citizeness’ fire.

When this task was done, and he had received a chunk of sour bread for his reward from Jeannette Maréchal, the cook, he shuffled out of the place and into the street, to do his employer’s errands.

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Paul Molé had been to the offices of the *Moniteur* and to the printing works of *L'Ami du Peuple*. He had seen the citizen Dufour at the Club and, presumably, had spent the rest of his time wandering idly about the streets of the *quartier*, for he did not return to the Rue des Cordeliers until nearly nine o'clock.

As soon as he came to the top of the street, he fell in with the crowd which had collected outside No 30. With his habitual slouchy gait and the steady pressure of his powerful elbows, he pushed his way to the door, whilst gleaning whisperings and rumours on his way.

'The citizen Marat has been assassinated.'

'By a woman.'

'A mere girl.'

'A wench from Caen. Her name is Corday.'

The people nearly tore her to pieces a while ago.'

'She is as much as guillotined already.'

The latter remark went off with a loud guffaw and many

a ribald joke.

Molé, despite his great height, succeeded in getting through unperceived. He was of no account, and he knew his way inside the house. It was full of people: journalists, gaffers, women and men – the usual crowd that come to gape. The citizen Marat was a great personage. The Friend of the People. An In-corruptible, if ever there was one. Just look at the simplicity, almost the poverty, in which he lived! Only the aristos hated him, and the fat bourgeois who battened on the people. Citizen Marat had sent hundreds of them to the guillotine with a stroke of his pen of a denunciation from his fearless tongue.

Molé did not pause to listen to these comments. He pushed his way through the throng up the stairs to his late employer's lodgings on the first floor.

The anteroom was crowded, so were the other rooms; but the greatest pressure was around the door immediately facing him, the one which gave on the bathroom. In the kitchen on his right, where a while ago he had been chopping wood under a flood of abuse from Jeannette Maréchal, he caught sight of this woman cowering by the hearth, her filthy apron thrown over her head and crying – yes, crying for the loathsome creature, who had expiated some of his abominable crimes at the hands of a poor, misguided girl, whom an infuriated mob was even now threatening to tear to pieces in its rage.

The parlour and even Simonne's room were also filled with people: men, most of whom Molé knew by sight; friends or enemies of the ranting demagogue who lay murdered in the very bath which his casual servant had prepared for him. Everyone was discussing the details of the murder, the punishment of the youthful assassin. Simonne Evrard was being loudly blamed for having admitted the girl into citizen Marat's room. But the wench had looked so simple, so innocent, and she said she was the bearer of a message from Caen. She had called twice during the day, and in the evening the citizen himself said that he would see her. Simonne had been for sending her away. But the citizen was peremptory. And he was so helpless…in his bath…name of a name, the pitiable affair!

No one paid much attention to Molé. He listened for a while to Simonne's impassioned voice, giving her version of the affair; then he worked his way stolidly into the bathroom.

It was some time before he succeeded in reaching the side of that awful bath wherein lay the dead body of

Jean Paul Marat. The small room was densely packed – not with friends, for there was not a man or woman living, except Simonne Evrard and her sisters, whom the bloodthirsty demagogue would have called ‘friend’; but his powerful personality had been a menace to many, and now they came in crowds to see that he was really dead, that a girl’s feeble hand had actually done the deed which they themselves had only contemplated. They stood about whispering, their heads averted from the ghastly spectacle of this miserable creature, to whom even death had failed to lend his usual attribute of tranquil dignity.

The tiny room was inexpressibly hot and stuffy. Hardly a breath of outside air came in through the narrow window, which only gave on the bedroom beyond. An evil-smelling oil-lamp swung from the low ceiling and shed its feeble light on the upturned face of the murdered man.

Molé stood for a moment or two, silent and pensive, beside that hideous form. There was the bath, just as he had prepared it; the board spread over with a sheet and laid across the bath, above which only the head and shoulders emerged, livid and stained. One hand, the left, grasped the edge of the board with the last convulsive clutch of supreme agony.

On the fourth finger of that hand glistened the shoddy ring which Marat had said was not worth stealing. Yet, apparently, it roused the cupidity of the poor wretch who had served him faithfully for these last few days, and who now would once more be thrown, starving and friendless, upon the streets of Paris.

Molé threw a quick, furtive glance around him. The crowd which had come to gloat over the murdered Terrorist stood about whispering, with heads averted, engrossed in their own affairs. He slid his hand surreptitiously over that of the dead man. With

dexterous manipulation he lifted the finger round which glistened the metal ring.

Death appeared to have shrivelled the flesh still more upon the bones, to have contracted the knuckles and shrunk the tendons. The ring slid off quite easily. Molé had it in his hand, when suddenly a rough blow struck him on the shoulder.

‘Trying to rob the dead?’ a stern voice shouted in his ear. ‘Are you a disguised aristo, or what?’

At once the whispering ceased. A wave of excitement went round the room. Some people shouted, others pressed forward to gaze on the abandoned wretch who had been caught in the act of committing a gruesome deed.

‘Robbing the dead!’

They were experts in evil, most of these men here. Their hands were indelibly stained with some of the foulest crimes ever recorded in history. But there was something ghoulish in this attempt to plunder that awful thing lying there, helpless, in the water. There was also a great relief to nerve-tension in shouting Horror and Anathema with self-righteous indignation; and additional excitement in the suggested ‘aristo in disguise.’

