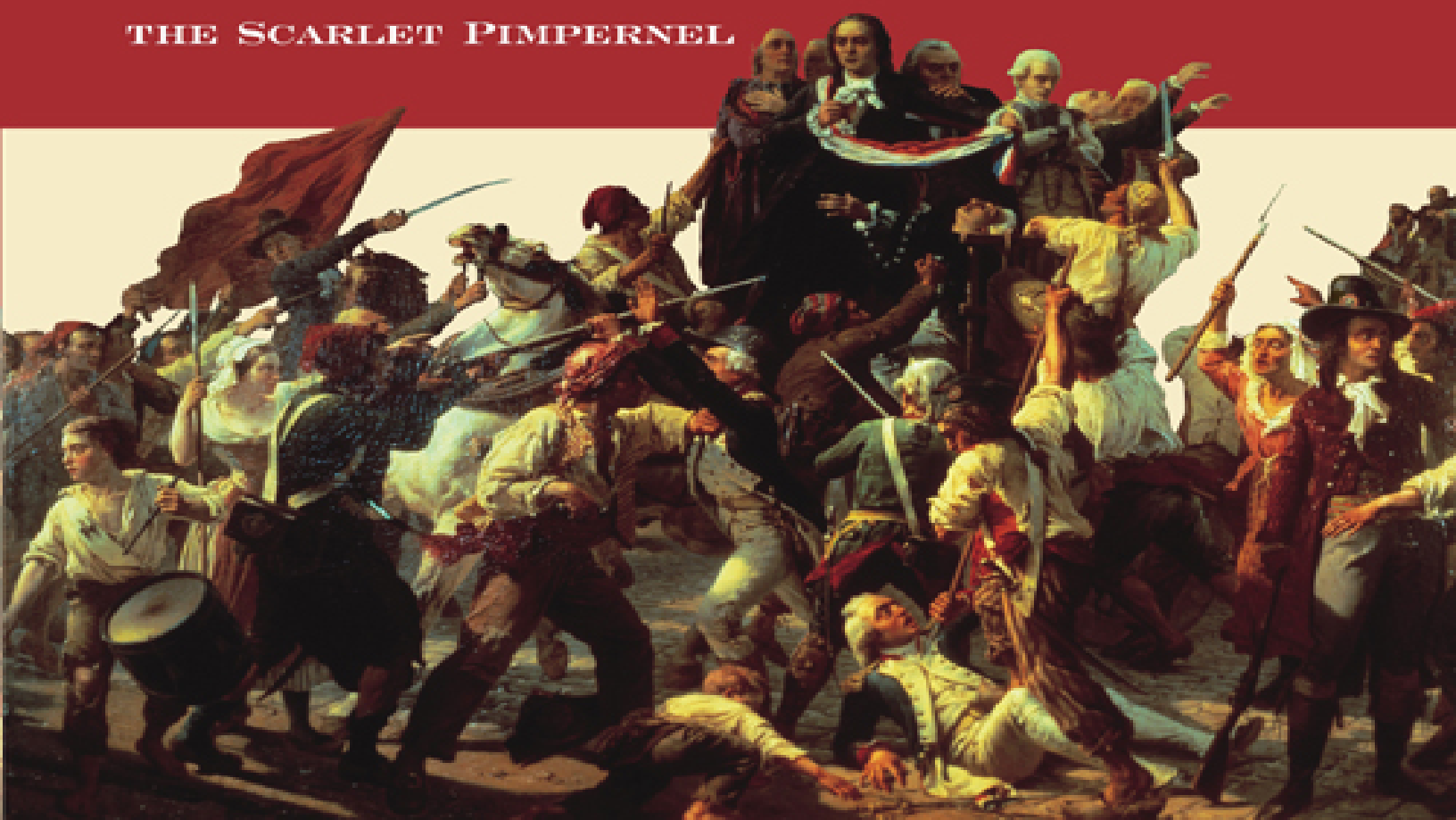
The Elusive Pimpernel

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.

1: Paris: 1793

There was not even a reaction.

On! ever on! in that wild, surging torrent; sowing the wind of anarchy, of terrorism, of lust of blood and hate, and reaping a hurricane of destruction and of horror.

On! ever on! France, with Paris and all her children still rushes blindly, madly on; defies the powerful coalition, Austria, England, Spain, Prussia, all joined together to stem the flow of carnage, defies the Universe and defies God!

