Mam'zelle Guillotine

Baroness Orczy

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CHAPTER I: 1789: THE DAWN OF REVOLUTION

"Arms! Arms! Give us arms!"

France to−day is desperate. Her people are starving. Women and children cry for bread; famine, injustice and oppression have made slaves of the men. But the time has come at last when the cry for freedom and for justice has drowned the wails of hungry children. It is Sunday the twelfth of July. Camille Desmoulins the fiery young demagogue is here, standing on a table in the Palais Royal, a pistol in each hand, with a herd of gaunt and hollow−eyed men around him.

"Friends," he demands vehemently, "shall our children die like sheep? Shall we continue to plead for ears that will not hear and appeal to hearts that are made of stone? Shall we labour to feed the welled−filled and see our wives and daughters starve? Frenchmen! The hour has come: the hour of our deliverance. To arms, friends! to arms! Let our oppressors look to themselves. Let them come to grips with us, the oppressed, and see if brutal force can conquer justice."

With burning hearts and quivering lips they listened to him for a while, some in silence, others muttering incoherent words. But soon they took up the echo of the impassioned call: "To arms!" and in a few moments what had been a tentative murmur became a delirious shout: "To arms! To arms!" Throughout the long afternoon, until dusk and nightfall, and thereafter the call to arms like the roar of ocean waves breaking on a rocky shore resounded from one end of Paris to the other. And all night long men in threadbare suits and wooden shoes roamed about the streets, gesticulating, forming groups, talking, arguing, shouting. Shouting always their rallying cry: "To arms!"

By dawn the next day the herd of gaunt, hollowed−eyed men has become a raging multitude. The call for arms has become a vociferous demand: "Give us arms!" Right to−day must be at grips with might. The oppressed shall rise against the oppressor. But the oppressed must have arms wherewith to smite the tyrant, the extortioner, the relentless task−master of the poor. And so they march, these hungry, wan−faced men, at first in their hundreds but soon in their thousands. They march to the Town Hall demanding arms.

"Arms! Arms! Give us arms!"

It is Monday morning but all the shops are shut: neither cobblers, nor weavers, barbers nor venders of miscellaneous goods have taken down their shutters. Labourers and scavengers are idle, for every worker to−day has become a fighter. Alone the bakers and the vinters ply their trade, for fighting men must eat and drink. And the smiths are set to work to forge pikes as fast as they can, and the women up in their attics to sew cockades. Red and blue which are the municipal colours are tacked on to the constitutional white, thus making of the Tricolour the badge of France in revolt.

The rest of Paris continues to roam the streets demanding arms: first at the Hôtel de Ville, the Town Hall where provost and aldermen are forced to admit they have no arms: not in any quantity, only a few antiquated firelocks, which are immediately seized upon. Then they go, those hungry thousands, to the Arsenal, where they only find rubbish and bits of rusty iron which they hurl into the streets, often wounding others who had remained, expectant, outside. Next to the King's warehouse where there are plenty of gewgaws, tapestries, pictures, a gilded sword or two and suits of antiquated armour, also the cannon, silver mounted and coated with grime, which a grateful King of Siam once sent as a present to Louis XIV, but nothing useful, nothing serviceable.

No matter! A Siamese cannon is better than none. It is trundled along the streets of Paris to the Debtors' prison, to the Chatelet, to the House of Correction where prisoners are liberated and made to swell the throng.

News of all this tumult soon wakens the complacent and the luxurious from their slumbers. They tumble out of bed wanting to know what "those brigands" were up to. The "brigands it seems were in possession of the barriers, had seized the carts which conveyed food into the city for the rich. They were marching through Paris, yelling, and roaring, wearing strange cockades. The tocsin was pealing from every church steeple. Every smith in the town was forging pikes; fifty thousand it was asserted had been forged in twenty−four hours, and still the "brigands" demanded more.

So what were the complacent and the luxurious to do but make haste to depart from this Paris with its strange cockades and its unseemly tumult? There were some quick packings−up and calls for coaches, tumbrils, anything whereon to pile up furniture, silver and provisions and hurry to the nearest barrier. But already Paris in revolt had posted its scrubby hordes at all the gates, with orders to stop every vehicle from going through and to drag every person who attempted to leave the city, willy−nilly to the Town Hall.

And the complacent and the luxurious, driven back into Paris which they wished to quit, desire to know what the commandant of the city, M. le baron Pierre Victor de Besenval is doing about it. They demand to know what is being done for their safety. Well! M. de Besenval has sent courier after courier to Versailles asking for orders, or at least for guidance. But all that he gets in reply to his most urgent messages are a few vague words from His Majesty saying that he has called a Council of his Ministers who will decide what is to be done, and in the meanwhile let M. le baron do his duty as beseems an officer loyal to his King.

Besenval in his turn calls a Council of his Officers. His troops are deserting in their hundreds, taking their arms with them. Two of his Colonels declare that their men will not fight. Later in the afternoon three thousand six hundred Gardes Françaises ordered to march against the insurgents go over to them in a body with their guns and their gunners, their arms and accoutrements. Gardes Françaises no longer, they are re−named Gardes Nationales, and enrolled in the fastgrowing Paris Militia, which is like to number forty− eight thousand soon, and by to−morrow nearer one hundred thousand.
If only it had arms, the Paris Militia would be unconquerable.

And now it is Tuesday, the fourteenth of July, a date destined to remain for all time the most momentous in the annals of France, a date on which century−old institutions shall totter and fall, not only in France, but in the course of time, throughout the civilized world, and archaic systems shall perish that have taken root and gathered power since might became right in the days of cave−dwelling man.

Still no definite orders from Versailles. The Council of Ministers continues to deliberate. Hoary−headed Senators decide to sit in unbroken session, while Commandant Besenval in Paris does his duty as a soldier loyal to his King. But what can Besenval do, even though he be a soldier and loyal to his King? He may be loyal but the men are not. Their Colonels declare that the troops will not fight. Who then can stem that army of National Volunteers, now grown to a hundred and fifty thousand, as they march with their rallying cry "To arms!" and roll like a flood to the Hôtel des Invalides?

"There are arms there. Why had we not thought of that before?"

On they roll, scale the containing wall and demand entrance. The Invalides, old soldiers, veterans of the Seven Years' War stand by; the gates are opened, the Garde Nationale march in, but the veterans still stand by without firing a shot. Their Commandant tries to parley with the insurgents, put they push past him and his bodyguards; they swarm all over the building rummaging through every room and every closet from attic to cellar. And in the cellar the arms are found. Thousands of firelocks soon find their way on the shoulders of the National Guard. What indeed can Commadant Besenval do, even though he be a soldier and loyal to his King?

CHAPTER II. PARIS IN REVOLT

And now to the Bastille, to that monument of arrogance and power, with its drawbridges, its bastions and eight grim towers, which has reared its massive pile of masonry above the "swinish multitude" for over four hundred years. Tyranny frowning down on Impotence. Power holding the weak in bondage. Here it stands on this fourteenth day of July, bloated with pride and, conscious of its impregnability, it seems to mock that chaotic horde which invades its purlieus, swarms round its ditches and its walls, and with a roaring like that of a tempestuous sea, raises the defiant cry: "Surrender!"

A tumult such as Dante in his visions of hell never dreamed of, rises from one hundred and fifty thousand throats. Floods of humanity come pouring into the Place from the outlying suburbs. Paris in revolt has arms now: One hundred thousand muskets, fifty thousand pikes: one hundred and fifty thousand hungry, frenzied men. No longer do these call out with the fury of despair: "Arms! Give us arms!" Rather do they shout : "We'll not yield while stone remains on stone of that cursed fortress."

And the walls of the Bastille are nine feet thick.

Can they be as much as shaken, even by a hurricane of grapeshot and the roaring of a Siamese cannon? Commandant de Launay laughs the very suggestion to scorn. He has less than a hundred and twenty men to defend what is impregnable. Eighty or so veterans, old soldiers who fought in the Seven Years' War, and not more than thirty young Swiss. He has cannons concealed up on the battlements, and piles of missiles and ammunition. Very few victuals, it is true, but that is no matter. As soon as he opens fire on that undisciplined mob, it will scatter as autumn leaves scatter in the wind. And "No Surrender!" has already been his answer to a deputation which came to him from the Town Hall in the early morning, suggesting parley with the men of the National Guard, the disciplined leaders of this riotous mob.

"No surrender!" he reiterates with emphasis; "rather will I hurl myself down from these battlements into the ditch three feet below, or blow up the fortress sky−high and half Paris along with it."

And to show that he will be as good as his word, he takes up a taper and stands for a time within arm's length of the powder magazine. Only for a time, for poor old de Launay never did do what he said he would. All he did just then was to survey the tumulteous crowd below. They have begun the attack. Paris in revolt opens fire on the 'accursed stronghold" with volley after volley of musket−fire from every corner of the Place and from every surrounding window. De Launay thrusts the taper away, and turns to his small garrison of veterans and young Swiss. Will they fire on the mob if he gives the order? He has plied them with drink, but feels doubtful of their temper. Anyway, the volley of musket−fire cannot damage walls that are nine feet thick. "We'll wait and see what happens," thinks Commandant de Launay, but he does not rekindle the taper.

Just then a couple of stalwarts down below start an attack on the outer drawbridge. De Launay knows them both for old soldiers, one is a smith, the other a wheelright, both of them resolute and strong as Hercules. They climb on the roof of the guard−room and with heavy axes strike against the chains of the drawbridge, heedles of the rain of grapeshot around them. They strike and strike again, with such force and such persistence that the chain must presently break, seeing which de Launay turns to his veterans and orders fire. The cannon gives one roar from the battlements, and does mighty damage down below. Paris in revolt has shed its first blood and reaches the acme of its frenzy.

The chains of the outer drawbridge yield and break and down comes the bridge with a terrific clatter. This first tangible sign of victory is greeted with a delirious shout, and an umber of insurgents headed by men of the National Guard swarm over the drawbridge and into the outer court. Here they are met by Thuriot, second in command, with a small bodygaurd. He tries to parley with them. No use of course. Paris now is no longer in

revolt. It is in revolution.

The insurgents hustle and bustle Thuriot and his bodyguard out of the way. They surge all over the outer court, up to the ditch and the inner drawbridge. De Launay up on the battlements can only guess what is happening down there. His veterans and young Swiss stand by. Shall they fire, or wait till fired on? Indecision is clearly written on their faces. De Launay picks up a taper again, takes up his position once more within arm's length of the powder magazine. Will he, after all, be as good as his word and along with the impregnable stronghold blow half Paris up sky−high? He might have done it. He said he would rather than surrender, but he doesn't do it. Why not? Who shall say? Was it destiny that stayed his arm? destiny which no doubt aeons ago had decreed the downfall of this monument of autocratic sovereignty on his fourteenth day of July, 1789.

All that de Launay does is to order the veterans to fire once more, and the cannons scatter death and mutilation among the aggressors, whilst all kinds of missiles, pavingstones , old iron, granite blocks are hurled down into the ditch, till it too is littered with dead and dying. The wounded in the Place are carried to safety into adjoining streets, but so much blood has let a veritable Bedlam loose. A cartload of straw is trundled over the outer drawbridge into the court. Fire! Conflagaration! Paris in revolution had not thought before of this way of subduing that "cursed fortress", but now fire! Fire everywhere! The Bastille has not surrendered yet.

Soon the guard−room is set ablaze, and the veterans' mess−room. The fire spreads to one of the inner courts. De Launay still hovers on the battlements, still declares that he will blow up half Paris rather than surrender his fortress. But he doesn't do it, and a hundred feet below the conflagaration is threatening his last entrenchments. The flames lick upwards ready to do the work which old de Launay had sworn that he would do.

Inside the dungeons of the Bastille the prisoners, lifewearied and indifferent, dream that a series of earthquakes are shaking Paris, But what do they care? If these walls nine feet thick should totter and fall and bury them under their ruins, it would only mean for them the happy release of death. For hours has this hellish din been going on. In the inner courtyard the big clock continues to tick on; the seconds, the minutes, the hours go by: five hours, perhaps six, and still the Bastille stands.

Up on the battlements the garrison is getting weary. The veterans have been prone on the ground for over four hours making the cannons roar , but now they are tired. They struggle to their feet and stand sullen, with reversed muskets, whilst an old bearded sergeant picks up a a tattered white flag and waves it in the commandant's face. The Swiss down below do better than that. They open a porthole in the inner drawbridge, and one man thrusts out a hand, grasping a paper. It is seized upon by one of the National Guard. "Terms of Surrender," the Swiss cry as with one voice. The insurgents press forward shouting: "What are they?"

"Immunity for all," is the reply. "Will you accept?"

"On the word of an officer we will." It is an officer of the National Guard who says this. Two days ago he was officer in the Gardes Françaises. His word must be believed.

And so the last drawbridge is lowered and Paris in delirious joy rushes into the citadel crying: "Victory! The Bastille is ours!"

CHAPTER III. ONE OF THE DERELICTS

It is best not to remember what followed. The word of an officer, once of the Gardes Françaises, was not kept. Old veterans and young Swiss fell victims to the fury of frenzied conquerors. Paris in revolution, drunk with its triumph, plunged through the labyrinthine fortress, wreaking vengeance for its dead.

The prisoners were dragged out of their dungeons where some had spent a quarter of a century and more in a living death. They were let loose in a world they knew nothing of, a world that had forgotten them. That miserable old de Launay and his escort of officers were dragged to the Town Hall. But they never got there; hustled by a yelling, hooting throng, the officers fell by the wayside and were trampled to death in the gutters. Seeing which de Launay cried pitiably : "O friends, kill me fast." He had his wish, the poor old weakling, and all of him that reached the Town Hall was his head carried aloft on a pike.

To the credit of the Gardes Nationales, once the Royal Regiment of Gardes Françaises, be it said that they marched back to their barracks in perfect order and discipline; it was this same Garde Nationale who plied hoses on the conflagration inside the fortress and averted an explosion which would have wrecked more than a third of the city.

But no one took any notice of the liberated prisoners. A dozen or so of them were let loose in this World−Bedlam, left to roam about the streets, trying all in vain to gather up threads of life long since turned to dust. The fall of the mighty fortress put to light many of its grim secrets, some horrible, others infinitely pathetic, some carved in the stone of a dank dungeon, others scribbled on scraps of mouldy paper.

> "If for my consolation" [was the purport of one of these] "Monseigneur would grant me for the sake of God and the Blessed Trinity, that I could have news of my dear wife: were it only her name on a card to show that she is alive. It were the greatest consolation I could receive, and I would for ever bless the greatness of Monseigneur."

The letter is dated "A la Bastille le 7 Octobre 1752" and signed Quéret−Démery. Thirty−seven years spent in a dark dugeon with no hope of reunion with that dear wife, news of whom would have been a solace to the broken heart. History has no record of one Quéret−Démery who spent close on half a century in the "cursed fortress." What he had done to merit his fate no one will ever know. He *was*: that is all we know and that he spent a lifetime in agonized longing and ever−shrinking hope.

One can picture him now on this evening of July 14th turned out from that prison which had become his only home, the shelter of his old age, and wandering with mind impaired and memory gone, through the streets of a city he hardly knew again. Wandering with only one fixed aim: to find the old home where he had known youth and happiness, and the love of his dear wife. Dead or Alive? Did he find her? History has no record. Quéret−Démery was just an obscure, forgotten victim of an autocratic rule, sending his humble petition which was never delivered, to "Monseigneur." Monseigneur who? Imagination is lost in conjecture. The profligate Philippe d'Orleans or one of his like? Who can tell?

The attempt to follow the adventures or misadvantures of those thirteen prisoners let loose in the midst of Paris in revolution, would be vain. There were thirteen, it seems. An unlucky number. Again history is silent as to what became to twelve of their number. Only one stands out among the thirteen in subsequent chronicles of the times: a woman. The only woman among the lot. Her name was Gabrielle Damiens. At least that is the name she went by

later on, but she never spoke publicly either of her origin or of her parentage. She had forgotten; so she often said. One does forget things when one has spent sixteen years− one's best years− living a life that is so like death. She certainly forgot what she did that night after she had been turned out into the world: she must have wandered through the streets as did the others, trying to find her way to a place somewhere in the city, which had once been her home. But where she slpet then, and for many nights after that she never knew, until the day when she found herself opposite a house in the Boulevard Saint−Germain: a majestic house with an elaborate coronet and coat of arms carved in stone, surmounting the monumental entrance door: and the device also carved in stone: "N'oublie jamais." Seeing which Gabrielle's wanderings came to a sudden halt, and she stood quite still in the gutter opposite the house, staring up at the coronet, the caot of arms and the device. "N'oublie jamais," she murmured. "Jamais!" she reiterated with a curious throaty sound which was neither a cry nor a laugh, but was both in one. "No, Monsieur le Marquis de Saint−Lucque de Tourville," she continued to murmur to herself, "Gabrielle Damiens will see to it that you and your brood never shall forget."

There was a bench opposite the house under the trees of the boulevard and Gabrielle sat down not because she was tired but because she had a good view of the coronet and the device over the front door. Desultory crowds paraded the boulevard laughing and shouting "Victory!" Most of them had been standing for hours in queues outside the bakers' shops, but not everyone had been served with bread. There was not enough to go round, hence the reason why with the cry of "Victory!" there mingled one which sounded like an appeal, and also like a threat:

"Bread! Give us bread!"

Gabrielle watched them unseeing. She too had stood for the past few days in queues, getting what food she could. She had a little money. Where it came from she didn't know. She had a vague recollection of scrubbing floors and washing dishes, so perhaps the money came from that, or a charitable person may have had pity on her: anyway she was neither hungry nor tired, and she was willing to remain here on this bench for an indefinite length of time trying to piece together the fragments of the past from out the confused storehouse of memory.

She saw herself as a child, living almost as a pariah on the charity of relatives who never allowed her to forget her father's crime or his appaling fate. They always spoke of him as "that abominable regicide," which he certainly was not. François Damiens was just a misguided fool, a religious fanatic who saw in the profligate, dissolute monarch, the enemy of France, and struck at him not, he asserted, with a view to murdering his King but just to frighten him and to warn him of the people's growing resentment against his life of immorality. Madness of course. His assertion was obviously true since the weapon which he used was an ordinary pocketknife and did no more than scratch the royal shoulder. But he had struck at the King and royal blood had flown from the scratch, staining the royal shirt. In punishment for this sacrilege, Damiens was hung, drawn and quartered, but to the end, in spite of abominable tortures which he bore stoically, he maintained steadfastly that he had no accomplice and had acted entirely on his own initiative.

François Damiens had left his motherless daughter in the care of a married sister Ursule and her husband Anatole Desèze, a cabinet−maker, who earned a precarious livelihood and begrudged the child every morsel she ate. Gabrielle from earliest childhood had known what hunger meant and the bitter cold of a Paris of winter, often without a fire, always without sufficient clothing. She had relaxation only in sleep and never any kind of childish amusement. The only interests she had in life was to gaze up at an old box fashioned of carved wood, which stood on a shelf in the living−room, high up against the wall, out of her reach. This box for some unknown reason, chiefly because she had never been allowed to touch it, had always fascinated her. It excited her childish curiosity to that extent that on one occasion when her uncle and aunt were out of the house, she managed to drag the table close to the wall, to hoist a chair upon the table, to climb up on the chair and to stretch her little arms out in a vain attempt to reach the tempting box. The attempt was a complete fiasco. The chair slid away from under her on the polished table, and she fell with a clatter and a crash to the floor, bruised all over her body and her head swimming after it had struck against the edge of the table. To make matters worse, she felt so queer and giddy that she had not the strenght at once to put the table and chair back in their accustomed places. Aunt and uncle came

back and at once guessed the cause of the catastrophe, with the result that in addition to bruises and an aching head Gabrielle got a sound beating and was threatened with a more severe one still if she ever dared to try and interfere with the mysterious box again. She was ten years old when this disastrous incident occurred. Cowed and fearfull she never made a second attempt to satisfy her curiosity. She drilled herself into avoiding to cast the merest glance up on the shelf. But though she was able to control her eyes, she could not control her mind, and her mind continued to dwell on the mystery of that fatal box.

It was not until she reached the age of sixteen that she lost something of her terror of another beating. She was a strapping girl by then, strong and tall for her age and unusually good−looking inspite of poor food and constant overwork. Her second attempt was entirely succesful. Uncle and aunt were out of the way, table and chair were easily moved and Gabrielle waas now tall enough to reach the shelf and lift down the box. It was locked, but after a brief struggle with the aid of an old kitchen knife the lid fell back and revealed− what? A few old papers tied up in three small bundles. One of these bundles was marked with the name "Saint−Lucque," a name quite unknown to Gabrielle. She turned these papers− they were letters apparently− over and over, conscious of an intense feeling of disappointment. What she had expected to find she didn't know but it certainly wasn't this.

The girl however, was no fool. Soon her wits got to work. They told her that, obviously, if these old letters were of no importance to her, Aunt Ursule would not have kept them all these years out of her reach. As time was getting on and uncle and aunt might be back at any moment, she made haste to replace the box on the shelf, carefully disguising the damamge done by the kitchen knife. Chair and table she put back in their accustomed places and the old letters she tucked away under the folds of her fichu. By this time she had worked herself up into a fever of conjecture, but she had sufficient control over herself to await with apparent calm the moment when she could persue the letters in the privacy of her own room. She had never been allowed to have a candle in the evenings, because there was a street−lamp opposite the window which, as Aunt Ursule said, was quite light enough to go to bed by. Gabrielle hated that street−lamp because as there were no curtains to the window, the glare often prevented her getting to sleep, but on this never−to−be−forgotten night she blessed it. Far into the next morning sitting by the open window, did the daughter of François Damiens read and re−read those old letters by the flickering light of the street−lamp. When the lamp was extinguished she still remained sitting by the window scheming and dreaming until the pale light of dawn enabled her to read and read again. For what did those old letters reveal? They revealed the fact that her unfortunate father who had been sent to his death as a regicide had not been alone in his design against the King. The crime− for so it was called− had been instigated and aided by a body of noble gentlemen who like himself saw in the profligate monarch the true enemy of France. But whilst Damiens bore loyally and in silence the brunt of this conspiracy, whilst he endured torture and went to his death like a hero, those noble gentlemen had remained immune and left their miserable tool to his fate.

All this Gabrielle Damiens learned during those wakeful hours of the night. A great deal of it was of course mere inference; the letters were all addressed to her father apparently by three gentlemen, two of whom with commendable prudence had refrained from appending their signature. But there was one name "Saint−Lucque" which appeared at the foot of some letters more damnatory than most. Before the rising sun had flooded the towers of Notre Dame with gold Gabrielle had committed these to memory.

Yes! Memory was reawakened now, and busy after all these years unravelling the tangled skein of the past. Sitting here on the boulevard opposite the stately mansion with the coat of arms and the device "N'oublie Jamais" carved in stone above its portal, Gabrielle saw herself as she was during the three years following her fateful discovery. Her first task had been to make a copy of the letters in a clean and careful hand, after which there were the days spent in establishing the identity of "Saint−Lucque" and tracing his whereabouts. M. le Marquis de Saint−Lucque turned out to be one of the greatest gentlemen in France, attached to the Court of His Majesty King Louis XV. He lived in a palatial masion on the Boulevard Saint−Germain ans was a widower with one son. His association with François Damiens had seemingly never been found out. Presumably the whole episode was

forgotten by now.

Then there came the great day when Gabrielle first called on Monsieur le Marquis. It was not easy for a girl of her class to obtain an interview with so noble a gentlemen, and at once Gabrielle was confronted with a regular barrage of lackeys, all intent apparently on preventing her acces to their master. "No, certainly not," was the final pronouncement of the major−domo, a very great gentleman indeed in this lordly establishment, "you cannot present yourself before Monsieur le Marquis, he will not see you." Gabrielle conscious of her personal charm tried blandishments, but these were of no avail, and undoubtedly she would have failed in her purpose had not Monsieur le Vicomte, son and heir of Monsieur le Marquis, come unexpectedly upon the scene. He was in riding kit. An exceptionally handsome young man, and apparantly more impressionable than the severe major−domo. Here was a lovely girl whose glance was nothing less than a challenge, and she wanted something which was being denied her by a lot of louts. Whatever it was, thought the handsome Vicomte, she must have her wish; preliminary, he added to himself with an appraising look directed at the pretty creature, to his getting what he would want in return for his kind offices. There was an exchange of glances between the two young people and a few moments later Gabrielle was ushered into the presence of Monsieur le Marquis de Saint−Lucque by a humbled and bewildered major−domo. Monsieur le Vicomte had given the order, and there was no disobeying him. "I'll wait for you here," he whispered in the girl's ear, indicating a door on the same landing. She lowered her eyes, put on the airs of a demure country wench, and disappeared within the forbidden precincts.

The first interview with the old aristocrat was distinctly stormy. There was a great deal of shouting at first on his part. A stick was raised. A bell was rung. But Gabrielle held her grounds: very calmly, produced the copy of a damnatory letter, and presently the shouting ceased, the stick was lowered, and the lackey dismissed who came in answer to the bell. The letter doubtless brought up vivid and most unpleasant memories of the past. Presently a bargain was struck, money passed from hand to hand− quite a good deal of money, more than Gabrielle had ever seen in all her life, and the interview ended with a promise on her part to destroy all the original letters. She was to bring them to Monsieur le Marquis the next day and burn them before his eyes. She trotted off with the money safely tucked away in the fold of her fichu. The handsome Vicomte was waiting for her, and she duly paid the tribute which he demanded of her. But she did not call on the old the old Marquis either the next day, or the day after that, or ever again, because a week later Monsieur le Marquis de Saint−Lucque had a paralytic stroke, and thereafter remained bedridden for over four years until the day when he was laid to rest among his ancestors in the family mausoleum in Artois.

In the meantime Gabrielle Damiens's relationship with Vicomte Fernand de Saint−Lucque had become very tender. He was for the time being entirely under the charm of the fascinating blackmailer, unaware of the ugly role she had been playing against his father. He had fitted up what he called a love−nest for her in a rustic chalet in the environs of Versailles and here she lived in the greatest luxury, visited constantly by the Vicomte, who loaded her with money and jewellery to such an extent that she forgot all about her contemplated source of revenue through the medium of the compromising letters.

Everything then was going on very well with the daughter of François Damiens. Her uncle and aunt with the philosophy peculiar to *hoc genus omne* of their country were only too ready to approve of a situation which contributed largely to their well−being, for Gabrielle, ready to forget the cavalier way in which she had been treated in the past, was not only generous but lavish in her gifts to them. And all went well indeed for nearly three years until the day when Fernand de Saint−Lucque became weary of the tie which bound him to the rather common and exacting beauty and gave her a decisive if somewhat curt congé, together with a goodly sum of money which he considered sufficient as a solace to her wounded vanity. The blow fell so unexpectedly that at first Gabrielle felt absolutely stunned. It came at a moment when, deluded into believing that she had completely enslaved her highborn lover, she saw visions of being herself one day Vicomtesse and subsequently Marquise de Saint−Lucque de Tourville, received at Court, the queen and leader of Paris society.

She certainly did not look upon the Vicomte's partin gift as sufficient solace for her disappointment. It would not do much more than pay her debts to dressmakers, milliners and jewellers. With the prodigality peculiar to her kind she had spent money as freely and easily as she had earned it. She had, of course, some valuable jewellery, but this she would not sell, and the future, as she presently surveyed it, looked anything but cheerful. Soon, however, her sound common sense came to the rescue. She took, as it were, stock of her resources, and in the process remembered the letters on which she had counted three years ago as the foundation of her fortunes. She turned her back without a pang on the rustic chalet, no longer a love−nest now, and returned to her uncle and aunt, in whom she now felt compelled to confide the secret of her disappointment in the present and of her hopes of the future.

She made a fresh attempt to see the old Marquis. Then only did she learn of his sickness and the hopeless state of mind and body in which he now was. But this did not daunt Gabrielle Damiens. Her scheme of blackmail could no longer be succesfully directed against the father, but there was the son, the once enamoured Vicomte, her adoring slave, now nothing but an arrogant aristocrat, treating the humble little bourgeoise as if she were dirt and dismissing her out of his life with nothing but a miserable pittance. Well! He should pay for it, pay so heavily that not only his fortune but also his life would be wrecked in the process. Moreover, she, the daughter of that same François Damiens, who had been dubbed the regicide and died a horrible death, would see her ambition fulfilled and herself paid court to and the hem of germent kissed by obsequious courtiers, when she was Madame la Marquise de Saint−Lucque de Tourville.

She started on her campaign without delay. A humble request for an interview with M. le Vicomte was at first curtly refused, but when it was renewed with certain veiled threats it was conceded. Armed with the copies of the damnatory letters Gabrielle demanded money first and then marriage. Yes! no less a thing than marriage to the hier of one of the greatest names in France, failing which the letters would be sent to the Comte de Meaurevaisre, Chief of the Secret Police of His Majesty the King. Well! When Fernand de Saint−Lucque had dismissed her, Gabrielle, with a curt word of farewell, he had dealt her a blow which had completely knocked her over. But it was her turn now to retaliate. He tried to carry off the affair in his usual high−handed manner. He began with sarcasm, went with bravado, and ended with threats. Gabrielle stood as she had done three years ago before the old Marquis. Already she felt conscious of victory, because she had seen the look almost like a death−mask which had come over Fernand de Saint−Lucque's face when he took in the contents of this the first of the fateful letters. When she held it out to him he had waved her hand aside with disdain. She placed it on the table, and waited until natural curiosity impelled him to pick it up. He did it with a contemptuous shrug, held it as if it were filth.

But the look so like a death−mask soon spread over his face. He did his best to disguise it, but Gabrielle had seen it and felt convinced that victory was already in sight. She left, not taking any money away with her, not exacting any promise at the moment save that her victim− he was her victim already− would see her once more. He had commanded her to bring the letters: "Not the copies remember! The originals!" which the Vicomte declared with all his old arrogance did not exist save in the imagination of a cinderwench.

For days and weeks after that first interview did Gabrielle Damines keep the Vicomte de Saint−Lucque on tednerhooks without going near him. The old Marquis was still alive, slowly sinking, with one foot in the grave, and Gabrielle hugged herself with thoughts of the hier of that great name writhing under the threat of disgrace to the head of the house, disgrace followed by confiscation of all his goods, exile from court and country, his name for ever branded with the stigma of regicide: disgrace which would redound on his heir and on all his family, and migh even be the stepping stone to an ignominious death.

When Gabrielle felt that Fernand had suffered long enough she sent him a harsh command for another interview. Devoured with anxiety, he was only too ready to accede. She came this time in a mood as arrogant as his own, exacting writtenpromise of marriage: the date of the wedding to be fixed here and now. She did not bring the original letters with her. They would, she said curtly, be handed over to him when she, Gabrielle Damines, was incontestably Vicomtesse de Saint−Lucque de Tourville.

Fernand at his wits' end did not know what to do. He tried pretence: a softened manner as if he was prepared to yield. Quite gently and persuasively he explained to her that whatever his ultimate decision might be− and he gave her to understand that it certainly would be favourable− he was compelled at the moment to ask for a few days delay. He had been, he said, paying court to a lady, at His Majesty's express wish, had in fact become officially engaged, and all he needed was a little time for the final breaking off of his obligations. In the meanwhile he was ready, he said, to give her a written promise of marriage duly signed, the wedding to take place within the next three months.

As usual Gabrielle's common sense warned her of a possible trap. The Vicomte had made a very sudden *volte−face* and had become extraordinarily suave and engaging. He even went to length of assuring her that he never ceased to love her, and that it was only at the King's command that he had become engaged to the lady in question. The breaking off of that engagement, he declared in conclusion, would cause him no heartache. A little doubtful, inclined to mistrust this plausible dissembler, Gabrielle remained impervious to his blandishments, even when she suddenly found herself in his arms, under the once potent spell of his kisses. No longer potent now. She smiled back into his glowing eyes, accepted the written promise of marriage and endured his kisses while keeping her wits about her. When she finally freed herself from his arms she merely assured him that the compromising letters would be returned to him when she had become his lawful wife.

She trotted home that afternoon happy and triumphant with the written promise of marriage duly signed "Fernand de Saint−Lucque de Tourville" safely tucked away in the folds of her fichu. Aunt Ursule and Uncle Desèze congratulated her on her triumph, and the three of them sat up half the night making plans for a golden future. Aunt and uncle would have a farm with cows and horses and pigs, a beautiful garden and plenty of money to give themselves every luxury.

"You need never be afraid of the future," Gabrielle declared proudly. "I'll never be such a fool as to give up the original letters. Even when I am Marquise de Saint−Lucque I will always keep that hold over my husband."

There ensued four days of perfect bliss, unmarred by doubts or fears. They were destined to be the last moments of happiness the blackmailer was ever to know in life. Saint−Lucque, whose engagement to Mademoiselle de Nesle had not only been approved of but actually desired by the King, was nearly crazy with terror at the awful sword of Damocles hanging over his head. Not knowing where to turn or what to do he finally made up his mind to confide the whole of the miserable story to his future mother−in−law, the person most likely to be both discreet abd helpful. Madame de Nesle was just then in high favour with the King, whose daughter Mademoiselle was reputed to be, and she was just as anxious as was His Majesty to see the girl married to the bearer of a great name who would secure for her the *entreé* to the most exclusive circles of aristocratic France. One could not, Madame declared emphatically, allow a dirty blackmailer to come athwart the royal plans, and at once she suggested a *lettre de cachet* , one of those abominable sealed orders which consigned any person accused of an offence against the King to lifelong imprisonment, without the formality of a trail. She was confident that she could obtain anything she desired from her adoring Louis, and anyhow incarceration in the Bastille was the only way of silencing that audacious malefactor.

And Madame was as good as her word. Four days later Gabrielle Damiens saw herself cast into a cell in the Bastille. All her possessions were seized by the men who came to arrest her. Pinioned between two of them she watched the other two turning out her table drawers, and pocket everything they found there, including the precious letters, the promise of marriage and the pieces of jewellery which she had saved from the *débâcle* of the love−nest. Neither tears, nor protest, nor blandishments were of any avail. Her demands for a trail were met with stolid silence, her questions were not answered. She had become a mere chattel cast into a dungeon, there to remain till she was carried out, feet first, to be thrown into an unknown grave. She never knew what had become of her aunt and uncle, nor did she ever hear the name of Saint−Lucque mentioned again while she spent her best years in a living death.

Gabrielle Damiens was nineteen years old when this catastrophe occurred. Sixteen years had gone by since then.

CHAPTER IV: London 1794

"Tell me more about that young woman, Blakeney. She interests me."

It was the Prince of Wales who spoke. He was honouring Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney with his presence at dinner in their beautiful home in Richmond. The dinner was over; the ladies had retired leaving the men to enjoy their port and their gossip. It had been a small and intimate dinner−party and after the ladies had gone only half a dozen men were left sitting round the table. In addition to the host and the royal guest, there were present on this occasion four of the more prominent members of that heroic organization known as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel: Lord Anthony Dewhurst, my Lord Hastings and Sir Philip Glynde, also Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, his chief's right hand and loyal lieutenant, newly wed to Mademoiselle Suzanne de Tournay, one of the fortunate ones whom the League had succeeded in rescuing from the horrors of revolutionary France.

Without waiting for a reply to his command, His Royal Highness went on meditatively:

"I suppose Paris is like hell just now."

"With the lid off, sir," was Blakeney's caustic comment.

"And not only Paris," Sir Andrew added; "Nantes under that fiendish Carrier runs it close."

"As for the province of Artois " mused my Lord Hastings.

"That is where that interesting young woman takes a hand in the devilish work, isn't that it, Blakeney?" the Prince interposed. "You were about to tell us something more about her. I confess there is something that thrills one in that story in spite of oneself. The idea of a woman "

His Highness broke off and resumed after a moment or two:

"Is she young and good−looking?"

"Young? No sir," Blakeney answered. "Nearer forty than thirty, I should say."

"And not good−looking?"

"She must have been at one time. But sixteen years in the Bastille has modified all that."

"Sixteen years!" His Highness ejaculated. "What in the world had she done?"

"It has been a little difficult to get to the bottom of her story. But I was interested. So were we all, weren't we, Ffoulkes? As you say, sir, there is something thrilling−horrible really−in the idea of a woman performing the revolting task of a public executioner. For that is Gabrielle Damiens's calling at the moment."

"Damiens?" His Highness mused; "the name sounds vaguely familiar."

"Perhaps you will remember sir, that some twenty−five years ago a kind of religious maniac named François Damiens created a sensation by slashing the late King with a penknife, without doing real harm, of course; but for

this so−called crime he was condemned to death, hung, drawn and quartered. He maintained to the end, even under torture, that he had acted entirely on his own and that he never had any accomplice."

"Yes! I remember the story now. And this female executioner is his daughter?"

"His only child. She was only a baby at the time. As far as we have been able to unravel the tangled skein of this extraordinary tragi−comedy, Damiens bequeathed her a packet of old letters which involved the old Marquis de Saint−Lucque−the father of the present man−in that ridiculous conspiracy. Armed with these the girl−she was only sixteen at the time−started a campaign of blackmail, first against the old Marquis and, when he became bedridden, against his son, who, I understand, was deeply in love with her at one time."

"What a complication! But go on, man. Your story is as interesting as a novel by that French fellow Voltaire. Well!" His Highness continued, "and what happened to the blackmailer?"

"The usual thing sir. Saint−Lucque got tired of his liaison, broke it off, became engaged to Mademoiselle de Nesle . . ."

"Good old Louis's daughter, what?"

"Supposed to be," Blakeney replied curtly.

"I remember Madame de Nesle," His Highness mused. A beautiful woman! She even made the du Barry jealous. I was in Paris at the time. And her daughter married Saint−Lucque, of course . . . I remember!"

"Then you can guess the rest of the story, sir. Madame de Nesle wanted her daughter's marriage to take place. She had great influence over the King, and obtained from him one of those damnable lettres de cachet which did effectually silence the blackmailer by keeping her locked up in the Bastille without trial and without a chance of appeal. There she would have ended her days had not the revolutionaries captured the Bastille and liberated the prisoners."

"Most interesting! Most interesting! And how did the blackmailer become the executioner?"

"By easy stages, sir."

"What was she like when she came out, one wonders."

"Like a raging tigress."

"Naturally."

"Vowing before anyone who cared to listen that she would make Saint−Lucque and all his brood pay eye for eye and tooth for tooth."

"That was inevitable, of course," the Prince mused, "and not difficult to accomplish these days. I suppose," he went on, "that this Gabrielle Damiens has already got herself mixed up with the worst of the revolutionary rabble."

"She certainly has. She began by joining in the crowd of ten thousand women who marched to Versailles demanding food. She seized a drum from one of the guard−rooms in the suburb where she lived, and paraded the streets beating the Generale and shouting: 'Bread! we must have bread! . . .' and 'Come, mothers, with your starving children . . .' and so on."

"You weren't there, were you, Blakeney?"

"I was, sir. Tony, Ffoulkes and I were the guests of the King that day at Versailles. We saw it all. It was the queerest crowd, wasn't it, Tony?"

"It certainly was," my Lord Tony agreed lightly; "fat fishwives from the Halles, chambermaids shouldering their brooms, pale−faced milliners and apple−cheeked country wenches. All sorts and conditions."

"And this Damiens woman was among them?"

"She led them, sir," Blakeney replied, "with her drum. The whole thing was really pathetic. Food in Paris was very scarce and very dear and there were many cases of actual starvation. The trouble was, too, that the Queen had chosen to give a huge banquet the day before to the officers of the army of Flanders who came over to take the place of certain disloyal regiments. Three hundred and fifty guests sat down to a Gargantuan feast, ate and drank till the small hours of the morning. It was most injudicious to say the least."

"Wretched woman!" the Prince put in with a sigh; "she always seemed to do the wrong thing even in those days."

"And did so to the end, poor woman," one of the others observed.

"Was that the banquet you told me about, Blakeney, where you first met your adorable wife?"

"It was, sir," Blakeney replied, while a wonderfully soft look came into his lazy blue eyes, as it always did when Marguerite's name was as much as mentioned. It was only a flash, however. The next moment he added casually:

"And where I first saw Mam'zelle Guillotine."

"Such a funny name," His Highness remarked. "As a rule they speak of Madame Guillotine over there."

"Gabrielle deserves the name, sir, odious as it sounds. I have been told that she has guillotined over a hundred men and women and even a number of children with her own hands."

Then as they all remained silent, unable to pass any remark on this horrible statement, Sir Percy went on:

"After the march on Versailles she became more and more prominent in the revolutionary movement. Marat became her close friend and gave her all the publicity she wanted in his paper L'ami du Peuple. I know for a fact that she actually took a hand in the wholesale massacre of prisoners the September before last. Robespierre thinks all the world of her oratory, and she has spoken more than once at the Club des Jacobins and at the Cordeliers. I listened on several occasions to the harangues which she likes to deliver in the Palais Royal Gardens, standing on a table with a pistol in each hand as Camille Desmoulins used to do. They were the most inflammatory speeches I ever heard. And clever, too. The sixteen years she spent in the Bastille did not dull her wits seemingly. Finally," Blakeney concluded, "Robespierre got her appointed last year, at her own request, public executioner in his native province of Artois, and there she has been active ever since."

There was silence round the festive board after that. They were all men here who had seen much of the seamy side of life. Even His Highness had had experiences which do not usually come in the way of royal personages, and he was the only non−member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel who knew the identity of its heroic chief. His eyes now rested with an expression of ill−concealed affection and admiration on that chief, whom he honoured with his especial friendship.

He raised his glass of port and sipped it thoughtfully before he spoke again, then he said with an attempt at gaiety:

"I know what you are thinking at this moment, Blakeney."

"Yes, your Highness?" Sir Percy retorted.

"That Mam'zelle Guillotine will soon be . . . what shall we say? . . . lying in the arms of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

This sally made everybody laugh, and conversation presently drifted into other channels.

CHAPTER V. A SOCIAL EVENT

There are many records extant to−day of the wonderful rout offered to the élite of French and English society in London by Her Grace the Duchesse de Roncevaux in her sumptuous house in St. James's Square. The date I believe was somewhere in January, 1794. The decorations, the flowers, the music, the banquet−supper surpassed in magnificence, it is asserted by chroniclers of the time, anything that had ever been seen in the ultra−fashionable world.

The Duchesse, as everybody knows, was English by birth, daughter of Reuben Meyer, the banker, and immensely rich. His Grace the Duc de Roncevaux, first cousin to the royal house of Bourbon, married her not only for her wealth but principally because he was genuinely in love with her. His name and popularity at court secured for his wife a brilliant position in Paris society during the declining years of the monarchy, whilst his charming personality and always deferential love−making brought her a full measure of domestic happiness. He left her an inconsolable widow after five years of married bliss. The revolutionary storm was by then already gathering over France. The English−born Duchesse thought it best to return to her own country, before the cloud−burst which appeared more and more threatening every day. She chose London as her principal home, and here with the aid of her wealth and a heart overflowing with the milk of human kindness she did her best to gather round her those more fortunate French families who had somehow contrived to escape from the murderous clutches of the revolutionary government of France. Thus a delightful set of charming cultured people could always be met with in the Duchesse de Roncevaux's luxurious *salons*. Here one rubbed shoulders with some of the members of the old French aristocracy now dispossessed of most if not all their wealth, but bringing into the somewhat free−and−easy tone of eighteenth−century London something of their perfect manners, their old−world courtesy and that atmosphere of high−breeding and distinction handed down to them by generations of courtiers. The Comte de Tournay with Madame his wife and their son the young Vicomte were often to be seen at these social gatherings. Mademoiselle de Tournay had recently married Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, the handsome young leader of fashion, who was credited with being a member of the heroic League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. There was Félicien Lézenne, who had been chairman of the Club des Fils du Royaume, his young wife and Monsieur de Lucines, his father−in−law, who were actually known to have been saved from the guillotine by that mysterious and elusive person the Scarlet Pimpernel himself.

There were others, of course, for the list of refugees from revolutionary France waxed longer day by day and all found a welcome in the Duchesse de Roncevaux's hospitable mansion; and not only did they find a welcome but also a measure of gaiety! for the daughter of Reuben Meyer the Jewish banker had understanding as well as social ambition. Her aim was to make her *salon* the most attractive one in town, and what society could be more attractive than that of those French aristocrats, most of whom had palpitating stories to tell of past horrors, of dangers of death, and, above all, of those almost phenomenal rescues of condemned innocents sometimes under the very shadow of the guillotine, effected by that heroic organization known as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and its lion−hearted chief.

