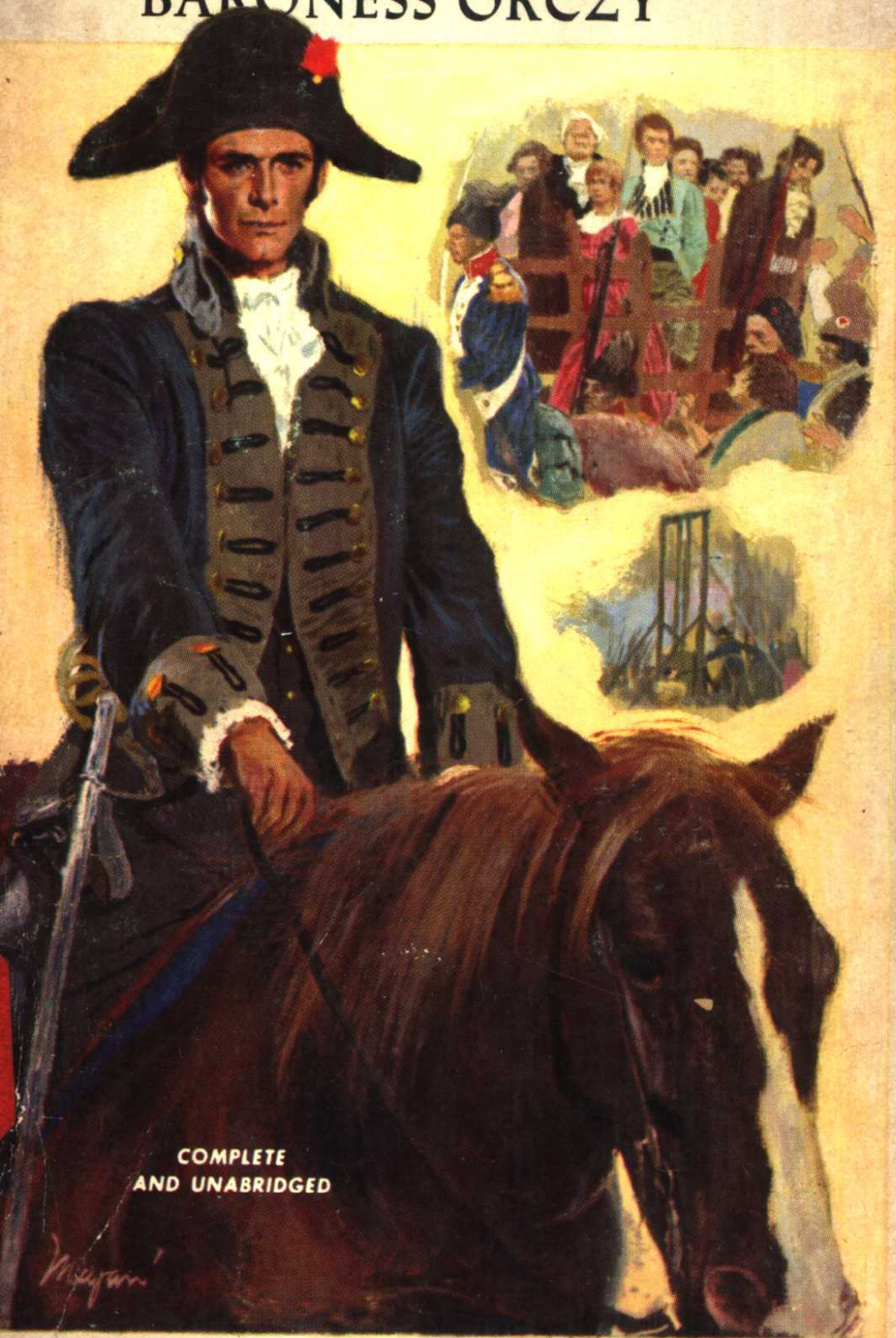


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The Scarlet Pimpernel

BARONESS ORCZY



COMPLETE
AND UNABRIDGED

with an introduction by B. ALLEN BENTLEY

The Scarlet Pimpernel



Baroness Orczy .

Introduction

There are some novels whose ~~plots~~ unfold with such a compelling energy, with such irresistibly mounting suspense, that they have, through the years, become characterized by a phrase which, if it has become trite, is nevertheless a testimonial to a work of rare imaginative power: "I just couldn't put it down until I'd finished it." Baroness Emmuska Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* is this kind of book.