Paris this September 1793! – or shall we call it Vendémiaire, Year 1 of the Republic? Call it what we will! Paris! a city of bloodshed, of humanity in its lowest, most degraded aspect. France herself a gigantic self-devouring monster, her fairest cities destroyed, Lyons razed to the ground, Toulon, Marseilles, masses of blackened ruins, her bravest sons turned to lustful brutes or to abject cowards seeking safety at the cost of any humiliation.

That is thy reward, O mighty, holy Revolution! apotheosis of equality and fraternity! grand rival of decadent Christianity.

Five weeks now since Marat, the bloodthirsty Friend of the People, succumbed beneath the sheath-knife of a virgin patriot, a month since his murderess walked proudly, even enthusiastically, to the guillotine! There has been no reaction – only a great sigh!… Not of content or satisfied lust, but a sigh such as the man-eating tiger might heave after his first taste of long-coveted blood.

A sigh for more!

A king on the scaffold; a queen degraded and abased, awaiting death, which lingers on the threshold of her infamous prison; eight hundred scions of ancient houses that have made the history of France; brave generals, Custine, Blanchelande, Houchard, Beauharnais; worthy patriots, noble-hearted women, misguided enthusiasts, all by the score and by the hundred, up the few wooden steps which lead to the guillotine.

An achievement of truth!

And still that sigh for more!

But for the moment – a few seconds only – Paris looked round her mighty self, and thought things over!

The man-eating tiger for the space of a sigh licked his powerful jaws and pondered!

Something new! – something wonderful!

We have had a new Constitution, a new Justice, new Laws, a new Almanack!

What next?

Why, obviously! How comes it that great, intellectual, aesthetic Paris never thought of such a wonderful thing before?

A new religion!!

Christianity is old and obsolete, priests are aristocrats, wealthy oppressors of the People, the Church but another form of wanton tyranny.

Let us by all means have a new religion.

Already something has been done to destroy the old! To destroy! always to destroy! Churches have been ransacked, altars spoliated, tombs desecrated, priests and curates murdered; but that is not enough.

There must be a new religion; and to attain that there must be a new God.

“Man is a born idol-worshipper.”

Very well then! let the People have a new religion and a new God.

Stay! – Not a God this time! for God means Majesty, Power, Kingship! everything in fact which the mighty hand of the people of France has struggled and fought to destroy.

Not a God, but a goddess.

A goddess! an idol! a toy! since even the man-eating tiger must play sometimes.

Paris wanted a new religion, and a new toy, and grave men, ardent patriots, mad enthusiasts, sat in the Assembly of the Convention and seriously discussed the means of providing her with both these things which she asked for.

Chaumette I think it was who first solved the difficulty – Procureur Chaumette, head of the Paris Municipality, he who had ordered that the cart which bore the dethroned queen to the squalid prison of the Conciergerie should be led slowly past her own late palace of the Tuileries, and should be stopped there just long enough for her to see and to feel in one grand mental vision all that she had been when she dwelt there, and all that she now was by the will of the People.

Chaumette, as you see, was refined, artistic; the torture of the fallen Queen’s heart meant more to him than a blow of the guillotine on her neck.

No wonder, therefore, that it was Procureur Chaumette who first discovered exactly what type of new religion Paris wanted just now.

“Let us have a Goddess of Reason,” he said, “typified if you will by the most beautiful woman in Paris. Let us have a feast of the Goddess of Reason, let there be a pyre of all the gew-gaws which for centuries have been flaunted by overbearing priests before the eyes of starving multitudes, let the People rejoice and dance around that funeral pile, and above it all let the new Goddess tower smiling and triumphant. The Goddess of

Reason! the only deity our new and regenerate France shall acknowledge throughout the centuries which are to come!”

Loud applause greeted the impassioned speech.

“A new goddess, by all means!” shouted the grave gentlemen of the National Assembly, “the Goddess of Reason!”

They were all eager that the People should have this toy; something to play with and to tease, round which to dance the mad carmagnole and sing the ever-recurring “Ça ira.”

Something to distract the minds of the populace from the consequences of its own deeds, and the helplessness of its legislators.

Procureur Chaumette enlarged upon his original idea, like a true artist who sees the broad effect of a picture at a glance and then fills in the minute details; he was already busy elaborating his scheme.

“The goddess must be beautiful…not too young… Reason can only go hand in hand with the riper age of second youth… she must be decked out in classical draperies, severe yet suggestive…she must be rouged and painted…for she is a mere idol…easily to be appeased with incense, music and laughter.”

He was getting deeply interested in his subject, seeking minutiae of detail, with which to render his theme more and more attractive.