To hear one of those deeds of unparalleled courage recounted by one of those who owed their lives to that

intriguing personality was voted unanimously to be far more exciting than a melodrama at Drury Lane, and the Duchesse de Roncevaux could always be relied on to provide her guests with one of those soul−stirring narrations which caused every velvet cheek to flush with enthusiasm and every bright eye to glow with hero−worship. There were other entertainments too to be enjoyed in the sumptuous mansion in St. James's Square, there were operas, ballets, comedies, concerts: young musicians often made their first formal bow before a discriminating company which often included the Prince of Wales himself and the élite of English society, and more than one disciple of the late Mr. Garrick first tasted the sweets of success in the Duchesse's *salon*. But none of these entertainments had the power to excite interest as did the relation of one of those hair−raising exploits of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, told with fervour and a charming French accent by whoever happened to be the honoured guest of the evening.

On this occasion it was the abbé Prud'hon, lately come from France in the company of Monsieur le Marquis de Saint−Lucque and the young Vicomte. The arrival of Monsieur de Saint−Lucque had been a real event in the chronicle of London society. He was known to have been saved from death by the hero of the hour: in fact, he and the abbé had proclaimed this openly, and everybody the men as well as the ladies had been on tenterhooks to hear the true version of their amazing rescue. All sorts of rumours had been afloat, as they always were whenever a French family came to join the colony of recent *émigrés* who had found refuge in hospitable England. Everyone was agog to know how they had been smuggled out of France, for that was what it amounted to. Men, women and children, the old, the infirm, whenever innocent seemed literally to have been snatched from under the very noses of the revolutionary guard, and this led to all sorts of tales, medieval in their superstitious extravagance, of direct interference from the clouds or of a supernatural being, of unearthly appearance and abnormal strength who scattered revolutionary soldiers before him as easily as he would a swarm of flies.

There was a first−class sensation in fashionable circles when Madame la Duchesse de Roncevaux issued invitations for one of her popular routs. The invitation promised a concert by the London String Band, a playlet to be performed by His Majesty's mummers, and a supper prepared by Monsieur Haon formerly cook−in−chief to Madame de Pompadour. But all these attractions paled in interest before the one brief announcement: "Guest of Honour: M. l'Abbé Prud'hon." Everyone in town knew by now that M. l'Abbé Prud'hon was tutor to the young Vicomte de Saint−Lucque and had been summarily arrested along with him and M. le Marquis by the revolutionary government under the usual futile pretext of having plotted against the safety of the Republic.

The *salons* of Madame la Duchesse de Roncevaux were thronged on this occasion as they had never been before, and there was such a chattering up and down the monumental staircase as the guests filed up to greet their hostess, as in an aviary of love−birds.

"My dear, isn't it too wonderful?"

"I declare I am so excited, I don't know if I am standing on my head or on my heels."

"I know I shall scream if that London String Band goes on too long."

"I call it cruel to put them on before we have heard M. l'Abbé."

"Hush! you mustn't say that. The dear Duchesse had them only in order to bring our blood to boiling point."

"Mine has been over boiling point all day, and I am on the verge of spontaneous combustion."

By ten o'clock all the guests had arrived, and the hostess, wearied after standing for over an hour at the head of the staircase receiving the company, had retired to the rose−coloured boudoir where His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney, Sir Andrew and Lady Ffoulkes and a small number of the more privileged guests were discussing the coming event somewhat more soberly than did the gaily plumaged birds in the

adjoining ball−room. M. l'Abbé was there too, a pathetic figure in his well−worn soutane: his cheeks, once round and full, were pale and wan now, showing signs of the many privations, the lack of food and warmth, which he had suffered recently. He looked ill and very weary. It was only his eyes, tired−looking and red−rimmed though they were, that retained within their depths a merry twinkle which every now and then came to the fore, when his inward glance came to rest on a memory less cruel than most: that merry twinkle was the expression of a keen sense of humour which no amount of sorrow and suffering had the power wholly to eradicate.

At the moment he certainly seemed to have thrown off some of his lassitude; finding himself the centre of interest in a sympathetic crowd, all anxious to make him forget what he had suffered, and to make him feel at home in this land of freedom and of orderly government, his whole being seemed to expand in response. A warm glow came into his eyes and the smiles so freely bestowed on him by the ladies found their reflection round his pale, drooping lips. Everyone was charming to him. The Prince of Wales was most gracious, and his hostess lavish in delicate attentions. He had had an excellent dinner, and a couple of glasses of fine old Burgundy had put heart into him.

"Ah, Monsieur l'Abbé," sighed lovely Lady Lauriston, "you will tell us, won't you, the true, unvarnished facts about your wonderful escape."

"Of course I will, dear lady," the old priest replied; "nothing could make me happier than to let the whole world hear, if it were possible, the story of one of the most valorous deeds ever accomplished on this earth. I have seen men and women, especially recently, show amazing pluck and endurance under the terrible circumstances which alas obtain in my poor country these days, but never did I witness anything like the courage and resourcefulness displayed by that noble gentleman who rescued us from certain death at risk of his life."

The abbé had spoken so earnestly and in a voice quivering with such depth of emotion, that instinctively the chatter around him died down, and for a few moments there was silence in the pretty rose−coloured boudoir, whilst the old priest and several of the ladies surreptitiously wiped away a tear. Everyone felt thrilled, emotional; even the men responded readily to that feeling of pride in the display of courage and endurance, those virtues which make such a strong appeal to the finest of their sex.

It was the hostess who first broke the silence. She asked:

"And you do not know who your rescuer was, M. l'Abbé?"

"Alas, no, Madame la Duchesse. Monsieur de Saint−Lucque, the Vicomte and I were locked up inside the coach which was conveying us to Paris for trial and, of course, execution. It was very dark. To my sorrow I saw nothing, no one. And that is a sorrow I shall take with me to my grave. To touch the hand of the most gallant man on earth would be an infinite joy to me. And I know that Monsieur le Marquis thinks as I do over that."

"How is Monsieur le Marquis, by the way?" His Royal Highness enquired.

The abbé shook his head and drew a deep sigh.

"Sadly, I am afraid. He is heart−broken with anxiety about his wife and the other two children: and he keeps on reproaching himself for being safe and free while they are still in danger."

"Don't let him break his heart over that, M. l'Abbé. Didn't you tell us the other day that the Scarlet Pimpernel had pledged you his word to bring Madame de Saint−Lucque and her two little girls safely to England?"

It was Lady Blakeney who spoke. She was sitting on the sofa near the old priest and while she said those comforting words she put her hand on his arm. She was the most beautiful woman there, easily the queen among

this bevy of loveliness. The abbé turned to her and met those wonderful luminous eyes of hers so full of confidence and encouragement. He raised her hand to his old lips.

"Yes," he said; "we did get that marvellous pledge, Monsieur de Saint−Lucque and I. How it came to us is another of the many miracles that occurred during those awful times after we were arrested and incarcerated in the local gaol. There was a funny old fellow, dirty and bedraggled, whom we caught sight of one day through the grated window of our prison−cell. He was stumping up and down the corridor outside singing the Marseillaise very much out of tune. Two days later we saw him again, and this time as he stumped along he recited in a cracked voice that awful blasphemous doggerel: 'Ça ira!' It was then that the miracle occurred, for after he had gone by we saw a crumpled wad of paper on the floor, just beneath the window."

Here the abbé's narration was suddenly broken into by a shrill little cry of distress.

"Sir Percy, I entreat, do hold my hand. I vow I shall swoon if you do not."

The cry broke the tension which was keeping the small company in the boudoir hanging on the words of the old priest. All eyes were turned to the dainty lady who had uttered the pitiful appeal. The Lady Blanche Crewkerne had edged closer and closer to the sofa where sat the abbé; her eyes were glowing, her lips quivered; she was in a regular state of flurry. As soon as she had attracted all the attention she coveted to her engaging personality she raised a perfumed handkerchief to her tip−tilted nose, fluttered her eyelids, closed her eyes and finally tottered backwards as if in very truth she was on the point of losing consciousness. From all around there came an exclamation of concern until a pair of masculine arms was stretched out to receive the swooning beauty, whereupon concern turned to laughter, loud and prolonged laughter while Lady Blanche opened her eyes, thinking to find herself reclining against the magnificent waistcoat of the Prince of Dandies. They encountered the timid glance of old Sir Martin Cheverill, who felt very much embarrassed in the chivalrous role of supporter to a lady in distress thus unexpectedly thrust upon him. Nor did the lady make any effort to conceal her mortification. Already she had recovered her senses, as well as her poise. With nervy movements she plied her fan vigorously and remarked somewhat tartly:

"Methought Sir Percy Blakeney was standing somewhere near."

There was more laughter after this, and old Lady Portarles who never missed an opportunity of putting in a spiteful word where the younger ladies were concerned, interposed mockingly:

"Sir Percy, my dear Blanche? Why, he has been fast asleep this last half−hour."

And picking up her ample train she swept across the room to where a rose−coloured *portière* was drawn across the archway of a recess. Lady Portarles drew the curtain aside with a dramatic gesture and there of a truth across a satin−covered sofa, his head reclining against a cushion, fast asleep, lay the Prince of Dandies, Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart. An exclamation of horror, amounting to a groan, went round the room. Such disgraceful behaviour surpassed any that that privileged person had ever been guilty of. Had it been anyone else . . .

The groan, the exclamation of horror, had quickly roused the delinquent from his slumbers. He struggled to his feet and looking round on the indignant faces turned on him he had the good grace to look thoroughly embarrassed.

"Ladies, a thousand pardons," he stammered shame−facedly. His Royal Highness deigned to keep me at hazard the whole afternoon and . . ."

But it was no use appealing to His Highness for protection against the irate ladies. He was sitting back in his chair roaring with laughter.

"Blakeney," he said between his guffaws, "you'll be the death of me one day."

And after a time he added: "It is to Monsieur l'Abbé Prud'hon that you owe an abject apology."

"Monsieur l'Abbé . . ." Sir Percy began in tones of the deepest humility, "to do wrong is human. I have done wrong, I confess. To forgive is divine. Will you exercise your privilege and pronounce absolution on the repentant sinner?"

His manner was so engaging, his diction so suave, and he really did seem so completely ashamed of himself that the kind old priest who had a keen sense of humour was quite ready to forgive the offence.

"On one condition, Sir Percy," he said lightly.

"I am at your mercy, M. l'Abbé."

"That you listen to me without once going to sleep, mind you while I narrate to Madame la Duchesse's guests the full story of how Monsieur de Saint−Lucque and his son as well as my own insignificant self were spirited away out of the very jaws of death, and at the risk of his own precious life, by that greatest of living heroes the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"I am at your mercy, M. l'Abbé ," Sir Percy reiterated ruefully.

"And now I pray you, Sir Percy," the Lady Blanche resumed, and gave a playful tap with her fan on Sir Percy's sleeve, "to hold my hand. I am still on the point of swooning, you know," she added archly.

She held out her pretty hand to Blakeney, who raised it to his lips, then turning to the Prince of Wales he pleaded: "Will your Royal Highness pronounce this painful incident closed and command Monsieur l'Abbé to give us the story of what he is pleased to call a miracle."

"Monsieur l'Abbé . . ." His Highness responded, turning to the old priest, "since you have been gracious enough to forgive . . ."

"I will continue, *c'est entendu*," Monsieur l'Abbé readily agreed. And once more the ladies crowded round him the better to listen to a tale that had their beau ideal for its hero. Nor were the men backward in their desire to hear of the prowess of a man whose identity remained as incomprehensible as were the methods which he employed for getting in touch with those persecuted innocents whom he had pledged himself to save.

"And what was written on that scrap of paper, M. l'Abbé?" His Highness asked.

"Only a few words, your Highness," the priest replied. "It said: 'We who are working for your safety do pledge you our word of honour that Madame de Saint−Lucque and her two children will land safely in England before long," and in the corner there was a drawing of a small flower roughly tinted in red chalk."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel!" The three magic words coming from a score of exquisitely rouged lips had the sound of a deep−drawn sigh. It was followed by a tense silence while the abbé mopped his streaming forehead.

"Your pardon, ladies," he murmured. "I always feel overcome with emotion when I think of those horrible and amazing days."

CHAPTER VI. THE PRINCE OF DANDIES

Thus was the incident closed. The hostess rose somewhat in a flurry.

"In my excitement to hear you, M. l'Abbé," she said, "I am forgetting my guests. Will your Royal Highness deign to excuse me?"

"I'll follow you in a moment, dear lady. Your guests I am sure are dying with impatience. And," he added, turning with a smile to the other ladies, "all the best seats will soon be occupied."

It seemed like a hint, which from royal lips was akin to a command. Lady Lauriston, Lady Portarles and the other ladies followed in the wake of Madame la Duchesse. Only at a sign from His Royal Highness did a privileged few remain in the boudoir: they were Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and his young wife, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Monsieur l'Abbé Prud'hon and two or three others.

The Prince turned to the old priest and asked:

"And M. de Saint−Lucque you say, reverend, sir, could find no trace of the whereabouts of his wife and daughters?"

"None, monseigneur," the abbé replied. "When M. de Saint−Lucque did me the honour of seeking shelter under my roof with Monsieur le Vicomte, he entrusted his wife and daughters to the care of a worthy couple named Guidal, who had a small farm a league or so from Rocroi. They had both been in the service of old M. le Marquis, who had loaded them with kindness, and I for one could have sworn that they were loyalty itself. The night before our summary arrest we already knew that we were under suspicion the woman Guidal came to my presbytery. She was in tears. I questioned her and through her sobs she contrived to convey to me the terrible news that her husband fearing for his own arrest had talked of denouncing Madame la Marquise to the police; that she herself had entreated and protested in the name of humanity and past loyalty to the family, but terror of the guillotine had got a grip over him and he wouldn't listen. The woman went on to say that Madame la Marquise had unfortunately overheard the discussion and in the early dawn before she and her husband were awake had left the farm with her two little girls going she knew not whither. "Your Highness may well imagine," the old man went on, "how completely heart−broken Monsieur de Saint−Lucque was and has been ever since. At times since then I have even feared for his reason. Had it not been for his son he would I feel sure have done away with himself, but never for one moment would I allow M. le Vicomte to be away from his father. This was not difficult as the guard put over us during our captivity and in the coach that was taking us to Paris kept the three of us forcibly together. The first ray of light that came to us through this abysmal horror," the abbé now concluded, mastering the emotion which had seized him while he told his pitiable story, "were the few lines written on the scrap of paper which a dirty and be−draggled scavenger threw in to us through the grated window of our prison−cell: 'We who are working for your safety do pledge you our word that Madame de Saint−Lucque and her two children will land in England before long.'"

"And you may rest assured, M. l'Abbé, that that pledged word will never be broken."

It was Marguerite Blakeney who said this, breaking the tense silence which had reigned in the gay little boudoir when the old priest had concluded his narrative. She put her hand on his, giving it a comforting pressure and the old man raised it to his lips.

"God bless you!" he murmured. "God bless England and you all who belong to this great country." He rose to his feet and added fervently: "And, above all, God bless the selfless hero of whom you are so justly proud and to whom so many of us owe life and happiness: your mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel."

"God bless him!" they all murmured in unison.

Over in the ball−room the London String Band had finished playing the last item on their programme and the final chords of the *Magic Flute* followed by a round of applause came floating in on the perfumed air of the rose−coloured boudoir.

"Your Royal Highness," came in meek accents from Sir Percy Blakeney, "will you deign to remember that I am forbidden to go to sleep until Monsieur l'Abbé has told us a lot more about that shadowy Scarlet Pimpernel, and frankly I am dead sick of the demmed fellow already."

The Prince had already regained his habitual insouciance.

"Nor do we wish," he said, and gave the signal for every one to rise and follow him, "to miss another moment of M. le Abbé's interesting talk. But I'll warrant, my friend," he added, with a chuckle, "that you won't get to sleep till after you have completely atoned for your abominable conduct."

He shook an admonishing finger at Sir Percy Blakeney, the darling of society, the pattern of the perfect gentleman, caught *in flagrante delicto* of bad manners, and finally led the way into the adjoining ball−room. It was crowded with an ultra−fashionable throng. The elite of English society was present in full force as well as a goodly contingent of French émigrés. Lady Lockroy was there with her two pretty daughters. The old Earl of Mainbron had brought his charming young wife, and the Countess of Lauriston, acknowledged to be next to Lady Blakeney the best−dressed woman in town, had donned one of the new−fashioned dresses of clinging material and high waist said to be the latest mode in Vienna. And many others, of course. When His Highness entered the ball−room and the ladies swept their ceremonial courtesy to him down to the ground, there was such a rustling of silks and satins as if a swarm of bees had suddenly been let loose. His Highness had Lady Blakeney on his arm, and immediately behind him came Sir Percy with young Lady Ffoulkes. The Prince was in the best of humours.

"Ladies! Ladies!" he said gaily; "you have missed such a scandal as London has not witnessed for many a day. Has not our charming hostess told you?"

The select company who had trooped out of the boudoir in the wake of His Highness tittered as the word "scandal" went round the big ball−room in varied tones of horror or suspense.

"Your Highness, I entreat," Sir Percy whispered in the ear of his royal friend.

But the Prince solemnly shook his head and made to look very serious.

"No good your appealing to me, Blakeney," he said with mock severity. "The ladies must hear of your abominable behaviour. Monsieur l'Abbé has been most kind and forbearing, but our royal patience has been sorely tried, and we have decreed that your punishment shall fit your crime, and that you shall be pilloried before all these ladies as the most ill−mannered man in London. What say you, ladies? Lady Blakeney, have I your permission to proceed?"

The ladies with one accord begged His Highness to go on, whilst Lady Blakeney, smiling at her discomfited lord, shrugged her pretty shoulders and said deferentially:

"As your Royal Highness desires."

"Then we will depute Lady Portarles to tell the awful tale." His Highness concluded, and deposited his bulky person in a capacious armchair. He begged his hostess to sit on one side of him and Lady Blakeney on the other. The story of how the Prince of Dandies had gone to sleep while M. l'Abbé Prud'hon was relating one of the

miracles accomplished by the heroic Scarlet Pimpernel was told with obvious gusto and a suspicion of malice by Lady Portarles, who, by the way, was known in society as the queen of scandal−mongers. The story lost nothing in the telling and as the horrifying recital of his misdeed progressed, Sir Percy Blakeney became the target of a hundred frowning looks and was forced to listen to a veritable uproar of censure of "Shame on you, Sir Percy!" and "Would you believe it, my dear?" or "Did you ever hear the like?" The whole thing, of course, in a spirit of fun, for there was no more popular man in the whole of England than Sir Percy Blakeney.

Lady Blakeney sat by smiling sweetly whilst His Royal Highness obviously enjoyed the discomfiture of his friend. Protests on Sir Percy's part were of no avail. His Highness had decreed that he should be pilloried and he was.

"I have often noticed," one of the ladies now remarked, "that Sir Percy makes a point of going to sleep whenever the rest of us are thrilled by one of those marvellous exploits of our beloved Scarlet Pimpernel related here in this very room by those who owe their life to him."

"I seem to have noticed the same thing," mused pretty Lady Blanche, "on more than one occasion."

"My belief," put in Lady Portarles, in a voice that dominated the din of conversation, "my firm belief, I may say, is that our Prince of Dandies is jealous of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"He is! He is!" came in a loud chorus from everyone around.

"Own to it, Sir Percy, that you are jealous of our wonderful hero."

Sir Percy no longer protested.

"I will own to it at your command, fair ones," he said ruefully. "What can a poor man say when the innermost workings of his heart are read like a book by a whole bevy of lovely ladies. How can I help being jealous of that demmed elusive fellow who monopolises your thoughts and conversations at all hours of the day? That, begad, shadow deprives us mere mortals of your attention when we would desire to lay our homage at your feet."

While this merry interlude went on, the servants had been busy arranging the chairs and putting the room generally in order for the hearing of Monsieur l'Abbé's recital. Now everything was ready. Heavy curtains masked the dais where the String Band had discoursed sweet music, leaving a semicircular alcove in the centre of which the major domo had placed a chair behind a table with a carafe of water and a glass. And gradually chattering and laughter ceased. There was a little whispering here and there, a few discreet ripples of laughter quickly suppressed, when Sir Percy after he had seen Madame la Duchesse to her seat, took up his stand with an air of resignation against the nearest window embrasure. Monsieur l'Abbé Prud'hon now mounted the few steps that led up to the dais whilst the company sat down, the ladies in the front displaying their brocaded gowns to the best advantage, and the men standing in compact groups all round them.

No actor of note or learned lecturer could have boasted of a more attentive audience than had this old Frenchman in the shabby soutane with the wan cheeks and the twinkling eyes. He sat down in the framework of the alcove, and once or twice passed his hand across his brow as if to collect his thoughts.

"Monseigneur," he began, *"Mesdames et Messieurs."* He spoke in French throughout. Most of the company which consisted exclusively of cultured, well−educated persons, understood every word he said, for his diction was of the clearest, and he spoke his own language with the exquisite purity of the Touraine district. It was Madame Descazes, wife of the eminent advocate at the Paris bar, who being an erudite as well as a meticulous lady, made copious notes of what Monsieur l'Abbé related to the elegant company assembled in the *salon* of Madame la Duchesse de Roncevaux on that never−to−be−forgotten evening in the winter of 1794; and it is on these notes that

all records of the event are based, for Madame Descazes very kindly allowed her intimate friends to study her notes and make a translation of them if they had a mind.

"I am so thankful, my dear, that I learned French at school," the Countess of Mainbron whispered to her neighbour while the abbé paused for breath.

"I wish I had done better with it," the latter responded. "Luckily, the dear old man speaks very slowly, and I shall not miss much."

"I can understand every word he says," the youngest Miss Lockroy put in glibly.

"Hush! Hush over there!" Lady Portarles admonished. "We can't have any chattering or we may miss something."

For Monsieur l'Abbé, after a few preliminaries, had now embarked on the most palpitating point in his narrative.

"The great miracle, for I must call it that," he was saying, "occurred on a steep bit of road which cuts across the forest of Mézières. It was mid−afternoon and very dull and dark. We could see nothing inside the carriage for the windows were veiled by a curtain of misty rain which had fallen in a drizzle ever since early morning. We sat huddled up against one another. Monsieur le Marquis and I had the young Vicomte between us, trying to keep him warm, for as the shades of evening began to draw in, the cold grew intense, and the poor lad had been half starved ever since our arrest eight days before.

"As I say, we could see very little of what went on outside; only the dim outline of horses trotting on each side of the carriage. We were being strongly guarded. You must know, ladies, that Monsieur le Marquis and all his family are the special targets of an insane hatred on the part of the revolutionary government and of a cruel woman, whom may God forgive, who seems to have vast influence with them all."

"You mean the woman they call Mam'zelle Guillotine?" His Royal Highness here put in.

"Your Highness knows?" the hostess asked.

"We heard her life−story a little while ago," the Prince replied. "It is one of the most extraordinary ones we had ever heard."

"What has always remained a puzzle," the abbé continued after this slight interruption, "in the minds of those of us who have had the good fortune of coming in personal contact with the Scarlet Pimpernel is how he comes to be always in close touch with those who presently may have need of his help. I have heard it argued among some of my English friends that on most occasions luck entered largely in the success of his plans. There never was a more false or more unjust suggestion. Let me assure you that certainly as far as we wretched prisoners were concerned it was pluck and pluck only, the courage and resourcefulness of one man, that saved the three of us from death."

From the elegant assembly, from those society ladies peacocking it in their silks and satins, from the men, some of whom spent the best part of their day at the gambling−tables, there came a sound like the intaking of one breath, a deep sigh which proclaimed more eloquently than words could do the admiration amounting almost to reverence laid at the shrine of the bravest of the brave. The sigh died down and a tense silence followed. Nothing was heard for a moment or two, save the faint rustle here and there of stiff brocade, or the flutter of a fan, until suddenly the silence was broken by a pleasant voice saying lightly:

"Surely not one man, Monsieur l'Abbé. I have it from M. de Saint−Lucque himself that there were at least three if not more of the rescuing party . . . and that your Scarlet Pimpernel did no more than . . ."

"Hush! Silence!" came in indignant protest from the ladies at this attempted disparagement of their hero.

"Sir Percy, you are impossible!" one of them declared resolutely, whilst another begged His Royal Highness to intervene.

"Jealousy carried to that point," concluded Lady Portarles, "amounts to a scandal. Your Royal Highness, we entreat . . ."

"Nay, ladies," His Highness responded with his cheery laugh. "Since you ladies have failed in inculcating hero−worship into this flippant courtier of mine, what can I do? . . . a mere man!"

There were few things the Prince enjoyed more than the badgering of his friend over this question of the Scarlet Pimpernel, while he yielded it to none in his admiration for the man's superhuman courage and spirit of self−sacrifice.

"Lady Blakeney," one of the younger ladies pleaded, "have you no influence over Sir Percy? His flippant remarks cut most of us to the quick."

Marguerite Blakeney turned smiling to the speaker.

"I have no influence, my dear, over Sir Percy," she said, "but I am sure that he would sooner remain silent the rest of the evening rather than distress any of you."

"You have heard what her ladyship says, you incorrigible person," His Highness put in. "It amounts to a command which we feel obliged to second."

"What can I do," Blakeney responded humbly, "but bow my diminished head? Lady Blakeney is quite right when she asserts that I would rather remain for ever dumb than bring one tear of distress to so many lovely eyes. It was only a sense of fair play that caused me to say what I did."

"Fair play?"

"Why, yes. Fair play. In your over−estimation of one man's prowess, you, dear ladies, are apt to forget that there are other equally gallant English gentlemen, without whose courage and loyalty your Scarlet Pimpernel would probably by now have fallen into the hands of those murdering devils over in France. Now, I know for a fact, and I am sure that Monsieur l'Abbé will bear my story out, that in this case . . ."

But the mere suggestion that the Scarlet Pimpernel might possibly one day fall into the hands of the Terrorists in France, raised such a storm of indignation from the entire assembly that Sir Percy was unable to proceed. He gave an audible sigh of resignation and thereafter leaned back once more in silence against the window embrasure. His eyes remained fixed on his beautiful wife. She was obviously smiling to herself. It was a mischievous little smile for she, too, like the Prince of Wales, enjoyed the good−humoured chaff to which her husband was invariably exposed when the subject of the Scarlet Pimpernel was on the tapis. She was sitting beside His Royal Highness now and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes sat next to her. There was no more ardent worshipper of his chief than Sir Andrew, the most faithful and loyal lieutenant a leader ever had, and an evening like the present one gave him a measure of happiness almost as great as that experienced by Marguerite Blakeney herself. She was looking radiant and her luminous eyes had a glow in them which had its counterpart in those of her friend. They were made to understand one another, these two, and now, unseen by the rest of the company, he raised her hand to his lips.

CHAPTER VII. A VALOROUS DEED

After this brief interval the old abbé was allowed to resume his narrative.

"I am quite prepared to admit," he now went on, "that Nature helped our rescuers all she could. It would have been more difficult, of course, had the afternoon been fine and clear. But even so, I am sure that the leader of that gallant league would have found some other means to save us. As it was, the drizzle mixed with sleet and driven by a cutting wind fretted the horses, and the driver had much ado to keep them in hand: a difficult task, as he himself was obliged to keep his head down and his hat pulled well over his eyes. So we went on for what seemed to me an eternity. I had completely lost count of time. We went on and on or rather were being dragged along in the jolting vehicle on the rough, muddy road until we wondered whether body and soul could bear the strain any longer, and would presently disintegrate, be forced to break apart and lose cohesion through the violence of those agonising shocks.

"A slight respite from this torture came presently when the road began to rise sharply, and the horses, sweating and panting, were put at foot−pace while they dragged the heavy coach up the incline, still in squelching mud. As I put it to you just now, I had lost count of time altogether; so, I know, had Monsieur le Marquis. The child was asleep in my arms, his curly head resting against my shoulder. His lips were parted and through them came at regular intervals a gentle, pathetic moan. The shades of evening were drawing in by now, darkness closed in around us; we were prisoners inside that jolting vehicle, aching in every limb, unable to see, unable to move, hearing nothing but the creaking of axles and of damp leather, and the squelching of horses' hoofs in the mud of the road.

"And suddenly out of the gloom there rang the report of a pistol−shot, followed immediately by a loud call: 'Stand and deliver!'"

At which palpitating point in the abbé's narrative one of the ladies gave a shrill cry, another exclaimed, breathless: "Oh, *mon Dieu* !" and there was a peremptory chorus of "Hush!" in which the men also joined.

"The first pistol−shot was followed by another and then by a third," Monsieur l'Abbé resumed. "The horses must then have reared and plunged wildly, for we were shaken right out of our seats and found ourselves on the floor of the coach in a tumbled heap one on the top of the other. We could hear a great deal of shouting, hoarse words of command from the officer in charge of our escort, and throughout it all a confused jumble of sounds, the jingle of harness, the stamping and plunging of the horses maddened by the noise, the creaking of the carriage wheels, dragged forwards and then backwards by their restless movements, and the constant lashing of wind and sleet beating against the carriage windows. Everything around the coach did, in fact, add to the confusion. We in the meanwhile did our best to extricate ourselves from our unpleasant position and had just succeeded in regaining our seats, when the carriage door was suddenly opened and the figure of a man appeared in the framework. He had a lantern in his hand which he swung about, lighting up the inside of the coach as well as our scared faces. The man wore a mask, and for all the world looked the very picture of a highway−man. The poor little Vicomte huddled up against me and began to whimper. I remember that at the moment my thoughts were busy with conjecture as to what would be preferable under these circumstances: to continue our fateful journey to Paris or to fall into the hands of highway robbers. Before I could make up my mind as to that, the man with the lantern said quite pleasantly: 'As you value your lives, keep as still as you can. There are four of us here working for your safety.'

"And before we had recovered from the shock the happy shock, I may tell you which his words had brought to our nerves, the pseudo−highwayman had vanished and closed the carriage door behind him. We were left to marvel at this miracle which the good God had deigned to perform for our salvation. Monsieur le Marquis murmured faintly: 'It is surely that wonderful English gentleman they call the Scarlet Pimpernel who is working

for us,' and after a time he sighed and said: 'If only my dear wife and my darling girls could have been here too.' But somehow I felt wonderfully elated. I had said my prayers of thankfulness to God, and after that I was granted the power to comfort our dear little Vicomte, by putting my arms round him and making him rest his head against my shoulder, and also to speak words of encouragement to M. le Marquis. Next to the good God himself, I felt in my very soul complete belief in the Scarlet Pimpernel and trust in his courage and his ability to save us."

The old man paused for a moment or two and mopped his streaming forehead. He had spoken at some length amidst breathless silence on the part of his hearers. Someone poured out a glass of water for him, and he drank this down eagerly. After this he resumed:

"As to what happened subsequently we knew nothing for certain till some days afterwards when we were on board an English ship and saw the shores of France receding from our gaze. Then it was that the details of our amazing rescue were related to me by one of the brave followers of the Scarlet Pimpernel. I believe that it was just boundless enthusiasm for his chief that caused him to speak to me as he did. He was not the Scarlet Pimpernel himself but was, I am sure, the leader's right−hand man. Let me tell you at once that I have pledged my word of honour that I would never reveal his identity under any circumstances whatever. As a matter of fact, he was the pseudo−highwayman who came to comfort us when we were nearly scared to death. What he ultimately told us was in substance this: that the whole surprise attack was the foundation of an ingenious plan devised by his chief. It took no more than a few minutes to carry through. Surprise and swiftness were, as my informant said, the keynote of success. Had there been the slightest slackening of speed, a word of command wrongly interpreted, a mere second of hesitancy and the whole plan would certainly have failed. It was swift action that won the victory, because it brought about a confusion during which can you believe it? the Scarlet Pimpernel and his three followers were down on their knees in the squelching mud of the road, engaged in cutting the saddle−girths under the bellies of the troopers' horses. Imagine what pluck, what coolness such an action demanded in view of the fact that our brave rescuers were outnumbered three to one. It is, so I understand, a well−known form of attack practised in the East, fraught with deadly danger even when attackers are numerically stronger than their enemy. In our case I imagine that a kind of superstitious terror on the part of the revolutionary guard must also have played into the hands of those brave English gentlemen. The soldiers had no elbow−room for a good fight. The road was narrow, the afternoon light growing more and more dim. And with it all the constant cracking of pistol−shots, the snorting and terror of their horses, the confusion, the mêlée and the gathering gloom hindered the men from using what arms they had for fear of wounding their comrades or injuring their horses.

"We, of course, kept as quiet as our nerves would allow, marvelling what was happening and repeating our prayers to the good God for mercy and divine help. As a matter of fact, what was happening unbeknown to us remains to my mind the most wonderful act of audacity and contempt of danger I for one have ever heard of. It seems that at a given moment the Scarlet Pimpernel scrambled up the box−seat of the coach, snatched the reins out of the driver's hands and in less time than it takes an old man to tell you of it he had calmed the poor horses down. This, of course, as I say, we did not know at the time, but it thrilled us poor prisoners, I can tell you, when we heard a voice, a wonderful, cheery and yet commanding voice speak the one word: 'Ready.'

"Was it intuition or inspiration, I know not; certain it is that I knew in my innermost soul, that the voice I heard at that moment, was that of the Scarlet Pimpernel. I can't tell you how I knew, but I did know, and I have often talked this over with Monsieur le Marquis and it seems that he too had the same conviction that I had. You must remember that we inside the coach know nothing of what was happening, and yet there we were suddenly convinced that the hour of our deliverance had come. Often since that fateful moment have I been stirred to the soul by the mere recollection of that voice speaking the word: 'Ready!' It was *his* voice, my friends! I believe I should know it again among thousands, or in the midst of the loudest uproar."

The priest had indeed no cause to complain of a want of attention on the part of his audience. Men and women alike hung upon every word he uttered. They held their breath, their glowing eyes were fixed upon the old man's face.

"But, M. l'Abbé . . ." one lady was heard gasping through the breathless silence that hung on this vast assembly.

"Yes, dear lady?" the abbé responded.

"As you say you would know the voice of the Scarlet Pimpernel again . . ."

"I should . . . anywhere . . ." he assented.

"Then you are the one to identify our mysterious hero . . . to tell us who he is and where, oh where, we are to find him."

This raised a wave of agitation, and a murmur of excitement. But Monsieur l'Abbé only shrugged.

"Alas!" he said. "I have not heard that voice again only in my dreams."

"If you do not proceed, Monsieur l'Abbé," here interposed Sir Percy Blakeney with a genial laugh, "a number of ladies here will faint on the spot."

"Oh, yes, do go on, we beg of you, Monsieur l'Abbé," the ladies pleaded, and one of them added lightly:

"See, even Sir Percy, the arch scoffer, hangs upon your lips."

"There is not much more to relate," the priest now resumed. "I understand that the word 'Ready' was a command from the chief to his followers to take immediate cover, which they did, whilst he himself with one light click of the tongue whipped up the team, which plunged down the incline at breakneck speed.

"My informant, bless him, cowering with his two friends in the gloom of the thicket, told me that one of the most thrilling moments in the day's adventure was to see the revolutionary soldiers trying to give chase. Had they been circus−riders they might have given a good account of themselves, but never having learned how to sit a horse with their saddle−girths severed, they did not get very far. The three lieutenants of your gallant hero did not stay to see the rest of the fun. They had their orders and made their way to the place assigned to them by their chief. As to the rest of our journey it has always seemed both to Monsieur le Marquis and to me nothing but a dream. I remember but only vaguely the dash down the forest road, and subsequently several halts for the night in wayside huts. I remember the three of us being ordered at one time to don the tattered garb of road−menders, and being jolted along interminable roads in a rickety cart driven by an old hunchback who appeared dumb as well as deaf; and I remembering staggering with surprise when I saw that same old mudlark straighten out his back and throw a purse of money to one of his own kind, who after that drove the rickety cart all the way to the coast.

"Many less important events do I remember also. We were I reckoned five days on the way, five days during which I was haunted by a clear, commanding voice calling 'Ready' and by the vision of an out−at−elbows' hunchback whose body presently appeared as tall and as straight as that of a young god, and who threw a purse of gold about as if it were dross.

"And that, your Royal Highness, my lords and ladies," the abbé now concluded, "is all that I can tell you of the great miracle accomplished on our behalf and under the guidance of God by the finest and bravest man that ever walked this earth."

"Marvellous!"

"Prodigious!"

"Incredible!"

"Quite uncanny!"

These were some of the words that flew from mouth to mouth. It had been a glorious story, told with the simplicity of truth. The audience rose soon after that and separate groups were formed, groups in which the palpitating tale of a man's heroism drove from the most flippant minds all desire for frivolous chatter. The Prince of Wales held Monsieur l'Abbé in earnest conversation. There were many here present this evening who vowed that His Royal Highness was deep in the secrets of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and could if he had a mind reveal the identity of the popular hero. Lady Ffoulkes had edged up close to Lady Blakeney and these two beautiful women, wives of two brave English gentlemen, exchanged glances not only of pride but also of anxiety for those precious lives so valiantly and constantly risked in the defence of the helpless and the innocent.

At the other end of the room a group of ladies were trying to remember the famous doggerel which that inimitable dandy, Sir Percy Blakeney, as great a poet as he was a sportsman, had conceived while tying his cravat.

"It went thus," Lady Blanche declared: "They seek him in England, they . . ."

"No! no! no," broke in the eldest Miss Lockroy. "I am sure there was no word about England . . . or France . . ."

"Yes, there was," asserted pretty Miss Norreys; "I remember the word England very distinctly."

"Besides, it stands to reason," argued another fashionable beauty, "they are seeking him in England, aren't they?"

"Wouldn't it be simpler, ladies," one of the men suggested, "to settle the argument by referring it to the author of the deathless rhyme?"

"Yes! Yes! Of course," the ladies agreed.

"Sir Percy! Where is Sir Percy?"

All eyes were turned to the window embrasure against which the darling of society had last been seen reclining with an air of resignation.

"Sir Percy!" the ladies reiterated. "Where is Sir Percy?"

But they looked for him in vain. That Prince of Dandies had, incontinently, it seems, taken his elegant self off to a more congenial atmosphere.

CHAPTER VIII. A ROYAL FRIEND

Madame la Duchesse de Roncevaux was preparing to bid good night to her guests. They were all standing in a wide semicircle at one end of the ball−room waiting for His Royal Highness to give the signal for departure before they in their turn took their leave. This he did raising his hostess's hand to his lips.

"We have spent a delightful evening in your charming house, Madame," he said graciously; "one that none of our friends will, I warrant, ever forget."

The frou−frou of brocaded skirts once more swept the parquet floor with a sound like the buzzing of bees; it came as an accompaniment to His Highness's departure. After he had taken final leave of Madame la Duchesse the Prince turned to Sir Percy Blakeney, who with Marguerite on his arm was also ready to take his leave.

"Nay, man," he said jovially. "I won't let you go quite so easily. You are coming with us for we want a turn at hazard."

He gave a gracious nod to Blakeney, who murmured obediently:

"As Your Highness commands."

"I vow," the Prince went on, "I was so thrilled by Monsieur l'Abbé's narration I must do something to take my mind off those horrors that go on continually the other side of the Channel. Come, man, I'll challenge you. The best of five throws, with doubles or quits a time. Lady Blakeney," he went on, addressing Marguerite, "will you honour my poor house by accompanying us? I feel I shall be in luck to−night and win some of that rogue's fortune which is far to great for the needs of any man. The Goddess of Fortune and the Goddess of Love have him under their special care, he cannot expect Dame Chance to favour him also."

Thus chattering with his wonted good humour, His Royal Highness offered his arm to Marguerite who took it and led the way down the monumental staircase closely followed by Sir Percy. After he and his immediate entourage had left, the party broke up. There was a general rush for cloaks and mantles, calls outside for chaises and coaches, endless chattering and shrill little cries as in an aviary of love−birds.

Soon the whole company had dispersed, coaches and calèches rattled over the cobblestones of old London in this or that direction, and the magnificent mansion in St. James's Square was shuttered and presently was wrapped in sleep.

The Prince of Wales who had Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney with him, was being driven round in the royal equipage to Carlton House Terrace. Not a word was spoken during the drive. It was quite a short one. All three occupants of the carriage were absorbed in thought.

Half an hour later the royal host and his two privileged visitors were closeted in the small library adjoining the enfilade of reception−rooms. Attendants and servants had been dismissed and three chairs disposed in front of the mantelpiece in which blazed a cheerful fire of logs. In one of these reclined the rotund form of the future King of England; Lady Blakeney sat beside him, her luminous eyes fixed on the fitful play of the flames. Sir Percy was standing behind these two, close to a table on which was placed a steaming bowl of punch. He was intent on ladling out the hot liquid into a glass which he then placed at the elbow of his royal host. The latter took a long draught, smacked his lips and pronounced the drink to be first−rate.

"There is one thing, Lady Blakeney," he said jovially, "that this scapegrace of a husband of yours can do to perfection and that is to brew a night−cap. This punch is superlatively good."

He had another drink, cleared his throat, and fidgeted with his lace−edged handkerchief. Obviously he had something to say and knew not how to begin.

"You have guessed, gracious lady, I'm sure," he began at last, "the reason why I have asked you to come here to−night knowing well how tired and anxious you must be."

Marguerite murmured: "Yes!" almost inaudibly. She seemed unable to speak.

"I desired your presence while I gave a serious talking to this *mauvais sujet*."

He then turned to Sir Percy.

"Blakeney," he commanded, "come hither and stand before me while I impart to you our royal behest."

Blakeney smiling and indifferent at once came forward and, leaning against the tall mantelpiece, stood facing His Royal Highness who then resumed:

"While we held converse with M. l'Abbé Prud'hon and afterwards when he gave us such a graphic account of the heroic way in which . . ."

He broke off with a jovial guffaw for Blakeney had made a sign of obvious impatience and put up a hand in protest.

"All right, all right man!" he said good−humouredly, "but don't forget that I who represent the King my father am speaking to you now and I forbid you to interrupt. I was going to say that while our friend the emotional old priest was talking I watched your face, and I may say that this gracious lady here, your wife, did the same, and we both came to the conclusion that you were then and there making up your mind to go back to France in order to effect the rescue of Madame de Saint−Lucque and her children. That is so, is it not?"

He looked up enquiringly at Blakeney, trying to read in his somewhat clumsy way what went on behind those deep−set blue eyes with their far−away look of absorption in one single overwhelming purpose. How could he tell? How could anyone guess the workings of this self−centred mind intent on one thing and one only: the fulfillment of that one purpose? Indeed Blakeney's gaze at this moment, though fixed on his royal friend, was obviously unseeing. It took in nothing of these luxurious surroundings in happy England, the ease, the comfort and the peace. It had come to rest far away over there in France where a helpless woman and two innocent children would soon be facing death unless . . . And at the thought a happy smile came curling round his lips, and a great sigh not only of longing but of resolve rose from out the depths of his heart. The smile lingered until he saw Marguerite's lovely face turned appealingly up to his, saw her sweet mouth a−quiver with silent anguish and her lovely eyes shining with unshed tears. Then the smile faded from his lips, and a kind of grey veil seemed to spread right over his face. For one moment only. Just a few seconds and that look was gone, the grey veil lifted by some ghostly hand. Back came the smile and with it the merry laugh which proclaimed high animal spirits and a carefree heart.

"Blakeney, are you listening?" the Prince demanded sternly.

"At Your Highness's commands."

"My commands are these, man, and note the word 'command.' I am not asking or suggesting. I am ordering you to accompany us to Bath to−morrow where we desire to spend the next month in taking the waters necessary for our health."

A few second's silence and Blakeney put in with seeming irrelevance:

"The thaw has set in, sir. They have resumed hunting in the Shires."

"Well! You may hunt till the frost begins again if you like. But it is Bath or the Shires, understand."

"Your Highness would not forbid me to hunt then?"

"Certainly not."

"Yet you would forbid me to go after a deadlier quarry than the fox. You deign to tell me that I may hunt till the frost begins again. And I will obey you, sir, and run a pack of wolves to earth who are after an unfortunate woman and two defenceless children. I will hunt them down and redeem my solemn word to a man who is breaking his heart at thought of what his wife and little children must endure in the hands of inhuman brutes. You would not forbid me to hunt the fox, sir. He has done nothing more heinous than rob a hen−roost or two. Then why should I run him to earth and let the wolves have their way?"

"Sport, man, sport!" His Highness broke in impatiently; "Fox−hunting is the noblest sport on earth, and methought you were a sportsman."