Molé struggled vigorously. He was powerful and his fists were heavy. But he was soon surrounded, held fast by both arms, whilst half a dozen hands tore at his tattered clothes, searched him to his very skin, for the booty which he was thought to have taken from the dead.

‘Leave me alone, curse you!’ he shouted, louder than his aggressors. ‘My name is Paul Molé, I tell you. Ask the citizeness Evrard. I waited on citizen Marat. I prepared his bath. I was the only friend who did not turn away from him in his sickness and his poverty. Leave me alone, I say! Why,’ he added, with a hoarse laugh,

‘Jean Paul in his bath was as naked as on the day he was born!’

‘’Tis true,’ said one of those who had been most active in rummaging through Molé’s grimy rags. ‘There’s nothing to be found on him.’

But suspicion once aroused was not easily allayed. Molé’s protestations became more and more vigorous and emphatic. His papers were all in order, he vowed. He had them on him: his own identity papers, clear for anyone to see. Someone had dragged them out of his pocket; they were dank and covered with splashes of mud – hardly legible. They were handed over to a man who stood in the immediate circle of light projected by the lamp. He seized them and examined them carefully. This man was short and slight, was dressed in well-made cloth clothes; his hair was held in at the nape of the neck in a modish manner with a black taffeta bow. His hands were clean, slender and claw-like, and he wore a tricolour scarf of office round his waist which proclaimed him to be a member of one of its numerous Committees which tyrannised over the people.

The papers appeared to be in order and proclaimed the bearer to be Paul Molé, a native of Besançon, a carpenter by trade. The identity book had recently been signed by Jean Paul Marat, the man’s latest employer, and been countersigned by the Commissary of the section.

The man in the tricolour scarf turned with some acerbity on the crowd who was still pressing round the prisoner.

‘Which of you here,’ he queried roughly, ‘levelled an unjust accusation against an honest citizen?’

But, as usual in such cases, no one replied directly to the charge. It was not safe these days to come into conflict with men like Molé. The Committees were all on their side against the bourgeois as well as against the

aristos. This was the reign of the proletariat, and the *sans-culotte* always emerged triumphant in a conflict against the well-to-do. Nor was it good to rouse the ire of citizen Chauvelin, one of the most powerful, as he was the most pitiless, members of the Committee of Public Safety. Quiet, sarcastic rather than aggressive, something of the aristo, too, in his clean linen and well-cut clothes, he had not even yielded to the defunct Marat in cruelty and relentless persecution of aristocrats.

Evidently his sympathies now were all with Molé, the out-at-elbows miserable servant of an equally miserable master. His pale-coloured, deep-set eyes challenged the crowd, which gave way before him, slunk back into the corners, away from his coldly threatening glance. Thus he found himself suddenly face to face with Molé, somewhat isolated from the rest and close to the tin bath with its grim contents. Chauvelin had the papers in his hand.

‘Take these, citizen,’ he said curtly to the other. ‘They are all in order.’

He looked up at Molé as he said this, for the latter, though his shoulders were bent, was unusually tall, and Molé took the papers from him. Thus for the space of a few seconds the two men looked into one another’s face – eyes to eyes – and suddenly Chauvelin felt an icy sweat coursing down his spine. The eyes into which he gazed had a strange, ironical twinkle in them, a kind of good-humoured arrogance, whilst through the firm, clear-cut lips, half hidden by a dirty and ill-kempt beard, there came the sound – oh, a mere echo – of a quaint and inane laugh.

The whole thing – it seemed like a vision – was over in a second. Chauvelin, sick and faint with the sudden rush of blood to his head, closed his eyes for one brief

instant. The next the crowd had closed round him; anxious inquiries reached his re-awakened senses.

But he uttered one quick, hoarse cry: ‘Hébert! *A moi!* Are you there?’

‘Present, citizen!’ came in immediate response. And a tall figure in the tattered uniform affected by the revolutionary guard stepped briskly out of the crowd. Chauvelin’s claw-like hand was shaking visibly.

‘The man Molé,’ he called in a voice husky with excitement. ‘Seize him at once! And, name of a dog! do not allow a living soul in or out of the house!’

Hébert turned on his heel. The next moment his harsh voice was heard above the din and the general hubbub around: ‘Quite safe, citizen!’ he called to his chief. ‘We have the rogue right enough!’

There was much shouting and much cursing, a great deal of bustle and confusion, as the men of the Sûreté closed the doors of the defunct demagogue’s lodgings. Some two score men, a dozen or so women, were locked in, inside the few rooms which reeked of dirt and of disease. They jostled and pushed, screamed and protested. For two or three minutes the din was quite deafening. Simonne Evrard pushed her way up to the forefront of the crowd.

‘What is this I hear?’ she queried peremptorily. ‘Who is accusing citizen Molé? And of what, I should like to know? I am responsible for everyone inside these apartments…and if citizen Marat were still alive–’

Chauvelin appeared unaware of all the confusion and of the woman’s protestations. He pushed his way through the crowd to the corner of the anteroom where Molé stood, crouching and hunched up, his grimy hands idly fingering the papers which Chauvelin had returned to him a moment ago. Otherwise he did not move.

He stood silent and sullen, and when Chauvelin, who had succeeded in mastering his emotion, gave the