But patience was never the characteristic of the Revolutionary Government of France. The National Assembly soon tired of Chaumette’s dithyrambic utterances. Up aloft on the Mountain, Danton was yawning like a gigantic leopard.

Soon Henriot was on his feet. He had a far finer scheme than that of the Procureur to place before his colleagues. A grand National fête, semi-religious in

character, but of the new religion which destroyed and desecrated and never knelt in worship.

Citizen Chaumette's Goddess of Reason by all means – Henriot conceded that the idea was a good one – but the goddess merely as a figure-head: around her a procession of unfrocked and apostate priests, typifying the destruction of ancient hierarchy, mules carrying loads of sacred vessels, the spoils of ten thousand churches of France, and ballet girls in bacchanalian robes, dancing the carmagnole around the new deity.

Public Prosecutor, Foucquier Tinville, thought all these schemes very tame. Why should the People of France be led to think that the era of a new religion would mean an era of milk and water, of pageants and of fireworks? Let every man, woman, and child know that this was an era of blood and again of blood.

"Oh!" he exclaimed in passionate accents, "would that all the traitors in France had but one head, that it might be cut off with one blow of the guillotine!"

He approved of the National fête, but he desired an apotheosis of the guillotine; he undertook to find ten thousand traitors to be beheaded on one grand and glorious day: ten thousand heads to adorn the Place de la Revolution on a great, never-to-be-forgotten evening, after the guillotine had accomplished this record work.

But Collot d'Herbois would also have his say. Collot lately hailed from the South, with a reputation for ferocity unparalleled throughout the whole of this horrible decade. He would not be outdone by Tinville's bloodthirsty schemes.

He was the inventor of the "Noyades," which had been so successful at Lyons and Marseilles. "Why not give the inhabitants of Paris one of these exhilarating spectacles?" he asked with a coarse, brutal laugh.

Then he explained his invention, of which he was inordinately proud.

Some two or three hundred traitors, men, women and children, tied securely together with ropes in great, human bundles and thrown upon a barge in the middle of the river: the barge with a hole in her bottom! not too large! only sufficient to cause her to sink slowly, very slowly, in sight of the crowd of delighted spectators.

The cries of the women and children, and even of the men, as they felt the waters rising and gradually enveloping them, as they felt themselves powerless even for a fruitless struggle, had proved most exhilarating, so Citizen Collot declared, to the hearts of the true patriots of Lyons.

Thus the discussion continued.

This was the era when every man had but one desire, that of outdoing others in ferocity and brutality, and but one care, that of saving his own head by threatening that of his neighbour.

The great duel between the Titanic leaders of these turbulent parties, the conflict between hotheaded Danton on the one side and cold- blooded Robespierre on the other, had only just begun; the great, all-devouring monsters had dug their claws into one another, but the issue of the combat was still at stake.

Neither of these two giants had taken part in these deliberations anent the new religion and the new goddess. Danton gave signs now and then of the greatest impatience, and muttered something about a new form of tyranny, a new kind of oppression.

On the left, Robespierre in immaculate sea-green coat and carefully gauffered linen, was quietly polishing the nails of his right hand against the palm of his left.

But nothing escaped him of what was going on. His ferocious egoism, his unbounded ambition was even now calculating what advantages to himself might accrue from this idea of the new religion and of the

National fête, what personal aggrandisement he could derive therefrom.

The matter outwardly seemed trivial enough, but already his keen and calculating mind had seen various side issues which might tend to place him – Robespierre – on a yet higher and more unassailable pinnacle.

Surrounded by those who hated him, those who envied and those who feared him, he ruled over them all by the strength of his own cold-blooded savagery, by the resistless power of his merciless cruelty.

He cared about nobody but himself, about nothing but his own exaltation: every action of his career, since he gave up his small practice in a quiet provincial town in order to throw himself into the wild vortex of revolutionary politics, every word he ever uttered had but one aim – Himself.

He saw his colleagues and comrades of the old Jacobin Clubs ruthlessly destroyed around him: friends he had none, and all left him indifferent; and now he had hundreds of enemies in every assembly and club in Paris, and these too one by one were being swept up in that wild whirlpool which they themselves had created.

Impassive, serene, always ready with a calm answer, when passion raged most hotly around him, Robespierre, the most ambitious, most self-seeking demagogue of his time, had acquired the reputation of being incorruptible and selfless, an enthusiastic servant of the Republic.

The sea-green Incorruptible!

And thus whilst others talked and argued, waxed hot over schemes for processions and pageantry, or loudly denounced the whole matter as the work of a traitor, he, of the sea-green coat, sat quietly polishing his nails.