"And I'll back my favourite sport against any that has ever been invented for whipping up the blood of a man and making him feel akin to the gods. And now in winter with the keen air fanning one's cheeks, with the night wrapping you round with its sable mantle, with woman or child clinging to you, their weak arms holding tightly to your waist, with human wolves behind you, while you ride for dear life through unknown country, riding, riding, not knowing where you may land, out of one death−trap into another, *that*, Your Highness, is the sport for me. I have tasted of it and so I know. Ask Ffoulkes, ask Tony, ask any of the others, heroes they, every one of them. Fine men all, brave men, and all of them obeying my slightest command. Sport, sir! Had you but tasted it once, you would never ask me to forgo it again!"

Never once did Blakeney raise his voice while he spoke. It never even shook. But the words came tumbling out of his mouth with the rapidity of running water. His voice while it was pitched low and as if muffled, became more sonorous, more vibrant, compelling attention with the overwhelming force of the passion within. He was looking straight out before him, with head thrown back, seeing as it were the vision which he had invoked: the loneliness, the blackness of the night, and those weak arms clinging round his waist. Hearing the thunder of hoofs behind him, scenting the hot breath of wolves in pursuit, and the approach of death which mayhap had marked him for its own. Ride on, thou gay adventurer! Ride on! For dear life, not your own but theirs, the weak, the innocent, the helpless. Ride on! Ride on! while beneficent darkness still lingers and the first grey streak of dawn tinges the east with its light. Ride! gaily ride while the thunder of hoofs behind you grows weaker and slowly dies away, and the breath of human wolves thirsting for blood is lost in the odour of the frosty air. Yes! here was the adventurer born, the reckless gambler, ready to toss his life against any odds of chance, forgetting everything save the thrill of the moment when even love is compelled to yield to the unconquerable spirit of dare−devilment in the name of mercy and the call of the oppressed for self−sacrifice.

Even the Prince, sybarite though he was, was held in thrall by the fascination of this extraordinary personality: courtier, lover, prince of dandies and king of adventurers. Less than an hour ago he had seen him an a ball−room dressed in the latest fashion, with priceless lace at throat and wrists, bandying inanities with brainless women, the butt and darling of society, the maker of merriment and laughter. How difficult it was to imagine this same man in rough and scanty clothing, unwashed, unshorn, dwelling in derelict huts on vermin−infested boards, or cowering in the scrub like some wild animal in its lair.

He, the Prince of Wales, the future King of England, had listened to that man in silence realising how futile his royal commands must sound after the inspired words of this visionary. And when Sir Percy had finished speaking, the silence still persisted. Any comment after this would almost seem like sacrilege. There was a mission here expounded that must surely have its inspiration from the God of Love Himself.

After a time the silence, broken only by the solemn ticking of a monumental clock over the mantelpiece, became strangely oppressive. It seemed as if Fate had taken her stand at the gambler's elbow and defied the two opponents the wife, the friend who pitted their weakness against her strength. Blakeney himself was the first to break in with his shy laugh and a quaint ejaculation:

"Good Lord! It must be that demmed punch getting into my head. Will Your Highness forgive me?"

"Forgive you? What have I to forgive?"

"Disobedience to royal commands for one thing, sir. The way I've made a fool of myself for another."

"You are determined to go then?"

"Would Your Highness have an English gentleman break his solemn word?"

"The risks are too great, my friend," the Prince insisted. "You are getting too well known over there. And you will be up against a woman this time, remember."

"Marvellous thought, isn't it, sir?"

"And women have sharper vision than men."

"I hope this one has. If she is as stupid as my old friend Chauvelin she won't give us a good run for our money."

"Percy," the Prince protested, "you are incorrigible."

And thus was the incident closed, the interview at an end. Soon Blakeney begged permission to take his leave. He had ordered his coach to be brought round to Carlton House Terrace for he knew that there was nothing Marguerite loved better than a drive through the night air after ball or rout in a stuffy atmosphere.

The major−domo was summoned to see that the coach was duly at the gate. For a few minutes while Sir Percy went to have a last look at his horses Marguerite was left alone with the Prince of Wales. He took hold of her hand and raised it deferentially to his lips.

"I have done my best, Lady Blakeney," he pleaded.

"I am eternally grateful, Your Highness," she murmured.

He went on with unusual solemnity:

"I am not a religious man, gracious lady, but to−night I will implore the good God on my knees to guard your husband from any kind of danger."

After Blakeney and his wife had left, the Prince of Wales remained for a long time absorbed in a kind of contemplation. He had seldom if ever been so moved as he had been to−night by the stripping naked of a soul the soul of his friend whom he had never truly understood until now. And he, the voluptuary, the hedonist, felt for the first perhaps the only time in his life a vague longing, almost an envy of that spirit which animated the personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and gave to him with all the hardships and selflessness necessary for the fulfilment of a self−imposed duty an overflowing cup of happiness and of joy.

"God grant her persuasive eloquence," he murmured to himself, when the time came to retire for the night. He was thinking of Marguerite, and the futile appeal she, poor woman, would also make to keep her beloved from fulfilling that duty which in this case might so easily lead to his death: one mistake, one slight mischance and one of the most precious lives in the land would be sacrificed on the altar of an ideal.

CHAPTER IX. THE BITTER LESSON

Marguerite had hardly spoken a word during the interview between her husband and his royal friend. She had sat by gazing into the fitful flames of the log−fire and listening, listening while torturing anxiety went on gnawing at her heart. Nor did she speak during the drive back to their home in Richmond. She loved the drive and to−night the air which was damp and soft and had brought about the thaw was sweet and invigorating. The four greys seemed to have the devil in their legs and Percy had another in his sensitive hands. He drove at breakneck speed over the cobblestones of suburban London, and over the squelchy road by the river.

An hour or so later Marguerite, having taken off her brocaded gown, donned a comfortable wrap and dismissed her maids, went to find her husband in the library where she knew he would be sitting now working away and elaborating the plan which he had formed for the rescue of Madame de Saint−Lucque and her children.

The evening in the *salon* of the Duchesse de Roncevaux had been torture to Marguerite, for while the abbé spoke so eloquently of the Scarlet Pimpernel she had detected every change in Percy's face. Others present only saw in him the fashionable dandy, the fop, the nincompoop who readily allowed himself to be the butt of empty−headed women, but she, his wife, knew just what was going on in his mind: she saw every subtle expression in the eyes, the flicker of the lids, the almost imperceptible set of his firm lips, and clenching of his hand.

But she never questioned him about his plans. She had learned the bitter lesson of waiting. She knew that no power on earth not even his love for her could move him once he had heard the call of innocents in distress.

Just when she reached the bottom of the stairs, the library door was thrown open by Percy's confidential valet. She heard Percy's voice from inside the room saying in French: "I will give you further instructions in the morning." A voice, unknown to her, replied: "At your commands, milor."

A small, spare man dressed in sober black came out of the room followed by the valet, who remained at attention whilst Marguerite, in her turn, passed into the library.

Percy was sitting at his desk with a map of Northern France spread out before him. He appeared to be tracing with one finger a route which he had marked out on it. At sight of that map and of Percy's obvious absorption, a pitiful cry was wrung from the poor woman's aching heart. She put her arms round him and murmured in a desperate appeal:

"If you love me, do not go!"

It was useless, of course. She knew that well enough. All he did was to take hold of her hands and press her soft palms against his lips. But his eyes soon wandered back to his desk. He picked up a paper on which were written a few lines in a small foreign−looking hand.

"Listen to this, m'dear," he said softly. "Our loyal friend Chartier of the Comédie Français has sent me the report I asked him for by special courier. You know how well informed he always is. He has such marvellous opportunities in the theatre and out of it. And this is what he says:

"'Chauvelin has been summoned back to Paris. Is not expected to return to Mézières for some time. Has reported to the C. of P.S. on the subject of the St. L's. Committee is sending their most famous spy to track down the woman and her two children. His name is André Renaud. He will arrive in M., so I understand, sometime in February. Up to the hour of writing no trace has been found of the woman and children, but believed to be still in the province not far from M.'"

He read the letter through quite slowly, as if he meant her to weigh every word. He then folded up the paper and slipped it in the inner pocket of his coat, murmuring softly the while:

"A stage coach plies between Barlemont in Belgium over the frontier to Mézières. That will be the best route for us to follow."

"Percy," she entreated, her voice choked with sobs.

Once again he pressed her soft palms to his lips.

"Light of my life," he said in a whisper close to her ear, "pray to God that I may not get there too late."

"Percy," she reiterated with infinite tenderness, "do not go."

She sank down on her knees. His arm rested on the arm of his chair. She laid her head down on it. Her hair fell in soft golden ripples all over her neck and shoulders. She felt his hand gently stroking her hair.

"Have no fear for me, my beloved, he said lightly, "those devils will never get me, I'll swear. But I am sorry," he added with a rueful smile, "that I shall not come to grips with my friend Chauvelin this time. This André Renaud won't be nearly so amusing. As for Mam'zelle Guillotine . . . Well! *A nous deux*, Mam'zelle.

He paused, gave a light−hearted laugh and then said with sudden earnestness:

"Joy of my heart! Have I not pledged my word to Saint−Lucque?"

Yes! he had pledged his word. Marguerite knew that well enough, also that he had proudly asserted: "The Scarlet Pimpernel never fails."

Nor would he fail, of that Marguerite was convinced. Strange as it may seem she knew within herself even at this hour of torturing anxiety, that Madame de Saint−Lucque and the two little girls would be brought safely to England and that very soon. But it was his life, his precious life, that was more and more certainly in jeopardy every time he went over to France. His anonymity was no longer absolute. Putting his arch−enemy Chauvelin aside, there must be quite a number of others who would recognise him as the Scarlet Pimpernel directly they saw him. Had he not spent weeks in the Conciergerie prison, when those devils tried to starve him into revealing the whereabouts of the unfortunate Dauphin? His warders and tormentors saw him day after day: any one of them would know him again, would even, perhaps, be able to pierce his cleverest disguise. And there were others! So many, many others and all of them on the look−out for the big reward promised for the capture of the English spy.

Useless? Of course it was useless. To−morrow or perhaps the next day he would steal away in the night, and she, Marguerite, would be left to mourn and to wait. Her arms tightened round him and she murmured in his ear:

"If you go, I go with you."

Before he could move or utter another word she had passed soundlessly out of the room.

And the day after next the social chronicle contained the announcement that Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney had left Richmond on a visit to friends in Leicestershire where they intended staying while the mild weather lasted. For the next twenty−four hours this somewhat sudden departure of these two leaders of fashion gave ample food for gossip over the coffee−cups. But everyone agreed that Sir Percy was eccentric. No one really knew how to take him, or Lady Blakeney for the matter of that. And then there were other matters to gossip about: the probable marriage of the Prince of Wales in the near future for one thing: the last phase of the trial of Warren Hastings for

another.

And of course the Prince of Dandies and his lady would soon be back, for the thaw was not likely to last.

CHAPTER X. A UNIQUE PERSONAGE

There is actually no authentic portrayal in existence of Gabrielle Damiens, the daughter of the "regicide," who was known during the early days of the revolution throughout the province of Artois as "Mam'zelle Guillotine." The only inkling one has of what she probably looked like comes from a sketch attributed to Louis David, at that time Director of Fine Arts and member of the National Convention. It is without doubt, like all David's work, an idealised representation of that odious, if remarkable woman. Even through the artist's pure and classical treatment of his subject, the woman's coarseness, not to say brutality, is apparent in the low forehead, the wide flat nostrils, the prominent eyes beneath the heavy brows, and above all in the full thick lips slightly parted, displaying a row of teeth sharp and long like the fangs of a wolf.

Nevertheless, one or two intimate chronicles of the time assert that Gabrielle Damiens had *une beauté de diable.* Thus might a Queen of Darkness be beautiful. Her figure was tall and well−proportioned suggesting great physical strength, and though her dark eyes seldom betrayed any emotion save of fury or hatred, her coarse lips would sometimes part in a smile, not of joy but of sensual pleasure which fascinated when it did not repel. Women, even the most ignoble harpies of this revolutionary period hated and feared her, but men like Marat and Danton looked upon her as the arch−fiend of the revolution and worshipped her as those of their kind worshipped the devil.

It was said of that inhuman monster Marat that he had been passionately in love with her.

Gabrielle Damiens occupied an apartment in what had been until a year ago the episcopal palace in Mézières. The bishop was now deposed. He was in hiding, so it was thought, somewhere in the forest, looked after surreptitiously by a few faithful peasants of the district, who did this act of charity at risk of their lives. The revolutionary government took over the palace, stripped it of everything of value that happened to be in it, desecrated the chapel and converted the fine reception−rooms on the ground floor into offices for the use of the local Committee of Public Safety, which now held its sittings in what had been the bishop's private oratory.

The floor above was assigned to Citizeness Gabrielle Damiens at her special request for her private residence. It was her friend Maximilien Robespierre, one of the most prominent members in the Convention who had obtained for her the position of Public Executioner in his native Province of Artois. The story of how a woman came to be appointed to such an odious post was a curious one. When Gabrielle Damiens was liberated from the Bastille after sixteen years' incarceration, and when full recollection came to her of how and by whose influence she came to be arrested, her one dominating thought was Revenge. Her mind, which had always been active, concentrated on schemes to accomplish that one supreme object. All sorts of different plans presented themselves before her in turn spying, denunciations, underground work of every sort and kind she rejected them all. Her diabolic temperament thirsted not for revenge only but for the actual blood of her enemies, of Saint−Lucque, who had engineered her incarceration in the Bastille, a living tomb in which she spent the best sixteen years of her life. And Saint−Lucque, it seems, was married and happy with his wife and young children. At thought of them Gabrielle Damiens became like those legendary vampires thirsting for the life−blood of the entire brood.

But how to attain her heart's desire? Gabrielle thought and thought and gradually a plan formed itself in her mind. A scheme. Only a vision at first but with the possibility of becoming a realisation, more wonderful, more stupendous than anything that had ever been done before. She saw herself like Sanson of Paris or Carrier of Nantes, the promoter and artisan of her own desires. She saw her hands, those large hands of hers with the short spatulate finger−tips dealing out death not vicariously but actually; deaths which she had for years madly longed

to witness. The guillotine! Why not?

What a vision! What if it became a reality? She foresaw difficulties, of course. Even in these topsy−turvy times a female wielder of the guillotine had not yet been thought of. But Robespierre was her friend and so was Marat. They were men of influence and both had the same kind of temperament as herself, cruel, vengeful and unscrupulous. It is to them that she turned. They whom she presently consulted, whose prestige she invoked. She was sure of Robespierre's approval. And Marat . . .? Well, Marat would come to heel like a snarling dog whatever she demanded of him. A flash of her eyes, a touch of her hand and he became her slave.

She sent for those two men one day. There was a short recess in the sittings of the Convention at the time and Robespierre had taken the opportunity of going down to his native province of Artois on business of his own, whilst Marat at Gabrielle's summons posted at once from Paris as he would have done from the furthest confines of France if she had called to him.

And so they came to her apartment which had once been a saintly bishop's oratory, and Gabrielle Damiens, "the regicide's daughter," stood before them, tall, spare, admirably poised. She was dressed like a man in crimson shirt and breeches: the sleeves of her shirt were rolled up to display her muscular arms, her bare feet were thrust into sabots.

"Do I not look like a man?" she challenged them. Robespierre nodded assent. Marat measured her with a tigerish glance.

"Mam'zelle Guillotine, what?" he murmured raucously.

"You call me Gabriel Damiens," the woman went on, "and you will present me to your committees as the son, not the daughter of François Damiens who was tortured and put to death by cowardly *aristos* to conceal their own misdeeds. You will explain that I was imprisoned in the Bastille for sixteen years for being my father's son. A good story eh?" she concluded defiantly.

"Excellent!" was Maximilien Robespierre's curt comment whilst Marat looked her up and down and gave a harsh laugh.

"You'll get found out pretty soon, *ma belle*," he said.

The woman shrugged: "Would that matter?" she retorted. "If I do my work well, which I certainly will, they will be satisfied and not care whether I am man or woman."

And so it came to pass that the Province of Artois boasted of that unique personage, a female executioner. She did not get found out till after those awful days in September when two hundred helpless prisoners were massacred in the prisons of Paris and in the surging crowd the murderers had their clothes torn off their backs. "Gabriel Damiens," summoned from Artois by Danton to give a hand in the butchery, accomplished, they said, the prodigies of patriotic ardour, by slaying no fewer than twenty women with "his" own hand. The revolutionary government, overruled at the time by the Extremists, desired to reward those who had served it well on that horrible occasion and Gabrielle Damiens had her reward by seeing her appointment confirmed as Public Executioner in the Province of Artois, despite her sex. She had not overestimated her valor when she said to her friends: "I'll do my work well! They will be satisfied with me."

And they were. Gabrielle Damiens, whenever the guillotine in the Province happened to be idle, filled in her time with public speaking. The days were already dawning when the tigers of the revolution were ready to devour one another. Denunciation against one party was eagerly listened to by the other. Extremists were at the throats of the Moderates. Failing them they were at one another's. Not one man who had been foolhardy enough to throw

himself into the vortex of public life felt that his head was safe upon his shoulders and the daughter of François Damiens "the regicide" saw to it that those who were avowedly or covertly her enemies became the victims of those who were her friends.

She had a caustic tongue and great power of oratory. Inflamed by her passions of hate and revenge she knew how to sway the populace by fierce attacks on those who had incurred her wrath. She would stand, as Camille Desmoulins had done four years before in Paris, on a table in the public park, holding a pistol in each hand; her harsh voice would ring out above the heads of the crowd gathered round her improvised rostrum. She knew, none better, how to pillory *aristos* and capitalists in the face of this poor, half−starved multitude, as potential assassins ready to sell the Republic to foreign usurers for gold. They would listen spell−bound, shivering under their miserable rags, a prey to a nameless fear of coming events which would mean death for them, and probably starvation for their wives and children.

And Gabrielle, feeling that she held these people by the magic of her eloquence, would stand there with flashing eyes, her cropped hair standing up on end around her head like a disordered mane, a blood−red flush covering her face like a veil. To the men her fascination soon became irresistible. When she spoke she could do with them what she liked, twist them round her little finger. Her face had in it at times an almost demoniac expression. She was no longer young, and loneliness, semi−starvation for sixteen years in the Bastille had robbed her of any charm she may have had in youth, but there was no denying that she had an extraordinary and compelling personality; and that her very brutishness had a certain attraction for these half−crazed revolutionists.

CHAPTER XI. BAFFLED

Close upon a year had gone by since Gabrielle Damiens had donned male attire, and exercised the gruesome profession of Public Executioner. A year during which her hatred for an entire caste must one would have thought have been appeased to a certain extent, for in the Province of Artois, through its proximity to the capital where the storm of revolution raged more furiously than elsewhere, the guillotine wielded by her hand had been at work day after day, and noble heads, intellectual and saintly heads, had fallen like corn under the harvester's scythe. But Gabrielle's blood−lust knew no appeasement yet. Her desire for vengeance demanded the death of those who had ruined her life and made of it for sixteen years a real hell upon earth. It was Saint−Lucque now Marquis of that name, it was his wife and his children on whom Gabrielle had concentrated the full venom of her wrath. It was for their blood that her very soul had thirsted ever since she had been turned out of the Bastille a free woman, physically free, but an abject slave to her passions. Ever since that day she had worked for their destruction, had put spies on their track when they left their chateau in Artois and became wanderers on the face of France as so many of their kindred had done. At last the spies had run the head of the house to earth, he and his son, a boy of fourteen, who were hiding in the little village of Orcival close to Rocroi, under the protection of the old *curé* of the parish who had not yet been dispossessed of his benefice owing to the affection in which he was held by the village folk.

The old man had been expecting dispossession, with it arrest and the inevitable guillotine. It was the usual fate of those servants of God who were prepared to give up their lives rather than fail in their spiritual duties to their flock. He had been tutor to the young Vicomte de Saint−Lucque, and had gladly given shelter under his roof to Monsieur le Marquis and the boy, while Madame la Marquise and the two little girls remained in hiding in another corner of the province not far from the Belgian frontier. The blow fell with such suddenness that neither Monsieur le Marquis and his son, nor the priest himself were able to escape arrest: they were incarcerated in the police commissariat of Mézières and the following day found them on the way to Paris for trial on a charge of high treason against the Republic. This was for Gabrielle Damiens the happiest day she had experienced for the past twenty years. Trusting in her powers of persuasion, she had no doubt that she could induce the authorities up

in Paris to allow the execution of the three *aristos* to take place in Mézières. "It would," she argued in a letter which she wrote to the Public Prosecutor, "help to quell certain subversive tendencies in the province, and demonstrate as nothing else could do the power and the determination of the Republic to deal mercilessly with traitors and counter−revolutionists."

Twenty−four hours later the blow came crashing down over her fondest hopes. The coach which conveyed the *aristos* to Paris was held up by highwaymen in the late afternoon in the forest of Mézières. The brigands had commenced operations by cutting the saddle−girths under the bellies of the soldiers' horses, had held a pistol at the driver's head and driven away the coach under cover of the gathering night. The *aristos* had vanished. What the brigands had done with them was not yet known. But Gabrielle was not deceived by the story. She knew well enough that the pseudo−highwaymen were none other than the gang of English spies who were the avowed enemies of revolutionary France and spent their time in endeavouring to cheat the Republic of her right to punish the traitors who had conspired against her safety. In that endeavour be it said those abominable spies always succeeded. The escape of the *ci−devant aristos* and of the priest Prud'hon was a case in point.

Fuming with rage like a wild beast baffled and foiled of its prey, Gabrielle Damiens appeared before the local Committee of Public Safety, in sitting the morning after the outrage, spouting forth invective and abuse, coupled with threats which caused every man there to put his hand up to his cravat. Every member of the august assembly endeavored to fasten the responsibility of the affair on his nearest neighbour, and tempers ran high while Gabrielle raged and stormed like a harpy.

The sergeant who had been in charge of the escort received a full measure of censure and vituperation. He had given a detailed account as far as he was able of the extraordinary event from the moment when the first pistol−shot was fired and the words "Halt and deliver!" rang suddenly out of the gloom. This was immediately followed by a general mêlée, and when a few minutes later the coach was incontinently driven away and he and the troopers were on the point of re−mounting they found that their saddle−girths had been tampered with and they, not being circus−riders were unable to give chase.

"With that infernal din going on," the unfortunate man went on to explain, "with pistols cracking all the time, with hoarse words of command from the unseen foe, with the plunging and rearing of horses and the creaking of coach−wheels, I could not get my men to hear me. They had drawn their sabres but found that in the narrow road, with the thicket on either side and with the fast gathering gloom they could not use their arms without fear of wounding their horses or their comrades. Not one of us had actually seen the attackers, they seemed to have emerged out of the ground, and at once to have vanished again. Rain and sleet were lashed into our faces by the wind. It was hell and pandemonium, I assure you, citizens. You may send me to the guillotine, but all I could say before my judges would be to repeat the story that I have told you now, which is the truth."

The sergeant was not sent to the guillotine for the simple reason that revolutionary France, now at war with half Europe, had need of all the man−power she could muster. High−placed officers might be put to death without compunction for they were *aristos* and therefore traitors to the Republic, but men like this wretched sergeant were trained soldiers, and they were of the people, nor could they very well be spared. The man, then, was kept in gaol for a week: he was browbeaten and kept in constant fear of death, until the Committee of Public Safety was satisfied that his spirit was sufficiently broken, after which he was sent with written orders to the General commanding the revolutionary troops in the eastern provinces that he be put in the thickest of the fight so that he might have a chance of showing his mettle and redeeming by outstanding bravery his tarnished reputation.

So much for him. It is to be supposed that out there on the Belgian front he spent many a sleepless night brooding over the extraordinary events of that memorable afternoon, and that the story of the mysterious English spies and their legendary chief was told and retold many a time round the bivouac fires, together with several additions and improvements to make it more palpitating than it already was!

CHAPTER XII. CHAUVELIN TAKES A HAND

A few days later in the luxurious apartment on the first floor of the episcopal palace Gabrielle Damiens was pacing up and down the floor like a hungry panther that has been cheated of its prey. Her dark hair, still innocent of grey, stood out all round her head in a crazy tangle, for she had been pulling at it with both hands whenever a fresh access of rage got beyond her control. Hoarse ejaculations found their way from time to time through her quivering lips. She would then pause by the centre table, pick up a bottle and pour some of its contents into a glass. The liquid was clear like water. But it was water only in name: *eau de vie,* water of life, Gabrielle drank it down at one gulp.

"The fools!" she muttered thickly after she had drunk; "the cowards!"

And then she went on: "If I had my way with them . . ."

"You would deprive the armies of the Republic of a number of good soldiers," a quiet voice here broke in. "Is that it?"

"Bah!" the woman retorted, "the armies have no use for cowards!"

The man who had spoken was sitting by the table, with elbows resting thereon. His long claw−like fingers were interlocked and made a support for his chin. He was a small spare man who would have appeared insignificant but for his pale, sunken eyes, which now and then flashed with a cold, glittering light like those of a cat on the prowl in the night. He was dressed in sober black and wore his dark hair tied at the nape of the neck with a black bow.

"It is not like you, Citizeness Damiens," he went on, with a sarcastic curl of his thin lips, "to brood over the past."

The woman shrugged.

"I would have liked to have the handling of that sergeant's head," she admitted.

"Of course you would," the man responded, with a note of irony in his even voice. He paused for a moment or two, his pale eyes fixed on Gabrielle and then went on coolly:

"But you would rather have the handling of the *ci−devant* Marquise de Saint−Lucque and her daughters. Am I not right?"

Gabrielle made no immediate response to this. She had come to a halt in the middle of the room with a half−filled glass of *eau de vie* in her hand, which she was on the point of conveying to her lips. At the name, *Saint−Lucque,* she suddenly became as if petrified. She stood absolutely still with the glass in her hand half−way up to her lips, rigid as a granite statue. Her face was entirely expressionless, like a death−mask, her eyes were entirely glassy, her lips were pressed tightly together. The man noted all this and smiled. It was a complacent, satisfied kind of smile, and his head nodded up and down once or twice.

"I am right, am I not, citizeness?" he reiterated after a moment or two.

Gabrielle drank down the *eau de vie.* Life appeared to come back into her eyes. She put the glass down and sank into a chair as if exhausted, passed her outspread fingers through her tousled hair, gave a deep sigh and said finally:

"Chauvelin, if you mention that woman again, I believe I should strangle you."

Chauvelin gave a dry chuckle.

"As bad as that, citizeness?" he queried.

"And worse," she retorted.

"And useless, shall we say?" the man went on flippantly. "My death would serve no purpose as far as you are concerned, and it would be good old Sanson of Paris who would have the handling of your handsome head."

He paused a moment, his pale eyes fixed on the woman as a snake fixes its eyes on the prey it covets. She said nothing either. Her mouth was set in a line of obstinacy and her eyes still glowered with fury. And so there was silence between these two, while up on the wall the old white−faced clock ticked away the seconds of time with irritating monotony. Chauvelin picked up a long quill, held it between two claw−like fingers and toyed with it, tap−tapping it against the table. He never took his eyes off her, noted every quiver of her over−strung nerves, and the power of his own self−control over her unruly temper. As soon as he was satisfied that he had obtained a certain mastery over her he resumed:

"Do not let us quarrel, citizeness," he said, with smooth urbanity, "or bandy empty threats. We have need of one another, you and I, as I will presently show you . . . if you will listen to me."

And as she still remained obstinately silent he added more insistently:

"Will you listen, citizeness?"

Whereupon she replied sullenly:

"I am listening. What is it you want?"

"Nothing but your attention for the moment."

"Well? Go on."

"I am about to give you sound advice, and I know that you do not usually take advice kindly. But will you make an exception in my favour, circumstances being what they are?"

"Well!" she rejoined with a shrug; "I sent for you, didn't I? It wasn't in order to get you to make love to me."

Chauvelin ignored the gibe and went on placidly:

"The escape of the three *aristos* through the agency of those damnable English spies is a nasty blow, not only for you personally, citizeness, but a blow to the prestige of all the local authorities of this province. That is so, is it not?"

As she gave no reply, he continued in the same suave, urbane tone:

"You will also admit, citizeness, that a repetition of such an incident would gravely compromise the reputation, not to say the lives of all the members of your local government."

He paused for a moment or two, and then added with ironic emphasis:

"Including yours, Mam'zelle Guillotine."

He no longer waited for her to speak. He could read the workings of her mind as he would an open book, knew that she cared for nothing at this moment, except the satisfaction of her vengeful hate, and that he would get nothing out of her until he had finally succeeded in persuading her that her interests and her desires were identical with his. And so he went on:

"That is why, citizeness, you and I must become allies not enemies. Your one desire in life, now that Saint−Lucque himself has escaped you, is to bring the rest of the family the wife and the two remaining children to justice. My one aim so long as I have breath in my body left will be to lay the English spies and their chief, the Scarlet Pimpernel, by the heels."

Gabrielle gave a shrug. "Pshaw!" she muttered contemptuously. What cared she about Chauvelin's grudge against the English spies? Give her the Saint−Lucque woman and her two brats and let Chauvelin deal with that legendary Scarlet Pimpernel as best he could. She for one did not believe in his existence at all.

"I care nothing about your English spies," she said presently. "Give me the Saint−Lucque brood . . ."

"You'll never get them, citizeness," he retorted with firm emphasis, "while the Scarlet Pimpernel is alive."

"Bah!"

"Never!" he reiterated forcibly.

"Well! You have tried often enough to get him, my good man, and you have failed every time, haven't you?"

"I know it. The man is a genius. A devil, if you like. So far he has baffled me. I am willing to admit my many failures. But I'll not fail this time if you, citizeness, will help me."

Gabrielle broke into a loud, prolonged, mirthless laugh.

"So that's it, is it?" she rapped out harshly. "I am to be the tool of your selfish intrigues."

She jumped to her feet, and brought her clenched fist banging down upon the table.

"It is not for me," she went on, hurling vituperation upon vituperation on the silent, smooth−tongued man, who sat quietly by allowing the flood of her wrath to pass unchallenged over his head: "it is not for me and my just cause that your are setting your crooked mind at work. Allies indeed! Friends! You care nothing for the punishment of traitors like that Saint−Lucques brood; all you think of is your petty revenge on the man who has made a fool of you, that creature of your own imagination the Scarlet Pimpernel."

She sank back into the chair, pausing for want of breath, for she had gradually raised her voice to a strident pitch, screaming at Chauvelin, who for once in his life was completely dumbfounded. He had not expected this outburst, had apparently not read quite deeply enough into the workings of this half−demented woman's mind, a woman whom, by the way, he heartily despised but whom he believed to have so completely mastered that she would be as putty in his hands. In point of fact, she was right when she said that he cared nothing about the Saint−Lucque women, except as a means to his ends. It was the Scarlet Pimpernel he wanted to destroy and he had set his brain to work to devise a trap into which that chivalrous dandy would be fated to fall.

For the moment, however, he allowed the full flood of Gabrielle's vituperations to flow unchecked over his head. He was not the man to be intimidated by the fury of any woman, not even of this one who had the reputation of

always getting the better of those who were bold enough to oppose her. He remained silent for the moment, with pale eyes fixed upon the irate harpy, his long, thin fingers drumming a tattoo upon the table−top. Soon, however, a thin, sarcastic smile curled around his lips, and when Gabrielle came to a halt, panting with exhaustion, he put in calmly;

"Are you not rather unjust towards me now, citizeness? You accuse me of scheming for the destruction of the Scarlet Pimpernel rather than for the punishment of three *aristos*. But let me remind you that while that audacious spy and his accursed league are at large they will never allow the Saint−Lucque women to be tried and condemned either here or in Paris. Never! They will plan their rescue, wherever they may be, and the will succeed in snatching them from under your nose, whatever you may do, even from the very steps of your guillotine."

He paused, letting his words sink into the woman's consciousness, and he had the satisfaction of noting that comprehension of his point of view did gradually filtrate into her mind. The look of rage slowly faded out of her eyes and her breath came and went more slowly through her parted lips. Presently she said with amazing calm:

"Yes! I see what you mean, and I dare say you are right. It would be the death of me if those women slipped through my fingers in the end."

"They won't," Chauvelin rejoined decisively, "once you have those English spies out of the way, and do not forget, citizeness, that the capture and death of the Scarlet Pimpernel will be a political event of the first magnitude and that you will reap as rich a reward as has ever been bestowed on any man or woman before."

He could no longer be in doubt now that he held her attention. Her expressive face showed plainly that she was listening, listening eagerly, and that it rested with him to hold her attention to the end and to force his will upon her. His will! She must bow to it. She must! His plan was so fine, so perfect! So certain of success. But he must have her co−operation. Without it he could not succeed. What a humiliation for this master−sleuth, this incomparable tracker of spies, to see himself dependent on a woman's whim for what meant his whole future, probably his life!

Ah, well! Ends had justified the means in many intrigues before now. Mentally, Chauvelin had counted his cards and could well be satisfied that he held the ace of trumps. Leaning well forward, with forearms resting on the table and hands clasped, he took as it were a final survey of this woman on whom so much depended. She sat opposite to him, lounging in an armchair, one leg crossed over the other, her hands thrust in the pockets of her breeches. She was the first to speak.

"Well!" she said, "what about that wonderful scheme of yours? Your tongue does not seem to be as glib as usual, I am thinking."

"I want to put the matter as briefly as I can before you, citizeness," Chauvelin gave answer; "but first of all, tell me, do you know where the Saint−Lucque women are hiding?"

"No, I don't," she replied curtly.

"Why not?"

"Because I am surrounded by fools and cowards" traitors I call them. . . . The committee and their sleuths are all alike. . . . Dolts, I tell you."

"Obviously then, if your own people cannot track those *aristos* we have got to find someone who can."

"I won't have a stranger meddling here, you know," Gabrielle snapped out quickly; "I sent for you because it is you I want. Why cannot you . . .?"

Chauvelin gravely shook his head.

"Impossible, citizeness."

"Why?"

"I have been summoned back to Paris, and I must return immediately. It is a matter connected with the arrest of a *ci−devant* sewing−maid who was intimately acquainted with the Capet family. The Committee of Public Safety fear the intervention of the English spies on her behalf. They have sent for me," he reiterated solemnly, "and I must go."

"I can arrange that," she retorted with her usual arrogance.

He shook his head once again.

"It would be the guillotine for us both," he rejoined, "if owning to any failure on my part or to any interference from you, the *ci−devant* sewing−maid were spirited away by the Scarlet Pimpernel."

He gave a short dry laugh and added:

"I don't know what you feel about it, citizeness, but there are one or two things I want to do before my unworthy head rolls into old Sanson's basket."

Gabrielle swore under her breath.

"I hate strangers," she reasserted, muttering hoarsely through her teeth: "I will not have a stranger here."

"The man I have in my mind, citizeness, is one of the finest trackers of *aristos* in the country."

"I hate strangers," she reiterated sullenly.

"Yet, you admit that you cannot trust your own spies to track the Saint−Lucque women to their hiding−place."

Gabrielle gave no reply to that and for a few minutes there was absolute silence in this room where two minds were busy scheming for the death of a helpless woman and her innocent children. Absolute silence, but the white−faced clock ticked on marking the passage of time towards eternity.

"What's the man's name?" Gabrielle queried at last.

"André Renaud, one of the ablest men on the staff of the Chief Commissariat in Paris," was Chauvelin's glib answer.

"And you are sure," she insisted, "that he can run that hateful brood to earth?"

"Quite sure. He will bring his own subordinates with him and within three days you will know where the three women are in hiding."

"And twenty−four hours later we have them under lock and key," she concluded with a sigh of satisfaction.

"Ready for conveyance to Paris. . . ."

But Gabrielle wouldn't have that.

"Don't be a fool, Chauvelin," she snapped out at him; "haven't I told you that I want the handling of those three cursed women myself. Isn't my guillotine good enough for that vermin? I tell you I will not have them sent to Paris."

"And they won't be. Not all the way, at any rate."

"I don't understand what you mean by 'not all the way.' I wish you wouldn't talk in riddles."

"It is quite simple, citizeness. As soon as the *aristos* are under arrest, let the fact be bruited abroad far and wide. The *ci−devant* Saint−Lucques are, I understand, very well known in the province and their arrest is sure to cause a sensation. In fact the greater the sensation the better it will suit my . . . our plan. After that let it be also known that the three women will be conveyed to Paris on a given day, for trial and summary condemnation. Surely you can guess what will inevitably follow?"

"You mean that the English spies . . .?"

"Exactly. Flushed with their recent success, they will at once be on the warpath, devising a plan for the rescue of these so−called innocent victims of our wicked revolution."

"Go on, man! Go on! I am getting interested."

"For the journey to Paris do not interrupt me again I pray you you must choose just such another day as served the English spies so well in the case of the other Saint−Lucques and the priest you want a mist or thin drizzle, lashing wind or driven rain. Do not have too big an escort: four to six men will suffice. Having settled on the day you will have a diligence ready in the earliest dawn shuttered so that no one can get so much as a peep into the interior."

"You don't want the crowd to see the prisoners inside the coach?"

"The prisoners will not be in the coach, citizeness."

"What do you mean? . . . not in the coach?"

"In the coach, citizeness, there will be a half a dozen picked men of your own local gendarmerie armed with pistols, ready to meet the surprise attack, which those English spies will of a certainty have engineered for the rescue of the *aristos*."

Gabrielle now was sitting quite still, with elbows on the table, her head resting against her hand. Her eyes were aglow gazing straight out before her as if she were already seeing a vision of the drama which Chauvelin had so graphically foreshadowed.

"I see it all," she murmured after a minute or two.

"You can rely on the Chief Commissary here, I suppose," Chauvelin added.

"He is my friend," she replied curtly; "he will do what I want."

"That's good, as we must have his co−operation. Will you tell him to order the driver, who had best be a trained soldier, to arrange a breakdown at twilight on the loneliest bit of road in the forest."

"That's simple enough as you say, providing . . ."

"Providing what?" Chauvelin threw a quick anxious glance at Gabrielle. Her manner had suddenly undergone a change. A moment ago her enthusiasm had seemed at fever−pitch. The scheme was grand and certain of success. She saw it all in a series of mental visions. The coach coming to a halt, the spies on the watch. The sudden attack on the diligence filled with stalwarts armed to the teeth. Yes! armed to the teeth. Six to one or more. All very well, providing they had to deal with an ordinary human being, say an eccentric Englishman. Or the usual type of adventurous spy, out for money or promotion. But this man this legendary creature with his impenetrable anonymity the Scarlet Pimpernel . . .

Instinctively she shrugged, obviously in doubt, her expressive face showing an inkling almost of fear. Chauvelin was sharp enough to note all this. Her doubts, her fears, and the reason for both. He gave a harsh mocking laugh and said in direct answer to her thoughts:

"Those misgivings which I can see have reared their ugly heads in your mind are unworthy of you, citizeness. I know that people in this country have talked of the Scarlet Pimpernel as if he were some kind of superhuman being bearing a charmed life, and those fools over in England are inclined to foster that belief. Now I know the man. I have seen him and spoken with him and I give you my word that there is nothing unearthly about him except his unfailing luck and . . . well, yes! . . . his physical courage. But let me assure you once more, citizeness, that the *aristos* whom you hate will never be sent to the guillotine while the Scarlet Pimpernel is alive. Never."

Chauvelin had risen from the table while he gave Gabrielle this assurance. She made no movement while he picked up his hat and cape and made a move towards the door, but he was quite shrewd enough to note that at last his solemn words of warning had their desired effect. His hand had already hold of the latch when she spoke abruptly:

"Where are you going, Chauvelin?"

"To interview the Chief Commissary of your section . . . with your permission that is . . . By the way, what is his name?"

"Lescar."

"Well! I'll go and have a talk with Citizen Lescar. I shan't have the same difficulty with him as I had with you, citizeness," he went on with a wry smile. "There is a reward of ten thousand livres for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, if taken alive. The largest share of that will go to the Chief Commissary of the district in which the capture has taken place. I imagine that our friend Lescar will not be lacking in zeal."

"No," Gabrielle returned with a mocking laugh; "money is the goad which moves you all."

"Perhaps," Chauvelin was willing to admit. After which he asked: "Is there anything else you wish me to do, citizeness?"

"No," she replied at first and then said: "Yes!"

"At your service, citizeness."

"You can tell those dolts up in Paris to send their sleuth down at once. We'll see what he can do."

CHAPTER XIII. The English Spy

The whole Province of Artois was seething by now with the wrath at the audacity of the English spies, and during the long winter evenings, round homely firesides or cabaret tables, that masterstroke accomplished in the forest of Mézières was discussed and commented on in all its aspects.

Just think on it! Three *aristos* who were being sent to Paris for trial were absolutely spirited away from under the very nose of the highly efficient police administration of the province. Spirited away! There was no other word for it! And the whole thing was obviously the work of those abominable English, who were emissaries of the devil, for no flesh and blood human creature could have engineered so damnable a trick and then disappeared as if the earth had swallowed them up.

No wonder that the good Artesians looked upon this hoodwinking of their Chief Commissary as the work of the devil, and their desire for revenge of the impudent spy was roused to positive fury. The very name of the Scarlet Pimpernel, the leader of that gang of brigands, had but to be mentioned to make the entire population of the province see red.

That barefaced, insolent Englishman and his equally brazen followers must be laid by the heels and handed over to the tender mercies of the citizeness Damiens who would have her quick way with them. Everyone was contemplating with joy the prospect of seeing those blonde heads they must be blonde since they were English, drop one by one into the basket of Mam'zelle Guillotine. "Not before she had slapped their ugly faces for them," was the express wish formulated by the women, who, as usual, were more rabid than the men.

The intensity of public feeling in Artois against the English spy soon became known in the capital, and Chauvelin, as soon as he arrived in Paris, did his best to magnify every incident that went to prove that the Artesians would be heart and soul in any enterprise directed against the Scarlet Pimpernel. It spite of his many failures in the direction of that elusive personage, he still had the ear of the Committee of Public Safety who did not undervalue his real worth, and though, at the special sitting convened for the purpose, several members were inclined to scoff when Chauvelin expounded his plan for the capture of the spies seeing the number of times that his masterstrokes had ended in failures nevertheless when it was put to the vote, the majority decided in favour of the plan being carried through, starting with the arrest of the Saint−Lucque woman and her two daughters. They were to be the bait that must inevitably draw that league of dare−devils into the clever trap laid for them.

Citizen Renaud who had earned his spurs as the most astute sleuth in the service of the Committee, second only to Citizen Chauvelin himself, was the man finally selected for this preliminary work. The three *aristos* were in hiding somewhere between Mézières and the Belgian frontier, where picked men of the revolutionary guard were on duty night and day as a living barrier against the escape of traitors over the border. Commissioned and non−commissioned officers were one and all ready to swear that no women had crossed the frontier into Belgium since last the *aristos* took flight from their old home and became wanderers in the land. The *ci−devant* Marquis and his son, together with a priest, had in due course been arrested, rescued and taken to England, while the three women had disappeared.

CHAPTER XIV. LE PARC AUX DAIMS

In these days travellers whose calling or business took them through Arras and Mézières to the Belgian frontier could not fail to note the derelict piece of land situated off the main road some two or three leagues before coming to Rocroi. The land still showed signs of having once been an extensive park surrounding a small château. The château in this year of the Republic was falling into ruins. It had been abandoned close on ten years ago, when the

then owners, scenting the fast approaching revolutionary storm tried to sell it, failed after repeated efforts, and finally abandoned it, taking themselves and their goods over to their native Flanders and leaving Mother Nature in possession of the house and the park, hoping no doubt to return after the storm had broken or blown over, and to find the château, if not the garden, very much as they had left it.

But Mother Nature is noteworthily the worst care−taker in the world. Civilisation and man's handiwork are needed to fight rust and decay. The park was first to go back to the wild. Flower−beds quickly became weed−beds; shrubs and fruit trees died for lack of pruning and of water, garden statuary split and broke in the course of two severe winters, and lay on the ground, pedestal and all beneath a blanket of fungus and of moss. After three years under Mother Nature's régime *le Parc aux Daims prês Rocroi, dans la province d'Artois,* was nothing but a piece of derelict land and its château a mere mass of brick and crumbling plaster, broken woodwork and leaky roof, through the cracked tiles of which rain quickly found its devastating way.

Soon the place got the reputation of being haunted. Country folk avoided going near it. At first, when the family had gone, leaving no one to look after the place, enterprising schoolboys would roam through the orchard in quest of apples, and thrifty housewives tried to raise cabbages and spinach on what had once been the vegetable garden. But after a time strange noises were heard to proceed from the château on dark winter nights, while certain mysterious lights were seen through the windows to be moving erratically to and fro, to flicker and presently to die out, only to reappear later or else on the next dark night. The enterprising schoolboys were scared out of their wits one evening in November, when unseen feet trod over the rough ground, making a noise like the crackling of firewood, although there was no firewood lying about; thrifty housewives had seen to that. After this mysterious episode apples hung unheeded on the old trees, and in due course fell to the ground and lay there rotting until the next season, and housewives gave the vegetable garden a wide berth, fearing the bane of cabbage grown on unhallowed soil.

And here in the derelict *Parc aux Daims* there was enacted in the year three of the Republic corresponding with our 1794 a quiet little idyll of loyalty on the one hand and of courage on the other.

At the earnest entreaty of his wife, and the advice of devoted friends, Monsieur de Saint−Lucque, taking his young son with him, had sought shelter in Abbé Prud'hon's presbytery, situated in a village in the vicinity of Rocroi; he confided his wife and two little daughters to the care of an old couple on whose loyalty he would have staked his life. The Guidals had been faithful servants of his family for close on half a century. They owned a small farm in the next village and were people to whom the unfortunate Saint−Lucque felt he could entrust with the utmost confidence those three women so dear to him. This occurred in the early autumn of 1793, and for time everything went well both in the presbytery and in the farm near Rocroi. But the trouble was that communication between the two places was fraught with so much danger that it had to be discontinued chiefly at the demand of old man Guidal.

Weeks and months went by while the unfortunate Saint−Lucque nearly broke his heart with anxiety over his beloved wife and daughters and Madame de Saint−Lucque was equally distraught with grief at being parted from her husband and only son. Matters, however, unfortunate though they were, might have gone on a little while longer, had not Christmas come along. The kind hearted abbé determined on that solemn occasion to carry a message through to the farm.

The inevitable happened. The old priest was waylaid by spies of the local Committee of Public Safety and caught in the act of carrying about with him papers of a suspicious nature. The immediate result of his well−meant action was a perquisition in the presbytery, followed by the arrest of Monsieur de Saint−Lucque with his young son, and also of the abbé himself; the latter on a charge of harbouring *aristos* who were traitors to the Republic.

But the cruel hand of fate had not done with striking at the unhappy Saint−Lucques yet. The law of the Suspect that most iniquitous of all the edicts passed by the National Convention had just come into force. By its

enactment the very fact that a man or woman or even a child, was as much as suspected of treason, made them liable to summary arrest and more often than not to the sentence of death.

Guidal, a worthy and timorous peasant, was terrified of the guillotine. He flatly refused to allow Madame de Saint−Lucque and her children to remain at the farm any longer. How did he know when he might become suspect of harbouring *aristos*? He had not the pluck to say this to the unfortunate lady himself, but deputed his wife for this very unpleasant task. The woman, genuinely horrified at what she called the act of an ingrate and a coward, argued and protested, but the old farmer was adamant. There is no worse counsellor or tempter in the world than fear, and Guidal was frightened to death.

At first, no doubt, he had been actuated by loyalty to his former employers, but as times got more and more troublous and the revolutionary waves rose higher and higher, when they broke over the countryside, it became more and more dangerous to aid *aristos* to escape from justice. To harbour them was reckoned to be a capital offence punishable by death.

And now this awful Law of the Suspect! Guidal was loyal, he was good and honest, but he was not going to risk his neck for anybody. In the end he told his wife, Marianne, that if Madame de Saint−Lucque did not leave the farm within twenty−four hours, he would himself denounce her and her children to the Commissary of Police.

With her heart beating well−nigh to suffocation, Eve de Saint−Lucque overheard the discussion that was going on. Her fate and that of her little girls were being debated by these two poor ignorant rustics. There could be only one issue to the threat uttered by Guidal. She was a pious woman and a loving wife and mother; what could she do but remain on her knees praying to God for protection, while the woman Guidal ran to the next village, to the presbytery and in a flood of tears told the heart−rending tale to the kind old abbé.

Before anything could be done, however, or any decision come to, the Marquis de Saint−Lucque, the little Vicomte and the abbé himself were arrested and dragged to Mézières pending their being taken to Paris for trial and sentence.

And when Marianne returned to the farm, she found that Madame de Saint−Lucque had left the house at dead of night with her two little children.

She had put together a small bundle of primary necessities, had wrapped the children up in all the warm clothing she possessed, and holding each one by the hand, she wandered down the road in the direction of Mézières. Where to go she knew not, only away, away from the danger of denunciation, of arrest and the awful, inevitable guillotine. Her two little girls! Innocent children! To think that there could be such inhuman beasts in the world, in this beautiful France, who would injure them. Who would, Heavens above! put them to death!

Of her husband and her son she had no news whatever. In her heart she cherished the one hope that they were still safe under the care of the Abbé Prud'hon. But of this she could not be sure, and she dared not question people, for fear of compromising those whom she cared for most in all the world.

There followed for the poor woman days of unspeakable misery: days in which she heard her children cry out: "*Maman, j'ai faim!*" and was unable to give them food. Her children! days, when feeling herself tracked like a wild animal, she became a wanderer on the face of the earth. The weather was cold, but, fortunately, it was dry. With the two little girls clinging to her skirts she roamed down the country roads around Rocroi getting as near the Belgian frontier as she dared, plunging into the woods, hiding in the undergrowth whenever her keen ear detected the slightest sound of approaching footsteps, or the clatter of distant horses' hoofs. And there she would remain crouching sometimes for hours on end, hugging the children as close to her as she could so as to impart some of the warmth inside her to their tender bodies. Then when she felt that immediate danger was past, she would wander out of the wood once more and go along the road, begging for a few sous or something to eat for

her hungry little ones from the barefooted passer−by or at the door of the meanest−looking peasant's hut, where news of whole−sale arrests or the iniquitous Law of the Suspect had not yet found its way. For many nights she and the children slept in derelict farm buildings or tumble−down outhouses, and once or twice out in the open. She was almost at the end of her tether when her wanderings brought her to the neighbourhood of the *Parc aux Daims* . The place was not altogether unknown to her, but while she was still at the Guidals she had heard rumours that the house was visited by ghosts. She had no superstitious fears herself, but came readily to the conclusion that it was soldiers of the Republican Guard or of the military police that haunted the place and had on that account never dared to go near it. But hunger and cold drove her thither one evening, when the children were almost perished with cold, and to add to her misery snow began to fall.

The whole property, garden, orchard and a piece of pasture land, was, as Madame de Saint−Lucque knew, enclosed by a low wall surmounted by iron work, which for the most part was broken down and a prey to rust and decay. The iron gate, too, was off its hinges and lying on the ground in a state of complete dilapidation, obstructing the access to the drive which in its turn led up to the perron of the château. Eve started to skirt the containing wall and presently came to a small postern gate, or rather the remnants of one. Her ears keenly on the alert, could detect no sound breaking through the stillness of the night. She lifted first one little girl and then the other over the broken stonework, and then passed through the gap in the wall. The snow fell in large flakes and was already lying thick on the ground. No light showed anywhere from the direction where the château stood out like a solid block of darkness blacker than the night. Without looking to right or left, but trusting to her instinct to guide her, she made her way through a wilderness of weeds to the house.

Presently she found herself at the foot of a short flight of stone steps leading to the perron. These she mounted and came to the front door, which was wide open. Through this she passed. The place was as dark as pitch. All that Eve could do was to grope her way round. She appeared to be in a square vestibule on which gave several doors, all of which were open. On the left she stumbled against the bottom of a marble staircase with what seemed to the touch like a wrought−iron balustrade.

The little girls, frightened of the dark and shivering with cold, were crying. Eve gathered them to her as a mother−hen does her chicks, and led them through one of the open doors. The room in which she now entered was obviously large and lofty. Vaguely through the gloom she perceived the dim greyish light of three tall windows, the glass of which was broken for the most part. But they were in the lee of the wind and here, at any rate, was shelter against the cold and the snow.

While groping her way about, Eve barked her shins against pieces of furniture that seemed to be lying topsy−turvily about. She set a chair or two up on their legs and lifted her precious children up on these. She had a bit of stale bread and a couple of apples in her pocket which she gave them to munch, and then went on groping. She could have screamed for joy when her hands encountered what was obviously a thick carpet rolled up into a bundle. It is wonderful what the ingenuity of a devoted mother will invent for the well−being of her children. To lay the heavy carpet out on the wooden floor, well away from the night air, to pick up the little girls, lay them down on the carpet and roll it over them, was soon done. The carpet was large and there was warmth in it for Eve also, and though she did not sleep much that night, she had the joy of hearing the even breathing of these two most precious beings on earth.

At daybreak the next morning Eve de Saint−Lucque explored the place where she had found temporary refuge. The room where she and the children had spent the night was one of three in enfilade, with double doors opening one into the other. All three were littered with furniture mostly broken. All three had tall windows with broken glass, oak floors and an air of complete desolation.

Going out to the vestibule, Eve perceived the marble staircase on her right leading to the story above, and, opposite, facing the bottom of the stairs, another tall double door which gave on a very large room with vaulted ceiling and a monumental mantelpiece, obviously a room used in the olden days of luxury and hospitality as a

banqueting−hall. Soon after that the children woke. They were warm, but they were hungry. Eve wandered out into what had once been a beautiful garden, but was nothing now but a wilderness of weeds. Beyond it, not far from the house, was the orchard. A few miserable apples still hung upon the trees. Eve gathered the best ones and gave them to the children to eat. Thank God for the good health and sturdy constitution with which they were endowed, or never could they have outlived the privations of the past two weeks.

Eve then wandered out into the road to beg. And this she did the following day also and the day after that, always like some small defenceless animal scenting an enemy in every flutter of a leaf or the crackle of tiny twigs in the woods. On the whole, passers−by were kind. The carriage−way which branches off the main road and winds along in a series of curves to the gateway of the *Parc aux Daims* was no longer a frequented one these days. No longer did luxurious equipages wend their way to the hospitable château, or gaily bedight cavaliers on prancing horses come cantering down the lane. Only now and then did a market cart go by, taking produce for delivery to the villages around, or an occasional passer−by farmer or peasant come stumping along in sabots. They were indigent most of them, the men and the women; but most of them had a sou to spare for the sad−eyed beggar in ragged black clothes in whom it would have been hard to recognise the proud and beautiful Marquise de Saint−Lucque. And when pockets were void of sous, there would be a bit of hard cheese or stale bread, a few apples or a drop of milk, and Eve de Saint−Lucque would murmur in gratitude through her tears: "May *le bon Dieu* reward you."

On the third day when she had taken her stand in the road at some little distance from the park gates, and stretched out her hand to occasional passers−by, she saw a woman come along who had a good−sized bundle slung over her shoulders. She seemed very weary. As this woman drew near, Eve perceived that she was none other than Marianne Guidal, the farmer's wife.

At sight of Madame de Saint−Lucque she threw her arms up in the air and cried excitedly: "At last! At last!" She seized hold of Eve's hands and covered them with kisses.

"Madame la Marquise! Madame la Marquise!" she continued almost sobbing, and would have fallen on her knees had not Eve restrained her.

"Marianne! My goodness Marianne!" the latter admonished, "in Heaven's name, be careful! there may be prying eyes and ears about!"

Marianne quickly put her hand to her mouth.

"I have been hunting for Madame la for you everywhere," she resumed, sinking her voice to a whisper. "But I have not dared to question people and I've had to be very careful where I went as I am sure Guidal is watching me. Yesterday he went off to Rocroi Fair. It lasts three days. He won't be back till late to−morrow. So I've been able to get about and keep my ears open for any village gossip. And so I heard casually that a poor woman your pardon Madame la Mar , had been begging the last day or two in the road near the *Parc aux Daims*. I guessed it was Madame, so I put a few things together this morning and came along."

She paused a moment, for she was evidently a prey to such deep emotion that she was hardly able to speak. At last she said, her voice shaking with excitement, her tear−dimmed eyes fixed on Eve de Saint−Lucque:

"I had to come. God guided me hither. I came to tell you that Monsieur le Marquis and Monsieur le Vicomte are now safe somewhere in Belgium or in England, people said, and so is our good Abbé Prud'hon."

Eve gave a gasp as much of astonishment as of intense joy.

"*Le bon Dieu* be praised," she exclaimed fervently, "but what has happened?"

"Monsieur le Marquis, Monsieur le Vicomte and the good abbé were arrested the very night that Madame left the farm. I had run out to the presbytery to let them know what Guidal had threatened to do. A few hours later I heard about the arrests. The news was all over the villages around. I was heart−broken and still more so when I realised that Madame had gone, I knew not whither. Three or four days later it was known in the entire district that the diligence in which Monsieur le Marquis with the young Vicomte and the abbé were being taken to Paris to be tried and put to death by those murdering devils, that the diligence, I say, was waylaid by highwaymen in the forest of Mézières, at dead of night, and driven away no one has ever known what direction. Anyway, it vanished then and there with M. le Marquis, the Vicomte and the abbé inside it. No one ever found a trace of it or of the highwaymen or of the prisoners. It was as if the earth had swallowed the lot of them. But I have heard it said more than once that *le bon Dieu* himself sent one of his emissaries to save Monsieur le Marquis, who had never harmed any man or woman in all his life, our good abbé, who is such a saintly man, and the dear innocent little Vicomte with them. The whole attack was so mysterious that the highwaymen could not have been quite human. People talk of English spies, but we poor country folk know nothing about that. All I know is that I will pray to *le bon Dieu* on my knees every night for the rest of my life that He may save Madame and the dear little demoiselles, by any means which He thinks best."

Long after Marianne had ceased talking, which she had done very volubly, Eve remained silent and contemplative savouring, as it were, the joy of knowing that her husband and her son were safe, even though she must continue to suffer, to care for her little girls and to avoid compromising their safety by any careless word or act on her part. Subconsciously she watched Marianne untying the knots which held her bundle together. It fell apart displaying its contents: a bottle of milk, a large piece of cheese, two loaves of bread, half a dozen apples. Also a couple of horse blankets, thick and warm. It was these that had made the bundle so bulky and heavy.

"I've boiled the milk," Marianne said; "it will keep for a day or two, till I can come back."

With innate delicacy she had refrained from intruding by word or look on Madame de Saint−Lucque's absorption, and now she asked with old−world deference:

"Would Madame deign to accept?"

She busied herself with doing up the bundle of provisions again. Eve could only murmur:

"Marianne, my dear, good Marianne!" She put her arms round the old woman's shoulders and kissed her on both cheeks. "How can I ever thank you?" she said, and took the precious bundle from her. "But you must not come again," she went on firmly, "for our sakes as well as your own, you must not come again. It is too dangerous, and much too far for you to walk. If people have already noticed me, I shall have to try and find shelter elsewhere, at any rate for a few days, and then perhaps come back here. But you must not come, Marianne dear. Promise you won't come."

Again she kissed the old woman's wrinkled cheeks and Marianne gave a reluctant promise which obviously she did not mean to keep. After which Eve, carrying the bundle of provisions which meant food for the two children for several days to come, turned back towards the *Parc aux Daims*, while Marianne, who by now was in a flood of tears, went away in the opposite direction.

There followed three days of comparative relief from hardship, of happiness at the news brought by Marianne, as well as the joy of having sufficient food for the two little girls. Eve only ate what kept body and soul together, but the children ate heartily and were luckily in quite good health.

She saw nothing of Marianne during those three days, but this was not because of the promise the good woman had made, but because the farmer had returned from Rocroi Fair a day earlier than was expected. He said very little to his wife, and appeared sullen and irritable. On the third day following Marianne's first visit to the *Parc*

aux Daims , he pleaded important business in the neighbourhood which, he said, would take up the best part of the morning. Marianne, thinking herself free, made her way with a few more provisions to the park gates, hoping to see Madame de Saint−Lucque again. Her husband suspecting her intention waylaid her: saw her turn into the side−road which leads to the *Park aux Daims.* He went straight to Mézières and that same afternoon gave information to the Commissary of Police that the *ci−devant* Saint−Lucque woman with her two children were hiding in the derelict château.

CHAPTER XV. WHATEVER HAPPENS

Eve de Saint−Lucque knew, of course, nothing during those few days of the terrible danger which threatened her and her children through the rancour of Guidal. The fact that her husband and her son had been rescued in such a mysterious way through an unexplicable agency, had not only given her a great measure of happiness, but also a wonderful feeling of hope. She could not account for that hope, but she certainly felt it. Deep down in her heart she felt it, and for the first time for many weeks and months she went about singing to herself for very joy. Sitting with one little girl on her knee, and the other squatting on the ground at her feet she would recall for them little childish songs of long ago, or tales of three little bears or of the seven dwarfs which enchanted them and caused them to break into the full−throated laughter which she loved to hear.

Only the nights were still terribly trying. They were so long and so cold, and the consequent inactivity so very hard to endure.

Marianne had put tinder and a couple of candles in that first bundle which she brought, but the danger of revealing her presence by allowing a light to filtrate through the windows was far too great to allow of such a luxury. Nor would Eve take the children out with her, even into the garden; their shrill young voices or their laughter might, she feared, attract the attention of a casual passer−by. And any passer−by might be an enemy these days.

Before Marianne's welcome visit she had gone out by day into the road to beg for food, and wandered out at night because of the feeling of peace the deserted garden gave her. Whatever ghosts had been wont to haunt the place had evidently found more congenial headquarters. With ears on the *qui vive* for the slightest sound that might betoken danger, Eve would then stroll as far as the orchard where a few winter apples still hung half withered on the trees. She never heard as much as a faint rustle among the leaves or the crackling of dry twigs in the undergrowth. Never, until that evening, the third since Marianne's visit. The moon was nearly at its full then, and though she hid her face behind a bank of clouds, the night itself was not very dark. A grey light hovered over the park as far as the surrounding wall, and the air was damp and quite still. Eve wandered as far as the postern gate. Resting her elbows on the broken piece of the wall she glanced up and down the road. It was completely deserted. Not a soul in sight. Not a cat on the prowl.

And chancing to look down on the edge of the road the other side of the wall, she saw something white lying there. Something white which looked like a piece of paper weighted down by a stone. Had it not been for the stone Eve would have thought no more about it. A piece of paper fallen out of the hand of a passer−by probably. But the stone? Someone must have weighted the paper down with a stone. Why? Curiosity impelled Eve first to lean out further over the wall, and then to slip out by the postern, to kneel down by the roadside and timorously to move the stone and extricate that piece of paper. Who put it there? Who put the stone over it, and did it contain a message intended for her? At first she thought it might be a message from Marianne. Dear, kind, thoughtless Marianne! Any passer−by might have picked it up and God only knew what mischief this might cause.

With the paper in her hand Eve quickly slipped back through the broken−down postern and made her way quickly to the château. Groping about in the dark she found one of the candles and the tinder. She had before now

explored the house sufficiently to know that there was a large wall−cupboard in one of the rooms in which she could safely venture to light the candle and let it burn for a few minutes, at any rate, while she crouched in its deepest recess just long enough to peruse the contents of the mysterious missive.

She had to read it through two or three times before she took in its full significance. This is what it said:

"Your husband, your son and Abbé Prud'hon are safe in England. You and your little ones will soon join them. Whatever happens do not lose your faith or your trust in those who have pledged their honour to save you and who have never failed to keep their word. Destroy this as soon as read. And remember . . . whatever happens do not lose your faith."

This message was so wonderful, so stupendous that no wonder Eve's poor aching head could not take it all at once.

It was impossible these days to live in France either openly or in hiding, without knowing something about a mysterious agency known as the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and its activities. In most places throughout the country, villages and small townships situated at some distance from the large cities, the leader of this gang of English spies, as they were called, was believed to be a kind of supernatural being, either an evil or a good spirit, according to taste or political views. To the Terrorists who ruled France, he was the devil incarnate. To the unfortunates whom fear of death compelled to remain in hiding, he was a messenger of God sent to bring into their hearts hope of deliverance and of life.

To Eve de Saint−Lucque he was that and more. She had heard before now of mysterious messages and this was obviously one, for in the right−hand corner, by way of signature, there was a rough drawing in red chalk of a small five−petalled flower. Marianne had already told her that rumour had it that Monsieur le Marquis, the little Vicomte and the good abbé had been rescued by an unknown agency when they were being taken to Paris for trial which could only have one dire issue. And now this wonderful message! This promise! This pledge! This word of honour given! She and her children were soon to join those dear ones in England, in that hospitable land of the free. A promise! A pledge! How could she fail to believe and to trust?

"Whatever happens do not lose your faith." It was so clear, so categorical! such a message of hope and of comfort. No! No! a thousand times No. She would never lose her faith. This she now swore before God, as she knelt by the side of her sleeping children. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed out her heart in an ecstasy of joy and gratitude.

CHAPTER XVI. A MASTER SLEUTH

It was on this same day that Citizen André Renaud, the master sleuth, arrived direct from Paris. He presented his credentials as special envoy of the Committee of Public Safety, first to the Chief Commissary of Police of Mézières, and then asked to be received by Citizeness Damiens, at whose special request he had been sent down from headquarters.

He was ushered into the presence of Mam'zelle Guillotine. She was in a towering rage, turned on the newcomer like a wild cat, showered a volley of abuse and vituperation on the unfortunate man who stood in the doorway mute and obviously flabbergasted at this stormy reception, his credentials, with large seals dangling therefrom, held in his trembling hand, towards the irate harpy. She was marching up and down the long room still muttering curses and generally behaving more like an animal in a rage than a human being.

At last she snatched the paper out of the man's hand. Without as much as glancing down on them, she tore them across and threw them into his face.

"So much for you," she cried hoarsely, and gave him a resounding smack on the cheek, "and so much for your Paris and your Committee. You are nothing but traitors and cowards traitors, I tell you, and cowards. But I'll teach you what it costs to fool and cheat Gabrielle Damiens. Mam'zelle Guillotine, they call me. Did you know that? I'll give you and your d Committee a taste of my guillotine."

And so she went on yelling and screaming, letting herself go to the full extent of her stupendous rage, while the sleuth, still mute and obviously thrown out of countenance, was picking up the torn pieces of paper, smoothing them out and thrusting them into the pocket of his coat. It was only when the rabid fury paused at last, exhausted and breathless, and, pouring out a mugful of *eau de vie* drained it at a draught, that he ventured at last to put in a word.

"But what have I done?" he murmured meekly.

Gabrielle put down the empty mug and turned to glance at the sleuth who was ruefully nursing his smarting cheek. She looked him up and down once or twice and gave a contemptuous shrug. Not that she did not like the look of the man. She did. She liked his large face, especially now that one cheek was flaming red, his blonde, tousled hair, his big coarse hands and powerful legs, and after that one shrug of contempt, a tigerish grin spread over her face. This the sleuth was quick to note and all at once he broke into a loud guffaw. And this also appeared to please Mam'zelle Guillotine. He came further into the room, towards her. He had a funny rolling gait, like that of a seaman, and now came to a halt with those big legs of his wide apart, his arms outspread, and coarse hands displaying the hard−skinned palms all disfigured with callosities and warts.

Like to like. Gabrielle Damiens's look, which she gave him now, became quite appreciative. She remained contemplative and silent for a moment or two, and he reiterated with a self−confident smirk this time: "What have I done to anger you, citizeness?"

"You have arrived exactly twenty−four hours too late, my friend," she replied dryly, "and those twenty−four hours will cost you dear, that's all."

"Twenty−four hours too late. What do you mean?" he queried.

"Just what I said."

He said nothing more for the moment, pulled a chair towards him, straddled it, rested his great arms across its back and looked her square in the face.

"What exactly did you say, my pigeon?" he then asked.

"I said that you have come to Mézières twenty−four hours too late."

"How so?"

"The *ci−devant* Saint−Lucque woman is in hiding with her two brats in a deserted house close by here. We are proceeding with her arrest this very night."

Citizen André Renaud broke into another loud guffaw.

"Oh!" he said, "is that it? I do the work and someone else gets the credit, while I get my face slapped and a torrent of abuse. You are really *impayable*, my pigeon."

"You do the work?" Gabrielle retorted; "it was Citizen Guidal, the farmer. . . ."

"Of course, it was Citizen Guidal, the farmer, my subordinate, who has been under my orders for the past three days," the sleuth broke in, and brought his large palm with a resounding slap on his thigh. "And he has been clever enough to fool you, my cabbage, into believing that a fool like that could track an *aristo* to her hiding−place. Why, farmer Guidal has about as much brains as one of his own calves. And what did you give him by way of payment for this information, citizeness? Public money or a kiss? What?"

And he was roaring with laughter all the time, with that full−throated laughter that Gabrielle loved to hear. But she was feeling completely bewildered now.

"Do you mean to tell me . . ." she began.

And once again he broke in:

"I mean to tell you, my cabbage, that you have been fooled. Do you suppose," he went on with an attempt at seriousness, "that the Committee of Public Safety not a provincial one, remember, but the Head Committee up in Paris−would have sent me down here to assist you in running to earth the Saint−Lucque women, if any local groundling could do the work for you?"

To this she made no reply, and he drew the torn credentials from his pocket and held them out to Gabrielle.

"Don't tear them up again," he admonished her; "now that my work here is done, I am going back to Paris and I shall want them."

Gabrielle didn't look at the papers again. She felt bewildered and distinctly humiliated.

"I'll send for farmer Guidal," she said.

"Yes, do!" he assented. "I'll comb his hair for him. The master sleuth, eh, what? Why didn't he find the *aristos* for you before? Why did you have to send to Paris for me? I was here two days ago. It took me twenty−four hours, exactly, to trace the Saint−Lucque *aristos* to that place what is it called?"

"The Parc aux Daims."

"And another twenty−four to make sure that the woman and the brats were the traitors you wanted. The Committee in Paris put me on the track of your friend the farmer. He was useful. I have a second subordinate working for me also. He, too, will be coming presently to denounce the *ci−devants* and to take credit like your friend Guidal, for having tracked them. You have been fooled, my pigeon, fooled. We'll say nothing more about it. But be careful that you do not get fooled again, and give away public money it was not just a kiss, was it? to liars and traitors. There might be trouble, you know."

His final outburst of laughter was so hearty that it rang out from attic to cellar of the episcopal mansion. He rubbed his large hands together, banged Gabrielle with easy familiarity on the shoulder, and gave a chuckle of complete self−confidence.

Indeed it was his self−confidence, his self−assurance that had finally subjugated Mam'zelle Guillotine. Like to like. They became the best of friends after this. She allowed him to sit down very close to her, laid her head

against his shoulder, and soon was in ecstasy over the wonderful stories he told her of his exploits as a tracker of *aristos*. He stretched out his spatulate fingers and moved them up and down to demonstrate their vice−like grip round the necks of traitors.

"If you want more work of that sort done," he added complacently, "before I go back to Paris, just command me. I will do it for you, my beauty."

He took hold of her hand and rubbed its palm against the thick stubble of his three−days' beard on his chin and upper lip. He had a way of purring like a wheezy old tom−cat. After which he pinched her ear and said in conclusion:

"Yes! I will do that work for you, citizeness, and for France, and leave you to do the rest, Mam'zelle Guillotine."

Yes! Gabrielle Damiens did like Citizen André Renaud, the master sleuth from Paris, very much.

CHAPTER XVII. THUNDER CRASH

Eve de Saint−Lucque had not known for months and years so much happiness as she did the whole of this day. With the knowledge that her husband and son were safe, and the certainty that she and the little girls would soon be with them and that they would all be re−united over in England with no daily tales of horror to poison the pure air of heaven, or danger of death hovering over their heads, she went about all day singing softly to herself and kissed her children over and over again for very joy of living. The flames of trust and love were burning brightly in her heart.

And then the blow fell like a thunder crash.

It was six o'clock in the afternoon: a wan, grey light still hovered over the open country. The last two days had been comparatively mild, but when the shades of evening began to draw in, a heavy bank of lead−coloured clouds gathered in the east and gradually spread over the sky. It soon got very cold. There was snow coming, Eve felt sure, shivering in her worn−out black dress. It would soon be bed−time for the children, she thought, and was thankful, because then she could make them snug and warm, rolled up in the old drawing−room carpet. Vaguely she wondered if anything was going to happen and when? She marvelled and tried to conjecture how the mysterious agency, the wonderful Scarlet Pimpernel, would work for her salvation. Would she presently hear the tramp of horses' hoofs and hear the hoarde of heroic rescuers come riding down the drive? Would she see these emissaries from heaven come dashing into the château and hear their rallying calls as one by one they would seize the children and finally herself and carry them off in their arms, away, away from terror and from death, away to happy England.

And suddenly she heard footsteps on the road beyond the gates. Not the tramp of horses' hoofs or the rallying call of heroic rescuers, but heavy, measured steps which came up the drive, approached the perron and then mounted the outside steps to the front door. In a moment Eve de Saint−Lucque's happy exultation was changed to sudden fear, stark agonizing fear. She strained her ears to listen. Two men had just crossed the threshold of the front door. Two men or perhaps a man and a woman. Eve couldn't quite tell but already instinct had told her that here was danger, deadly danger for herself and for her children. She struggled to her feet and tiptoed to the folding doors, which were the sole barriers between her and that enemy, who had come through the darkness as the messenger of death. But there was neither latch nor bolt on the doors. They were rickety and hung loosely on their hinges.

Eve went back to the improvised beds where the little girls were lying. They had been asleep but now they woke and Mariette, the little one, began to cry: "Maman! what is it?"

"Hush, my pigeon," the distraught mother murmured, "say your prayers and ask the good God to protect us."

The footsteps had now got as far as the vestibule. They came to a halt and a man's voice called loudly:

"Open that door!"

Eve could not have moved for very life. She remained crouching by the side of her children, with her protecting arms round them. Her limbs were paralysed and her eyes were fixed on the door, through the chinks of which she perceived the dim light of a lantern.

The next moment the doors were roughly thrown open, and in the framework a man and a woman appeared. He was wrapped in a dark cloak from his neck down to his knees, and wore a felt hat which completely hid the upper part of his face. But it was not on him that Eve de Saint−Lucque fixed her horrified gaze. She was looking on the woman on whose face the light from the lantern drew deep and grotesque shadows. The features coarsened with age, brought back memories of the past, and involuntarily Eve's lips gave a murmur:

"Gabrielle Damiens!"

The woman laughed. It was a harsh and a cruel laugh. Her dark eyes glowed, with a kind of savage triumph. She chuckled and took a step or two into the room.

"Aye, Eve de Nesle!" she said harshly. "It is Gabrielle Damiens right enough. You did not expect to see me again in this world, did you, after your precious mother and your cowardly husband consigned me to a living tomb?"

She stood there in the darkness, her tall gaunt frame silhouetted against the dim light of the lantern. To Eve de Saint−Lucque she appeared as the very incarnation of the spirit of evil, of the power of darkness come to dash her fondest hopes and drag her down into the abyss of despair. The woman went on speaking slowly, as if she had weighed every word before she uttered them.

"For sixteen years did I linger in a dungeon in the Bastille, while you, Eve de Saint−Lucque, lived your life of happiness and luxury with the dastard who had betrayed me and cast me off like a worn−out shoe. Sixteen years! during which my life was at a standstill, and one hope alone compelled death to pass me by. The hope that I should live to see what I see now."

Slowly Eve rose to her feet. The depth of her misery was so immense that in spite of her shorter stature she seemed to tower over the other woman through the very sublimity of her despair. Her slender body appeared as a protective shield between this creature of evil and her innocent children.

"May God forgive you," she murmured. "You tried to do a great wrong sixteen years ago, but I had nothing to do with your punishment."

"That is as it may be," Gabrielle retorted with a shrug, "but let me assure you that I shall have everything to do with your punishment. Your miserable husband has escaped but I'll guarantee that he will be wishing himself dead before I have done with you and your brats."

After which she turned to her companion.

"You can go now, Citizen Renaud," she said curtly. "You have done your work well and I'll do the rest."

"You are satisfied," the man responded, "that these *aristos* are the women you want?"

"Yes. I am satisfied."

"Sergeant Meridol is just outside with half a dozen troopers. I'll send them along to you." He looked Eve de Saint−Lucque up and down seeming to appraise her weakness; then pointing at her over his shoulder with a grimy thumb he went on with a sneer: "I don't think you need fear trouble from her until they come."

He turned on his heel and strode out of the room and across the vestibule. Eve's sensitive ears caught the sound of his footsteps going down the perron steps and treading the garden path, and after a few minutes she heard his voice calling out: "Citizen sergeant." And another voice answering from a distance: "Present, citizen."

Gabrielle Damiens had remained in the room leaning against the door−jamb, her arms crossed over her sunken bosom. Eve de Saint−Lucque could perceive the vague outline of her silhouetted against the light behind. She closed her eyes trying to shut out this vision of cruelty and of impending doom. Gabrielle never said another word. She seemed just to be gloating in silence at sight of the hopelessness of this woman whom she hated with such brutal intensity.

The measured tread of the sergeant and the guard were heard coming up the path, mounting the perron and presently coming to a halt in the vestibule. The sergeant took one more step forward. Gabrielle, turning to him, demanded gruffly:

"Everything ready, citizen sergeant?"

"Everything, citizeness," the man replied. "I have a couple of good horses harnessed to a covered cart, and as you see the commandant has given me a half a dozen men."

Gabrielle threw one last malevolent look on Eve de Saint−Lucque and the two children, after which she turned and strode out of the room and across the vestibule to the front door without uttering another word. Her footsteps not unlike those of a man resounded down the perron steps and on the frozen ground outside. Then only did Eve open her eyes, and fixed them on the soldiers who had lined up behind their sergeant and were standing at attention the other side of the folding doors. Two of them carried stable lanterns. All were armed with bayonets. They wore the promiscuous shabby uniforms affected by the Republican army: they had red caps on their heads adorned with tricolour cockades. The sergeant now stalked further into the room. He gave a word of command to the men and they followed him in, making straight for Eve and the place where the children lay.

"What do you want?" Eve demanded.

"You and the two brats," the sergeant gave curt reply. "Come quietly," he added sternly, "or there will be trouble."

Two of the men seized hold of her while the others pulled away the old carpet that covered the children.

Eve de Saint−Lucque fought like a lioness, while the two men tried to drag her to the door.

"Leave me alone," she cried while she struggled. "We'll come quietly if you leave us alone."

The men let her go and the sergeant ordered her to put some clothes on the children. The soldiers stood about while Eve collected what warm clothing she had for the little girls and with trembling hands managed to get them dressed. She took the two horse blankets which Marianne had brought her and wrapped these round the children's shoulders. The sergeant said roughly:

"That's enough now. We can't stay here all night." And turning to the men he commanded:

"Pick up these brats and take them outside."

Then, of course, prudence went to the wind. Eve de Saint−Lucque felt her senses going. She became a mad woman, seized hold of a chair, swung it over her head threatening to hurl it at the first man who approached her children, would have done it too the next moment had not one of the soldiers at a word from the sergeant dealt her a blow on the head with the butt−end of his bayonet. She fell in a pathetic heap to the ground, not seriously hurt, only stunned, for the blow had not been a heavy one. To soldiers of the Republic detailed to apprehend fugitive *aristos*, the general orders were to bring in their prisoners alive.

"Pick up the woman and the brats," the sergeant said reiterating his former order. Eve de Saint−Lucque was unconscious. Mercifully she was spared the sight of seeing her children in the arms of men who were followers of regicides and wholesale murderers. Soon the jolting and creaking of wheels grinding on the axles brought her back to her senses. She and her two little girls had been bundled into a hooded cart, and were lying side by side on its hard wooden flooring. Both the children were crying and calling pitiably for "*Maman!*" Madame de Saint−Lucque feeling ill and sick from the blow contrived nevertheless to gather the little ones closer to her. Fortunately they were well wrapped up in the thick horse blankets, and their tiny hands felt quite warm. One of these blankets had also been thrown over her, and she did not feel the cold.

The cart went slowly jolting along over the rough roads. Through the canvas hood Eve perceived vague forms stumping along the ground, keeping pace with the cart, and heard the measured footsteps of the troopers each side of her. The children had cried themselves to sleep and both were now cuddled up against their mother. Eve was wide awake. Satisfied that the children were asleep and fairly comfortable, she tried to gather her wits together. As her mind gradually cleared, she became aware of the two words that seemed to stand before her mental vision in letters of fire: "Whatever happens!"

Was it comprehensible? Was it possible that this mysterious behest could apply to the terrible event that had just taken place? "Whatever happens!" the behest had gone on to say, "do not lose your faith or your trust in those who have pledged their honour to save you, and who have never failed to keep their word."

Eve had obeyed the command to destroy the missive as soon as read. But she had committed every word to memory. Until a few hours ago these words had been to her like a profession of faith and of hope. She had sworn before God that she would never lose her faith. But now that faith began to waver, and hope to recede into clouds of despair, she recited them *sotto voce* over and over again forcing hope to return to her, and faith to revive.

"Whatever happens" was comprehensive, she kept on reiterating to herself, forcing herself with all the will−power she possessed to trust and to believe. Whatever happens! the words at the close of the missive had been underlined. Whatever happens, her arrest and that of her children, the terror, the humiliation, the terrible predicament in which she now was, being driven along, whither she knew not, guarded by a posse of soldiers who of a surety would never allow her to escape were all these horrors hinted at in the magic word: "Whatever"?

"Oh my God!" she murmured, and hugged her children closer to her, "grant me faith, make me trust those brave men who have sworn to protect me and my innocent little ones."

CHAPTER XVIII. AT THE COMMISSARIAT OF POLICE

The Commissariat of Police, Section City of Mézières, stood, an isolated building, at a corner of the Market Square. It was being guarded day and night by a detachment of the local police which, to make assurance doubly sure, had been reinforced by half a company of troopers with a sergeant and two corporals, all of them trained and

experienced men. It had gradually leaked out, though still kept in the deepest secrecy, that an expedition was being set on foot which had for its object nothing less than the apprehension of that gang of English spies and their audacious chief who had set the revolutionary government by the ears for the past three years, by aiding *aristos* and traitors to escape justice. The reward for the apprehension of the master spy was a matter of ten thousand livres, of which every man who aided in the capture would receive his share, in consequence of which there was no lack of keenness on the part of police and troopers, keenness which amounted to enthusiasm.

On the morning following the arrest of Madame de Saint−Lucque and her children, two men and a woman sat in conference on the upper floor of the Commissariat. The men were the Chief Commissary, Citizen Henri Lescar, and the Citizen André Renaud, the reputed master sleuth, the stranger sent down from Paris to assist the authorities of the province in the difficult task of apprehending the Saint−Lucque family of traitors. The woman was Gabrielle Damiens.

Though the conference was being held at a round table it was pretty evident that the dominating personality among these three officials was the woman.

The Chief Commissary of Police, Citizen Henri Lescar, had a paper covered with writing in his hands and had just completed the reading of it out loud. He then laid the paper down on the table in front of him and said firmly:

"These are my orders. Citizen Chauvelin sent them down to me himself from Paris by special courier. They were drafted by the Head Section of the Committee of Public Safety who sat in special session for the purpose. And these orders," he concluded decisively, "I must obey."

Gabrielle Damiens on the other hand was making no secret of her determination to disobey those orders, wherever they came from. The Saint−Lucque woman and her children were now under arrest, and she had made up her mind as to what she wanted done with the prisoners. Nothing would do but she must have her way, and let the Committee of Public Safety mind its own affairs. In the Province of Artois the will of Mam'zelle Guillotine, in her own estimation at any rate, was law. She spoke in a loud voice and with forceful gestures, bringing her fist down now and again on the table with such a crash that everything on it shook and rattled: the ink spluttered out of the ink−pot, and the grease from the tallow candles flew in all directions.

The men listened to her, dominated by the power of this woman's personality. But at first they had protested.

"I think," Renaud the sleuth had put in tentatively, "that we ought to obey the orders from Paris."

And the Chief Commissary reiterated with a dubious shake of the head:

"They were transmitted to us through Citizen Chauvelin at the bidding of the Committee of Public Safety, who sat in special session in order to discuss the whole question."

This was one of the occasions on which Citizeness Damiens brought her fist down with a bang on the table and the Chief Commissary's immaculate waistcoat was sprinkled with ink and with tallow.

"What do I care," she queried defiantly, "about any Committee of Public Safety and their orders? As for Chauvelin, he is only a fool with one fixed idea the capture of the English spy. But things here in this province are going to be done my way, let me tell you. If they are not "

She shrugged, a shrug which implied a threat that neither of the two men dared apparently to disregard. Renaud did put in a feeble: "But . . ."

"There is no but about it," Gabrielle retorted forcibly. "Chauvelin has already used every argument to try and persuade me that the capture of that cursed English spy is of more importance to the government than bringing *aristos* and traitors to justice. That may be. I dare say he is right, but he has blundered so often that I do not trust his much−vaunted acumen. The capture of that Scarlet Pimpernel may be all very well, but I won't allow the Saint−Lucque brood to slip through my fingers. Let me tell you that. And if you two idiots," she went on with a chuckle and a coarse oath, "go against my will, I can assure you that you will no longer have need of your cravats."

She looked so resolute and so fierce that instinctively the hands of the two men went up to their necks. Chief Commissary Lescar's cheeks had turned a greenish colour, the glance with which he met the woman's savage glare was furtive and terror−stricken. But the sleuth did not allow himself to be intimidated for long. He edged his chair closer to Gabrielle's, put on an amorous air whilst his arm stole round her shoulders.

"You know, my cabbage," he murmured, "that you can always reckon on your little André to do what you want."

Gabrielle coolly shook herself free from his embrace.

"My little André," she retorted dryly, "had better do what I want or . . ."

"Don't let's quarrel, my pigeon," the man went on with fulsome adulation; "give me a kiss. You are my queen, you know, the only love of my life, my beautiful adorable goddess."

And as she turned, half willing to respond to this maudlin flattery, he broke into one of those loud guffaws which experience had taught him always got the better of her irascible moods.

"Did my little cabbage really think," he queried between bursts of immoderate laughter, "that her André would want to thwart her in anything?"

Thus was peace restored between the lovers. What could the unfortunate Commissary do after that but agree to everything that Mam'zelle Guillotine desired? It was, anyway, the safer attitude to take up, for Gabrielle Damiens could be a relentless enemy, and she had power too to enforce her will. So he waited patiently and in silence while a kind of rough bill−ing and coo−ing went on at the other end of the table, whispered endearments, pinching of cheeks and ears, all intermingled with prolonged outbursts of laughter. At last he ventured to interrupt:

"Then what is it you wish to do, Citizeness Damiens?" he asked abruptly.

Gabrielle thrust her ardent lover away from her and turned in her usual resolute way to the Chief Commissary.

"How does the whole affair stand at the present moment?" she countered.

"The women were arrested last evening, as you know, citizeness . . ."

"I know all that," Gabrielle broke in dryly; "that is not what I was asking. Where are the *aristos* now?"

"In the cells down below," the Commissary replied.

Gabrielle was silent for a moment or two. A deep frown appeared between her brows, giving an almost sinister expression to her face. Her thoughts were concentrated on the one thing that her very soul desired, the death of Eve de Saint−Lucque and the two children. Let that elusive Scarlet Pimpernel do his worst; all that she, Gabrielle Damiens, lived for these days was to see the heads of these three women fall under the knife of the guillotin her guillotine, hers, wielded by her own hand, and to hear the death−rattle in their throats.

The two men had waited in silence while she appeared buried in thought. At last she spoke.

"The diligence from Rocroi was due in on Wednesday. It does not go back until Monday. Now I want it brought round here to the back door. I want the Saint−Lucque woman not the children, mind to be taken in it to Paris to−morrow, along with a half a dozen fully armed men, who will travel inside the coach with her. And I imagine," she added with a harsh laugh, "that she will not have a very agreeable journey. I propose that we make a start soon after daybreak. I will drive the diligence myself and come to a halt on the crest of the hill in the forest where we shall expect to get in touch with the English spies. The escort shall dismount, we'll eat and drink and pretend to go to sleep."

"Though I am not proposing to obey every command of Citizen Chauvelin," she continued after a slight pause, "I consider him a shrewd man, even though he is in disgrace. He is quite convinced and I am sure he is right that the Scarlet Pimpernel will be at his tricks again and risk everything in an attempt to drag the Saint−Lucque women out of our clutches. Anyway, I shall be ready for him. The trap is set for the English vermin to fall into, and when we have got him and his followers we'll truss them like so many calves, throw them into the diligence and, as I said, I will drive them myself for immediate slaughter to Paris. The men from inside the coach will then march back to Mézières and wait there for further orders. I'll warrant," she concluded with a complacent chuckle, "that no man or superman, spirit of evil or mere audacious spy, will snatch the reins out of these hands."

She spread out her large, coarse hands hands that had dealt death to many innocent men, women and children. Renaud captured one of them and raised it to his lips.

He broke into the loud guffaw which Gabrielle loved to hear: but it was only a wry smile that curled round the Chief Commissary's lips.