But he had already weighed all these discussions in the balance of his mind, placed them in the crucible of

his ambition, and turned them into something that would benefit him and strengthen his position.

Aye! the feast should be brilliant enough! gay or horrible, mad or fearful, but through it all the people of France must be made to feel that there was a guiding hand which ruled the destinies of all, a head which framed the new laws, which consolidated the new religion and established its new goddess: the Goddess of Reason.

Robespierre, her prophet!

2: A Retrospect

The room was close and dark, filled with the smoke from a defective chimney.

A tiny boudoir, once the dainty sanctum of imperious Marie Antoinette; a faint and ghostly odour, like unto the perfume of spectres, seemed still to cling to the stained walls, and to the torn Gobelin tapestries.

Everywhere lay the impress of a heavy and destroying hand: that of the great and glorious Revolution.

In the mud-soiled corners of the room a few chairs, with brocaded cushions rudely torn, leant broken and desolate against the walls. A small footstool, once gilt-legged and satin-covered, had been overturned and roughly kicked to one side, and there it lay on its back, like some little animal that had been hurt, stretching its broken limbs upwards, pathetic to behold.

From the delicately wrought Buhl table the silver inlay had been harshly stripped out of its bed of shell.

Across the Lunette, painted by Boucher and representing a chaste Diana surrounded by a bevy of nymphs, an uncouth hand had scribbled in charcoal the device of the Revolution:*Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité ou la Mort;* whilst, as if to give a crowning point to the work of destruction and to emphasise its motto, someone had decorated the portrait of Marie Antoinette with a scarlet cap, and drawn a red and ominous line across her neck.

And at the table two men were sitting in close and eager conclave.

Between them a solitary tallow candle, unsnuffed and weirdly flickering, threw fantastic shadows upon the

walls, and illumined with fitful and uncertain light the faces of the two men.

How different were these in character!

One, high cheek-boned, with coarse, sensuous lips, and hair elaborately and carefully powdered; the other pale and thin-lipped, with the keen eyes of a ferret and a high intellectual forehead, from which the sleek brown hair was smoothly brushed away.

The first of these men was Robespierre, the ruthless and incorruptible demagogue; the other was Citizen Chauvelin, ex-ambassador of the Revolutionary Government at the English Court.

The hour was late, and the noises from the great, seething city preparing for sleep came to this remote little apartment in the now deserted Palace of the Tuileries, merely as a faint and distant echo.

It was two days after the Fructidor Riots. Paul Déroulède and the woman, Juliette Marny, both condemned to death, had been literally spirited away out of the cart which was conveying them from the Hall of Justice to the Luxembourg Prison, and news had just been received by the Committee of Public Safety that at Lyons, the Abbé du Mesnil, with the ci-devant Chevalier d’Egremont and the latter’s wife and family, had effected a miraculous and wholly incomprehensible escape from the Northern Prison.

But this was not all. When Arras fell into the hands of the Revolutionary army, and a regular cordon was formed round the town, so that not a single royalist traitor might escape, some three score women and children, twelve priests, the old aristocrats Chermeuil, Delleville and Galipaux, and many others, managed to pass the barriers and were never recaptured.

Raids were made on the suspected houses: in Paris chiefly, where the escaped prisoners might have found refuge, or better still where their helpers and rescuers

might still be lurking. Foucquier Tinville, Public Prosecutor, led and conducted these raids, assisted by that bloodthirsty vampire, Merlin. They heard of a house in the Rue de l'Ancienne Comédie where an Englishmen was said to have lodged for two days.

They demanded admittance, and were taken to the rooms where the Englishman had stayed. These were bare and squalid, like hundreds of other rooms in the poorer quarters of Paris. The landlady, toothless and grimy, had not yet tidied up the one where the Englishman had slept: in fact she did not know he had left for good.

He had paid for his room, a week in advance, and came and went as he liked, she explained to Citizen Tinville. She never bothered about him, as he never took a meal in the house, and he was only there two days. She did not know her lodger was English until the day he left. She thought he was a Frenchman from the South, as he certainly had a peculiar accent when he spoke.

"It was the day of the riots," she continued; "he would go out, and I told him I did not think that the streets would be safe for a foreigner like him: for he always wore such very fine clothes, and I made sure that the starving men and women of Paris would strip them off his back when their tempers were roused. But he only laughed. He gave me a bit of paper and told me that if he did not return I might conclude that he had been killed, and if the Committee of Public Safety asked me questions about him, I was just to show the bit of paper and there would be no further trouble."