"You are willing, citizeness," he ventured to ask, "to take full responsibility for this direct disobedience to orders?"

"What orders?" Gabrielle questioned with a shrug.

"That the three *aristos* shall remain here in the cells until *after* the capture of the English spies has been effected."

Another shrug from Gabrielle and a contemptuous "Pshaw!" After which she said decisively, weighing every word and emphasising it by a tap of her finger on the table−top:

"Did you not hear me say, Citizen Commissary, that I want the Saint−Lucque woman to be taken to Paris in the diligence to−morrow, along with half a dozen fully armed men? I spoke pretty clearly, it seems to me."

"Quite clearly, my sweet dove," André Renaud put in with a smirk.

The Commissary ventured on a final protest, a very weak one this time.

"Orders state categorically that there should be no prisoners in the diligence. Only half a dozen picked men fully armed and . . ."

Gabrielle looked him up and down for a moment or two before she broke in dryly:

"That cravat of yours does not become you, Citizen Lescar. Are you tired of wearing it?"

The threat was obvious. The Commissary swallowed hard. His throat was dry and his cheeks were the colour of ashes.

André Renaud burst into a loud guffaw.

"No use for cravats, Citizen Commissary," he chortled, "if one runs counter to my turtle−dove here."

He then turned to Gabrielle and put his arm round her shoulder, trying to draw her nearer to him.

"And what does my lovely one wish her little André to do in all this?" he asked with an affected simper.

She shook herself roughly free from him.

"You, André," she replied curtly, "will take charge of the cart into which the two Saint−Lucque brats must be thrown sometime during the night, when there are no prying eyes about. The woman, on the other hand, must be taken in the same way from the cells to the diligence, as secretly as possible, and given in charge of the picked men in there. The brats must be securely bound in the cart against possible escape. It will be the Citizen Commissary's business to see that all this is properly done: the diligence brought round here to the back door, half a dozen picked men armed to the teeth settled inside, and the woman thrust in quietly sometime during the night. Everything done, in fact, according to my orders," Gabrielle said finally, and cast an imperious glance on the unfortunate Lescar, now reduced to abject silence.

She waited a moment or two before turning to Renaud.

"Weather permitting, I shall make an early start with the diligence to−morrow," she said to him, "and take what escort I may require. How many men has the citizen captain promised you?"

"Two dozen, my pigeon," he replied.

"Including the six picked men?"

"Yes!"

"Then I'll have twelve troopers with me, and you can have the rest. I shall drive the diligence myself, as I said before, and the picked men will be inside ready for the attack. As soon as we have got the English spies we'll have them bound and gagged and thrown into the coach. We'll drive post−haste to Grécourt and wait for you there."

"For me, my cabbage?"

"You will have made a start half an hour after I have gone. You will drive the cart yourself and go round by Parny and Labat. Make a halt at Grécourt. If I am not there wait for me. If I am there first I'll wait for you. Anyway, it must be at Grécourt that we join forces, and all drive happily to Paris together: the English spies in the diligence, the three women in the cart, two dozen men to escort us and see that the devil himself does not interfere. After that, hey, presto! the tribunal and the guillotine for that lot of vermin, what?"

"And promotion for us all," Renaud put in jovially, turning to the Chief Commissary, "not forgetting the reward of ten thousand livres of which you and I will pocket the largest share, eh, my friend?"

He brought his huge hand down with such force on Lescar's shoulder that the poor little man nearly fell off his chair. A fit of coughing took his breath away. Renaud cast adoring glances on his "little cabbage."

"Isn't she wonderful?" he ejaculated fulsomely, and once more tried to draw her closer to him. But she shook him off as roughly as before.

"Leave off behaving like a maudlin fool," she said harshly.

She turned to the Chief Commissary and queried:

"Have I made everything clear?" Are you going to follow my instructions? That is what I want to know." Citizen Lescar was making violent efforts to recover his dignity. Difficult under the circumstances. He had been dominated by this woman, been made to feel abject through sheer terror for his life. He, the chief magistrate in this district, who ought to have it in his power to order her arrest for contempt of the law, for flouting the commands of the Committee of Public Safety; but he couldn't do it. He dared not. He felt humiliated and abject, yet writhing within himself for what he knew was sheer cowardice. That ever−present fear held him down in craven bondage the fear of the guillotine, of the Committee of Public Safety, of Gabrielle Damiens. He knew not which he feared the most.

At last he said, putting on as pompous an air as he could:

"Since you are taking the lead in this affair, citizeness, everything will be done in accordance with your wishes."

Gabrielle drew a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"I think that is a wise decision, Citizen Commissary," she said dryly. A contemptuous smile curled round her full lips. She had got her way, and knew well enough what had brought this man to heel: but like most dominating women she despised the men who surrendered their will to hers.

While this brief passage of arms went on inside the Commissariat, a tumult in the street below which had been slight at first was growing in volume. A number of people had congregated at the corner of the Market Square, and something, apparently, had annoyed them. A very usual thing these days. Crowds collected in desultory fashion with no known purpose. The women would start grumbling about something or other. There was so much to grumble at. The price of flour, the scarcity of milk, just anything and everything that was very obviously the fault of the government up in Paris. Then the men would take the matter up. Growling and threatening. Drowning the women's shrill voices with their vituperations.

The government? Bah! What are they doing save talking and promising. Promising! always promising! The capture of the English spies, the punishment of all the *aristos*! The execution of the oppressors of the people! But what came of those promises. Nothing at all. Flour and lard were as dear as ever, and milk more and more unobtainable every day. And what about the English spies? They had been at their tricks again and put the whole of the province to shame. And those *aristos*, the women whom Mam'zelle Guillotine has sworn to execute with her own hands, what about them? Promises, promises, *sacré* name of a dog! Why was nothing done?

"Where are the *aristos*?" came in a strident call from the women.

And the men shouted: "Have the English spies got at them again?"

Loud and ribald laughter greeted this suggestion. Citizen Lescar whose nerves had not yet recovered from repeated shocks, looked at Gabrielle with the eyes of a dog that has been whipped and fears further punishment. Pathetic eyes they were in their avowal of helplessness and reliance on moral support from this strong−willed woman. But all he got from her was another contemptuous shrug and a sneer.

"Hadn't you better reassure them, Citizen Commissary," she said, "before they throw stones at these windows?"

She watched him with that withering glance of hers while he was obviously trying to gain time by collecting papers together, blowing his nose, smoothing his hair, all of it with hands that shook visibly.

"Try not to be such a craven," Gabrielle snapped out at last. "Go out to them like a successful general about to proclaim a smashing victory. You have the *aristos* under arrest, haven't you? And a trap set for the English spies from which they cannot escape? Tell them so, like a man, and don't look like a whipped cur if you can help it. The revolutionary government has no use for curs, remember."

Thus placed between the devil and the deep sea, the fear of the Committee in Paris and terror of this vitriolic woman, the unfortunate Lescar had no alternative but to obey. He rose in grim silence and tinkled a hand−bell. A subordinate entered to whom he gave orders for the front door of the Commissariat to be thrown open.

"And don't forget to have the diligence sent round to the back door, Citizen Commissary. I expect the driver can still be found at the *Ecu d'Or*," were Gabrielle's final commands to her victim as, without casting another glance at his tormentor, he followed his subordinate down the stairs.

A few cheers and an equal number of cat−calls greeted him as he stepped out on the perron.

Somehow, now that he no longer felt the eyes of Mam'zelle Guillotine looking down on him with contempt or with fury, he felt more of a man. He looked down on the crowd below, almost unafraid. The cheers had heartened him: the cat−calls he did not hear, or else mistook them for cheers also. Gabrielle's final words had given him his clue. Now that she wasn't there to prod him with her irony he felt proud and sure of himself, and knew just what he meant to say. He would speak like a successful general, and proclaim victory. There he stood now on the top of the perron this winter's morning casting vague and grotesque shadows on his lean face, his long thin nose and pointed chin. He raised his hand demanding silence.

"Citizens," he began in a firm tone of voice, and loudly enough for all to hear, "this is a great day for us all, for we have wiped out the blot from the escutcheon of our beloved province. The impudent English spies got the better of us once, but we have turned the tables on them this time. The three *aristos*, whom you all know to have been oppressors of the poor, and traitors to the Republic, are under arrest. Citizen Renaud, a stranger to us all, but as great a patriot as ever served his country, came all the way from Paris to track these vermin, these snakes to their lair. Now we have got them safely under lock and key here in the Commissariat and to−morrow we will convey them, under sufficient escort this time, to Paris, where they will be tried on a charge of high treason, judged and condemned to death. Our esteemed citizeness Gabrielle Damiens will have the privilege of presiding over their execution here in Mézières. Long live the Republic!"

All this and more did Citizen Lescar say to the assembled townsfolk, who cheered him to the echoes. And having done this he was conscious of a great sense of relief. He had been given his orders by that irascible and dangerous harpy, whose dictates under the present conditions prevailing in France, no man would ever dare to disobey: these orders ran counter in some respects to those which he had received from Paris, but she didn't care; she had made her own plans for the conveyance of the *aristos* and for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, and had shouldered full responsibility for her disobedience. In case of failure she must also shoulder the blame and suffer the punishment.

CHAPTER XIX. THE INTERLOPER

The news of the arrest of Madame de Saint−Lucque and her daughters created a great stir not only in Mézières itself but throughout the neighbourhood. Madame de Saint−Lucque belonged as it were to the district. Her mother was the daughter of a local estate agent, became for a time King's favourite, was created Comtesse de Nesle and played for some six or eight years a great role in the court life of Paris and Versailles. Her daughter Eve was generally believed to be the daughter of Louis XV, who engineered her marriage with the Vicomte afterwards

Marquis de Saint−Lucque. The marriage was a very happy one: there were three children a boy and two girls and all seemed *couleur de rose* until the outbreak of the revolution, when persecution followed, flight from the ancestral home, separation, arrest and constant danger of death.

The Marquis de Saint−Lucque and his son had been rescued from the clutches of the Terrorists through the agency of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel. This fact had rankled in the midst of all patriotic Artesians, who looked upon this successful feat of the English spies as a disgrace and a direct insult to the whole of their province and their local revolutionary guard. The news that the *ci−devant* Marquise and her children had at last been run to earth and were now under arrest soothed their wounded pride to a certain extent. Not that the Saint−Lucques were any of them disliked in the district. Monsieur le Marquis as he was termed in those pre−revolution days often came to Tourteron, where Madame had inherited the château and demense of that name from her grandfather, the estate agent. He had made himself very popular with the working people round about the neighbourhood. He was good−looking the women liked him for that he was genial, open−handed and not proud. Madame was also very much liked. She was a good mother and devoted wife, virtues very much appreciated in provincial France in those olden days, when the King and Court gave a sad example of immorality and loose living, and she took a real and personal interest in the families of the poor, and the hard−working housewives whom she often visited.

But, of course, these things were all of the past. There were no such persons as Monsieur le Marquis and Madame la Marquise now, when all men and all women were equal in the sight of the government of France and an era of Liberty and Fraternity had set in throughout the country. The fact that Fraternity seemed to mean that every man's hand was raised against every other who did not agree with his views did not strike the poor ignorant farmer or charcoal−burner as peculiar. The government had declared that *aristos* were traitors and avowed enemies of wage−earners whom they had reduced to slavery. They plotted with foreigners for the destruction of France and must be exterminated as vermin, root and crop. And that was that.

Men with stentorian voices and wearing tricolour scarves round their waists toured the country in luxurious chaises and harangued the populace of towns and villages from improvised rostrums set up outside estaminets or public buildings. With impassioned words and gestures they pilloried those who had dared to own land which rightfully belonged to tillers of the soil or houses which were obviously the property of those who had built them with their own hands. The fact that some of those houses, like the château of Labat, had been built two or three hundred years ago, had nothing to do with the principle enunciated by these wine−shop orators and the impecunious Artesians were ready enough to swallow the bait cast to them by these mischief−makers intent on fishing in troubled waters.

Everything then was made ready for the start on the morrow. The *ci−devant* Marquise was hustled in the small hours of the morning into the diligence which stood outside the back door of the Commissariat of Police.

She was not allowed to bid good−bye to her children who had been incarcerated in a separate cell from hers. The poor woman had been gagged and trussed with cords, and been rendered half unconscious by blows before the men detailed for this abominable work succeeded in getting her locked up in the diligence. Only an hour later was the gag removed from her mouth, and her arms and legs freed from the cords. When she opened her eyes, she found herself propped up in a corner of the vehicle and all around her there were a number of men who stood or sat there in stony silence, filling all the available space inside the coach. It remained at a standstill, and the only light by which Eve was able to take stock of her surroundings came from a small lantern outside. After a time she tried to speak, asked a timid question or two but she received no answer. It would be impossible even to attempt to describe what that poor woman suffered in mind and body during the whole of that awful night. To call her experience a nightmare would be to understate what she went through. For it was no dream. Rather was it hell upon earth. The parting from her children had been the worst of the many ordeals she had had to undergo in these past four years of anxiety and sorrow; and now, when she sat huddled in a corner of the diligence not knowing what had become of them and with those grim and silent men keeping guard over her, she thought that she had at last reached the abysmal depths of misery. In vain did she try and infuse hope into her stricken soul. In vain did

she make brave efforts to keep two magic words before her mind: "Whatever happens . . ." She kept on reiterating them, forcing herself to trust and believe but alas! no longer succeeding. Surely when those brave Englishmen planed her rescue they had not anticipated this.

The dawn broke, grey and dim, and very cold. It had snowed all night. The diligence was driven round to the open Market Square in front of the main door of the Commissariat, where a score of troopers from the 61st Regiment of Cavalry were already lined up. Citizeness Damiens was early on the scene, giving orders, seeing to it that every man had his arms and accoutrements in perfect condition, encouraging, admonishing, full of excitement and energy. Once she opened the door of the diligence and peeped in to have a look at the men inside, and also to gloat over her victim. She called out with a strident laugh:

"This is what it felt like, Eve de Nesle, inside a dungeon of the Bastille with nothing to dream of for sixteen years except revenge. I thought you would like to know."

She slammed the door and turned to find herself in the embrace of André Renaud.

"That's right, my cabbage," he said and imprinted a smacking kiss on her neck; "don't spare that vermin. Give it them hot and strong."

He had arrived on the scene with another score of troopers for use as escort if required. A hooded cart into which the two young daughters of Madame de Saint−Lucque had been hustled, as their mother had been, under cover of the grey dawn was drawn up in the narrow street at the side door of the Commissariat.

The military pageant thus formed on the market place was quite imposing. Two score of troopers, the huge diligence and in the forefront an orderly holding the handsome white charger of Citizen André Renaud. The latter was in close conversation with the Chief Commissary. His massive arm was round Gabrielle's neck, and every few moments his loud guffaws would ring out through the frosty air right across the market place.

A huge crowd had assembled by now and cheered the soldiers, the Chief Commissary and Mam'zelle Guillotine with lusty energy. The morning was raw and frosty and it was still snowing. The troopers ill−clad and ill−shod as were most of the regiments of the Republic were inclined to grumble. The old clock on the municipal building had just struck seven and there was talk of making a start. The Chief Commissary was bidding the travellers farewell and wishing them luck: Gabrielle was preparing to climb up to the box−seat of the diligence when there appeared to be some commotion at the further end of the market place. Shrill voices were heard asking hurried questions.

"Where?"

"Art sure they were the English spies?"

"In the Parc aux Daims?"

The crowd round the diligence thinned out a little as several quidnuncs turned to find out what was causing the tumult over there. A young labourer was, it seems, the centre of attraction in a small knot of excited townsfolk. He was being thrust forward by them across the square in the direction of the Commissariat.

"Go and tell the Citizen Commissary."

And above the hubbub three words twice repeated rang out clearly: "The Scarlet Pimpernel!"

It struck Citizen Lescar like a blow on the side of the head.

"What is that?" he thundered. And: "Who is this lad? What does he want?"

"He has news for you, Citizen Commissary," shouted a man from out the crowd.

"Go on, boy," urged one of the women, "tell the Citizen Commissary. Don't be afraid."

The boy was now quite close to the Commissary, but he stood there, looking scared, mute as a carp and scratching his head.

"What is it?" thundered Lescar. "Who is this lad?"

"Jean Bernays," somebody said, "the shepherd."

"What does he want? Name of a dog! Won't anyone speak?"

"He says that there is a gang of foreigners, English he thinks, in hiding in the Parc aux Daims."

"Name of a name!" the Commissary swore hoarsely, and seizing the boy by the shoulder he gave him a vigorous shake. The lad immediately began to cry.

Here Gabrielle intervened. She knew the village lads in the district and that there was nothing ever to be gained by trying to bully them. They at once became scared and dumb.

"Tell me, boy," she said and thrust her tall form between Lescar and the shepherd: "Didst see the foreigners last night or only this morning?"

The boy sniffed and wiped his nose with the back of his hand before he replied:

"I only saw them this morning. I was looking after the farmer's sheep. It was maybe four o'clock. Very dark it was. They weren't there yesterday."

"What were they doing?"

The boy shrugged. "Just moving about," he said.

"How didst know they were foreigners?"

"Well! I didn't understand what they said. And then one man caught sight of me. I was watching them from the gate. He offered me money to run away and to hold my tongue. He spoke like a foreigner."

"Then what didst thou do?"

"I took the money and ran to farmer Matthieu and told him what I had seen."

"What did farmer Matthieu say?"

"Told me to get up behind him on his horse. He was just going off to Charleville market. From Charleville I ran all the way to here."

"Where is the money the foreigners gave thee?" the Commissary demanded.

The boy did not like that, would have run away had he dared. Gabrielle thrust a hand summarily into his breeches' pocket, encountered a screw of paper which she drew out and unfolded. It was crumpled and dirty: inside it there were a few silver coins.

"Something is written here," she said and handed the paper over to Renaud. "Can you read it, citizen? I can't."

Nor could the clever sleuth from Paris. He gazed on the dirty scrap of paper and so did Gabrielle. In the end it was Chief Commissary Lescar who looked over Renaud's shoulder and then pointed with a triumphant finger to the last word of the mysterious writing: and whether you could read the rest or not made no matter, for that one word did stand out clearly and unmistakably and it was scribbled in red chalk: P I M P E R N E L.

The Chief Commissary, the sleuth and Gabrielle Damiens gazed at one another for a moment, open−mouthed, dumbfounded just long enough for the shepherd to seize his opportunity, snatch his money out of the woman's hand and run away across the square. The Chief commissary was the first to speak.

"I am going after him," he said resolutely.

"After whom?" Gabrielle demanded.

"After that accursed English spy. Citizen sergeant," he commanded, "you and twenty of your men come with me. I am for the Parc aux Daims."

He called to one of the troopers to dismount and bring his horse round to him. In vain did Renaud protest.

"You can't take all these troopers away like that," he said; "Citizeness Damiens and I cannot be left to make a start without sufficient escort."

"You will not need to make a start," Lescar retorted gruffly, "until I come back with my prisoner, that impudent Scarlet Pimpernel."

"But the prisoners . . ." Renaud went on expostulating.

"If you are afraid," the Commissary broke in, "send round to the barracks for reinforcements. I am going to the Parc aux Daims with Sergeant Méridol and twenty men to capture my quarry while I know where I can get it."

A horse was brought round to him and he prepared to mount when Gabrielle's harsh voice once again intervened.

"You are making a fool of yourself, Citizen Lescar," she said roughly. "The purpose of the Scarlet Pimpernel is to get at the *aristos*. If we get him or when we get him, it will be when he is at one of his tricks either here or in the forest, or in fact anywhere on the road. To run after him when we have set such a fine trap for him is just folly."

But the Chief Commissary had been too long under the domination of this tyrant in petticoats. He refused to listen to her now.

"My duty," he said resolutely, "is to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel. I have had orders to that effect over and over again for the past three years. If I allow this opportunity to slip by I should be a traitor to the Republic. Already I have wasted too much time in talk and recriminations."

He swung himself into the saddle and called again to the sergeant.

"Citizen sergeant," he commanded, "you will accompany me with twenty of these men. The others remain here with Citizeness Damiens, and Citizen Renaud will send to the barracks for as many more as he wants."

In vain did Renaud swear and protest: in vain did Gabrielle growl like an angry tiger: they were both of them powerless in face of the Chief Commissary's superior authority over the soldiers.

"*En avant!*" he cried, and set off across the square followed by sergeant and troopers.

"*En avant!*" and the cavalcade rode away with much jingling of harness and clatter of hoofs on the stone pavement and to the accompaniment of loud cheers from the crowd. Young and old, men and women, yelled themselves hoarse with enthusiasm. Admittedly the worthy townsfolk cared nothing about Citizen Renaud who remained standing there looking somewhat sheepish. He was a stranger to them. Nobody knew him. He had certainly been credited with having tracked the female *aristos* to their hiding−place, but there the matter ended. Many there were who had listened with indignation to the altercation between him and Citizen Lescar. What right, they thought, had this Parisian interloper to interfere with their Chief Commissary in the exercise of his duty. The Chief Commissary was entirely within his rights when he decided to go at once and capture that abominable English spy, who had led the entire province by the nose with his devilish tricks of helping traitors to escape from justice, and it was past any worthy Artesian's comprehension that Citizeness Damiens herself a god patriot if ever there was one should have backed up a stranger against one of their own townsfolk. But there! What can one expect from a woman in love? And Mam'zelle Guillotine's infatuation for the Parisian was no longer a mere rumour but a fact known to all who had their wits about them.

Thus had the crowd watched the proceedings with mixed feelings of approbation for their Chief Commissary and a certain measure of hostility towards Renaud, and after the cheering for Lescar and his cavalcade had subsided there was some booing and hissing directed at the stranger.

Two soldiers were standing together on the fringe of the crowd at the junction of the market place with the narrow street on which gave the side door of the Commissariat. They were ill−shod and ill−clothed in the same haphazard uniforms as their comrades of the 61st regiment. Now and then they both looked over their shoulder down the narrow street where the hooded cart was drawn up.

Presently they were joined by a third man, who was dressed as they were, whereupon all three drew back a few steps from the edge of the crowd.

"You have the orders?" one of them asked.

"Yes!"

They spoke in French. Only a keen ear would have detected the foreign accent in their speech, which was scarcely audible through the hubbub and chattering of the crowd.

The newcomer now said:

"When the hubbub is at its height, and the attention of the entire crowd is concentrated on what goes on in the market place, we must work our way unobserved down this narrow street to the cart, garrotte the troopers in charge of it driver and two troopers throw them into the cart and drive away like hell, take first turning on the right and drive straight on after that. The chief will meet us soon after on the road."

"Is that all?" one of the others asked.

"Yes! The chief warns us to pay no heed to what goes on in the market place, however startling it may be."

"I wonder what he is thinking of?"

"Something desperate, I take it."

"God protect him!" sighed one of the men.

"To−day and always," the others echoed simultaneously.

Renaud, evidently both furious with things in general and perplexed as to what he had better do in view of the hostility of the crowd, turned for advice to Gabrielle Damiens.

"What shall I do now, my pigeon?" he asked dolefully.

She was standing by the near front wheel of the diligence giving orders to the corporal left in command of her escort.

"Take the reins yourself," she was saying to the soldier, "and drive as far as Grécourt and wait for me there. I will take the reins after that."

Then only did she condescend to notice the somewhat foolish−looking swain.

"What does my little cabbage wish me to do?" he reiterated meekly.

"Stay here," she replied dryly, "and see that the two brats in the cart are not spirited away from under your nose. With half the population of Mézières standing round gaping at you, you would be a fool and worse to let that happen. In the meanwhile send round to the barracks for a score more soldiers. When you have them here you can make a start just as if nothing had happened."

"But you, my love . . ." Renaud ventured to say.

"I shall stay here till that fool Lescar returns either with that English devil in which case I should like to get a squint at the impudent rascal before Paris claims him, or without him which I imagine will be the case. I shall then ride to Grécourt and pick up the diligence there. And everything," she concluded, "will go on just as I have planned."

The corporal had already obeyed orders, climbed to the box−seat of the diligence and taken up the reins. Gabrielle gave the order: "*En avant*," and the old vehicle giving a great shake like a frowsy dog wakened from sleep, started on its way with much creaking of wheels and grinding of axles. The escort thundered to right and left of it, their horses; hoofs drawing sparks from the stony ground. The crowd forgetting for the moment to boo at the stranger broke into a cheer and the young ones among them ran across the square in the wake of the cavalcade, until it turned into the main road and was lost to view.

The master sleuth remained standing where he was, looking the picture of indecision and bewilderment. He tried to recapture Gabrielle's attention by amorous glances, but she only gave him a contemptuous shrug, and without another word turned on her heel and went up the perron steps into the Commissariat.

CHAPTER XX. THE COURIER

Chief Commissary Lescar was in the meantime riding hell for leather at the head of his troop of stalwarts on the hard road which winds its tortuous way between Mézières and Rocroi. The Parc aux Daims lay about midway

between the two cities, to the right of this main artery; a narrow way, little more than a lane, led up to its front gate. Lescar communicated itself to the soldiers who saw in this expedition the foundation of their future fortune.

"On! On citizens!" the Chief Commissary had cried out lustily at the start; "we'll have that abominable English spy under lock and key, and out share of ten thousand livres in our pockets before the day is out."

So on the rode, twenty of them, a sufficient number surely of well−equipped soldiers of the Republic to put to rout that elusive and dangerous adventurer the Scarlet Pimpernel. On they rode heedless of their empty stomachs and of the inclemency of the weather. An hour or so went by. The weather had turned bright and frosty and the men were hard put to it to prevent their horses from slipping. At a word of command from Lescar they drew rein to give the wearied beasts a breather.

"We'll be at the Parc long before midday," the Commissary said, wishing to put heart into the men. "There will be at least a hundred livres for each of you if we bring back that Scarlet Pimpernel alive."

A quarter of an hour later they turned into the secondary road which led to the Parc aux Daims. Presently they drew rein once more. The château and the park were in sight.

"Now citizen soldiers," Lescar enjoined the men, "attention! Keep your eyes open! Let nothing escape you. The English spies will be on the alert."

He paused a moment, rose in his stirrups and gazed out in the direction of the Parc.

"They have taken shelter inside the château," he said. "I don't see anything moving in the garden."

"*En avant!*" he commanded.

The narrow road was bordered with grass. Covered with frozen snow it deadened the clatter of horses' hoofs. Absolute silence reigned around. Lescar proceeded cautiously. He knew the ground well and avoiding what had been the drive and the main gate he made straight for the broken−down postern in the encircling wall. The men passed through behind him, at foot pace, one by one. The château lay at a distance of some two hundred metres to the left. The Commissary gave the order to dismount and to tether the horses to some tall pine trees which formed a spinney close by. While the men obeyed, he stepped out into the open and took a quick survey of the stretch of parkland before him. The quietude all around disconcerted him. Surely those devilish English spies had not slipped through his fingers after all. He was beginning to wish he had listened to Mam'zelle Guillotine's advice and remained with these good troopers on guard round the *aristos*. As she rightly said the purpose of the Scarlet Pimpernel was the rescue of the *aristos.* It always was. Perhaps it was foolish to try and run him to earth. The challenge should come from him.

The silence which reigned in park and château was certainly strange. Alone the breeze which had sprung up in the last few moments made a weird sound as it moaned through the leafless twigs of the old trees and the lifeless foliage of evergreen shrubs. Calling to Sergeant Méridol to accompany him Lescar went down on hands and knees and holding his pistol in his right hand, he crept forward cautiously in the direction of the château, closely followed by the sergeant. The broken unshuttered windows seemed to stare at him like giant eyes. Lifeless yet alert. Had the English spies decamped or were they behind those windows, watching him as he moved soundlessly through the tall grass and tangled undergrowth.

Far be it from me to suggest that Chief Commissary Lescar was in any way afraid; rather was he conscious of a feeling of excitement, as if something stupendous was about to happen, something that would prove to be the turning−point of his whole career. Now he came to a halt and beckoned to the sergeant to do the same. They were within a hundred metres of the château. The perron and wide−open front door were clearly visible. Still not a

sound from there.

"Go back and tell the men to come along," Lescar murmured under his breath. "I have a feeling that the English spies are in there and are waiting for us."

He didn't wait for the men but crept along under cover of the shrubbery right up to the perron. Pistol in hand, ready for anything he mounted the short flight of steps and peeped through the front door into the vestibule. Not a sound. No sign of any living soul. He passed through the front door taking stock of his surroundings. He had been inside the château before. Long ago when it was inhabited, and before it had fallen into decay. He was familiar with the two smaller rooms in front of him, with the staircase on the left and, on the right, the door which gave on the largest room in the house where receptions and big dinners were wont to be held.

But all the doors were closed now and Lescar did not feel like pushing any of them open while he was alone in case those English devils were on the other side ready to pounce on any intruder. The next moment, however, his straining ears caught the sound of the troopers approaching. Sergeant Méridol was the first to mount the perron and to step over the threshold. The men soon followed. Cocked pistols in hand they filed in through the front door into the vestibule.

The Chief Commissary indicated the door on the right. The soldiers visibly impressed by the silence and by the aspect of this derelict building seemed none too eager to obey, whereupon Lescar, closely followed by the sergeant, strode to the door and kicked it open. It flew back with a loud cracking and banging, disclosing a sight which caused every man there to gasp with astonishment. The room was large and lofty and must at one time have looked imposing, before the paper on the walls had peeled off in strips and the windows were broken. But it was not the aspect of the room itself that roused the men first to surprise and then to excitement, it was the long table which stretched along it from end to end, a table laden with all sorts of good things, most of them unknown to these poor half−starved soldiers of the Republic: meat, bread, cheese, and what's more, three dozen or more bottles of wine, with corks drawn, all ready for a score of hungry, thirsty men who had been in the saddle for three hours and were half perished with cold and fatigue. In vain did Sergeant Méridol attempt to intervene, in vain did Lescar command, threaten, entreat in the name of the Republic; discipline, never very easily enforced in these days of liberty and equality, was thrown to the winter wind that came in gusts through the broken windows. The men, uttering a portentous cheer, pushing and jostling, tumbling over one another, made helter−skelter for the festive board, seized on slabs of meat and hunks of bread and grabbed the thrice−welcome bottles of wine, which in most cases were emptied almost at a draught. The sergeant, of course, was caught in the vortex. In face of such a marvellous spread, he would have been more than human had he allowed duty to interfere with his enjoyment of it.

As for the Chief Commissary, after he had raged and stormed, after he had threatened sergeant and troopers with exemplary punishment, he realised that he was wasting his breath. The scene before him was like the realisation of a human torrent which nothing on earth had the power to stay. He himself remained dumbfounded, unconscious of hunger, thirst or fatigue, conscious only of a weird sensation of something stupendous and fateful to come. No, no! Things were not as they should be. This mysterious repast laid out by unseen hands in a derelict house savoured of witchcraft or the machinations of a devil. The question was: what devil had engineered and brought about this amazing situation and lured twenty good patriots to such a flagrant dereliction of duty. Lescar turned his head away so as not to gaze any longer on this guzzling, already half−besotted, crowd of men whom he had brought hither to help him come to grips with the most audacious adventurer known. In spite of the cold outside, the large room had become hot and stuffy, the atmosphere reeked of the smell of meat, of hot breaths and the fumes of wine: the weird silence which a while ago had reigned in the empty house had given place to sounds of smacking lips and of working jaws.

Disgusted with sight and sound he made his way to the window and stood gazing out on the wintry landscape, the snow−covered ground, the leafless trees. The whole aspect of this deserted parkland seemed like an emblem of

the despondency of his soul. He felt lonely and misunderstood, and suddenly gazing out across the park his eyes became aware of something moving over by the broken−down postern gate. The next moment he was able to distinguish that "something" to be a horse picking its way across the overgrown lawn and through the tangled shrubbery. There were two men in the saddle: one of them a soldier in uniform, the other riding behind him had his arm round his companion's waist. His head drooped over the other's shoulder. He appeared half fainting with exhaustion.

Lescar was out on the perron in a trice. The rider had already drawn rein at the foot of the steps.

"Where are you from?" Lescar called out to him.

"From Mézières, citizen," the soldier replied.

"What news?"

"Citizen Renaud sent me to tell you that all was well. The diligence is well on the way and he himself was thinking of making a start with the other *aristos*. He doesn't want to wait much longer as he wants to make Grécourt before nightfall. He sent to the barracks for more men. They only could spare half a dozen, but citizen Renaud says that these are quite sufficient."

Lescar made no comment on the news. He was wondering in his mind where his own interests lay in this tangled affair. Should he return to his post in Mézières and let the matter of the Scarlet Pimpernel drift? He certainly didn't feel that he would have much chance against the English spies should they return in numbers, and with most of his troop in a state of intoxication. Or should he stand his ground and with the few men who had remained sober, like this newcomer and Sergeant Méridol, effect the wonderful capture which would mean a fortune and his name inscribed on the golden roll of patriots who had rendered signal service to the Republic? It was a difficult problem to solve. The Chief Commissary remained silently brooding for a minute or two and then bethought himself of the man who had ridden behind the soldier.

"Who are you?" he demanded abruptly.

The man appeared almost exhausted, and at Lescar's peremptory question he gave a start and almost rolled out of the saddle. He would have measured his length on the ground had not Lescar run down the perron steps and caught him ere he fell. He was a youngish man decently dressed, save that his clothes were stained with the dirt and mud of the road.

"Your pardon, citizen," he murmured, "but I have ridden all the way from Paris without drawing rein."

"Who are you?" Lescar reiterated, "and what do you want?"

The man drew a sealed letter from the inner pocket of his coat.

"I am courier in the service of the Committee of Public Safety," he said; "I have orders to deliver this to no one but the Chief Commissary of the Mézières Section himself. My credentials are inside," he added and handed the letter to Lescar who at once broke the seal and quickly unfolded the missive.

"I met the courier outside Mézières," the soldier put in. "He was asking for the Chief Commissary. I thought I had best bring him along with me. And as he "

But he got no further for he was suddenly interrupted by a cry of horror twice repeated from Citizen Lescar, who in his turn appeared as if he was about to measure his length on the ground. "A horse!" the Chief Commissary

exclaimed hoarsely. "I must to Mézières at once."

Without waiting to see if the courier or the soldier followed him he ran across the park as fast as the undergrowth and the weedy grass would allow him in the direction of the spinney where his troopers' horses were tethered.

"Follow me," he cried over his shoulder to the soldier, "and let the courier come too."

The two men were inclined to grumble, but Lescar gave them no time to protest.

"It is a matter of life and death," he shouted as he ran, "and all those louts over in the château are either drugged or drunk."

After a moment's hesitation the soldier thought it best to obey, whilst the courier appeared unwilling to be left alone in this derelict spot. At any rate he climbed slowly and rather painfully back into the saddle, and the wearied mount with its double burden picked its way to the spinney where the Chief Commissary was just getting to horse, looking so scared and so death−like pale that the soldier called out instinctively:

"What has happened, citizen? You look scared to death."

But Lescar who had run on the rough ground nearly all the way from the château was hardly able to speak.

"Get fresh horses both of you . . ." he gasped, "and follow me."

CHAPTER XXI. AN OUTRAGE

To gather one's thoughts together, to think at all, was quite out of the question. Lescar's brain was at a standstill, all he could do was to ride, ride on, with hope and despair warring in his mind, despair for the most part gaining the upper hand. He had thrust the letter in the inner pocket of his coat and his hand remained there clutching that fateful missive which, undoubtedly, did mean life or death to him.

The wintry sun was past the meridian now and had begun its downward course to the west. Soon the shades of evening would be drawing in and the market cart with the two female *aristos* would be driven, Satan alone knew whither. And the unfortunate Commissary rode on at breakneck speed, with just enough sense to avoid the frozen puddles on the road, and to take advantage of any patches of mud where a feeble thaw had set in under the midday sun. The two men followed more leisurely. The were, in fact, some little way behind when the town of Mézières at last came in sight.

Ten minutes later Lescar on ahead had reached the first isolated house of the city; another five and his horse's hoofs were drawing sparks from the stones of the main street. The Market Square could already be perceived through the mist−laden atmosphere. Lescar strained his eyes to see what was going on. There was quite a good crowd there still apparently, hanging about in a desultory fashion. And there was a sprinkling of uniforms to be seen among the throng. In the midst of it all there was Citizen Renaud, who held his white charger by the bridle. Gabrielle Damiens ran down the steps of the Commissariat just then and flung herself into his arms.

Lescar gave a cry of jubilation. All was well.

Renaud had just called out:

"One more kiss, my pigeon, and I go."

Gabrielle threw her arms round his neck. The crowd closed in round them, and forgetting its hostility to the stranger, gave the lovers a loud cheer as they exchanged kiss after kiss.

Another minute and Lescar was across the square. He drew rein so abruptly that his horse reared and snorted and the crowd in dismay scattered in all directions. Gabrielle dragged herself out of her lover's embrace.

"What's all this?" she demanded harshly.

"If it is not the Citizen Commissary," ejaculated a woman in the crowd.

Whereupon Renaud, in the act of mounting his white charger, exclaimed with an oath:

"That cursed fool again!"

"What do you want?" Gabrielle demanded as Lescar dismounted in double−quick time and nearly knocked Mam'zelle over, so close to her did he land.

"Have you got the spy? Where is he?" she went on peremptorily, and the men and women in the crowd questioned him eagerly. "Where is the English spy?"

With a dramatic gesture worthy of the finest classical traditions, Lescar pointed to the man on the white charger and spoke the one word at the top of his voice so that all might hear:

"There!"

Gabrielle shrugged and muttered: "The man is drunk." The whole crowd turned to look on Citizen Renaud, who was evidently of the same opinion as Mam'zelle, for he only shrugged and with a click of the tongue urged his horse to start. With a yell that would have shamed a wild beast in a rage, Lescar threw up his arms and with a vigorous working of his elbows forged his way through the crowd to the very side of Renaud and seized the bridle of the prancing white charger.

"I tell you all," he screamed, in a voice hoarse with excitement, "that if you let this man out of your sight you will be the blackest traitors that ever betrayed your country."

Renaud raised his whip and with it struck the Chief Commissary on the head. An outrage against the chief authority of the town. The population resented it. It had appeared dumbfounded for the moment, but now it rose in its wrath and with many murmurings gathered round their Commissary and the man on the white charger, effectually impeding the latter's movements. It was once again a case of animosity against the stranger and loyalty to one of their own kin. Renaud struck out right and left with his whip.

"Let me pass, you dolts," he cried, while Lescar, who had yelled himself hoarse, tried to recover his breath before starting to yell again.

"*En avant!*" Renaud shouted to the escort of troopers, who had much ado to keep their horses quiet in the midst of all this turmoil. "This man is mad or drunk."

Gabrielle in the meanwhile had also forged her way to the side of her lover. She came to a halt, facing Lescar with flaming eyes.

"What's all this?" she demanded. "Speak, man, ere I denounce you as the traitor you so freely talk about."

"Don't let this man go," Lescar countered, "and I'll tell you."

"Citizen Renaud stays here," Gabrielle responded firmly. And the sleuth accustomed to obey this masterful woman turned to her, holding his horse in check.

"All right, my pigeon," he murmured, "but it's getting late and I can't waste my time with this fool."

"Never mind about your time, citizen," she retorted dryly. "You stay here, understand? I want to hear what the Chief Commissary has to say, and that's enough. Now then, citizen, speak up."

The crowd gathered more closely round the principal actors in this rather puzzling drama, pressing near to one another in an endeavour to get some warmth into their blood, for it was very cold. The women drew their shawls if they happened to have any tightly round their shoulders. The men's noses and hands were blue. Their bare feet in their wooden sabots were nearly frozen. But the situation as it now appeared provided excitement enough to make their discomfort seem unimportant. The Chief Commissary looked to be in a fever of agitation. Mam'zelle Guillotine was obviously puzzled, whilst the stranger was in a towering rage. The young corporal in command of the troopers who formed the escort round the cart tried to push his way through the throng, but it had become so dense and the hostility of the people so marked that he ordered three of the men to join him, whilst the others were told to remain with the cart on the fringe of the crowd, one to hold the reins and the others on guard.

"Speak up, Citizen Commissary," the woman shouted to Lescar, and the men echoed the cry. "Speak up!"

Lescar dived into the pocket of his coat. He drew out the papers which the courier from Paris had brought him. He put on a pompous air and forced himself to speak slowly and steadily.

"The Committee of Public Safety sitting in Paris," he began, "sent me a courier this morning with a letter which was to be delivered into no other hands but mine. Here are his credentials."

He unfolded one of the papers and with a grandiose gesture held it out to Gabrielle, who snatched it out of his hand. She had become, as it were, the spokesman of the assembly. The paper bore the signature of two of the principal members of the Committee of Public Safety and also its official seal. It stated that the bearer was an accredited courier to the Committee and had been entrusted with a private letter addressed to the Chief Commissary of the district of Mézières; the letter to be delivered into his own hands.

"Yes, that's in order," Gabrielle declared. "Where's the courier?"

"Not far behind," the Commissary replied. "I rode along full tilt, he followed more slowly. He'll be here in a few minutes."

While he spoke he unfolded the second communication, and, with a flourish more dramatic than before, handed it to Gabrielle. Now there was no one to equal Gabrielle Damiens for shouting, raging and storming when she was roused, and both Citizen Renaud and the rest of the crowd quite expected one of those violent outbursts from Mam'zelle Guillotine while she ran her eyes down the paper which the Citizen Commissary had given her. But the only sound that came through her lips was a growl like that of a wild cat before it starts to spit and to scratch. The crowd remained breathless. Waiting. Wondering. And suddenly the enraged woman's arms shot out, she threw the paper back into the Commissary's face and then with both hands she seized the man on the white charger by the leg, and had dragged him off his horse before he realized what was happening. Thus taken unawares and entirely helpless, he rolled over and over on the ground. The horse reared, plunged, scattering the bystanders, and the unfortunate man had the greatest difficulty in warding off the more dangerous kicks form its hoofs, until the

corporal was able to seize the mettlesome beast by the bridle and to bring it to comparative quiescence. But this didn't prove to be the end of the wretched stranger's troubles, for Gabrielle had got hold of his whip and with it was belabouring him on the head, the back, the shoulders with such fury and such strength that he cried and cried again for mercy. Nor did she desist till the whip broke. She threw it from her and stood with arms akimbo, looking down on her half−conscious victim. The man on whom she had lavished her kisses a few short minutes ago. Her face looked positively evil.

True, the good Artesians were not altogether sorry to see the arrogant stranger thus brought to pain and humiliation, for these were days when the sight of physical and mental suffering was an all to familiar one; the tumbrils and the guillotine made it an almost daily spectacle for young and old, and even for children. They looked on it as a part of this life's routine, as a distraction from the monotony of weary, idle hours. But in this case the expression on Mam'zelle's face was almost terrifying. There was contempt as well as rage in her eyes and the strong vein of cruelty never wholly absent from her mien. They were all of them dumbfounded, even the Chief Commissary had lost his pompous air, and his excitement appeared to have calmed down. He and Gabrielle, the stranger on the ground, the corporal on horseback holding the white charger by the bridle and the three troopers, formed a compact group, round which the throng now stood in a wide circle, eager, expectant, awed into silence. But the silence did not last long. Presently there rose a murmur. It began with the women whispering to one another:

"What has he done?"

"Is he really the English spy?"

"The Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"No, impossible!"

"The Commissary said so."

"He denounced him."

"But how did he know?"

And the murmur was taken up by the men, until there was a hum like a swarm of hornets which filled the market.

"Is he the English spy?"

"How do they know?"

For somehow the stranger, much as they mistrusted him, did not answer to their conception of what the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel was like. He was tall, but should have been taller still, of Titanic proportions, like the legendary giants: he should have looked less human, more like the supernatural being of the nether world.

"He is not the Scarlet Pimpernel," some of the women asserted boldly.

"I don't believe it," the men said.

Gabrielle turned her glowering eyes on the Chief Commissary.

"Tell them," she commanded, "what is written in that letter."

Lescar smoothed out the crumpled paper which Gabrielle had thrown in his face.

"Attention!" he cried loudly, and then went on:

"This letter comes to me from Citizen Renaud . . ."

"Citizen Renaud?" they exclaimed. "But the letter came by courier from Paris, then how ?"

He then began to read:

"Citizen Chief Commissary of the Section of Mézières in the Province of Artois,

"This is to warn you that there is an English spy known to his followers as the Scarlet Pimpernel, who has been impersonating me these few days past. I have reasons to believe that his latest activities have been directed in your province. So, be on the look−out. I have been detained in Paris, but will be in Mézières within the next twenty−four hours. The Committee of Public Safety here in Paris is sending its special courier to you for me, to bring you this urgent letter.