She had talked volubly, more than a little terrified at Merlin's scowls, and the attitude of Citizen Tinville, who was known to be very severe if anyone committed any blunders.

But the Citizeness – her name was Brogard and her husband’s brother kept an inn in the neighbourhood of Calais – the Citizeness Brogard had a clear conscience. She held a license from the Committee of Public Safety for letting apartments, and she had always given due notice to the Committee of the arrival and departure of her lodgers.

The only thing was that if any lodger paid her more than ordinarily well for the accommodation and he so desired it, she would send in the notice conveniently late, and conveniently vaguely worded as to the description, status and nationality of her more liberal patrons.

This had occurred in the case of her recent English visitor.

But she did not explain it quite like that to Citizen Foucquier Tinville or to Citizen Merlin.

However, she was rather frightened, and produced the scrap of paper which the Englishman had left with her, together with the assurance that when she showed it there would be no further trouble.

Tinville took it roughly out of her hand, but would not glance at it.

He crushed it into a ball and then Merlin snatched it from him with a coarse laugh, smoothed out the creases on his knee and studied it for a moment.

There were two lines of what looked like poetry, written in a language which Merlin did not understand. English, no doubt.

But what was perfectly clear, and easily comprehended by anyone, was the little drawing in the corner, done in red ink and representing a small star-shaped flower.

Then Tinville and Merlin both cursed loudly and volubly, and bidding their men follow them, turned away from the house in the Rue de l’Ancienne Comédie

and left its toothless landlady on her own doorstep still volubly protesting her patriotism and her desire to serve the government of the Republic.

Tinville and Merlin, however, took the scrap of paper to Citizen Robespierre, who smiled grimly as he in his turn crushed the offensive little document in the palm of his well-washed hands.

Robespierre did not swear. He never wasted either words or oaths, but he slipped the bit of paper inside the double lid of his silver snuff-box and then he sent a special messenger to Citizen Chauvelin in the Rue Corneille, bidding him come that same evening after ten o'clock to room No. 16 in the ci-devant Palace of the Tuileries.

It was now half-past ten, and Chauvelin and Robespierre sat opposite one another in the ex-boudoir of Queen Marie Antoinette, and between them on the table, just below the tallow-candle, was a much creased, exceedingly grimy bit of paper.

It had passed through several unclean hands before Citizen Robespierre's immaculately white fingers had smoothed it out and placed it before the eyes of ex-Ambassador Chauvelin.

The latter, however, was not looking at the paper, he was not even looking at the pale, cruel face before him. He had closed his eyes and for a moment had lost sight of the small dark room, of Robespierre's ruthless gaze, of the mud-stained walls and greasy floor. He was seeing, as in a bright and sudden vision, the brilliantly-lighted salons of the Foreign Office in London, with beautiful Marguerite Blakeney gliding queen-like on the arm of the Prince of Wales.

He heard the flutter of many fans, the frou-frou of silk dresses, and above all the din and sound of dance music, he heard an inane laugh and an affected voice repeating the doggerel rhyme that was even now

written on that dirty piece of paper which Robespierre had placed before him:–

> “We seek him here, and we seek him there,
> Those Frenchies seek him everywhere!
> Is he in heaven, is he in hell,
> That demmed elusive Pimpernel?”

It was a mere flash! One of memory’s swiftly effaced pictures, when she shows us for the fraction of a second indelible pictures from out our past. Chauvelin, in that same second, while his own eyes were closed and Robespierre’s fixed upon him, also saw the lonely cliffs of Calais, heard the same voice singing: “God save the King!” the volley of musketry, the despairing cries of Marguerite Blakeney; and once again he felt the keen and bitter pang of complete humiliation and defeat.

3: Ex-Ambassador Chauvelin

Robespierre had quietly waited the while. He was in no hurry: being a night-bird of very pronounced tastes, he was quite ready to sit here until the small hours of the morning watching Citizen Chauvelin mentally writhing in the throes of recollections of the past few months.

There was nothing that delighted the sea-green Incorruptible quite so much as the aspect of a man struggling with a hopeless situation and feeling a net of intrigue drawing gradually tighter and tighter around him.

Even now, when he saw Chauvelin's smooth forehead wrinkled into an anxious frown, and his thin hand nervously clutched upon the table, Robespierre heaved a pleasurable sigh, leaned back in his chair, and said with an amiable smile:

"You do agree with me, then, Citizen, that the situation has become intolerable?"