"And," the Chief Commissary added, "the letter is signed André Renaud, and bears the seal and stamp, as well as two signatures of members of the Committee of Public Safety in Paris."

The unfortunate man, still lying in his semi−unconsciousness on the ground, had made desperate efforts to regain his senses. He struggled and wriggled his bruised body about until he was able to prop himself up on his elbow. Looking up at his tormentor with an expression of hatred at least as intense as her own: "You'll pay for this, Mam'zelle Guillotine," he contrived to murmur between his teeth and then turned his glance on the Chief Commissary, who was in the act of folding up the momentous papers and thrusting them back into his pocket. The expression of hatred in the stricken man's eyes lingered there also for a few seconds, but soon changed to contempt as he broke into a forced, immoderate laughter. But this hilarity was short−lived. The next moment the crowd had suddenly, if somewhat tardily, realised the full significance of the one horrible fact, namely that this man, this intruding, arrogant stranger, was none other than the far−famed Scarlet Pimpernel, the most dangerous enemy of France, who had devised the abominable trick of impersonating a servant of the Republic in order to save a batch of female traitors from the punishment their crimes deserved. The fact that it was this same man who had brought about the arrest of the *ci−devant* Marquise de Saint−Lucque was lost sight of for the moment. What was remembered was the dramatic gesture of the Chief Commissary pointing to this man when he was asked: "Where is the English spy?" and his voice answering loudly so that all might hear: "There!"

The angry murmurings of the crowd turned to threats of violence.

"The Scarlet Pimpernel! That abominable English spy! That's what this man was all the time, and we never guessed."

"Mam'zelle Guillotine!" one of the women shouted, "you'll know what to do."

The man on the ground realised the danger he was in. Three or four violent kicks had already been dealt to him.

The corporal ordered the troopers to close in round him to protect him from further assaults from the crowd. This audacious English spy was food for the guillotine, not for the mere sadistic entertainment of a lot of provincial louts. They did their best to ward off the kicks and blows that were freely aimed at the prostrate form of the stranger.

Whether it was a sudden inspiration or merely the powerful instinct of self−preservation, who can tell? Certain it is that when matters appeared at their blackest, when the troopers seemed unable to cope any longer with the crowd which had become very violent, the stranger, whoever he was, succeeded in regaining his feet. He looked to right and left of him and over the heads of the multitude and uttered a long−sustained cry of horror and affright.

"The cart," he exclaimed, "where is it?"

Where, indeed? The crowd parted, gazed in direction of the street corner to which the stranger pointed with quaking hand.

"The cart!" the latter reiterated, choking with emotion, whilst men and women vainly tried to switch off their minds from one horrible fact to another, from the personality of one man, his duplicity, his shameless impersonation, their own wrath and desire to punish, to the outrageous trick played upon them by one whose identity could not be in doubt for one moment. For the cart had gone. Vanished with the troopers and their horses. While the attention of the crowd had been drawn to the stranger and his presumed misdeeds, the female *aristos* had been spirited away from under their nose. The cart had been driven away under cover of the uproar and the gathering mist which enveloped the narrow street. A couple of troopers had been left in charge of it when the others with their corporal were called to protect the stranger from further assaults from the irate and unruly crowd. Their horses had vanished with them, whilst a third trooper who had been holding the reins had also disappeared. When did this outrage happen? Whither had all those men gone? Who could tell? And what in Satan's name had become of the cart and horses?

Both Gabrielle and the Commissary had remained tongue−tied at first, rigid as granite statues; the expression on the Commissary's face was at first one of incredulity, then of bewilderment and finally of horror. But Gabrielle's face remained expressionless, her face became the colour of ashes, it looked like the face of the dead. She never moved, not even when the Commissary gave a loud command to the troopers.

"After them, citizens, they cannot have gone far."

The corporal and the troopers jerked their horses' heads round and set spurs to their flanks, scattering the crowd in all directions. Men and women took up the cry: "They cannot have gone far," and swarmed all over the market place, rushing blindly, aimlessly, hither and thither, shouting confused suggestions to the bewildered soldiers.

"This way, citizen!"

"No, that!"

"This is the short cut to Grécourt."

"They'd avoid that."

"Try the road to Labat."

The way into the side street and that street itself were soon nothing but scenes of the wildest confusion in which men and women effectively obstructed all possibility of pursuit.

"This way, citizen!"

"No, that!"

And so on, while confusion was made more confounded at every moment. There were at least half a dozen ways which led from the centre of the town to anywhere. It was getting late in the afternoon. Evening began to draw in. Soon a misty sleet mixed with snow began to fall and it was difficult to distinguish anything beyond a fraction of a league ahead, past the city lights.

It was all very well to keep on shouting and urging: "They cannot have gone far." That might be true enough but the question was: "In which direction?"

There were only three troopers, besides their corporal, and the Chief Commissary who were mounted, and they might possibly have overtaken the cart even though it was being driven at breakneck speed. The corporal and one of the troopers went in one direction, the others followed the Commissary while the young men in the crowd ran down the various narrow streets which gave all round the Market Square. And with it all there was rush and uproar and enough shouting, clatter of horses' hoofs and of wooden shoes on the pavement stones, as to give any fugitive all the warning required for a good get−away.

CHAPTER XXII. NIGHTMARE

Gabrielle, after those few minutes of stone−like stupefaction, had pulled herself forcefully together. Hers was not a nature to allow herself to be cowed by any man or any event. In spite of the humiliation which she had endured and the many ups and downs of exultation and of horror through which she had passed during this fateful day, she was still Mam'zelle Guillotine, whose commands were law in the Province of Artois, and at whose words the fiercest Terrorists up in Paris were wont to tremble. Renaud, the sleuth, the arrogant stranger on whom she had lavished her kisses a short hour ago, and to whom she had administered such degrading punishment, was standing there, by the white charger, with one hand on the bridle, and was making serious efforts to shake off the feeling of giddiness caused by the heavy blows on his head. They stood isolated now, these two, in front of the Commissariat, the whole crowd having melted away, scattered like leaves before the wind. Gabrielle turned a glance of withering contempt on her former suitor and when she saw that he was preparing to mount, she just seized him by the arm with a grip that was like a vice and thrust him out of her way with such violence that he nearly came down again on his knees. Another contemptuous glance, a shrug, and it was she who had mounted the white charger.

"You stay where you are!" she commanded, "While I try to undo the mischief you have done."

With a click of the tongue she set the horse to walk across the square.

Renaud shouted after her, his voice choked with hatred unspeakable.

"The mischief I have done? You devil incarnate, you shall pay for this. Mark my words."

Whether she heard him or not is difficult to say. Certain it is that she put her horse to the trot without once turning to him. Straight ahead she rode across the square until she turned into the Grécourt road.

It was still snowing, but overhead the clouds were thin and from behind them the wan light of the moon shed a faint, greyish aura over the frozen landscape. Gabrielle knew every inch of the road and with unerring hand and eyes guided her mount. At first she overtook one or two detachments of voluntary search−parties who with much shouting and any amount of voluble talk were still patrolling the road, hopeful of coming up with the cart, which "could not have gone far." They cheered Gabrielle as she went by.

Once past the foremost of these enthusiasts she put her horse to a walk. Her eyes keen as those of a hawk pierced the darkness to right and left of her. She had the feeling that it would be on this road that she would come across

some trace of that audacious Scarlet Pimpernel. All around her the stillness could almost be felt. The snow fell in large soft flakes. Not a breath of air stirred the leafless branches of the tall poplars that bordered the road, and Gabrielle's keen ears could not detect the slightest sound of distant wheels or horse's trot. It was only half an hour later that the white charger suddenly shied at a black, shapeless mass which lay by the roadside.

Gabrielle dismounted and holding the horse by the bridle went up to the black mass which had frightened it. Two men, wearing the uniforms of the 61st regiment, were lying half in and half out of the ditch. They were tied to one another with cord, and a woolen scarf was wound round the lower part of their faces. The snow lay over them like a thin, white blanket. As Gabrielle approached them, they made a combined vigorous effort to utter a cry of distress, but it was only a faint gurgle that reached her ears. She threw the reins over her arm and with strong capable hands she released the men of their bonds, and unwound the scarf from round their mouths. Their teeth were chattering and their arms and legs were trembling with the cold. She pulled one man up by his coat collar and then the other, but never uttered a word till she had them both in a sitting posture.

Once this was accomplished her peremptory questions came out sharp and clear.

"What happened?"

"It was while you were hitting out at the English spy," one of the men contrived to reply.

"The English spy?"

"Yes! We thought he was the man sent down here to track the *aristos*. And he turned out to be that abominable Scarlet Pimpernel."

"Then what happened?"

"We could not help watching," and even through his chattering teeth the soldier gave a chuckle. "It was such a fine sight seeing you belabouring that spy."

"I stood on the front board," added the trooper who had been holding the reins. "the better to see you. Name of a dog, I wouldn't have been in his shoes for a pension."

"And the kisses you had been giving him . . ."

But Gabrielle was not in a mood to listen to any bantering. "Didn't you hear me ask what happened?" she demanded harshly.

"Just this, citizeness," one of the troopers gave reply, the one who was best able to speak; "when the whole crowd in the square was yelling itself hoarse with laughter and when excitement was at its height, my comrade and I were suddenly seized by the leg, dragged off our horses, struck on the head, and rolled over on the ground. We were gagged and bound and thrown into the cart before we could utter a sound."

"The same thing happened to me," said the other. "I held the reins, and I was standing on the front board watching you flourishing that whip, when I was seized by the legs and dragged down from the board. I too was gagged and bound and thrown into the cart, and as I had struck my head heavily against the wheel, I was too dizzy to offer any resistance."

"You were driven away in the cart?"

"Then and there, citizeness."

"Where is the cart now?"

"I don't know, citizeness. But it must be somewhere near here. I just heard it come to a halt and the horses gallop away before I half lost consciousness."

"The horses?"

"Yes! They were taken out of the shafts. I could hear that. It was not far from here."

"Where is your other comrade?"

"I don't know, citizeness. He was with us in the cart. Perhaps he is still there now."

"Anyone else but you three dolts in the cart?"

"Yes! Two brats. And there were others, I think, but I could not see," the soldier gave answer.

"Nor I," echoed the other.

"How many English spies were there?" Gabrielle asked again.

"I couldn't tell exactly, citizeness. There must have been at least a dozen. They fell on us like a swarm of hornets."

"And that's a lie," Gabrielle asserted dryly. "A dozen? I don't believe there were more than two or three And perhaps only one," she added slowly.

"I give you my word, citizeness "

"Hold your tongue. You were nothing but a set of traitors and cowards."

"And that is unfair, citizeness. What could we do? When the cart stopped we were dragged out and thrown down in this ditch and left to perish of cold for all those devils knew. Wasn't that so, comrade?"

There was a grunt of assent, and Gabrielle queried again:

"Where is the cart now?"

"I don't know, citizeness."

To Gabrielle Damiens the whole of this story told jerkily by men whose lips were shaking with cold, was like a nightmare from which she would presently wake and find that nothing of it was real, that all of it was only a hideous phantasmagoria brought before her mind by mischievous emissaries of Satan and sent by him to worry and exasperate her. That she, the strong−minded Amazon, the lion−hearted wielder of the sword of justice, the indomitable scorner of men should thus have been cozened, baffled, bamboozled like any groundling or village dolt was inconceivable. It was maddening and for a time she felt as if her wits had deserted her and she remained crouching there in the ditch beside those two soldiers, with an expression in her face which, but for the darkness, would have been terrifying.

The men never moved. They were sore in limb and their bodies were almost inert. After a time Gabrielle appeared to gather her wits together again. She struggled to her feet, paid no heed to the soldiers, never spoke another word to them. She stood there with the horse's reins swung over her arm, she, more solidly dark than the surrounding

darkness, and the white charger beside her like a ghost. Her eyes tried to pierce the veil of snow, searching the gloom for an outline of the cart. The men watched her when presently she mounted and threw herself astride into the saddle. They went on watching as she turned her horse's head back towards Mézières, put him to the trot and was soon engulfed in the night. After which they in their turn struggled to their feet and walked slowly back in the direction of the city.

They walked on in silence at first, stamping their feet and swinging their arms across their chest striving to get the blood back into their frozen limbs. At first and until the sound of the white charger's hoofs died away in the distance down the road.

Had Gabrielle Damiens been endowed with super−human senses, she would have been lost in wonderment, for as soon as the stillness of the night became so absolute that it seemed almost palpable, it was broken by a sound which, in this lonely bit of country, roused the barn−door owl from its nightly contemplation and disturbed the prowling cat in its chase after little birds.

"By George!" a voice suddenly broke forth through the gloom in a language Mam'zelle Guillotine would not have understood, had she heard; "I'm positively frozen stiff."

And another voice then echoed: "I've never been so cold in all my life."

"Got your flask handy, Glynde?"

The other fumbled into his inside pocket and handed a flask to his friend.

"No, you go first," the latter said.

Both had a good pull at the flask.

"I hope we get horses at the *Ecu d'Or*."

"The chief said we were certain to. It is a posting−inn, you know. Stage−coaches get their relay there."

"Yes, I know. And with all this turmoil going on . . ."

The other man shrugged.

"Well! If we can't get horses we'll have to walk. It is not far and I know the way."

"The walk will do us good," his friend commented with easy philosophy.

"When I think what the chief has put up with . . ."

One of the men who spoke was Sir Philip Glynde, the owner of Glynde Towers, one of the show places in East Anglia, with its famous racing stables, its show gardens and hot−houses. The other was Viscount St. Dennys, one of the richest men in England, who had been equerry to the Prince of Wales till he gave up that position and all the pleasures attached to it, in order to follow his chief in the path of obedience and self−sacrifice. Accustomed to every luxury that the possession of a large fortune can procure, sybarites both, they talked quite gaily of a tramp in the night across country with an icy wind driving snow and sleet into their faces, just as they had endured with equal gaiety and as a matter of course, lying flat on hard frozen ground for over an hour with teeth chattering and limbs growing stiff with cold and the pressure of ropes around their body.

On ahead a bright light glinted through the gloom.

"There's the *Ecu d'Or*," Glynde remarked.

"Now for a mug of mulled wine," the other rejoined.

"If we get it the Lord be praised."

"If we don't may the devil take the landlord and his ugly wife."

On they tramped after that in silence till they came to the posting−inn into which they turned and made straight for the coffee−room.

There was mulled wine made hot for the asking and the payment thereof, and there were a couple of horses to be had also, old nags but serviceable, anyway. Glynde gave a deep sigh when the obsequious landlord closed his grasping hand over the pieces of gold which St. Dennys had pressed into it.

"I almost wish the brute had not got us everything we wanted," he said ruefully. "The thought of Blakeney at this moment sickens me."

St. Dennys agreed with him, but said more lightly:

"We've obeyed orders. Thank God we were able to do that. I was dreadfully sorry for those kids."

"And there's the poor mother still knocking about somewhere."

"How in Heaven's name will the chief get her away?"

They drank the hot wine while the two nags, which they had been forced to purchase at a preposterous price, were being saddled. Soon they got to horse and rode away, into the night.

"What did they give thee?" the woman asked her husband, while he busied himself putting up the shutters in the house and barring the door.

"Five louis," he replied curtly.

"They are either mad," the wife retorted, "or else English spies; else they wouldn't have parted with all that money."

"It matters not what they are," the man rejoined with a shrug. "Their money is good anyway."

CHAPTER XXIII. A MESSAGE

All these exciting events just described are put on record in the archives of the city of Mézières: the arrival of the master sleuth from Paris, the arrest of the *ci−devant* Marquise de Saint−Lucque and her two children, and the preposterous accusation brought against the envoy of the Committee of Public Safety by Citizen Chief Commissary Lescar and the turmoil that ensued in consequence.

It is also on record that three days before this last event the stage−coach which plies fortnightly between Barlemont in Belgium and Paris, came to its habitual halt at the *Ecu d'Or*, the posting−inn on the outskirts of

Mézières. On this occasion it brought its usual complement of travellers who were made to alight in order to have their passports examined and their identity scrutinised. There were not many strangers among the small crowd that tumbled helter−skelter out of the lumbering vehicle which had brought them jogging along the hard frozen road from the other side of the Franco−Belgian frontier, and nearly shaken their souls out of their bodies during four hours of this very trying journey. Half a dozen passengers were allowed to pass immediately through the barrier where the examination took place, and filed into what was still called the coffee−room, though no coffee was ever dispensed there these days. Only mugs of sour wine which was made hot if it was specially paid for, and if the landlord and his wife happened to be in an amiable mood. This privileged half−dozen hungry and thirsty travellers were French citizens, farmers or shopkeepers who traded regularly with Belgium, crossing the frontier backwards and forwards, and personally known to the police. The others, they were Belgians of Dutch for the most part, were kept waiting, standing out in the cold where innumerable questions were put to them, their papers taken away from them and brought back again, and countless other vexations put upon them till one of them, a woman, collapsed, fainting with hunger and cold and had to be carried indoors by her fellow sufferers. These were two men and another woman, all obviously foreigners. One of the men, a stocky little fellow, was described on his passport as of Dutch nationality, native of Batavia, and skipper of the cargo ship *Van Tromp* of the Netherlands line. He had landed in Antwerp with a load of coffee, part of which was destined for a wholesale house in Paris. His papers were all in order. They had been signed by the Dutch governor of Batavia and countersigned in Antwerp by Citizen Duvernay, representing the revolutionary government of France in the port of Antwerp. Nothing could be more clear or above board, but the police inspector in charge of the revision of foreign passports in the district was inexperienced and officious. He gave himself airs of authority which annoyed the Dutch skipper who became very truculent, heaped curses and abuse on the young officer and was with difficulty restrained from coming to blows with him.

His fellow travellers, a man and a woman, did their best to soothe the ruffled feelings of the irate Dutchman.

"Do, I pray you, intervene," the woman said to her companion, "we shall never get away while this row is going on"

They had each their passports and other papers in one hand, and each carried a small valise. The man thrust the papers without more ado under the young officer's nose.

"If you could get us through quickly, citizen," he said ingratiatingly, "we would be greatly beholden to you. My friend is cold and hungry. We would like to get food and drink and beds for a night or two before we proceed on our way. We are American citizens," he went on, "and our papers are entirely in order."

With this he insinuated a handful of silver coins into the officer's hand, whose manner at once underwent a change: his hand closed over the money and thrust inside his tunic, after which he took the American's papers and made a show of scrutinising them carefully.

Passports and papers were undoubtedly in order. They were signed by Mr. John Adams, the first United States ambassador accredited to England. Possibly, the officer of Mézières knew nothing at all of Mr. John Adams, and very little of the United States of America, but he knew all about Citizen Jean Lambert Tallien and Citizen Barras, two of the most prominent members of the Convention, who had countersigned the passports. The woman was described thereon as Madeleine St. Just and the man as Honoré St. Just her brother, both citizens of the United States, come to Europe in order to visit their cousin Louis St. Just, the friend and intimate of Maximilien Robespierre himself, names indeed to conjure with.

The police officer's manner became almost abject. Completely ignoring the truculent Dutchman and his imperious demands, he stamped passports and papers without further demur, did not order the valises to be opened for examination, and even went to the length of escorting these highly−connected foreigners as far as the inn and recommended them to the special care and attention of the landlord and his ill−favoured wife, with a whispered

hint of the financial benefit that would be derived from such attention. The landlord took the hint and forgetting his status of free citizen of the Republic of France, and its laws of Equality for all, became almost servile in his desire to provide his guests with everything they desired.

However, they did not want much seemingly, only a couple of rooms with a clean bed for two or three nights, and for the moment just a quiet corner where they could sit and eat in peace. There was a lot of: "This way, citizeness," from the landlord, and: "The coffee−room is crowded, you will be better here," as he ushered the travellers into a small parlour adjoining the larger room and summoned his wife to lay the table and bring along the best food the *Ecu d'Or* could muster.

Marguerite Blakeney sank on to the hard horse−hair sofa, and drew a long sigh of relief. She gathered her cape closely round her and gave a little shiver.

"You are cold, Lady Blakeney," her companion said with obvious concern.

There was an iron stove in a corner of the room. A fire of logs was roaring up the chimney. Marguerite held her hands to the blaze.

"And very tired, I am afraid," the man continued; "it has been such a long journey."

"It was not so bad at first," she commented softly, "while Percy was with us."

And her eyes seemed to search the flames as if seeking in them a picture of the face and form she loved. They had only just parted. And no journey, however trying, could be hard to bear while Percy was there with her.

After a moment or two she spoke: "Sir Andrew!"

"Yes?"

"Do you think we shall see Percy again to−day?"

"I don't know, Lady Blakeney . . ." Ffoulkes replied, paused a moment or two and then added: "I am afraid not."

"He only left you the one message, didn't he?"

"That's all. He slipped the note into my hand when he got off the coach at Bouillon and whispered the two words: "For her."

Sir Andrew took a crumpled paper from his pocket, gave it to Marguerite. Her hand closed on it.

"You have seen yours?" she asked.

"Yes!"

"What does it say?"

"Only one word: Wait."

"Not much, is it?" Marguerite commented with a fleeting little smile.

"I suppose Tony has gone by now," she added.

"I'll go and see, shall I?"

"Please do."

"You'll be all right here, won't you?" Sir Andrew asked anxiously.

"Of course I will. Don't worry about me. Our friend the landlord and his grim−faced wife have scented a bribe and are as amiable as you could wish."

He picked up his hat and went out of the room.

After he had gone Marguerite sat for a while with that crumpled paper in her hand. It was early afternoon, but the narrow room with its dingy rep curtains and windows veiled in dust was already wrapped in gloom. Only the red glow from the iron stove shed a warm light on Marguerite's hand and the paper which she held. A confused murmur of voices came from the crowded coffee−room next door. Presently a woman came in carrying a lighted lamp which she set upon the table. She certainly was grim−faced and surly, and looked askance at Marguerite who paid no attention to her.

"I have some soup," she said curtly; "it is hot. Would you like some?"

Marguerite said "Yes!" thinking more of Sir Andrew than of herself.

"There are also potatoes cooked in lard," the woman went on, "and a small piece of pork. You had better have that too as there's nothing else."

She did not wait for a reply, and stumped out of the room.

As soon as she had gone, Marguerite smoothed out the paper which contained Percy's last message to her. She swallowed the tears which dimmed her eyes and pressed her lips against the paper whereon his dear hand had rested.

And this is what she read:

"On my knees do I beg your forgiveness, my beloved, for the discomfort and suffering you are enduring now. Would I had had the heart not to listen when you said to me: 'If you go, I go with you.' Your eyes, your lips, your lovely arms held me in bonds that no man living should have dared to sever. 'If you love me, do not go,' you entreated, and your exquisite voice broke in an agony of tears. Yet I, like a madman, thought only of two little children who would need a woman's care, and thought more of them and their helpless mother, thought more of an ideal, of my duty and mine honour and of my solemn pledge to Saint−Lucque, more of all that than I did of you. 'If you love me,' you begged, 'do not go.' If I loved you! I love you with my whole soul, with every fibre of my being, more than life and eternity, but I could not love you, dear, so much, loved I not honour more. With the help of my faithful lieutenants I will bring those defenceless women safely to England according to my pledged word, then my arms will close again around you and you will feel my whole soul in a kiss."

His whole soul! his wonderful, self−denying, high−minded soul. That last day in London, how vividly did she recall it now, the rout at the Duchesse de Roncevaux's mansion. The Abbé Prud'hon's tribute to the heroism of her beloved, the intimate talk with the Prince of Wales, and those few brief moments in the library when she made her last desperate appeal to him in the name of love, and felt that appeal was useless and that love stood vanquished before the inner instinct of the sportsman−adventurer, the selfless humanitarian, the knight−errant who had heard the call of the innocent and the weak.

This occurred three days ago. Since then Marguerite Blakeney and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had obeyed Percy's laconic instructions and waited. Whether they were in danger or not, they neither knew nor cared. Certainly not, declared Marguerite, for Percy was of a surety watching over them. They were objects of special care from the landlord and his wife, who took the money so lavishly poured into their hands and in exchange did their best to secure the privacy of these American guests, and to give them clean beds and as good food as the state of the country allowed. Citizens of the great American Republic for whom the great patriot General Lafayette had fought, were popular in France, and the name of St. Just was also one to conjure with. And they still waited in patience and in fortitude on this third day after their arrival, while the most exciting incidents the city of Mézières had ever known were occurring in the market place, while Mam'zelle Guillotine belaboured her unfortunate swain with his riding−whip, while the hooded cart with the Saint−Lucque children was spirited away and their mother endured soul−racking agony inside the diligence that was taking her off to Paris. Marguerite and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes heard vague rumours that something unusual was going on in the city. Sound of many voices raised in shrill staccato reached their ears, while they were sitting in the parlour waiting for their meagre supper. People seemed to be passing in and out of the front door all the time and the door of the coffee−room kept on banging constantly.

When the woman brought in the supper she appeared less surly than usual. Seemed actually inclined to talk. Her eyes were quite bright and her cheeks flushed. Marguerite ventured to question her.

"Has anything special happened, citizeness? There seems to be such excitement about."

The woman grunted and shrugged.

"Excitement!" she exclaimed. "I should think there was excitement and to spare. They say that the English spy has been captured. The man they have been hunting for for years."

Marguerite's self−control at this moment was super−human. She did not gasp or catch her breath. She never moved. It was Sir Andrew who spoke.

"Oh! I have heard about him. Even in the United States of America people talk about a mystic personage who goes by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel. I don't know what he is supposed to do. And have they really got him?"

The woman gave another shrug and a short, harsh laugh.

"Not they," she said. "Our people are fools. It seems they collared the wrong man."

"The wrong man?"

"Well, some people said he was the right man and some that he was the wrong one. But what everyone in Mézières knows by now is that the two *aristos* who should have been taken to Paris to be guillotined two little traitors, what? were spirited away under the very nose of Citizeness Damiens, the public executioner. It seems she is mad with rage and the whole town is in a state of terror, wondering on whom she will vent her fury."

Marguerite really was wonderful. How she kept motionless and outwardly calm while she heard the woman actually stating the fact that Percy had been captured is one of the secrets of her intrepid nature. Sir Andrew remained standing close beside her, with one hand on her shoulder. She put up hers and their two hands met in a pressure of reassurance and of comfort.

As soon as the woman had gone Sir Andrew said:

"I don't believe for a moment that anything has happened to Percy. You don't either, do you, Lady Blakeney?"

"No," she replied simply, "I do not."

"But with your permission I'll go and ascertain just what did occur to give rise to the rumour. I might hear something. Shall I go?"

"Do."

"Promise me you won't fret," he urged.

She looked up at him with a wan little smile.

"I promise," she said.

"I won't be long," were his final words before he went out.

He was back half an hour later.

"I've seen Tony," were the first words he spoke as soon as he had closed the door behind him.

"Tony!" Marguerite exclaimed.

She was still sitting by the fire which now was burning low. Ffoulkes put some logs on while he continued.

"I met him a few moments ago. He was coming this way and will meet us on the Grécourt road. He gave me a scribbled note from Percy."

He took the note from his waistcoat pocket and read out its contents by the light of the lamp.

"The Saint−Lucque children are quite safe. I am taking them to a place I know of called Saint Félix. It is a derelict village this side of Grécourt, slightly off the road on the right. You can't miss it. I want you to meet me there. Your landlord at the Ecu d'Or has a cabriolet and a good horse, which you can either hire or purchase outright. Steal it if you must, bring plenty of provisions and drive hell−for−leather."

Ffoulkes thrust the paper into the stove. Marguerite watched it burn.

"Thank God!" she said, "he is safe. And there is at last something for us to do."

"We had better pretend to eat some of this supper," Sir Andrew rejoined, "and then talk about the cabriolet."

They sat down and tried to swallow a morsel. Marguerite asked:

"Did Tony say anything about the Saint−Lucque children?"

"Yes ye did. He was in it all. But he couldn't say much as it would have been dangerous with so many people about."

"But what about Sir Philip Glynde and my Lord St. Dennys?"

Sir Andrew gave a short laugh. Quite a merry one.

"They are having a very hard time, poor devils," he said lightly.

"What do you mean?"

"Tony had been busy trussing them up like a pair of capons and left them lying in a near−by field, getting frozen and cramped like the very devil."

"Great heavens!"

"Oh, they are quite happy, Lady Blakeney. Do not fret about them. The chief's orders, you know. We'd all go to hell for him, if he ordered us to go."

Marguerite made no reply to this. How could she? Ffoulkes, the loyal lieutenant, had spoken and voiced the feelings of eighteen others as true and brave as himself. She could only wonder within the depths of her soul at the marvellous magnetism exercised by the one man who had made her so infinitely proud and happy in his love.

They sat at the table a few minutes longer. The white−faced clock up on the wall struck five. The shades of evening were rapidly drawing it. Ffoulkes rose and went in search of the landlord. The question of hiring a vehicle of some sort was then broached.

"We want to get to Grécourt before nightfall," Ffoulkes explained to the man. "My aunt, the citizeness St. Just, the mother of the great patriot my cousin, has been expecting us the last two days. We had not intended to stay here so long, but my sister was tired after the journey and we were very comfortable in your house."

A preposterous price was, of course, asked for the purchase, not the hire, of an old−fashioned cabriolet, an equally aged horse and a basket of provisions, such as could be got. The landlord made pretence of being suspicious, talked of police and of taking risks by aiding strangers to wander about the country without special permits. Such risks and suspicious were naturally to be paid for along with the horse and the cabriolet.

In the end the sight of half a dozen louis set all patriotic scruples at rest. The cabriolet was brought round. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes took the reins whilst Marguerite, wrapped in shawl and mantle, snuggled in the corner of the carriage under the hood.

On the road to Saint Félix, they met Lord Anthony Dewhurst, one of the most elegant fops known in the society of London and Bath. He was clothed in the promiscuous bits of uniform, tattered tunic and shoes down at heels, his nose was blue and his fingers stiff. Sir Andrew drew rein and Tony scrambled into the cabriolet by the side of Marguerite.

"What is Percy going to do about Madame de Saint−Lucque," she murmured enquiringly, more to herself than to him.

"God and he alone know," Tony replied, then he added: "It is the devil, the children being separated from their mother. It means two tasks instead of one."

"But he'll do it," murmured Ffoulkes fervently.

"No doubt about that," Tony echoed under his breath.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE COSY CORNER

The *Parc aux Daims* is not by any means the only derelict homestead in Artois. The province, owing to its proximity to the capital, had already suffered much even in the early days of the revolution when inflammatory speeches delivered outside and inside of every cabaret by agents of the government had provoked a half−starved peasantry into acts of brigandage and loot. And not only were these acts directed against landlords and so−called *aristos*, but more often than not well−to−do farmers and peasant proprietors even in a small way, were faced with the fury of an enraged populace and saw their homesteads invaded and destroyed, even though some of their most virulent attackers had been their equals and friends in the past.

Thus it was with the once prosperous village of Saint Félix, distant a couple of leagues from Mézières and less than half a league off the Grécourt main road. In this year of grace and fraternity that is 1794 it was nothing but a conglomeration of derelict cottages and a jumble of stones, broken−down walls and charred remains of roofs, doors and window−frames. The tower of the little church had partially collapsed. It was leaning over at an acute angle with great fissures in its sides, its pointed roof with great gaps open to rain and snow, showed glimpses of its cracked bell, now for ever mute. What had been the presbytery beside it had been burnt down to the ground.

Close to the presbytery there had once stood a substantially built wayside inn with stables and outhouses. Its sign was *Le bon petit Coin* (The Cosy Corner), and had been the property of a worthy Artesian who had drawn home−brewed ale, tapped casks of local wine and led a God−fearing life with his wife and family until a rabble led by paid agitators from Paris had raided his house, set fire to it and destroyed all his belongings till nothing but the crumbling walls remained of what had been a prosperous business place and a happy homestead. The innkeeper and his family drifted away, no one knew or cared whither they went, or what became of them, nor is it the purpose of this chronicle to follow up their traces. Enough that crumbling walls and broken roof of the house withstood the ravages of autumn gales, of winter snow and hail−storms better than the rest of the village had done, and that as a freakish chance would have it, the sign *Le bon petit Coin* still dangled engagingly on its posts. But no one ever went there. No traveller ever entered its inhospitable doors.

"The Cosy Corner"? It was anything but cosy on this bleak February evening when a hooded cart drawn by a couple of horses came to a halt beneath its creaking signpost. The man who had been driving it threw down the reins and jumped down from the cart. At the back, under the hood, there were two bundles wrapped in thick blankets. Live bundles, through the thick folds of which came the sound of whimpering and little human cries: "*Maman?*" The man went round to the back of the cart. With infinite precaution he took up the bundles and carried them into the derelict house. Through one room, which had obviously been the public bar once, he carried the two bundles one by one, and thence into an inner room, wherein, as there was no furniture whatever, he deposited them with tender care on the wooden floor. He saw to it that the blankets covered the small human forms efficiently against the cold, and listened for a moment or two to the pathetic cries of " *Maman.*" He then took a bottle out of the pocket of his big coat. It contained milk. Perhaps there was even a tiny, very tiny drop of brandy in the milk.

"That will comfort you, you poor kids," he murmured to himself, and insinuated the bottle into the small human mouths. There was some spluttering, but swallowing also. The man gave a quaint little chuckle. "I ought to have been a nursemaid!" he went on murmuring to himself. He waited for a few moments longer, until gradually the cries of "*Maman* " became more rare, and the two bundles of blankets no longer betrayed any movement through their folds. He went out of the room and gave himself a good stretch. "Sink me!" he muttered, "but I'm stiff. I never thought a woman could hit so hard."

He went back to the cart and peeped down under the hood. It was still snowing, but the evening had not yet fully drawn in, and he could perceive the forms of three men lying on their sides across the floor of the cart. They were trussed up with cords, and their knees were drawn up to the middle of their chests. Their coats were wrapped

round their legs and shoulders, and scarves were wound round their mouths and chins.

"Well," the man muttered again, "you can't come to much harm like that, my friends, and cannot do much mischief either." He tied up the horses to the ring in the wall, picked up an untidy bundle of something soft from the driving−seat of the cart and finally turned into the tap−room of the Cosy Corner.

This was none other than Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., the prince of dandies, the *enfant gâté* of London and Bath society, the brilliant sportsman, and always the smartest and gayest man in town. He was anything but that just now when he staggered into the tap−room and let himself go down on the floor. Now that there was nothing imperative left to do, reaction set in, and in spite of indomitable will−power, he was feeling giddy and sick. He ached in every limb. Felt himself all over to see if there were any broken bones to deplore.

"Curse that virago! How she did hit!"

But he was light−hearted for all that. Physical discomfort that's all this was had no hold on his spirits. Except for that feeling of giddiness, caused by the blows on his head, he would have burst into song or laughter.

"By George!" he thought, and chuckled inwardly. "How she must have cursed when she learned that the kids had gone. And how she will swear, and threaten and fulminate when "

He paused abruptly in his reflection, for his keen ear had suddenly detected the sound of wheels in the remote distance. He pulled himself together, struggled to his feet, stretched out his arms, and there he was now, a magnificent specimen of manhood, tall, broad, vigorous, as if he had never known an ache or pain in his life.

Marguerite was nigh! Marguerite was coming! In five minutes she would be here in his arms. O God! grant a weak man strength to bear up under the fullness of this joy!

A quarter of an hour later the tap−room of the Cosy Corner was giving shelter to the three men who had watched the well−nigh tragic drama enacted by Mam'zelle Guillotine and Chief Commissary Lescar, a drama in which their beloved chief had been the all−too−willing victim.

They crouched on the creviced floor, closely huddled together, for it was very cold. A stable lantern placed in front of them threw a circle of dim light on the floor and on the primitive repast which they were consuming at the moment; they were digging their young teeth into hunks of stale bread and dry cheese and alternately taking pulls at their respective flasks of brandy. They were dressed in the promiscuous clothes that were served out to infantry regiments not required for service in the more important towns. This meant that their breeches were ragged, that they had no tunics or stockings, and that their shoes were down at heels. And here they were, these sybarites, accustomed to silks and satins, perfumes and Mechlin lace, to drinking old Burgundy and feeding on turkeys and Strasburg patties, here they were munching rye bread and drinking raw brandy and enjoying life to the full as they had never done before.

With them at this hour was Sir Andrew Ffoulkes just come over with Lady Blakeney from the neighbourhood of Mézières in a ramshackle cabriolet purchased at a fabulous price from the landlord of the *Ecu d'Or*. Poor Sir Andrew! He had gone through a bad moment when he entered the tap−room of the Cosy Corner and there was greeted by Sir Philip Glynde and my Lord St. Dennys with a stern demand for something fit to eat.

"Something fit to eat?" Sir Andrew mimicked with biting irony. "You gluttons! Haven't I given you luscious cheese and −"

"Luscious cheese?" Sir Philip broke in with mock indignation. "St. Dennys, did you hear that? And luscious bread I suppose he would call this jaw−breaking crust."

"Now, listen to me, Ffoulkes," St. Dennys continued sternly. "Either you delve once more into that basket which I saw reposing in the vehicle which brought you here, and bring us along something fit for an English gentleman to eat −"

"Together with enough good wine to tickle his fastidious palate," the other put in.

Sir Andrew laughed and gave a shrug.

"Well, what is the alternative?" he asked gaily.

"Or you give us a good reason for not doing as we command"

"I'll give you the best of reasons," Ffoulkes retorted. "The provisions were not intended for a set of gluttons like you. They will be kept for the journey which lies ahead of us all. And let me tell you that I will defend them against your predatory fingers to the last drop of my blood."

"You inhuman monster," St. Dennys cried, and with this he flung a lump of cheese at the head of Sir Andrew, who, still laughing, dodged this first missile only to be pelted by others. He was forced ultimately to cry for mercy. A free fight ensued such as all British schoolboys revel in. And they were just schoolboys for the time being, these brave followers of the Scarlet Pimpernel, full of high animal spirits and the very joy of living.

When peace was at last restored, all four of them settled down once more to their repast of dry bread and cheese.

Between the courses of this sumptuous repast they tried to give Ffoulkes some account of what had gone on in Mézières this afternoon.

"Never in all my life," my Lord Tony was saying, "did I see anything so appalling as the chief under the hand of that vixen, and Glynde, St. Dennys and I being obliged to stand by, under strict orders not to interfere and commit a murder. I tell you," he concluded emphatically, "it was hell!"

A hearty, careless laugh broke in on the moodiness which had suddenly fallen on the small company at recollection of the horror they witnessed a few short hours ago. The laughter came from the inner room, where Marguerite at this moment was held closely in her husband's arms, while he whispered in her ear:

"You understand, don't you, my beloved?"

"No, Percy," she said resolutely, and threw her head back so as to look him straight in the eyes. "I do not. What you wish me to do is impossible. Impossible," she reiterated firmly.

A stable lantern was set on a projection in the wall, and by its dim light Marguerite could just see her husband's face. His eyes were looking down into hers and she could see that there was a merry twinkle in them and that the lines round his mouth were set in a gently ironical smile.

It was then that this merry, careless laugh came to the ears of his friend.

"What?" he enquired lightly. "Insubordination?"

"Percy!" she protested.

"I am not wishing you to do anything, my beloved," he said. "You are a member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. The most adored. The most revered amongst all. But you are a member, and I am your chief whom

you have sworn to obey in all things. And I am giving you a command."

That was all he said, speaking very softly; his voice was hardly audible it was so low, just a trifle husky, but perfectly firm. Marguerite buried her face against his shoulder. He went on with infinite tenderness:

"Look at me, my beloved. Are we not one, you and I? Have we not gone through endless joy and often bitter sorrow together? This is one of the moments in our life when we must work together and suffer together −"

"Why Percy? Why?" she broke in pitiably through her sobs.

"Because somewhere near here, within a stone's throw of this spot which your dear presence has hallowed, there is a helpless, innocent woman who is faced with death, a horrible death which she would have to endure in loneliness and sorrow surpassing in intensity anything you and I have ever known. Also because there are two little children in this very room who will be motherless unless we come to their aid, you and I, and because an English gentleman would stand for ever dishonoured before you and his own conscience if he so shamefully broke his word."

"But if I stayed with you Percy . . ." came as a final entreaty from Marguerite's aching heart. The hood had fallen back from her head. Through the gloom Percy's hand sought the waves of her soft golden hair which rippled gently round her face and neck. With his handkerchief he brushed gently, very gently the tears that were coursing down her cheeks.

"I might fail, my adored one," was his calm reply. "Do you know what that would mean to them and to me?"

She could no longer speak, her heart was so full of sorrow that she thought it must surely break. And suddenly his mood changed. The tender sentiment of a moment ago flew away into the unknown and the adventurous spirit, the spirit of the sportsman, once more gained the mastery over his strange personality.

"You do understand, don't you, my adored, my loyal helpmate," he asked with his habitual light−hearted eagerness, "just what I want you to do?"

Marguerite unable to speak nodded in reply.

"You will take these two innocents with you in the cart. Glynde, St. Dennys and Tony, who are still in their haphazard uniforms, will accompany you. All three will sit on the driving−seat and will look very imposing and official up there in their tattered uniforms. Ffoulkes, of course, will have to remain under the hood with you. Tony will drive you to Perignon, which is on the other side of the French frontier not far from the city of Luxembourg. He knows the way quite well as he has been along there with me more than once. It is one of the loneliest corners in Eastern France. There is no proper road, only a rather wide bridle−path through ploughed fields which skirts a few isolated villages and avoids the approach to any city. Anyway, the news of what has been going on in Mézières has not had time to spread itself in that direction. There are no patrols along the paths and no garrisons anywhere near. If, after the break of dawn, a few labourers going to their work should gape at you, they will be over−awed at sight of three soldiers of the Republic on the driving−seat of a market cart."

He broke off for the sole purpose of gazing anxiously into her tear−filled eyes and to murmur with a short sigh: "How lovely you are, my beloved!" and then went on in the same matter−of−fact tone of voice, giving his direction clearly, succinctly, like a general issuing commands, certain that they would be obeyed. "I have given Tony all the necessary papers in case they are required. They are in perfect order, signed by Tallien, Barras and our faithful friend, Armand Chauvelin. These signatures are the most perfect specimens of forgery I have ever seen in all my life, and I have had some experience in forged safe−conducts, have I not? I need not tell you who did them, nor what I paid for them. The fellow runs great risks every time he serves me, but he must have put by a

cosy little fortune by now and he knows that in case of trouble he can always count on us −"

Once again he paused, his eyes fixed into vacancy, his mind at work on the great problem which he would confront on the morrow. The children were safe, of that he was sure. So sure, in fact, that something of his almost supernal confidence in himself had communicated itself to Marguerite. She had contrived to swallow her tears and it was in a steady voice that she put the all−important question to him:

"What about you, Percy?"

He gave a little chuckle.

"What about me?" he echoed with inimitable merriment. "Why, sweetheart, I will be kissing your lovely hands let me see in a sen'night from to−day at the Fisherman's Rest in Dover, while that nice little baggage, Suzan Jellyband, will be seeing to the creature comforts of poor Madame de Saint−Lucque. . . . Hush! my adored one," he added quickly, and placed a finger over her mouth, for she had been on the point of speaking. "If you say one word more I shall be tempted to silence you with a kiss, and then . . . then God help me! for it would be so difficult, so very difficult to slip away. Now you must try and get a couple of hours' rest if not of sleep.

He stooped and picked up the bundle which he had brought with him in the cart. Out of it he took a couple of cushions. One of these he disposed upon the floor in a corner of the room, the other he propped up against the wall. She watched him smiling.

"Promise me you will try and rest," he urged. "The children are asleep and you must not worry about them any more, promise."

She contrived to say firmly "I promise," and did her best to appear comfortably installed on one cushion with her head resting on the other.

He did not look at her again, turned the lantern so as to shade its light from her eyes.

Before he left the room he said earnestly:

"You don't know what your presence here this time has meant to me. God bless you."

In the meanwhile, in the tap−room after that one moment of subdued emotion when their chief's laughter rang so merrily in their ears, Sir Philip Glynde, his eyes fixed on the communicating door, murmured with a quick sigh:

"Poor old Percy!"

"Don't say that!" Sir Andrew Ffoulkes protested earnestly, knowing what was passing in the minds of the three friend. "Percy adores his wife. We all know that. And she worships him. But those two wonderful people would be the first to resent the idea of any of us being sorry for them. They are prepared to sacrifice everything for the cause they have at heart. Their lives, their entire fortune . . ."

"Their love?" put in one of the others.

"Their love, yes," Ffoulkes assented; and then added after a second's hesitation: "He, at any rate. He has proved it more than once. But, of course, with a glamorous woman like Lady Blakeney it is difficult to guess just what she feels."

"What about you, Ffoulkes," St. Dennys put in with a smile. "You ought to know what all that sort of thing feels like. The long separations, the constant 'farewells.'"

None of the others passed a remark on this. They all knew Ffoulkes's love for his young wife and that he, too, like all the others, was ready to follow his chief wherever and whenever he was called. He, too, like Blakeney, was ready for any sacrifice in the cause of suffering humanity. As indeed they all were. But he and Blakeney were the only married men in their ranks, and many a time had some of them like Glynde or Tony or St. Dennys probed their hearts wondering whether if they in their turn would be ready to sacrifice love for the sake of an ideal.

Sir Andrew gave a slight shrug.

"That's quite right, my dear fellow," he said lightly in answer to St. Dennys, and with that reticence in matters of sentiment peculiar to the Anglo−Saxon race. "But you see, Percy means so much to me, and I have such an admiration for him as a man and as our chief, that when I am working with him I seem to become different somehow . . . I feel differently, I mean . . . about everything. . . . I dare say this sounds queer, and I expect you all think me a bounder for saying it . . . but there it is. . . ."

There was no answer to this, for obviously there was nothing that could be said, and silence fell for a few moments on the congenial little company.

But all of a sudden the communicating door was opened and Blakeney came in.

"Well," he queried airily, "you four chatterers, have you had enough of this sumptuous repast, and have you got a last drop of something to drink for a thirsty man?"

Four flasks of brandy were immediately held up to him. He took two and drained them both.

"I know what your were talking about. Your chief under the whip of a virago, what?"

"Don't, Percy," Tony exclaimed, "it was hellish."

Blakeney could not help laughing: the earnestness and the towering rage of his friend filled him with boyish delight.

"I am sure it was," he admitted, "but how else were we going to engage the attention of that huge crowd long enough to give you three fellows time to deal with those poor kids, with the three troopers and with the cart? And you did it splendidly. And that awful time you had lying in the open field, trussed like a brace of chickens, frozen nearly to death. My God! but you were wonderful! weren't they, Ffoulkes? There are no finer men in the whole wide world than you fellows who honour me by your friendship. God bless and reward you! You have been wonderful to−day."

He appeared to be in the highest spirits though to the keen ears of his devoted followers the voice of their valiant leader sounded perhaps a trifle husky, a little less vibrant than usual.

"Thank Heaven!" he added with a short, quick sigh, "Lady Blakeney will know nothing of what happened in Mézières."

"And she never will," Lord Tony declared fervently.

There was a short moment of silence until Blakeney exclaimed:

"Sink me! I never thought a woman could hit quite so hard. I had a good wacking from my friend Chauvelin once. Not himself, but a pair of lusty bullies. It would have made his heart glad to see me this afternoon. Mam'zelle Guillotine hit twice as hard as his myrmidons did that time in Calais. By George!" he concluded, with something approaching admiration, "what a woman!"

"What are you going to do with her, Blakeney," Glynde asked, "when you've got her?"

There arose an animated discussion as to what should be done with the noted fury. Hanging was, of course, too good for her. Lifelong imprisonment to repeat her experiences in the Bastille would be far too merciful. Tony, who felt particularly bloodthirsty, had read something about lynching in America. He would have liked to have seen the harpy who had laid hands on his chief either burned at the stake or beaten to death, something peculiarly painful and lingering, he urged.

Blakeney said nothing while the matter was being discussed. When the arguments were finally silenced he rejoined:

"You sadistic young ruffians! But you won't get your way with Mam'zelle Guillotine, you know."

"Why not?"

As Blakeney made no immediate reply to this, Tony queried anxiously:

"You are not going to let her get away, Percy, are you?"

"No!" Blakeney answered. "I won't do that, I promise you."

The last sight Marguerite had of her husband was when she peeped out under the hood at the back of the cart. His tall form was still vaguely distinguishable through the fast gathering gloom. He stood, a solitary figure, under the portico of the Cosy Corner. Bare−headed. The falling snow made white patches on each of his shoulders. His face she could no longer see. Tony clicked his tongue. The horse's hoofs grated against the frozen road. The cart gave a lurch and moved slowly away into the night. And darkness swallowed the solitary figure of the great leader, who after a moment or two turned and went within.

CHAPTER XXV. THE MAN IN BLACK

Saint Félix is situated half a league, not more, from Grécourt. The latter in itself is not much of a town, all it does is to serve as a stopping−place for one or two diligences that did not halt in Mézières. It also was noted for its fortnightly horse and cattle market which used to be the scene of great activity in the olden days, and of festive gatherings during the spring and summer months when music and dancing went on all day and half the night, on the grass plots of the cabarets around the market place, and copious drinking and jollity in their respective rooms.

But all this merry−making was now a thing of the past. Farmers and cattle−breeders did stroll into the city once a fortnight with their live stock such as it was: poor half−starved animals they were for the most part, because food was dear and scarce now that the brains of the country concentrated on the quickest way to get rid of all landowners who before this era of equality and fraternity had helped nature to produce the necessities of life for man and beast.

It was the eve before market day when Gabrielle Damiens mounted on her whilom swain's white charger rode into

Grécourt. She was in an anxious and moody frame of mind. The disappearance of the two Saint−Lucque children, coming on the top of her disappointment over the rescue of the Marquis and the young Vicomte, had dealt a smashing blow not only to her pride, but chiefly to her burning passion of hatred and revenge.

After she had left the three soldiers on the road, she wandered on horseback first into Mézières, then feeling unconquerable restlessness, she prowled about in the fast−gathering darkness along the country roads oblivious of time and place; like an unquiet spirit seeking repose. At one time she almost lost her way. She hardly knew where she was when she came on a deserted village, or rather what had been a village once and was now only a mass of ruins. She gave the charger his head and let him roam around the tumble−down cottages and what had once been the village street.

"This must be Saint Félix," she thought. "And Grécourt must be over that way."

She turned her horse's head in the direction in which she thought the little township lay. The short interlude had caused her to gather her roving thoughts together. But only momentarily. As soon as she found herself on the right road once again, off they went at a tangent. The image of that great, hulking creature, André Renaud, rose out of the darkness confronting her mental vision. The problem of the man's personality, his tempestuous wooing, his exuberant temperament puzzled and harassed her brain, taunted her with its unfathomable mystery. If the man whom she had kissed and trusted and subsequently chastised was not the master sleuth sent to her from Paris, who and what was he? And what had become of him while the crowd dispersed and she herself rode away? She had no recollection of him after she had snatched the reins of the white charger out of his hands and left him lying on the ground muttering threats and imprecations.

She reached Grécourt in this confused state of mind. Even the sight of the diligence which stood in the yard of the *Bon Camarade* where she intended to spend the night did not rouse her out of her moodiness. She drew rein. The ostler ran along to aid her to dismount. Scorning his help she jumped down from the saddle. The landlord came along quickly. His manner, when in the new arrival he recognised Mam'zelle Guillotine, became almost servile.

"What did the citizeness require?"

"Supper and a room. I leave again early to−morrow." After which she demanded:

"When did the diligence come in?"

"About two hours ago, citizeness."

"Where is the corporal?"

"In the tap−room having supper."

"Many people in the tap−room?"

"A good number. It's market day to−morrow."

"I know that. I want my supper in a quiet corner. By the way, what is your name?"

"Magnol Fernand. At your service, citizeness."

"Get me something hot then, Citizen Magnol, and be quick about it."

She made her way to the tap−room. It was of the usual pattern to be found in varying sizes in every inn and cabaret of eastern France. Drab−coloured walls that had once been white. An iron stove with inside chimney rising to the blackened, raftered ceiling. A long, trestle table in the middle of the room. Benches each side of it, and the inevitable odour of boiled cabbage, garlic, damp clothes and humanity. A score or more of men were sitting at the centre table consuming platefuls of soup with much sound of gustation and smacking of lips. Their steaming contents gave forth the insistent odour of garlic and cabbage.

A girl with tousled hair and dressed in a promiscuous conglomeration of rags, went round the table bearing hunks of bread on a platter. Her name was apparently Philoméne. There was hardly any talking in the room, except for occasional calls for Philoméne and for bread.

When the door was opened and Gabrielle came in a few heads were turned in her direction. Not by any means all. Most of the men knew her by sight as a matter of course, but these were not the days of cheery, friendly greetings, and after a moment or two the smacking of lips and plying of metal spoons went on as before. She strode across the room. The landlord hovered round her and piloted her to a corner of the room where two small tables were seemingly disposed for the reception of privileged guests. One of these tables was occupied by a solitary guest, a man dressed in sober black. Gabrielle bestowed on him a quick appraising glance. She sat down at the other table. Philoméne brought plates, fork, spoon and knife and set a candle on the table.

"What will the citizeness take?" the landlord asked.

"What is there?"

"Cabbage soup . . ."

"I can smell it. Whet else?"

"A piece of pork with beans."

"What else?"

"Potatoes . . ."

"Good. Bring me potatoes, beans and pork, and see that they are hot."

"Any wine?"

"Yes! Red. From the cask."

The landlord shuffled out of the room. Gabrielle sat on, waiting. She tried hard not to appear to be scrutinising her fellow guest too closely. Nevertheless, she took stock of him every time his head was turned away. She could not see him very well because of the flickering candlelight between her and her vision of him. She put him down as an official of some sort. Police probably. His hair was very dark and lanky. He wore it rather long at the back and tied at the nape of the neck with a black ribbon. It was plastered down his forehead in a rigid, straight line, which made it look like a black band just above his bushy eyebrows. He looked well groomed, although his cheeks showed dark blue against his sallow skin and the starched linen stock round his throat. In her present mood Gabrielle felt intrigued. A Marseillais, she thought, and wanted to hear him speak. Anyway, from the South.

She called to Philoméne for salt.

Forestalling the girl, the stranger took the salt box from his own table and placed it in front of Gabrielle. She gave him a curt "Thank you," to which he responded: "At your service, citizeness," stressing the last syllable of *citoyen−ne* as is the manner of those in the South.

"You are a stranger here, citizen?" Gabrielle asked.

"I am a stranger everywhere, citizeness," he replied, "even in Paris from whence I came yesterday."

"Yes," thought Gabrielle, "you are distinctly of the South, my friend. Your accent is slight but unmistakable."

"So you are from Paris, citizen?" she went on. "Are you making a long stay in our province?

"That depends."

"On what?"

"How soon I can lay hands on a reputed criminal."

"How so?"

"I am of the secret police, Citizeness Damiens," the man replied quietly, and with his left hand he turned back the lapel of his coat, displaying a metal badge surmounted by a tricolour ribbon. It was then that Gabrielle noticed that his right sleeve was pinned empty to his coat.

"You know who I am?" was all she could think of saying at the moment.

"If I did not would I have revealed my mission to you?" he countered dryly.

He spoke all the time in an even, monotonous tone of voice, without the slightest inflexion or emphasis, like one reciting a lesson learned by heart.

"What is that mission, citizen?" Gabrielle queried, this time in her wonted peremptory way.

"As I have told you, citizeness, to hunt after a reputed criminal."

"If he is reputed I must know about him. I know every criminal in the Province of Artois. Who is he?" she demanded, paused for a second or two, and suddenly gave a gasp, exclaiming: "Do you mean the English spy?"

The stranger nodded.

"Do you know him, citizeness?"

"No," she faltered.

"Nevertheless, if rumour does not lie, you had him under your hand a few hours ago. Why did you let him go?"

His voice was still quite even and only just audible, but there was something stern now and rasping in its tone. He did not look at the woman while he spoke, but over her shoulder on the drab−coloured wall on which to the words "*Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité,*" traced thereon in black chalk, had been added the words: "*ou la Mort.*" He looked that way so insistently that Gabrielle, fascinated, turned round to look. But she was not the woman ever to be intimidated by the suggestion of a threat, wherever it came from. She gave a shrug and a harsh, ironic laugh.

"If you have those sort of ideas in your head, citizen," she said dryly, "You won't go far in your career."

"What do you mean?"

"That you are altogether on the wrong track. The man whom I horsewhipped this afternoon is not the celebrated Scarlet Pimpernel."

"What makes you say that?"

"It was he who first called our attention to the disappearance of the cart."

"A clever trick, since he took you in."

"What do you mean by a clever trick?"

"He had to get out of your clutches, citizeness, or you would have killed him."

"I certainly would " she began, paused a moment or two, then went on: "Do you dare to assert that the man who has been spending the last two days in Mézières, who effected the arrest of the traitor *aristos* the *ci−devant* Saint−Lucque and her brats, and who was sent out specially from Paris by Armand Chauvelin to aid me in the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel, do you dare to tell me that he was . . ."

"The Scarlet Pimpernel himself," the man broke in firmly. "He was not sent out from Paris, citizeness. He only said he was."

"He was André Renaud I saw his papers. They were sighed by Maximilien Robespierre and two other members of the Committee of Public Safety; André Renaud . . ."

"He was not André Renaud," the other broke in again with increased emphasis.

"How do you know?"

"Because I happen to be André Renaud, citizeness." Gabrielle Damiens gave such a start that the table on which she had leaned her elbows gave a lurch, and the beer bottle which did duty for a candlestick rolled down on the floor. The candle broke, the light went out and the corner where these two sat in close conversation was in greater obscurity than before.

Gabrielle's glowering eyes searched the face of the stranger through this gloom.

"You!" she burst out, gasping for breath.

"Even I," the man responded coolly.

"I don't believe it . . . I don't believe it," she reiterated over and over again, trying to steady her voice, and to stop her teeth from chattering.

"Why shouldn't you believe it, citizeness?" he retorted. "Who do you suppose I am?"

"I don't know," she murmured gruffly.

He gave a short laugh.

"Well, I am not the Scarlet Pimpernel, am I, or I shouldn't be here talking to you?"

That was true enough. Gabrielle passed the back of her hand across her moist forehead. He went on:

"You have been believing and disbelieving so many things here to−day, citizeness, no wonder you are bewildered, and," he added, with, for the first time, the hint of a threat in what he said, "are like now to commit the greatest blunder of your career. And let me tell you, citizeness, that you are not quite so indispensable in the estimation of the government that you can afford to commit blunder after blunder as you have done in the past few days."

She pulled herself together, straightening out her massive shoulders, and retorted defiantly:

"Blunders? I? You forget to whom you are talking, Citizen "

"André Renaud," he put in with a thin smile.

Whereupon she gave a shrug.

"I don't believe it," she again persisted.

"It makes no matter," he countered coolly, "whether you believe in me or not. I can do my duty without any help from you. I know all the plans that have been made for the capture of the English spy, and I also know that you, Citizeness Gabrielle Damiens, Mam'zelle Guillotine, have run counter to the orders sent to you direct by the Committee of Public Safety . . ."

"How do you know that?" she broke in roughly. "Who was . . ." She paused abruptly, afraid that she was giving herself away.

"It was Citizen Armand Chauvelin who told me what the orders were," he put in quietly.

"I don't believe it," she reiterated with parrot−like insistence.

"Shall I tell you what they were . . . and how you contravened them?"

No reply to that from Gabrielle. She sat there a veritable statue of obstinacy and sullenness, her elbows resting on the table, her chin cupped in her hands. Her mind had got back to that awful state of puzzlement and confusion of a while ago. The very name André Renaud, seemed to be burning inside her brain with letters of fire. She tried to recapture every phase of her association with the man. His arrival at the episcopal palace, her rage against him because he had come when the *ci−devant* Saint−Lucque woman was already under arrest, on a denunciation from the farmer Guidal. Guidal! She had flung the name in the man's face at the time, whereupon and with consummate self−possession he had erased Guidal's very name from the tablets of her memory. It came back to her now. What a fool she had been not to confront the farmer with the man who called himself André Renaud and claimed to be the master sleuth sent to her from Paris.

Then there was the man's personality, which now obtruded itself with exasperating persistence before her troubled mind. The more she thought of him the more did her brain reject the thought that that huge, hulking male creature with his coarse ways and brutal love−making could possibly be André Renaud the noted sleuth−hound, the tracker of criminals and traitors, a calling requiring suavity of manner, tact, effacement, every quality, in fact, which that rowdy, hoydenish lout did not possess. English that's what he was. He spoke French, but he was English. He couldn't be anything but English not with those huge legs and immense shoulders. Frenchmen occasionally were broad and powerful−looking, like this man opposite to her now. Though tall, a Frenchman was graceful and soft

of speech, unless he was the spokesman of the government and was obliged to talk forcefully to a crowd of waverers.

Thoughts! Thoughts! Conjectures! There they were going round and round in the whirlpool of Gabrielle's brain. Her dark, glowering eyes remained fixed on the man who had set all this effervescence foaming and boiling inside her, making her temples throb and sending her blood rushing like a fiery torrent through her veins. He was almost sinister−looking in his funereal clothes and that black hair which looked like a mourning band round his forehead, with his measured speech, his sallow skin and that empty sleeve. What a contrast to the burly, noisy boor who had made love to her, to his showy clothes and clumsy boots, his tousled yellow hair and florid skin.

Gabrielle Damiens visualising all this, remembering the other man's fulsome adulation, and his resounding kisses, cursed herself for a fool. Fortune and fame were in her grasp and she let everything go, even the chance of realising a part of her revenge.

The *ci−devant* Marquis and the boy were gone, the two brats also, probably. And all of this the work of a man who had bamboozled her. Led her by the nose until she became like a despicable noodle, mistrusting her own powers of which she had always been so justly proud.

"If I only could trust you," she burst out, staring like a wild cat at the sober, placid figure of the man before her. "Whom else could you trust, citizeness, if not the man who was sent down for the express purpose of aiding you in the capture of the greatest prize that ever fell to the lot of a patriot like yourself?"

He paused a moment. Looking her full in the face. Returning stare for stare. His eyes looked more sinister than ever overshadowed by those bushy eyebrows and surmounted by that band of straight black hair which seemed to cut off the upper part of his face. It appeared to begin at the eyes and to end just above the chin, where the stock of snow−white linen presented such a crude contrast to his blue−black cheeks and chin. He did look sinister, devilish, for there had crept a look into his eyes that was both malefic and menacing.

"And that prize," he resumed after that short ominous pause, "you actually allowed to slip out of your hands. You held him at your mercy and you let him go."

"I horsewhipped him," she murmured, through clenched teeth.

"Do you think he cared? What you did was to give his followers time to spirit away the two *aristos*. After that he disappeared. Or am I wrong?" he concluded with biting sarcasm.

Slowly, gradually, step by step, Gabrielle saw her spirit breaking and her will−power crumbling under the vague terror engendered in her by this man's malignant personality. He dominated her. She was half afraid of him, in a way that she had never been afraid of anyone in her life before. She tried to think of him as a minor official, with far less influence with the powers up in Paris than she had. She thought of her own friends, of Robespierre, the virtual dictator of France, and of others in commanding positions who knew and appreciated her patriotic worth. They would stand by her, even if she had committed a blunder or two or contravened a casual order.

Something that went on in her mind at this comforting thought must have shown in her face, for the man broke in on her meditations:

"This is not the time to think of influential friends, citizeness. The dogs of the revolution are at one another's throats. Robespierre is at grips with Danton. Terror is the order of the day. The chase after traitors is swift and hot. Nothing but a spectacular *coup* can save you from death after the blunder you have committed, Mam'zelle Guillotine."

Having said this he rose.

"This place is insufferably hot," he said dryly. "I shall be at your service in the courtyard, in close proximity to your diligence and in close conversation with your troopers. I must feel assured that they are worthy of the trust which you have placed in them."

He stalked out of the room, leaving Gabrielle Damiens sitting in the gloom with her elbows on the table, her chin resting against her clenched fists, her eyes glowering. Glowering like those of a wild cat. Burning with hatred and with fear. She watched the man walk through the room with a long, rather laboured stride. He was tall, but distinctly round−shouldered, and stooped as he walked. How different, through Gabrielle, to the rolling gait, the straight square shoulders, the heavy tread of her whilom courtier.

Something had to be done about the whole thing. Gabrielle Damiens was no fool. She knew even before this man began to threaten her that if she allowed the English spy to slip through her fingers again it would go ill very ill with her. And she would die un−avenged. The hated Saint−Lucque, and the whole brood of them would be spirited away if she blundered again. Well then, what had best be done? This man here with his airs of incorruptible officialdom imitator of Robespierre what? in his sober, well−cut clothes, might, after all, be of service. Might have ideas worth considering. He was a blood−hound, a tracker, he might have ideas. Time was getting short. There was the journey to Paris on the morrow, and the certainty that the English spies would work their *coup* in the forest of Mézières. Everyone thought that. Everyone believed it. Chauvelin had expounded his theory before the Committee of Public Safety, had submitted his plans for the capture of the arch−enemy. The Committee had approved of the theory and agreed to the plan. This man, this Marseillais with the stooping shoulders and blue chin, had knowledge of all that. He seemed to know everything, in fact, like one associated with the high powers in Paris. He knew all about the orders transmitted to her by Chauvelin. He had heard of her defiance and contravention of the orders.

There were calls for the landlord just then. They came from outside. Sharp and peremptory they were, coming from one who was not used to being kept waiting. Gabrielle thought she recognised the voice with its accent from the South. At once there was a commotion. Citizen Magnol ran in and out of the house, backwards and forwards from the tap−room to the kitchen, carrying bottles and tins labelled "cloves" and "nutmeg" or "sugar." After a time he came in carrying a huge bowl of steaming mulled wine. Philoméne was hard on his heels, laden with a number of pewter mugs.

"What's all this?" Gabrielle queried.

"Hot wine, citizeness, for the soldiers," the landlord replied.

"Who ordered it?"

"Citizen Renaud from Paris. He thought the men looked starved with cold. . . . They certainly look it . . . This will do them good."

He took a ladle full of the hot stuff from the bowl, tasted it and smacked his lips. The company at the trestle−table watched the proceedings with covetous eyes. The men laughed. One of them said: "It looks good." Another declared: "I'll have some of that, too, citizen landlord."

"So will I," said a third.

"And I," came lustily all down the length of the table.

"Make haste, citizen landlord," they all shouted at him, as he held up the bowl with both hands and marched with it as with a trophy out of the room. Philoméne ran in his wake, carrying a load of pewter mugs. Their exit was accompanied by lusty cheers, which after a moment or two found their echo in the yard outside.

Gabrielle struggled to her feet, feeling unaccountably weary. Her legs felt heavy like lead. She picked up her mantle and, wrapping it round her, stumped slowly out of the room.

André Renaud was he really André Renaud? was out there in the yard. Half a dozen troopers were gathered round him, all laughing and bandying jokes. The landlord had just come out carrying the bowl of mulled wine. Philoméne was close behind him with the pewter mugs. They came to a halt, Magnol holding up the bowl in accordance with the custom of the country, for the customer who paid for the drink to pronounce his approval. This the black−coated stranger did, he took the ladle offered him by the landlord, and pronounced the mixture good.

The landlord assisted by Philoméne now went the round, distributing the hot drink. The soldiers raised their mugs, cheering the black−coated stranger. Nor were the men in the diligence forgotten. From them, after their long confinement in the narrow space, came huzzas and cheers more lustily than the rest.

"Shall we give the prisoner a hot drink, too?" the stranger suggested. "It will put heart into her."

The corporal in charge was quite willing.

"Why shouldn't she get drunk, poor thing?" he said lightly.

He and the men were having a good time. They felt kindly disposed towards that wretched woman, who was being trundled about in a jolting vehicle with nothing short of trial and death at the end of this awful journey. Once or twice during the day she had been jostled out by order of the corporal in charge of the escort. She had been given food on arrival at the *Bon Camarade,* when she was thrust in and out of the coach as if she had been a bale of goods. But not once during this long day did a word of complaint escape her lips. She sat in a corner of the vehicle, motionless and silent. The soldiers were not cruel men, not all of them by any means. There were some who felt quite sorry for her, especially when Mam'zelle Guillotine came a while ago and had a look at her. Such torrents of abuse as then poured from the lips of the noted patriot, even the troopers had never heard before. But the woman never moved. She scarcely seemed to hear. Yes, the men had been sorry for her then. But, *que voulez vous*? Duty is duty, and disobedience to orders punishable by death.

The corporal in charge was not averse to allowing the prisoner to take a mug of hot wine at the hands of the stranger who was so generously paying for this treat. There was nothing in his orders against that. Two of the men even got out of the coach to make room for him and helped him up the step because of his one arm, when he handed a mug to the wretched woman and stood by while she drank it down.

Gabrielle had been standing all this while outside the door of the inn gazing at the animated scene. Her glowing eyes followed every movement of André Renaud. He had just come out of the diligence when he caught sight of her. The lanthorn which hung from a rafter under the projecting roof was above his head. The new style sugar−loaf hat which he wore threw an irregular shadow over parts of his face. It also caused him to look taller than she had thought him before, in spite of his decided stoop. Below the hat the funereal looking band of black hair encircled his forehead and the top of his long nose, were the only features visible on his face.

Gabrielle strode across the yard, and he came on to meet her.

"What right had you," she demanded roughly, "to interfere with my men?"

He was profuse in his apologies.

"A thousand pardons, citizeness," he pleaded with unwonted humility; "I did it for the best. The men were getting restive as the cold got into their bones. They will fight better now, being warm inside. I was sure you would approve."

The false air of humility did not last long. Already his voice had become harsh and his tone dictatorial. Gabrielle was up in arms.

"I am not starting before dawn," she declared curtly; "time for them to freeze again before then."

Greatly to her surprise he seemed to acquiesce.

"You must do as you please," he responded dryly, paused a moment, then added with a regretful sigh:

"And so we shall miss that elusive English spy again!"

"Miss him?" she countered. "Why should we, or rather I, miss him?"

"Because, as I said before, the men are already impatient and restive, what with the cold and the delay. If you wait about here all night their enthusiasm will fizzle out before you reach the forest. It is only a fizgig now. You blame me for giving them a warm drink, but they were more tired and dispirited than you think. Make a start soon, citizeness," he urged with great earnestness, "their blood is warm now, don't let it cool down again. You could be in the forest before the dawn and the weather is just perfect for the capture of a gang of marauders like those English spies."

Then, as she remained obstinately silent, he continued with a note in his voice which sounded like a solemn warning:

"Your policy, citizeness, believe me, is to travel by night and to rest by day. The English spies are night birds. They only fly about in the dark."

She was looking straight past him now, across the yard where the bulky diligence with its inside load of picked men loomed out like a huge black mass darker than the darkness around. It held the one thing that to Gabrielle Damiens was more precious than anything on earth, more precious than life itself her chance of revenge. It was all very well for this man here and for all the Committees in Paris to think only of the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel; but for her, Gabrielle, who had spent sixteen years in a living tomb to suit the ambitious intrigues of the Saint−Lucque family, the thought of wreaking her revenge on the entire brood outweighed any thought of patriotism or personal advancement. That woman in the diligence meant more to her than a whole army of English spies.

She stood there brooding, unable to make a decision. She felt that in a way this man, André Renaud was he really André Renaud was right, whoever he was. The English spies were night birds who flapped their wings only in the night, and they were out to wrest that woman Saint−Lucque out of her clutches. Yes! the man with the maimed arm was probably right, and as for her, Gabrielle, the double capture was the prize to aim for. There had been so much talk, so many intrigues and so much mystery around the personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel, that she herself was caught in the vortex of hatred against the man and in the torrent of this mad longing to see him brought to ruin and to death. The man who had made love to her! The man whom she had kissed! Who had mocked and derided and flouted her! The man whom she had held at her mercy under her whip−lash and whom she had allowed to escape from full retributive justice.

She hated him! By Satan and all his horde, how she did hate him!

"His was not really a clever impersonation," the man in black broke in casually on her thoughts. "I wonder that you, citizeness, who have a great reputation for shrewdness, were so easily taken in. You have met men of the secret police before now, was he at all like any of them? Just think of our mutual friend, Citizen Chauvelin. He is the master of us all. We try to model ourselves on that pattern. Suave. Soft of speech. Gentle of manner. There you have your successful tracker of spies and criminals. Not a great hulking, blundering lout like the man who courted your favours. Look at me, citizeness, and think of him and then say which of us two is the most likely to trap those audacious English spies?"

She did look at him. Suave. Soft of speech. Gentle of manner, he was the very replica of Armand Chauvelin.

She had, however, remained as was her wont, obstinately silent, nor did he say anything more for the moment. He allowed her gaze to travel over his stooping figure, his lean jaw and empty sleeve; a slight, ironical smile hovered round his lips. But this Gabrielle could not see. Then there was silence between them for a time. A distant clock in the city struck ten. The night was going to be very dark. Only a thin film of snow fell intermixed with rain. It no longer spread a mantle of white over the ground, rather did it turn to slush and mud as it fell. The troopers when they had drunk their fill of the good mulled wine, turned into the coach−house for shelter. The doors and windows of the diligence had once again been hermetically closed on the six picked men and their unfortunate prisoner. And gradually all signs of life were stilled in the yard of the *Bon Camarade.* And darkness became more dense. Almost palpable. The volets throughout the house had been closed one by one, only the door into the inn had remained open, and through it came filtrating a dim shaft of light.

These two, the man and the woman, remained as it were the sole occupants of this dark and noiseless place. They were looking at one another like two swordsmen about to engage. A few moments went by, and then Gabrielle suddenly turned on her heel and went into the house. The man did not follow her. He remained standing almost motionless under the shelter of the projecting roof. He did not seem to feel the cold, nor was he impatient. The distant clock struck the quarter after the hour, and a minute later Gabrielle emerged once more out of the house.

She took no notice of the stranger, strode past him and called loudly for the corporal in charge.

To him she gave the order to make an immediate start.

In a moment the *Bon Camarade* awoke from its torpor. There was running and shouting. Orders and counter orders. Horses pawing in their stables, the clatter of their hoofs on the cobblestones of the yard. Volets and windows thrown open, heads thrust out to see what was going on. Ostlers and grooms busy. The landlord fussy and obsequious. The team was put to. The carriage lanterns lighted and fixed in position. The escort prepared to mount. A few street urchins ventured into the yard and stood round the diligence gaping at its closed doors and windows, watching the soldiers and the horses, passing criticisms and remarks in their shrill childish voices.

And towering in this vortex of sound and movement the massive form of Mam'zelle Guillotine wrapped in a fur−lined mantle, stood out by the side of the tall, stooping figure clad in black, scarce distinguishable from the darkness around. The master sleuth from Paris.

Gabrielle Damiens prepared to mount to the box−seat of the coach.

"I am driving," she announced briefly, speaking to him. "Are you coming with me?"

"Not with you, citizeness," he replied. "I might hamper you. But there will be a horse to spare for me here. I will start as soon as may be and meet you at the cross−roads just before you come to Falize. Will you wait for me there?"

"Falize itself would be better. We could pull up there."

"As you like, but the cross−roads would suit you best, citizeness. If I am there, and I shall be, we would have command of the two roads and could then decide which would be the safest to take."

"What do you mean by that?" Gabrielle demanded. She had one foot on the axle of the near front wheel, preparing to mount.

"There has been a persistent rumour all day in Grécourt," he said in a whisper, "that the English spies are mustering in this district. They are said to be more numerous than they usually are. Some talk of a dozen, others of two score. Of course, the story may only be a *canard.* But it is best you should be warned. I shall know more about the rumour when I meet you, and, as I say, we'll take the road that gives the best chance of safety."

"I am not afraid," Gabrielle muttered, and without another word she climbed up to the box−seat and settled herself down, reins in hand, and driving−apron stretched over her massive thighs. The corporal in charge climbed up after her and sat down by her side.

A click of the tongue. A scraping and jolting and lurching. Much pawing and snorting. The iron hoofs drawing sparks from the cobblestones. The damp leather squeaking. The axles grinding. The metal jingling. A shout from Gabrielle:

"The cross−roads then."

A resounding crack of the whip and the lumbering vehicle started on its way.

CHAPTER XXVI. FORTUNE IN SIGHT

Long after the rumble of wheels had died away in the distance the quidnuncs sat around in the tap−room arguing, talking, discussing they knew not what, and drinking their favourite mulled wine. As a matter of fact nothing very important had happened. Nothing so very unusual. The farmers who had come to Grécourt with their live stock were the first to say that the sight of a coach with closed doors and windows and escorted by a posse of soldiers was not a rare occurrence in the city. A fortnight or so ago−it may have been three weeks, just such a coach had come through Grécourt on its way to Paris. Doors and windows closed. An important detachment of soldiers from one of the local regiments. Great secrecy. Everything, in fact, to arouse the curiosity of patriots who wanted to know what all the mystery was about. In that case it transpired that in the coach were three whilom *aristos,* one of them none other than the *ci−devant* Marquis de Saint−Lucque, who was known by all and sundry in the province. With him was his son, a boy who should have been at school. And there was also a *caoltin,* the abbé Prud'hon. Not at all a bad man, any more than Saint−Lucque and his boy were bad. But it seems that they really were traitors to their country. They wanted to sell the whole of the province of Artois to the Austrians, who were the arch−enemies of France, and who would immediately grind all the Artesians under their iron heel, seize their land, their crops, take their children into bondage and their wives as serving−maids.

And it seems that Saint−Lucque, the abbé Prud'hon and even the boy were all in a huge maleficent plot to do this evil thing. And so they were arrested and were being driven to Paris in the diligence which halted at the *Bon Camarade,* just as this other one had done this very night. In Paris it seems all three of them were going to be tried for treason. They would be condemned to death and then they were going to be brought back to Mézières where

Mam'zelle Guillotine was going to make short work of them.

Yes, the worthy Artesian farmers nodded sagely, that was what happened to traitors who conspired against the Republic and worked against their own country and for the ruin of all the farmers who toiled for the welfare and prosperity of France.

Unfortunately in that case things did not turn out quite in the way that had been anticipated. For while the diligence conveying the traitors to Paris was passing through the forest of Mézières, it was held up by masked highwaymen who attacked the soldiers, killed and wounded most of them, maimed the horses and finally drove the coach away in the darkness, no one knew whither or in which direction. The highwaymen were never apprehended and the traitors vanished as if they had been spirited away by the devil himself.

That was the story that was told in the tap−room of the *Bon Camarade* on this February night, the eve of market day, by the farmers and breeders gathered in Grécourt for the occasion. Their spirits were not as high as they usually were. Money was scarce these days, in spite of the fact that money−grabbers and *aristos* had been put to death in hundreds, and the government up in Paris had solemnly promised that when there were no more *aristos* in France every labourer, every farmer, every toiler and worker would have the fortunes that those traitors had stolen from the people and then squandered like water. Every man in the country would be prosperous and free to do just what he liked and never need do another stroke of work if he had no mind to do it.

Well, promises were all right enough. But as far as agriculture in the Province of Artois was concerned, there was less money to be made out of it now than in the days when the *ci−devant* Saint−Lucque, the Belforts and others were there to farm the land and pay good wages to those who worked for them.

As for market day, it certainly was not the merry, profitable day it used to be in the past. What about to−morrow? The weather was so bad. Buyers would certainly be scarce and prices would come down to cut−throat level.

"What we each want is money to drop down into our laps without having to toil and moil for it. That is what the government has promised us and nothing less should satisfy us."

The man who spoke was younger than the majority of the guests around the table. This, no doubt, accounted for his lusty speech and full−throated voice. Most of the others approved of what he said and showed their appreciation by banging their half−empty mugs on the table. "Money to drop down into our laps, without having to toil and moil for it." No wonder the prospect appealed to all these harrased, over−taxed, hard−working men.

"The government did promise . . ." somebody remarked.

"And nothing less should satisfy us," another echoed forcefully, while mugs were again banged on the table−top.

Right through the hubbub of voices and the noise of metal against the table, a clear, sharp voice suddenly resounded. It came from near the door, through which the one−armed stranger had just entered the room. He closed the door behind him, stood with his back to it, facing the company, every man of whom had suddenly turned astonished, enquiring eyes upon him. There was silence for a moment or two, while the resonant voice appeared to have raised an echo in the low−raftered room. The pewter mugs were slowly emptied. One old farmer gave a doubtful shrug.

"All very well talking," he said.

"Talking won't feed the stock or manure the ground," objected another greybeard.

"How are we going to set about it, citizen?" queried a third, with slashing irony.

"About making money drop into to your laps?" he countered.

There was a chorus of "Yes! yes! yes! how is it going to be done?"

"And when?" the youngster added, he who had first brought the question on the tapis.

"When?" the man in black rejoined. "Not later than to−night."

Well, of course, that was something undreamed of. Something so utterly foolish and impossible that the man who suggested it was either a devil or just a mad−man. Roars of mocking laughter greeted him, when he moved away from the door and took his stand at the head of the table. Mocking laughter, jeers, ironical huzzas were hurled at him, and cries of "How? How? How?"

By way of a reply the stranger called loudly for the landlord.

"Our throats are dry," he said; "we'll talk about this over full mugs of mulled wine."

Magnol came in, looking rather scared. He had been on the point of closing his house for the night, not being used to such late hours.

"Citizen landlord," the stranger commanded, turning to him, "a fresh bowl of spiced wine, the best your cellar can procure. Into it you shall pour a bottle of your best brandy. Make it hot and strong, well spiced and as sweet as love. And now be quick about it. We have important business to transact."

This all looked more serious than had at first appeared. The man in black was certainly no devil or he never would have ordered a bowlful of that excellent mulled wine, and all the more excellent with a bottle of good brandy poured into it. He had the welfare of farmers and stockbreeders of Artois at heart. No! No! he was no devil. A madman perhaps, but his next words would settle that question. For the moment he remained standing at the head of the table, obstinately silent, paying no heed to the many questions, some sarcastic, others encouraging and even peremptory, that were hurled at him from one end of the table to the other. Until presently the landlord returned with the bowl of hot wine and received a regular ovation, as he went the round ladling the drink into the mugs.

"This man here," one of the drovers said to him, "tells us that he is going to find a way of throwing money into our laps without our having to do a handstir of work for it."

"More power to his elbow," Magnol assented, "but how is he going to do it?"

"Let's drink his health and see," a farmer suggested who, apparently, had a practical turn of mind.

This was done, with much cheering, and a great deal of laughter mostly sarcastic and sceptical.

"I thank you, friends," responded the man at the end of the table. He scarcely touched the edge of his mug with his lips. "And now," he went on, and allowed his resonant voice to reach every ear and so fill every corner of the room. "enough of this and let us talk seriously. You want to know how you can earn a substantial sum of money without toiling and moiling for it. You can do it by thwarting the machinations of a grasping harpy who to−morrow will, if you do not put a stop to it, pocket the sum of two thousand louis which by right of justice should be yours."

A gasp went right round the table.

"Two thousand louis!" came bursting out from every mouth.

"Where would two thousand louis be coming from?"

"Can you tell us that?"

"From the government who is paying that sum of money in solid gold to any party of French citizens who between them effect the capture of the noted English spy known as the Scarlet Pimpernel."

It was a loud groan of disappointment that went the round this time when the vibrant voice of the man in black ceased to resound through the room.

"Oh! That!!!" was uttered in tones of withering contempt. Contempt which was expressed in several less salubrious ways. They had all heard of the English spy before, and they had been harangued before now by representatives of the government who came down from Paris and talked, and talked, and made all sorts of promises which where never kept. The English spy! Yes! they knew all about him. A myth, what? An imaginary personage whom no one had ever seen and whose personality was always brought to the fore whenever any *aristos* who should have been sent to the guillotine managed to evade justice. Whenever that happened there was always a lot of talk. It was at once asserted that the local police officials were not at fault. Of course they were not. The Commissary was invariably spoken of as a man of lofty patriotism and of great acumen. But obviously no man born of woman could grapple with a supernatural creature, with a Titan of immense stature, fiery eyes, hair that bristled and nostrils that emitted crackling flames.

Oh, yes! the good farmers and hard−working drovers and breeders had all heard these stories before. They were not going to listen to them again to−night. They drained their mugs, and grumbled as they drank.

"I am for bed," one of the men said and rose to go.

"So am I," concluded another.

In a moment most of them were on their feet. Moody and disillusioned, they never thought of saying "Thank you!" for the warm drink.

There was quite a stampede in the direction of the door, until that same resonant voice called out: "Stop!" And the call was so compelling that for the space of a minute of two the drive towards the door came to a halt, and twenty pairs of eyes were once more turned in the direction of the stranger.

"Are you fools or madmen?" he cried forcefully. "Are you really going to throw away the one chance you will ever have of bringing ease and comfort to your wives and children? Do you know what two thousand louis means? They mean one hundred louis to each one of you. One hundred louis to put in your pocket this very night. And for doing what? Wresting the English spy from the clutches of a woman, who already has more louis and is richer than any of you can ever hope to be."

"What woman?" someone shouted.

"Mam'zelle Guillotine, of course."

A few of the men gravely shook their heads, others murmured: "That huzzy!" and muttered under their breath: "I wouldn't care to tackle her."

Be it noted that in spite of these grave misgivings on the part of the older men, the younger ones looked eagerly up at the speaker.

Mam'zelle Guillotine had apparently not many friends among this little crowd of country bumpkins. She had certainly become very prominent and very powerful in the province, but many there were who remembered her when in ragged kirtle and torn shift she wandered from one village to another and from an improvised rostrum outside the local inn spouted denunciation against every *aristo*, and every man who possessed as much as a square bit of land. And when she had finished spouting, she would drag a cap off the head of the man nearest to her and hand it round begging yes, begging for a few sous to pay for a bit of supper. And now she wore a fur−lined mantle and lived in Mézières in a palace.

Bah!!

And with riches had come arrogance. She was dictatorial, tyrannical as any *aristo*. She was feared, but she also was detested.

"Have you never realised," the stranger went on, not loudly but very quietly, leaning slightly forward, his eyes under those beetling brows searching the faces of his hearers, "have you never guessed that all along the arrest of the *ci−devant* Saint−Lucque family, one after the other, has been connected with the capture of the English spy? He has been at work in your district for some time. Was it not he who dragged the *ci−devant* Marquis and his son and the *calotin* Prud'hon out of the clutches of Mam'zelle Guillotine? And now she means to have her revenge on him. She means to capture the Scarlet Pimpernel in the very act of trying to effect the escape of the woman Saint−Lucque, and thus earn the full reward of two thousand louis offered to any patriot who would lay that enemy of France by the heels."

"Lucky Mam'zelle Guillotine," he went on, certain now of holding the attention of his audience. "She has the means of earning twenty times as much money as would keep any one of you in affluence for the rest of your lives. Lucky Mam'zelle Guillotine! And I'll tell you something more, my friends, and that is that she already has the Scarlet Pimpernel gagged and bound in that diligence which you saw standing here in the yard for over two hours. How do you suppose I should know anything of this affair, if it was not already accomplished? No, no, Mam'zelle Guillotine is not one to talk till after a thing is done. And I tell you she talked to me about it all in this very room. And she laughed at me and mocked me and threw my helplessness in my face, knowing that I could do nothing.

"She was right there, citizens. I was alone. What could I do? I had not had the chance of talking to you all, of hearing from you that you would join me in the most glorious expedition ever undertaken by twenty patriots like yourselves."

Indeed, the man had no cause to complain of inattention. Never had an orator so engrossed an audience. Young and old hung upon his words. They exchanged glances, murmuring words of commendation. Eager, excited were they all. Impatient. Expectant. Wanting to hear more about this money, this gold, this fortune that could be theirs for the snatching.

"What must we do?" they asked.

"What must we do to be as lucky as Mam'zelle Guillotine?"

"Just do as I tell you," the speaker replied in stentorian accents, "and the fortune is yours."

"Tell us, then."

"Speak up, citizen."

"We'll go to hell with you."

The man threw back his head and laughed. Laughed immoderately. And the laughter came from the intense joyousness of his heart.

"Not to hell, citizens," he cried exultantly. "Only as far as the cross−roads on this side of Falize."

He dropped his voice and once again spoke in that subdued tone which was more impressive than any shouting could be.

"Some of you, if I mistake not," he said, "have brought in horses for the sale of livestock to−morrow. They could not be put to better use than the purpose which we have in view. If any man has a pistol let him take it, or a sabre if he has one, a goodly knife, a garden tool, a scythe, anything he can fight with. For there may be a bit of fighting, let me tell you. Mam'zelle Guillotine and her myrmidons will not give up their prize−capture without putting up a fight. Mounted on good horses, we'll easily overtake the party at the cross−roads on this side of Falize. I know they mean to call a halt there before deciding which road which they will ultimately take. Both lead to Paris, one through the forest, the other by a round−about way. Well! citizens, what do you say? Shall we decide what their fate is to be? Shall we seize the coach and its occupants, one of which is worth one hundred louis to every one of you? Shall we? Shall we, citizens, who see your wives in ragged kirtles and your children cold and hungry, shall we snatch this rich booty from the hands of an overweening terrorist? What do you say?"