Then as Chauvelin did not reply, he continued speaking more sharply:

"And how terribly galling it all is, when we could have had that man under the guillotine by now, if you had not blundered so terribly last year."

His voice had become hard and trenchant like that knife to which he was so ready to make constant allusion. But Chauvelin still remained silent. There was really nothing that he could say.

"Citizen Chauvelin, how you must hate that man!" exclaimed Robespierre at last.

Then only did Chauvelin break the silence which up to now he had appeared to have forced himself to keep.

"I do!" he said with unmistakable fervour.

“Then why do you not make an effort to retrieve the blunders of last year?” queried Robespierre blandly. “The Republic has been unusually patient and long-suffering with you, Citizen Chauvelin. She has taken your many services and well-known patriotism into consideration. But you know,” he added significantly, “that she has no use for worthless tools.”

Then as Chauvelin seemed to have relapsed into sullen silence, he continued with his original ill-omened blandness:

“Ma foi! Citizen Chauvelin, were I standing in your buckled shoes, I would not lose another hour in trying to avenge mine own humiliation!”

“Have I ever had a chance?” burst out Chauvelin with ill-suppressed vehemence. “What can I do single-handed? Since war has been declared I cannot go to England unless the Government will find some official reason for my doing so. There is much grumbling and wrath over here, and when that damned Scarlet Pimpernel League has been at work, when a score or so of valuable prizes have been snatched from under the very knife of the guillotine, then, there is much gnashing of teeth and useless cursings, but nothing serious or definite is done to smother those accursed English flies which come buzzing about our ears.”

“Nay! you forget, Citizen Chauvelin,” retorted Robespierre, “that we of the Committee of Public Safety are far more helpless than you. You know the language of these people: we don’t. You know their manners and customs, their ways of thought, the methods they are likely to employ: we know none of these things. You have seen and spoken to men in England who are members of that damned League. You have seen the man who is its leader. We have not.”

He leant forward on the table and looked more searchingly at the thin, pallid face before him.

“If you named that leader to me now, if you described him, we could go to work more easily. You could name him, an you would, Citizen Chauvelin.”

“I cannot,” retorted Chauvelin doggedly.

“Ah! but I think you could. But there! I do not blame your silence. You would wish to reap the reward of your own victory, to be the instrument of your own revenge. Passions! I think it natural! But in the name of your own safety, Citizen, do not be too greedy with your secret. If the man is known to you, find him again, find him, lure him to France! We want him – the people want him! And if the people do not get what they want, they will turn on those who have withheld their prey.”

“I understand, Citizen, that your own safety and that of your government is involved in this renewed attempt to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel,” retorted Chauvelin drily.

“And your head, Citizen Chauvelin,” concluded Robespierre.

“Nay! I know that well enough, and you may believe me, and you will, Citizen, when I say that I care but little about that. The question is, if I am to lure that man to France what will you and your government do to help me?”

“Everything,” replied Robespierre, “provided you have a definite plan and a definite purpose.”

“I have both. But I must go to England in, at least, a semi-official capacity. I can do nothing if I am to hide in disguise in out-of-the-way corners.”

“That is easily done. There has been some talk with the British authorities anent the security and welfare of peaceful French subjects settled in England. After a good deal of correspondence they have suggested our sending a semi-official representative over there to look after the interests of our own people commercially and

financially. We can easily send you over in that capacity if it would suit your purpose."

"Admirably. I have only need of a cloak. That one will do as well as another."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. I have several plans in my head, and I must know that I am fully trusted. Above all, I must have power… Decisive, absolute, illimitable power."

There was nothing of the weakling about this small, sable-clad man, who looked the redoubtable Jacobin leader straight in the face and brought a firm fist resolutely down upon the table before him. Robespierre paused a while ere he replied; he was eying the other man keenly, trying to read if behind that earnest, frowning brow there did not lurk some selfish, ulterior motive along with that demand for absolute power.

But Chauvelin did not flinch beneath that gaze which could make every cheek in France blanch with unnamed terror, and after that slight moment of hesitation Robespierre said quietly:

"You shall have the complete power of a military dictator in every town or borough of France which you may visit. The Revolutionary Government shall create you, before you start for England, Supreme Head of all the Sub-Committees of Public Safety. This will mean that in the name of the safety of the Republic every order given by you, of whatsoever nature it might be, must be obeyed implicitly under pain of an arraignment for treason."

Chauvelin sighed a quick, sharp sigh of intense satisfaction, which he did not even attempt to disguise before Robespierre.