"Yes!" came from a score of sturdy throats, shouting in unison.

"Let's drink to it, then!" And the stranger raised his mug high above his head. He went on once again in his full, vibrant voice. "To the confusion of Mam'zelle Guillotine! To our success in snatching from her the prize that is ours by right! To victory!"

"To victory!"

And the mugs were emptied at one draft.

So compelling was this man's personality, so irresistible his oratory, that these men, some young and eager, others older and sedate, drank and shouted in a way that they never would have dared to do in a more sober mood. To drink to the confusion of Mam'zelle Guillotine would on normal occasions have entailed immediate arrest, prosecution for treason, probably. But this occasion was abnormal. One hundred louis dangling as a golden vision before the eyes of men who had never looked forward to a carefree future, made warriors of these simple country folk. They felt that the blood of heroes was coursing through their veins. Even the grey−beards shouted: "To victory!" as heartily as the youngsters. What would you? Money was so scarce these days! Everyone was so poor. So poor! Starvation was stalking the land. Children cried for bread. Work was grinding and wages small. No wonder that the thought of capturing the mysterious English spy and seeing a hundred louis fall into their laps inflamed the imagination of these ignorant rustics. A hundred louis! And golden louis at that! No dirty scraps of paper, mind you! And with nothing to do for it but an exciting adventure.

So "Hurrah!" for the man who had shown them the way to this marvellous good fortune.

There was only the unfortunate landlord, citizen Magnol, who did not feel as happy as his customers. He had crept back into the tap−room and had been standing in the doorway listening to the harangue of that black−coated, one−armed stranger. He had witnessed the incitement to treason, the appeal to the cupidity of a lot of witless boors, which of a certainty would land the lot of them in gaol. He had heard the shouts and the cheers, and he was terrified. When the cry to "Victory!" echoed from one end of the tap−room to the other, he turned tail and ran helter−skelter up the rickety stairs that led to the loft under the sloping roof, and bolted into the attic where his wife was already in bed. There he joined her, buried his face in the hard pillow and pulled the blanket right over his head so as not to hear anything more of the awful things that were going on down below.

But he was not destined to enjoy tranquillity for long. A few moments during which his wife, roused from her first sleep, tried in vain to get a word out of him. She had just turned over ready to go to sleep again, having made up her mind that her Fernand had had one of his many drinking bouts, when a heavy step came mounting up the rickety stairs. The sound was followed by repeated hard knocks on the door and a peremptory call for the citizen landlord. The door was thrown open and the black−coated stranger who was making all this pother stalked in. He carried a small lantern, which he flashed into the faces of Magnol and his wife, who sat up straight in bed, shivering and shaking with terror.

"Citizen landlord," he said. And he spoke as one in authority. "A grave injustice is being done to the loyal patriots who are at present under your roof. They are determined that the wrong done to them shall be righted this very night. I have told them how this can best be done, and they are going in a perfectly peaceful frame of mind to put their case before one of the highest authorities in the Province of Artois. I will not mention names, but what the patriots propose to do is in accordance with the laws of the Republic as passed by the National Convention and in strict accordance with the Rights of Man."

He paused a moment, letting his words sink into the feeble minds of these two terrified individuals. Magnol was staring round−eyed not at the stranger, but into the flame of the lantern which appeared to fascinate him and to render him motionless and mute. Only his teeth chattered as if he suffered from ague. The woman had disappeared from view. Her head was buried in the bedclothes.

The stranger continued in the same authoritative voice: "Citizen landlord, two courses are open to you now. Either you side with the patriots in the cause of justice, in which case, if you give them the required help, there will be twenty golden louis for you . . ."

Once more he came to a halt. Magnol's fixed stare seemed suddenly to become galvanised. Cupidity never entirely absent from a peasant's nature gave a spark of vitality to his beady, black eyes. His gaze shifted from the light of the lantern to the hand of the stranger, in whose palm something jingled which sounded uncommonly like precious metal.

"I am a good patriot," he murmured through his chattering teeth.

"I know you are," the stranger rejoined, "that's why I have come to tell you that we count on you to side with us who are fellow patriots and give us what help you can. For," he went on solemnly, emphasising every word, "if you refuse to give us that help, I myself will denounce you as aiding and abetting treason by lending your house to a pack of conspirators and supplying them with food and drink."

Saying this, he turned back the lapel of his coat and allowed the light of the lantern to flash on the metal badge beneath it, which proclaimed him to be a high official of the national police force.

Magnol, scared and bewildered, passed the back of his hand over his humid brow.

"I don't understand," he murmured; "on which side are you, citizen?"

"On your side if you give me the help I need. Dead against you if you refuse."

Once more he allowed the precious metal to jingle in his hand. And Magnol, scared out of his wits, murmured feebly:

"What must I do?"

"Get out of bed," the stranger commanded, "and come with me. You will hand over to the patriots downstairs every gun, every pistol and sabre, every scythe, axe or other tool which you have got stored in your cellars."

"I haven't any stores," Magnol protested.

But he did get out of bed; the jingling metal was a magnet that would have lured him to Gehenna.

"Well, let me see what you have got; and then we will talk."

So far so good. Citizen Magnol, like any landlord of a prosperous country inn, had three or four serviceable guns, a pistol or two and a good number of agricultural implements carefully stored away. He allowed the twenty good patriots to help themselves to what they needed and soon these worthies had laid hands on every available weapon likely to be useful in a fight, if fight there was. And most of them hoped that there would be a good scrap at the very least. Three of them commandeered the guns, two others were quick enough to seize the pistols, while some had to be content with sickles or scythes. One man had a saw, another took a wood−chopper, and there were two or three who had brought their own guns with them, on the chance of getting a pot−shot at a hare.

After that there was a raid on the stables. Most of the men had come into Grécourt on their own horses, and there were a few nags which had been brought in for the sale, for those who had come on foot. There were two fine, mettlesome young horses that had been brought in by a farmer from Tourteron. These were at once appropriated by the stranger without any protest from the owner.

Thus the little cavalcade was formed. They were lined up in the yard, the horses champing and snorting in the cold night air. A pale watery moon had rent the bank of clouds and peeped down on the amazing scene more suggestive of mediæval times than of a winter's night in revolutionary France. The stranger mounted on one young horse held the other by the bridle. He gave the order to start and the *cortége* filed past him with many a hearty cheer and loud huzzas.

When the last of them had turned out of the yard into the road, he called to the landlord. Magnol had been standing by, gazing on the men, on the horses, on the primitive arms glinting in the blue light of the moon. He was like a man in a trance. He made sure that he was dreaming and would presently wake up to the sound of snoring emitted by his plethoric wife. He was still conscious of an awful feeling of terror, of speeches round him, of Mam'zelle Guillotine wielding her instrument of death, and of a tall, sable−clad figure spouting threats at him. A menacing "either−or."

"Citizen landlord!"

The voice struck his senses as with a whip−lash. He staggered and nearly measured his length on the ground. He blinked his eyes and shielded his head with his arm, for something had been flung at him, something that jingled as it fell at his feet.

The sound of the cavalcade galloping away down the road, the cheers and huzzas were gradually getting fainter. But now there was a fresh clang of hoofs on the cobblestones of the yard. Magnol pulled himself together, tried to collect his scattered senses. He looked about him and perceived a solitary rider wrapped from head to foot in a voluminous mantle. The rider held a second horse by the bridle. In a trice he was across the yard and disappeared round the angle of the house. Magnol could hear the young horses prancing and champing and finally settle down to a swift and fiery gallop.

Then only did Magnol stoop and pick up the missile that had been flung at him.

It was a purse and contained twenty golden louis.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE FIGHT

The troopers round and in the diligence were on the alert. They could hear in the distance the sound of horses' hoofs, the shouts and laughter which proclaimed the approach of the English spy and his followers. The English spy! whose capture would mean a goodly sum of money in the pockets of every soldier here present this night. The order to mount was given by the corporal, and in a trice half a dozen stalwarts were in the saddle while six others inside the diligence sat waiting with cocked pistols on their knees.

A few minutes of tense expectation went by, then suddenly round the bend of the road the forms of a dozen or more horsemen galloping, detached themselves from out of the gloom. At sight of the diligence they gave a wild cry of triumph, and brandishing a collection of miscellaneous weapons they rushed to the attack.

"Attention, citizen soldiers," the corporal commanded. "Shoot low. We must have this English horde alive or we'll forfeit half the prize money."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth than with another outburst of frenzied excitement the band of hot−headed farmers and drovers tumbled helter−skelter out of their saddles and rushed to the attack. There was the diligence in front of them looming out of the night like a huge black mass. A fortress to be stormed as the Bastille, that monument of tyranny, had been stormed and reduced four and a half years ago. While some of the party started a hand−to−hand fight with the mounted troopers, others made for the diligence. But before they had come anywhere near it the corporal gave the word of command in a stentorian voice. The carriage door was suddenly thrown open and out came the half−dozen picked men, pistol in hand, eager and ready for the fight. The result of this move was nothing short of disastrous for the unfortunate soldiers.
They were not in the best of trim, after being cooped up in an airless box with only a few short periods of relaxation, for close on twenty−four hours. But apart from that they were from the first at a disadvantage. The attacking party rushed on them as they scrambled out of the coach. Not only were they outnumbered, but as they were forced to come out one by one through the narrow doors, they were fallen on with fists and sickles or axes and soon a number of them were more or less seriously wounded.

It was then that the corporal, who was in the thick of it all, suddenly became aware that the man with whom he was at grips at the moment was not the Scarlet Pimpernel at all or any of the English spies, but farmer Papillon with whom he, Corporal Orgelet, had drunk a mug or two of excellent mulled wine at the *Bon Camarade* in Grécourt only a few hours ago. He had known Citizen Papillon ever since they had run about together, barefooted ragamuffins in ragged breeches, bent on raiding the nearest apple−orchards.

"What the devil does all this mean?" he thundered, as his friend Papillon raised a powerful, menacing fist high above his head.

"It means that thou art a thief," the farmer fulminated in reply. "Aye! a thief and a liar, and that I'll teach thee not to cheat thy friends another time."

With this, he brought his fist down with a crash on his whilom boon−companion's head.

The fight, such as it was, degenerated into fisticuffs. Farmers and drovers expert enough with a gun when out after a hare or a rabbit had little experience in the use of a pistol or a sabre. Seeing that they were not making any headway with these weapons they cast them incontinently aside and relied on their fists, their sickles and woodchoppers to wreak what mischief they could. And they did wreak any amount of that, for they brought down and wounded a couple of horses, which was an infamous thing to do, and had the effect of turning the wrath of the

soldiers into something like execration. They struck at their assailants with their sabres, shouting:

"Take that, thou limb of Satan!"

"'Tis with Mam'zelle Guillotine thou wilt have to reckon."

Indeed, the troopers had already realised that here were no English spies, only a set of drunken jackanapes who in their senseless frenzy were actually daring to lay hands on the soldiers of the Republic. The attack was either an insane hoax, or the result of some ghastly misunderstanding. For the soldiers and the attacking party were all friends together. There was Faret, the drover from Néthon and Constant the washerwoman's son over St. Charles way, and there was Charon the farmer as well as Papillon, and even Antoine, who was own cousin to Corporal Orgelet. What in the devil's name was it all about? It was very mysterious and extremely foolish.

It was also very serious.

These irresponsible fire−eaters would have to be taught a lesson. They would have to learn to their cost that such wanton madness could not remain unpunished and that a man who dares to attack a soldier of the Republic and impede him in the execution of his duty must suffer for his crime. The fight had only lasted a few minutes, but of the thirty−two combatants who took part in it, on one side and the other, there were at least a dozen lying wounded on the ground. And there were the poor horses too. The whole affair might have become even more tragic than it already was. So far the troopers had been unable to use their pistols to good effect. The mounted men were slashing away with their sabres, and the others who had turned out of the diligence, had been at grips each with two or even three assailants who gave them no respite but pounded away at them with their fists. Corporal Orgelet himself was lying on the ground with his friend Papillon holding him down. He had already received from his whilom boon−companion one or two nasty cracks on the head, when with a clever twist of his body he contrived to get hold of his pistol and to discharge it into Papillon's thigh. The latter uttered a loud imprecation and rolled over on his side yelling: "Assassin! Thou hast murdered me!"

The sudden report, however, had the good effect of sobering the aggressors. It also brought the soldiers back to a sense of discipline, and gave them the confidence which this extraordinary surprise attack had so signally shaken. At once the fight between soldiers and civilians assumed its just proportions, and after a few more pistol shots had been discharged, a few more sabre thrusts gone home and a few stalwarts had been sent rolling over on the ground, Orgelet was able to call a "Halt!". The assailants were ready to surrender. He ordered them to be mustered up. Groaning and cursing, for most of them had suffered pretty severely at the hands of the soldiers, they were lined up, guarded by the troopers, some of whom were in as pitiable a state as themselves. The faint, grey gleam of a winter's night revealed some of them standing, others kneeling or crouching, some with their faces smeared with blood, their eyes bunged up and lips bleeding, all with their hair hanging lank and wet over their eyes. They did indeed present a sorry spectacle. Orgelet himself in a sad plight and dizzy with many a crack on the head, passed up and down the short line, eyeing the wretched men with wrath and contempt in his eyes.

"I ought to have the lot of you summarily shot," he said grimly. "Yes! shot here and now. And I will do it, too," he bellowed at them, "Unless you tell me at once what is the meaning of this abominable outrage."

"Thou can'st add murder to thy other crimes, citizen corporal," Papillon retorted loudly, "to thy lying and thy cheating, and joining hands with Mam'zelle Guillotine to rob us of what was our due."

"Joining hands with Mam'zelle Guillotine to rob you?" Orgelet countered, lost in bewilderment. "What the devil do you mean? Of what did I rob you?"

"Of the reward due to us for the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

"The capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel?" Orgelet thundered at them. "You fools! You dolts! That is impossible now after the hellish row you have been making."

"Do not lie to us, Orgelet," one of the wounded men responded. "We know that thou didst capture the English spy in our district and that thou and Mam'zelle Guillotine will share the prize money which is rightly due to us. We came to avenge a wrong . . ."

"What balderdash is this?" Orgelet broke in gruffly. "Who says we captured the English spy?"

"I do," declared Faret, the drover from Néthon.

Orgelet gave a shrug of contempt, a light had suddenly broken in on the confusion of his mind. He was beginning to understand.

"If we captured him," he queried, "what have we done with him?"

"You've got him locked up in there." And with a dramatic gesture Antoine, who was own cousin to Orgelet, pointed to the diligence. "Thief! Liar, thy mother shall hear of this."

This was altogether too much for the corporal's gravity. He burst out laughing and continued to laugh immoderately until feeling faint and giddy with the pain in his head, he nearly measured his length on the road.

"Ah!" he said, his voice still shaking with inward laughter, "is that where that mysterious English spy is? . . . Well," he went on, after a slight pause, "go and get him out, my friends."

Funnily enough, in the heat and excitement of the fight the one object that had induced these madmen to commit the unpardonable folly of attacking troopers of the Republican army had been lost sight of by them. From the moment when they came to close quarters with the soldiers, thoughts of the Scarlet Pimpernel and the English horde vanished from their minds. The only idea that did remain fixed was the question of a hundred louis apiece which these soldiers had filched from them. But now, when Corporal Orgelet himself pointed to the diligence and said: "Go and get him out," there was, in spite of wounds and despite exhaustion, one concerted rush for the coach. Something like a scramble, in fact, which left an unpleasant trail of blood in its wake. The carriage door was still wide open. Farmer Papillon was the first to set foot inside the coach. He groped about the interior with his hands, administered vigorous kicks to supposed and non−existent occupants. Kicks which only reached his unfortunate boon−companions and drew groans and curses from them in response. Some seven or eight of them succeeded in entering the coach and as they tumbled one on the top of the other all they did was to aggravate their woes and the soreness of their wounds.

And all the while Orgelet and the men stood outside whole−heartedly enjoying the joke. For them the whole thing had degenerated into a joke. Whether in the meanwhile the English spies had gone never to return, whether their chance of earning a bit of money had vanished into the night air, on the wings of noise and confusion and hard blows freely dealt and received, they could form no idea as yet. One thing only was certain, and that was that orders must be obeyed. Orders were to fight to the last man and then proceed to Falize where Mam'zelle Guillotine would rejoin the party. Orgelet, who was a good soldier and good disciplinarian, rallied the troopers round him. He ordered the wounded to enter the diligence, and the others to get back to horse. The horses brought hither by the attacking party had wandered away across fields for the most part. A few had stampeded and bolted back to the stables whence they had come. Others again were presently recaptured, after a short difference of opinion 'tween man and beast. Those that were hurt must of necessity be walked along very quietly on the lead. Fortunately their wounds were not serious and Falize was not far.

As for the miserable aggressors, there they were, crestfallen, and dolefully nursing their wounds. It was easy to see that Corporal Orgelet and the soldiers looked upon them with contempt and pity rather than ill−feeling. The whole affair had been inglorious. Victory over such rabble was nothing to be proud of. Orgelet mounted to the box−seat and took the reins. The escort was formed once more. A crack of the whip and a click of the tongue and the team settled into their collars. The cumbrous vehicle once more started on its way, whilst a score of discomfited and bedraggled rustics made their way as best they could afoot or astride a horse, back to Grécourt.

CHAPTER XXVII. AT THE CROSS ROADS

Mam'zelle Guillotine had given the order to halt. It was here, at the cross−roads, that André Renaud had promised to meet her. Falize was distant less than a league away. The road ahead led straight to Paris. There was the secondary road which, as Renaud said, also led by a détour to the capital. Gabrielle was wishing he would soon come. The drive had proved very wearisome, for the roads were heavy and so was the old diligence with its load of armed troopers. And she felt lonely and dispirited. Even the thought of that woman, the last of that family which she hated with such intensity, failed to inflame her blood. The woman was safe enough for the guillotine, but there should have been five of that abominable brood to satisfy Gabrielle Damiens's lust for the blood of the Saint−Lucques.

She gave the order to dismount and the troopers sat by the roadside, or walked up and down the road trying to put warmth into their feet and hands. The moon, peeping through a bank of clouds, made the whole scene appear weird. It did not seem real. Not of this earth. Soon after the start one of the team had gone lame. The corporal in charge was bending over examining the fetlock. Gabrielle, restless and impatient, came down from the box−seat. Wrapped in her warm mantle, with the hood over her head, she looked like a huge furred animal stamping up and down to keep herself warm. Her keen ears were attuned to catch the slightest sound. She felt the tension that kept the men's nerves on edge. They, of course, could do nothing but wait while the time dragged on and there was no sign, as yet, of that mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel whom they were out to capture.

The great lumbering vehicle loomed out of the wan grey light like some grim, spectral monument.

And all at once a sound which caused the men to pause in their pacing, to stand rigid and on the alert, ready to mount the very second that the order was given. Gabrielle too had paused. Her heart seemed to have stopped its beating. Her hot hands gripped the edge of her fur mantle, and with a sharp twist of the head she threw the hood back, away from her ears. The sound which she had heard was of two horses galloping at tip−top speed from the direction of Grécourt. Two horses? Would that be André Renaud? Or was chance really on her side and was it the English spy with one of his followers who were coming this way? She gave a quick appraising glance on the men and gave the order: "Attention!"

The men saw to the priming of their pistols, thrust them back into their belts and drew their sabres. The corporal went round to the door of the diligence, released the lock and to the men cooped up inside he also spoke the one word: "Attention!"

"If that should be the English spies," Gabrielle said aloud, so that the men might hear, "we are ready for them."

The order as far as the escort was concerned was to feign inattention and wait for the attack. The English spies were wily, and should they scent a trap they might scamper away to safety. And the men stood still and waited, their nerves taut, their senses strained. They were like greyhounds held in leash. And now with the Scarlet Pimpernel almost in sight, they were straining the leash to breaking−point.

It was the corporal who first caught sight of the black−coated stranger riding full tilt, from the direction of Grécourt and putting on greater and greater speed as he neared the crossways.

"The stranger with the one arm, citizeness," he said to Gabrielle. She drew a deep sigh of relief. André Renaud she was sure of him now had not played her false. With him to give her the weight of his personality with the troopers, she felt more sure of success. Here was a man worthy of her trust. Of late she had felt oh! so vaguely a certain weakening of her mettle. Once or twice she had felt conscious of the one thing she had never dreamed of before Fear. Yes! on two occasions she had actually been afraid. Of whom? Of what? She could not say. It was something indecisively connected with the man with one arm and the fiery eyes under beetling brows. She had not actually been afraid of him or of his threats. He was of the secret police, but she did not fear the police. Her record for militant patriotism was unblemished. At the same time she felt reassured that he was no enemy, and was whole−heartedly on her side.

For Gabrielle Damiens was clever enough to know that her hold on the people of Artois was beginning to slacken. Popular she had never been. But she had been held in awe and that was what she liked. So far there had been no outward sign of waning in the fear which she liked to inspire. Fear? Yes! but no longer that kind of rough admiration which her ruthlessness and free speech was wont to call forth. She had not often indulged in tub−thumping oratory lately, but on the rare occasion when she did, the crowd around her was much thinner than it used to be. She was seldom cheered nowadays, and often she would see her audience diminish in number while she talked. Men on the fringe of the crowd would quietly steal away to the nearest cabaret. Women hardly ever came to hear her.

All these thing were facts which had gradually forced themselves upon her mind. They were the result of her absorption in the one great object of her life, the destruction of the Saint−Lucque family. Thoughts of her revenge obtruded themselves into her oratory until it became dull through the monotony of its theme. The worthy Artesians got tired of listening to vituperations hurled at this one family of *aristos*, when they wanted to hear all about the doings of the Committee of Public Safety up in Paris, the execution of the Girondins, the quarrels between the Moderates and the Terrorists and other more interesting subjects.

Be that as it may, Gabrielle with her thoughts still centered on the Saint−Lucques and her disappointment in connection with their rescue by the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, was inclined after this to allow the man from Paris, whoever he was, to dominate her.

He was out to capture the English spy, she to keep her hold on the prisoner. True he was maimed and, as far as she could judge, past middle−age, in spite of his jet−black hair which she was sure was dyed with walnut juice but he had a commanding voice and would keep up the soldiers' morale more easily than she could.

The rider drew rein, arriving at full tilt, and pulled the young horses back on their haunches till they reared and beat the air with their forefeet. In an instant he was out of the saddle and close to Gabrielle. A voluminous dark mantle wrapped him up from head to foot, and the bridle of the two horses were curled round his one arm, leaving the hand free. He took hold of Gabrielle's wrist and drew her to the side of the road out of earshot of the men.

"I don't want to scare them," he said to her in a whisper, "but the rumour has gained ground and what's more it is true."

"What rumour?"

"The English spies have mustered a full force. Some put their numbers down to half a hundred. They were in hiding all day in and about Grécourt. As soon as you had made a start with the diligence they seemed literally to spring out of the ground. So someone told me who saw it all. They were all over the town, swarmed in the market place, in the streets, the cabarets, everywhere. The inhabitants bolted into shelter like rabbits lopping off to their burrows. They were scared out of their wits. Some of them, however, ran to the police and demanded protection. The police duly turned out. The English attacked them with pistols. They killed and wounded a number of them, and then galloped away, hell−for−leather, in this direction."

He still kept a hold on Gabrielle's wrist; but now, when he paused for a moment in order to draw breath, she shook herself free and made for the diligence.

"What are you going to do?" he demanded, and seized hold of her arm again.

"Make an immediate start," she replied curtly.

"How far will you get," he countered, "with that slow−going vehicle? You cannot vanish into the night before the English rabble overtakes you, and they are more numerous than your escort. They are well mounted, too, let me tell you. Now I have two high−mettled horses here. One for you, the other for myself."

"You are crazy!"

"You would be crazy, citizeness, if you tried to flee with that lumbering vehicle, before a pack of well−mounted brigands."

"I would take the secondary road . . ."

"And risk losing the prisoner? The English spies would sight you before you came to the bend of the road. And what chance would your men have, out−numbered four to one?"

"I will not be parted from the prisoner," Gabrielle declared obstinately.

"Why should you be?" he retorted. "Listen to me, citizeness. Name of a dog! can't you understand that the only way to keep the prisoner out of the clutches of the English spies is to leave the coach here standing as a decoy, and to take the woman along with us?"

"Take the woman along with us?" she echoed fiercely. "What in the name of Satan do you mean?"

"You take one horse, citizeness, and I the other. The prisoner can ride pillion behind one of us. They are high−mettled three−year−olds, these horses. We'll be well away before the English horde has discovered that there is no one in the diligence, only the troopers. Order your corporal to wait here and stand his ground. To fight to the last man, and when he has captured the Scarlet Pimpernel, to throw him into the coach and start at once for Falize, where we will meet him as soon as we are satisfied that the storm has blown over and that the coast is clear. Come, citizeness," he urged, "there is no time to lose."

He paused a moment, tensely expectant. Then as she still remained silent and obstinate, he spoke the one word:

"Listen!"

The night was so still that from far, very far away, a confusion of sounds seemed to come floating on the midnight air. Only a murmur at first. Nothing more. A buzzing as from a swarm of bees.

"Listen!" the man said again. And now his voice, though hoarse and toneless, was soul− and spirit−stirring. Gabrielle stood motionless as a statue and listened. She heard the distant murmur like a swarm of bees. The buzzing and the droning. And then, through that confused sound, something like a shout. So vague, so distant, it could scarcely be heard.

"The prisoner, citizeness. It is her they are after."

That compelling voice with its commanding note pierced the armour of Gabrielle's obstinacy.

"Come," she commanded.

She strode to the diligence and he followed her with the horses. With her own hands she opened the door of the coach. The atmosphere inside was suffocating. There was a scramble and a scraping of feet, as the troopers were roused from torpor.

"Present, citizeness," they muttered in unison.

"The prisoner," she commanded again.

"Here, citizeness," one of the soldiers responded.

They pushed and they jostled, each striving to snatch a breath of fresh air at the open door. The unfortunate prisoner was pushed about like a bundle of goods. A feeble moan escaped her lips.

"Hold the horses, citizeness," the stranger broke in curtly.

She obeyed mechanically, moving like an automaton. And like an automaton she called the corporal and gave him what orders the stranger had demanded of her: "Fight to the last man. . . . Throw the English prisoner into the coach. . . . We will meet you at Falize." She watched the man put his foot on the step of the vehicle and with his one arm elbow his way to the woman's side, put that one arm round her and drag her to him. He wrapped his voluminous mantle round her and held her close.

"To horse, citizeness," he urged with desperate intensity. Again she obeyed and was already in the saddle, when the confusion of sounds far away, suddenly became more distinct. A shout arose and then another. Above the buzzing and the humming they arose and seemed to come from many lusty throats. And through the shouting and the buzzing there was a rolling and a drumming and the tramp of many hoofs.

On one high−mettled horse rode Gabrielle Damiens, known throughout the Province of Artois as Mam'zelle Guillotine, on the other a man wrapped in the folds of a black mantle had a woman in his arms.

The moon hid her light behind a bank of clouds.

Darkness fell once more over the land.

The riders galloped on and on into the night.

CHAPTER XXIX. HELL−FOR−LEATHER

Blakeney held Eve de Saint−Lucque close to him under the folds of his voluminous mantle. Keeping to the edge of the road, where the ground was soft, he gave the mettlesome three−year−old full rein. He seemed indeed to have imbued his mount with all the devilment that was in his own blood, enjoying to the full the noble sport which in an earnest profession of faith he had extolled before his royal friend on that winter's evening more than a sen'night ago, when surrounded by every luxury that wealth and epicurism could devise, he had boldly declared:

"I'll back my favourite sport against any that has ever been invented for making a man feel akin to the gods. . . . With the keen air fanning your cheeks, with the night wrapping you round. With woman or child clinging to you, their weak arms holding tightly to your waist, with human wolves behind you while you ride for dear life through unknown country, riding, galloping, not knowing where you may land, out of one death−trap into another . . . *that*, Your Highness, is the sport for me . . ."

Gabrielle was doing her best to keep up with him. Something of his wild animal spirits had got into her now. No longer dispirited, no longer doubtful of success, she kept her mind fixed on this wonderful victory which she had achieved over those whom she hated so bitterly. True the other members of the execrated family had escaped her, but she hugged herself with the comforting thought that the Saint−Lucque children would be motherless, and their father a widower, and all of them broken−hearted. And this was thanks to André Renaud or whoever he was who had been the *deus ex machina*, the final instrument of her revenge.

Galloping sometimes behind him, at others some little distance in the rear, all that she could see of him through the gloom was the square mass of his mantle, which enveloped him from the neck to the knees. Yes, there was a devil in the man, she said to herself, while she made vigorous efforts not to lag behind.

After the first ten minutes of this wild gallopade, when the sounds of fighting, way over the cross−roads, had been swallowed up by the night, she had ceased to try to determine whither she was being led. She had lost all sense of direction. All she could do was to follow blindly on. It was only after a long climb over a steep portion of the road, when the man drew rein to give his horse a breather, that she ventured on questioning him.

"What is our first objective?" she asked.

"The unknown," he cried joyously in response.

"The unknown?" she echoed grimly. "You are mad."

"By George! I believe I am," he assented, and peeped down through the closure of his mantle at the burden which lay in his arms.

"We are not heading for Paris," she objected; "I do not even know where we are."

"No more do I, citizeness," he responded with a happy chuckle. "But we'll get somewhere in time. Before dawn if we are lucky. *En avant*, citizeness, the unknown means victory to two of us over our enemies. They'll never look for us there.

Even before he had finished speaking, he had touched his mount slightly with a spur and off they were again, he with his burden under his mantle, and she, galloping as close to him as she could, with her thoughts once more beginning to whirl about in her brain and her nerves strained to breaking−point.

At one time she thought that they were making tracks for Mézières. It was too dark to see much and Gabrielle Damiens was not a country wench, not a rustic who would know direction by instinct, by the way the wind blew, and by the fleeting clouds. Less than five years ago she was still a captive in the Bastille. Since then she had roamed in and out of cities and knew little of the open country. She had not seen much of her own Province of Artois. Mézières and its immediate neighbourhood she knew, of course. She also knew Grécourt and Falize and the main roads which led to Paris one way and to the Belgian frontier the other. It was not along either of these roads they were speeding now. Then whither were they going? Her tired eyes wandered round striving to pierce the darkness of the night. Now and again, when for a few brief moments the moon peeped through a fissure in the clouds, she thought to perceive somewhere in the distance a half−forgotten landmark: a jutting hillock, a belt of trees or the white church steeple of an isolated village. And when presently the road plunged into a thicket she thought it must be the forest of Mézières. But the forest of Mézières was more dense, the undergrowth thicker, the road in places more steep. It was here that the encounter with the English spies was to have taken place. No, no! This was not the forest of Mézières. Then what was it?

Once outside the belt of trees, her straining ears perceived the sound of running water. Swift and turbulent. Where could this be? They went over a bridge and to right and left she could hear the water rushing and tumbling down

from a height over rocky projections. The rider on ahead put his horse to a trot, and she was able to come up to him. Quite close. It seemed to her then as if at a short distance away a few solid masses inky−black and grouped together loomed out of the gloom darker than the night. A village probably.

"The unknown," he called out, with a ring of triumph in his voice, and pointed in that direction. "*En avant*, citizeness."

And before she was aware of what was happening, he had caught hold of her bridle rein, and thereafter she knew nothing more, for her mount was being carried along with its stable companion, hell−for−leather at breakneck speed.

She made an effort to wrench the bridle out of his hand, but it was held in a grip that was as hard and as unyielding as steel. Half dazed with fatigue and want of breath, she tried to slide down out of the saddle. Her foot had just touched the ground the ground, when with a vigorous jerk he drew rein. Panting and snorting and beating the air with their hoofs, the horses presently came to a dead halt. Gabrielle fell clean out of the saddle and lay in a heap on the ground. She was on the point of swooning. Through a state of semi−consciousness, she heard the man calling repeatedly for the landlord, and later on there was a banging of shutters and creaking of door hinges. She lay quite still for she was bruised all over and inexpressibly weary. Again she heard the man's voice:

"Hey there! citizen landlord."

And she murmured: "Where am I?"

It was shortly before the dawn, a pale grey light in the east picked out with a silvery sheen here and there a sloping roof or the topmost branch of tall cypress trees. It was cold and damp. Gabrielle rolled over on her side. She was lying prone on the mud of the road. Over her head something squeaked with irritating persistency. She glanced up and vaguely discerned a painted sign swinging on its post. She heard one man's voice alternating with another.

"Travellers, citizen landlord. We have lost our way. Can you put us up until daylight?"

There was some demur followed by a jingle of precious metal. After which the other voice put in gruffly:

"I have one room. . . ."

"This purse contains a louis d'or, citizen landlord. If there were two rooms there would be two louis."

Further demur apparently and then:

"It is too late for supper, anyway."

"If you bring us three mugs of hut mulled wine, there will be four louis d'or inside this purse."

After which a shrill voice called from above:

"Don't be a fool, Mathieu. Let the travellers come in and give them mulled wine while I get the rooms ready. It will cost you five louis," she went on after a slight pause, "and no questions asked."

The three of them sat at a table in the tap−room of this wayside inn. The landlord had brought in three large pewter mugs filled to the brim with steaming, spiced wine. There is no better drink in the world than mulled wine concocted by a French countryman. Eve de Saint−Lucque, looking a pitiful rag of femininity, gave a wan smile as

Blakeney persuaded her to drink.

"You too, citizeness," he said turning to Gabrielle, who sat there sullen and mute doing her best to fight that intense weariness which took all the life out of her. Blakeney drew a flask out of his pocket.

"The wine is good," he said, "but a drop of good old cognac will improve it."

He poured out the contents of his flask into Gabrielle's pewter mug. She drank it all down at one draught.

A woman's footsteps were heard clattering down the wooden stairs.

"The rooms are ready," she announced curtly.

"And so are the five louis d'or," Blakeney responded gaily and counted out the gold in the woman's wrinkled hand.

"Will you follow our kind hostess, citizeness," he said, lightly touching Gabrielle on the shoulder. She gave no answer, spread out her arms over the table and let her head drop down heavily upon them.

"I'll stay here," she murmured almost inaudibly.

Blakeney stood by for a moment looking down on her with an expression in his face that was partly of contempt and partly of pity. She never moved.

He then went over to the other side of the table where Eve de Saint−Lucque sat fingering the pewter mug, and gazing out before her, at Gabrielle for a time and then at him. Her eyes circled with purple, her quivering lips, her wan and sunken cheeks, showed plainly the extent to which this unfortunate and plucky woman had suffered. But in spite of the pain which she still endured, in spite of intense fatigue, bruised body and aching head, it was a pæan of praise and benediction and reverence that her poor, weary eyes expressed as she looked on the man to whom she owed her life and that of her children.

When she rested in his arms throughout this mad gallopade through the darkness and the frosty air, he had at one moment peeped down at her through the folds of his mantle and murmured just loudly enough for her to hear:

"Your children are safe in the care of my friends. You are safe with me. The Scarlet Pimpernel has kept his word."

She had snuggled up closer to him then, striving to make herself as small, as little burdensome to him as she could. She had never seen him yet, but from the moment that he dragged her out of the diligence, she felt somehow secure in his protecting arms.

Now in this squalid room, with its drab walls and its menacing inscriptions: *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité ou la Mort*, with the silence around only broken by the prosaic sound of the other woman's stertorous breathing. Eve looked up and tried to make out something of the mysterious personality of her rescuer. All she saw of him was the top of his head masked by coal−black hair which lay across his forehead like a funereal band. She saw a pair of bushy, black eyebrows, a long thin nose, a chin buried in a white linen stock. The tallow candle set on the table flickered in the draught. The sight which she got of that curious face was fitful and intermittent, but in her own mind she was quite sure that the black hair was a wig and that the nose was a false one, and the beetling brow a final touch to what was obviously a disguise. She gazed at him whilst an expression of puzzlement settled into her eyes. Puzzlement that turned into an appeal. Would she ever look into his face, his real face, she wondered. Would she ever behold the man as he really was, or would he ever remain for her an enigma, a mysterious entity, the hero of her dreams?

"Do you think you can bear it Madame?" he now asked. He had said something else before that, but she had not heard. So she said simply:

"I can bear anything that you impose upon me. What is it?"

"Three, perhaps four days in a rickety, jolting cart with intervals of rest in derelict cottages with a hard floor for a bed and straw for a pillow. Can you bear it?"

"You mock me, sir," she countered with a smile, "by asking me this. When do we start?"

"As soon as I have made arrangements with our rapacious landlord. In the meanwhile try and snatch a couple of hours' sleep. The woman is just outside. She will conduct you to your room."

He went to the door and called to the woman. When he turned back to Eve she was standing beside Gabrielle's inert form. She raised enquiring eyes to his.

"Will she be with us all the time?" she asked.

He gave a short, low laugh. Then he said with a curious sudden change to earnestness.

"No, Madame, whatever the fool or the heathen may say, God is just." He paused a moment, then added:

"We'll leave her here in the care of her master."

"Her master? You mean . . .?"

"I mean the master who has prompted all her actions in the past. He will, I doubt not, looked after her now and in the future."

Eve, wondering what he meant, went thoughtfully to her room.

CHAPTER XXX. THE SILENT POOL

When Gabrielle roused herself from her drugged sleep, a pale wintry sun was peeping in through the grimy window of the tap−room. It was broad daylight. Half a dozen men were sitting at the table, some of them were drinking wine, others eating some sort of savoury stew which they ladled out for themselves out of a metal tureen. Gabrielle opened her eyes and looked about her. She had no recollection whatever of where she was. She sniffed the air like a hungry dog, the odour of the stew had roused her and she was hungry. Her tongue felt parched and clung to the roof of her mouth.

An elderly woman was busy about the room serving the men who called for this, that and the other. They were all labourers or countrymen of some sort. Gabrielle looked at them with bleared eyes. When her gaze came to rest on the woman, she blinked and then called thickly for food and drink. No one took much notice of her. The woman brought her a mug and a bottle and set them on the table; she also brought a spoon and a metal plate and Gabrielle helped herself to the savoury stew out of the tureen.

"There's a room ready for you upstairs," the woman said to her, "It is paid for. You can go up if you like."

Gabrielle rose, she shook herself like a frowsy cur, for she felt cold and stiff. Wrapping the fur mantle closely round her she strode out of the room. A slaternly wench on the landing showed her up to the attic where a

truckle−bed had been made up for her. Gabrielle threw herself down on the palliasse, closed her eyes and went to sleep.

Suddenly she opened her eyes, she was wide awake. It must have been late in the afternoon. The last of a wintry twilight shed its wan light through the cracked window of the squalid attic. Gabrielle rose. She still felt cold and stiff and dizzy from the fatigue of that wild ride through the night. She wandered down the rickety stairs and peeped into the tap−room. The slaternly wench was there doing some perfunctory cleaning of the table and setting down mugs, plates and spoons for supper−guests. The landlord came stumping out form the back premises, his sabots clattering on the tiled floor.

"Your room has been paid for for a week," he said gruffly, as soon as he caught of Gabrielle. "Do you want to stay?"

She said: "Perhaps." And turning on her heel went in the direction of the front door.

"The other two went at crack of dawn," the man went on. "They left a small parcel for you. I'll go and get it."

He stumped back to the kitchen and returned after a moment or two with something soft wrapped in a dirty scrap of paper, held tightly in his hand. Gabrielle took the parcel from him. It was dark in the passage, so she went back to the tap−room, sat down at the table and drew the tallow candle nearer to her. She undid the parcel and spread the contents out on the table. The landlord peered inquisitively over her shoulder.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "what on earth are these things?"

"As you see, citizen," Gabrielle replied. And the landlord declared subsequently that never had he heard a woman's voice sound so strange and inhuman. It was, he said, more like the growling of a wounded beast than the voice of a woman. She fingered the things that were lying on the table: a wig of black hair, a papier−mâché nose, a pair of false eyebrows. She touched each thing with a hand that shook visibly. The man picked them up one by one and quickly dropped them again, as if they scorched his fingers.

"What devil's work is this?" he muttered.

"Devil's work, as you say, citizen landlord," she rejoined dully. "The work of the English spy who was here in this very room a few hours ago. Had you detained him, you would be richer now by a hundred louis. Think of that, citizen landlord. Good night. Pleasant dreams."

She gave a curious, mirthless laugh, as if she were demented, so the landlord said later on. She picked up one by one the miscellaneous contents of the parcel, strode out of the room and went out into the street.

The last of the twilight had faded out of the sky. The village street lay still and dark to right and left of the wayside inn, in the doorway of which stood the lonely woman. She glanced up and down the street, trying to distinguish some landmark or other in the gloom, or perhaps just making up her mind as to which way to turn for her solitary ramble in the night. The sound of running water came faintly to her ear from the left. She turned in that direction, ambling along aimlessly at first. Then as the sound grew more distinct, she quickened her step, walked more resolutely along. Always in the darkness which only revealed vaguely the edge of the road, and always in the direction whence came the sound of running water.

Thus she came to the bridge which spanned the torrent, the bridge over which she had ridden full tilt yesterday, with her bridle rein held in a grip that was like steel, whilst she herself was held in bondage and rendered helpless in the hands of a ruthless and relentless enemy.

"What is our first objective?" she had asked him then.

And he had replied: "The unknown."

And for her the unknown was a torrent that came scurrying and tumbling down over rocky projections. She stood quite still, looking down on the waters which she heard but could not see. On the right a mossy path ran along the edge of the stream. Gabrielle turned her wearied footsteps down that way. On she wandered with the sound of running water falling on her ear like the accusing voice of a relentless Nemesis.

"Thy revenge," it murmured, "where is it now? For it thou didst scheme and murder and commit every crime that disgraced thy womanhood. Where is it now? Those whom thy hatred has pursued are safe and happy out of thy reach. Where art thou at this hour? Whither doest thou go?"

And idly wandering Gabrielle Damiens came to the pool wherein the turbulent eddy found its rest. Here the swirl of the falling waters caused innumerable bubbles to form and to burst again. Beyond the swirl, the pool seemed to be placid and very still. Gabrielle came to a halt, and looking down she tried to gauge the depth of the water, but the night was like ebony and the over−hanging trees threw a further veil of darkness over the silent pool. She stood quite still now, and around her everything was still save for the occasional crackling of dry twigs overhead or the movement of tiny furtive feet in the undergrowth. She still had in her hands that collection of curious objects the wig, the false eyebrows, the nose made of papier−mâché such as clowns wear at the circus. She fingered them lightly for a while, then laid them down on a flat piece of projecting stone. There was no wind and the things remained all night where she had put them. The were found in the early morning by a couple of labourers on their way to work. They wondered what on earth these things could possibly be, and how they got there. No one ever knew.

Throughout the length and breadth of the Province of Artois no one ever knew what had become of Mam'zelle Guillotine. She had come no one knew whence. She went no one knew whither. Six months later the Reign of Terror in France came to an end. The guillotine in the province was no longer kept busy and an honest butcher of Mézières did all that there was to do.

CHAPTER XXXI. AN INTERLUDE

Marguerite Blakeney was in her husband's arms. She was looking pale and wan and her wonderful, luminous eyes still bore the traces of all the tears which she had shed. She had been the first to arrive in Dover at the Fisherman's Rest, in the company of Percy's devoted followers and the two little children for whose sake he had thrown his precious life in the balance of Fate, courting death with joy in his heart and a smile on his lips. For close on a month Marguerite in her weary travelling to Belgium and through Belgium on to England, had known nothing of her adored husband, save that at every hour of the day and night that heroic life was in deadly peril

Now when his arms were once more round her and she looked into his merry deep−set eyes, the joy of reunion was almost more than she could bear. She tried to make him tell her something of what he had endured and gone through for the sake of an unfortunate woman and two innocent children now happily reunited to husband, father and brother.

"Luck was on my side, light of my life," was all he said, "because you were so near me all the time. And luck was backed by the courage and understanding of brave men like Ffoulkes and Tony, Glynde and St. Dennys, and your adorable self."

"But, Percy," she insisted, "if luck had failed you. If . . ."

"Luck, my beloved," he said, and once more that wonderful look of the born adventurer, the gambler, the fearless sportsman, the look which she dreaded to see more than any other, came back into his eyes; "luck is just an old woman, m'dear, bald save for one hair on her head. It is up to her courtier to seize her by that one hair when perchance she flits by past him at arm's length. But, by George," he concluded with his infectious, merry laugh, "having got hold of that hair, it is up to him not to let it go. And that is all I did, my adored, I did not let go."

The End