"I shall want agents," he said, "or shall we say spies? and, of course, money."

"You shall have both. We keep a very efficient secret service in England and they do a great deal of good

over there. There is much dissatisfaction in their Midland counties – you remember the Birmingham riots? They were chiefly the work of our own spies. Then you know Candeille, the actress? She had found her way among some of those circles in London who have what they call liberal tendencies. I believe they are called Whigs. Funny name, isn't it? It means perruque, I think. Candeille has given charity performances in aid of our Paris poor, in one or two of these Whig clubs, and incidentally she has been very useful to us."

"A woman is always useful in such cases. I shall seek out the Citizeness Candeille."

"And if she renders you useful assistance, I think I can offer her what should prove a tempting prize. Women are so vain!" he added, contemplating with rapt attention the enamel-like polish on his fingernails. "There is a vacancy in the Maison Molière. Or – what might prove more attractive still – in connection with the proposed National fête, and the new religion for the people, we have not yet chosen a Goddess of Reason. That should appeal to any feminine mind. The impersonation of a goddess, with processions, pageants, and the rest. Great importance and prominence given to one personality. What say you, Citizen? If you really have need of a woman for the furtherance of your plans, you have that at your disposal which may enhance her zeal."

"I thank you, Citizen," rejoined Chauvelin calmly. "I always entertained a hope that some day the Revolutionary Government would call again on my services. I admit that I failed last year. The Englishman is resourceful. He has wits and he is very rich. He would not have succeeded, I think, but for his money – and corruption and bribery are rife in Paris and on our coasts. He slipped through my fingers at the very moment when I thought that I held him most securely. I

do admit all that, but I am prepared to redeem my failure of last year, and…there is nothing more to discuss. I am ready to start."

He looked round for his cloak and hat, and quietly readjusted the set of his necktie. But Robespierre detained him a while longer: that born mountebank, born torturer of the souls of men, had not gloated sufficiently yet on the agony of mind of this fellow-man.

Chauvelin had always been trusted and respected. His services in connection with the foreign affairs of the Revolutionary Government had been invaluable, both before and since the beginning of the European War. At one time he formed part of that merciless decemvirate which – with Robespierre at its head – meant to govern France by laws of bloodshed and of unparalleled ferocity.

But the sea-green Incorruptible had since tired of him, then had endeavoured to push him on one side, for Chauvelin was keen and clever, and, moreover, he possessed all those qualities of selfless patriotism which were so conspicuously lacking in Robespierre.

His failure in bringing that interfering Scarlet Pimpernel to justice and the guillotine had completed Chauvelin's downfall. Though not otherwise molested, he had been left to moulder in obscurity during this past year. He would soon enough have been completely forgotten.

Now he was not only to be given one more chance to regain public favour, but he had demanded powers which in consideration of the aim in view, Robespierre himself could not refuse to grant him. But the Incorruptible, ever envious and jealous, would not allow him to exult too soon.

With characteristic blandness he seemed to be entering into all Chauvelin's schemes, to be helping in every way he could, for there was something at the

back of his mind which he meant to say to the ex-ambassador, before the latter took his leave: something which would show him that he was but on trial once again, and which would demonstrate to him with perfect clearness that over him there hovered the all-powerful hand of a master.

“You have but to name the sum you want, Citizen Chauvelin,” said the Incorruptible, with an encouraging smile; “the Government will not stint you, and you shall not fail for lack of authority or for lack of funds.”

“It is pleasant to hear that the Government has such uncounted wealth,” remarked Chauvelin with dry sarcasm.

“Oh! the last few weeks have been very profitable,” retorted Robespierre; “we have confiscated money and jewels from emigrant royalists to the tune of several million francs. You remember the traitor Juliette Marny, who escape to England lately? Well! her mother’s jewels and quite a good deal of gold were discovered by one of our most able spies to be under the care of a certain Abbé Foucquet, a calotin from Boulogne – devoted to the family, so it seems.”

“Yes?” queried Chauvelin indifferently.

“Our men seized the jewels and gold, that is all. We don’t know yet what we mean to do with the priest. The fisherfolk of Boulogne like him, and we can lay our hands on him at any time, if we want his old head for the guillotine. But the jewels were worth having. There’s a historic necklace worth half a million at least.”

“Could I have it?” asked Chauvelin.

Robespierre laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

“You said it belonged to the Marny family,” continued the ex- ambassador. “Juliette Marny is in England. I might meet her. I cannot tell what may happen: but I feel that the historic necklace might prove useful. Just as you please,” he added with renewed indifference. “It

was a thought that flashed through my mind when you spoke – nothing more."

"And to show you how thoroughly the Government trusts you, Citizen Chauvelin," replied Robespierre with perfect urbanity, "I will myself direct that the Marny necklace be placed unreservedly in your hands; and a sum of fifty thousand francs for your expenses in England. You see," he added blandly, "we give you no excuse for a second failure."

"I need none," retorted Chauvelin drily, as he finally rose from his seat, with a sigh of satisfaction that this interview was ended at last.

But Robespierre too had risen, and pushing his chair aside he took a step or two towards Chauvelin. He was a much taller man than the ex-ambassador. Spare and gaunt, he had a very upright bearing, and in the uncertain light of the candle he seemed to tower strangely and weirdly above the other man: the pale hue of his coat, his light-coloured hair, the whiteness of his linen, all helped to give to his appearance at that moment a curious spectral effect.

Chauvelin somehow felt an unpleasant shiver running down his spine as Robespierre, perfectly urbane and gentle in his manner, placed a long, bony hand upon his shoulder.

"Citizen Chauvelin," said the Incorruptible, with some degree of dignified solemnity, "meseems that we very quickly understood one another this evening. Your own conscience, no doubt, gave you a premonition of what the purport of my summons to you would be. You say that you always hoped the Revolutionary Government would give you one great chance to redeem your failure of last year. I, for one, always intended that you should have that chance, for I saw, perhaps, just a little deeper into your heart than my colleagues. I saw not only enthusiasm for the cause of the People of France, not

only abhorrence for the enemy of your country, I saw a purely personal and deadly hate of an individual man – the unknown and mysterious Englishman who proved too clever for you last year. And because I believe that hatred will prove sharper and more far-seeing than selfless patriotism, therefore I urged the Committee of Public Safety to allow you to work out your own revenge, and thereby to serve your country more effectually than any other – perhaps more pure-minded – patriot would do. You go to England well-provided with all that is necessary for the success of your plans, for the accomplishment of your own personal vengeance. The Revolutionary Government will help you with money, passports, safe-conducts; it places its spies and agents at your disposal. It gives you practically unlimited power, wherever you may go. It will not enquire into your motives, nor yet your means, so long as these lead to success. But private vengeance or patriotism, whatever may actuate you, we here in France demand you deliver into our hands the man who is known in two countries as the Scarlet Pimpernel! We want him alive if possible, or dead if it must be so, and we want as many of his henchmen as will follow him to the guillotine. Get them to France, and we'll know how to deal with them, and let the whole of Europe be damned."

He paused for a while, his hand still resting on Chauvelin's shoulder, his pale green eyes holding those of the other man as if in a trance. But Chauvelin neither stirred nor spoke. His triumph left him quite calm; his fertile brain was already busy with his plans. There was no room for fear in his heart, and it was without the slightest tremor that he waited for the conclusion of Robespierre's oration.

"Perhaps, Citizen Chauvelin," said the latter at last, "you have already guessed what there is left for me to

say. But lest there should remain in your mind one faint glimmer of doubt or of hope, let me tell you this. The Revolutionary Government gives you this chance of redeeming your failure, but this one only; if you fail again, your outraged country will know neither pardon nor mercy. Whether you return to France or remain in England, whether you travel North, South, East or West, cross the Oceans, or traverse the Alps, the hand of an avenging People will be upon you. Your second failure will be punished by death, wherever you may be, either by the guillotine, if you are in France, or if you seek refuge elsewhere, then by the hand of an assassin. Look to it, Citizen Chauvelin! for there will be no escape this time, not even if the mightiest tyrant on earth tried to protect you, not even if you succeeded in building up an empire and placing yourself upon a throne."

His thin, strident voice echoed weirdly in the small, close boudoir. Chauvelin made no reply. There was nothing that he could say. All that Robespierre had put so emphatically before him, he had fully realised, even whilst he was forming his most daring plans.

It was an "either – or" this time, uttered to *him* now. He thought again of Marguerite Blakeney, and the terrible alternative he had put before *her* less than a year ago.

Well! he was prepared to take the risk. He would not fail again. He was going to England under more favourable conditions this time. He knew *who* the man was, whom he was bidden to lure to France and to death.

And he returned Robespierre's threatening gaze boldly and unflinchingly; then he prepared to go. He took up his hat and cloak, opened the door and peered for a moment into the dark corridor, wherein, in the far distance, the steps of a solitary sentinel could be faintly heard: he put on his hat, turned to look once more into