From its exciting opening, with the clattering cart and horses' hoofs dinning in his ears as a border guard watches an old hag drive away to freedom with her load of smallpox-stricken humanity, until its ingeniously tense ending as the Scarlet Pimpernel wriggles from the bottleneck into which the villain's cleverly dispatched troops have forced him, the plot advances in a straight line from one critical situation to another, proceeding relentlessly to its culmination in the triumph of the hero. Indeed, there are few books which maintain such a constant and unflagging pressure of suspense and excitement; there are fewer whose plot structure is shaped

with such simplicity of line. Baroness Orczy has confined her characters to the barest essential figures, all of whom have a starkly defined and dramatically active function in the plot centered directly upon the unknown Scarlet Pimpernel himself. He radiates his influence upon every character, upon every situation and event in the book, defining its structure and controlling its pace of movement. Focused so intensely upon one dominant figure, all action and all characters merge into one direct advancing line of action; any subplot that might develop out of the actions of any single person is virtually crushed in the steam-rolling pressure of the events that stream from the devious movements and unpredictable appearances of the Pimpernel.

The source of this extraordinary plot power lies in the historical period in which the novel is set, in the enormous popular energy released by the upheaval of royalist control during the French Revolution, energy which, allowed to run riot, resulted in senseless carnage, madness, and hysteria. By 1792, everything that was beautiful and should have endured in the old order was threatened with extermination, along with the avowedly tyrannical and cruel aspects of the regime. Clearly, developments under the insane impulses of men like Marat and Robespierre—whose very essences Baroness Orczy has caught in the grim and repelling figure of her villain, Chauvelin—were getting wildly out of hand. It was the preservation of the good and glorious traditions of France that inspired the Scarlet Pimpernel's mad dashes literally into the jaws of death, to the foot of the guillotine where he rescued the condemned aristocrats and gave them refuge in England. Dickens had, of course, already told the story in *A Tale of Two Cities* from a point of view which, while it did not identify with the bestiality of the mob, did, nevertheless, exalt the fallen Cartons, the self-dispossessed Darnays, the common and middle classes, and did portray as unconditionally inhuman and cruel the aristocrats against whom the full tide of history had turned. Baroness Orczy, on the other hand, herself a European aristocrat and a member of London society, automatically entered the dignity of France's *ancien*

régime, sensed the peril that loomed about it, tasted the grossness of the unbridled mob that encroached upon it, and swept through the dashing and terrifying adventures of the hero who slashed and overturned the conspiracy and the times.

Indeed, it is illuminating to examine the tone and plot of her book in the light of the Baroness' biography. Just as every critical episode of the novel emanates from an eighteenth-century drawing room or mansion—from Lord Grenville's ball in the Foreign Office, where Chauvelin first closes in upon his victim, to Sir Percy Blakeney's country home where Marguerite first becomes aware of the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel—so Emmuska Orczy's life and critical experiences were centered in the courts and noble homes of Hungary, France, and England. Born in September, 1865, in Tanaors, Hungary, the only child of Baron Felix Orczy, she was exposed to all the finest cultural influences of Europe. Wagner, Gounod, Liszt, and Massenet were frequent visitors in her father's home, he himself being an accomplished musician and composer. The young baroness was educated in Brussels, Paris, and at the Heatherly art school in London, where her latent talent for painting developed so noticeably that a few of her works were hung in the Royal Academy. Brought into contact with all that was dynamic and alive in the fine arts and philosophy, it is no wonder that the gifted baroness' most popular novel should be interlaced with a vivid aesthetic and musical taste. Her descriptions of Sir Percy Blakeney's mansion are baroque and filigreed in detail; her re-creation of the inside of Jellyband's inn, with its warmly gorgeous brasses and oak beams, her amazing sense of color, texture, and movement bring to life with captivating realism a romantic age that the streamlined twentieth century has forgotten.

The music of the age also ripples through the pages. Gluck's opera, "Orpheus," was haunting the courts of Germany and England with its revolutionary strains at the very moment when the peasants of Paris were storming the Bastille, and so it is little wonder that, in a court-centered novel written by a woman of deep sensitivity, one of the most striking crucial episodes should be confined within an opera box in Covent

Garden, in the midst of an "Orpheus" aria. Finally, it is not unlikely that, in the mind of this romantically sensitive woman, there was forged an identification of herself with the heroine of her novel—Marguerite Blakeney, the French actress, the cleverest brain in Europe, the stunning creature who sailed over the hearts and hopes of the richest and noblest men and the finest diplomats in the world.

Although Baroness Orczy's life was centered in a world of wealth and privilege, it is not to be supposed that life in that world was without its darkness and horror.

The other side of aristocratic life in eighteenth-century France was the threat of annihilation; the hidden, deeper movements beneath the lavishly jubilant English society consisted of currents of intrigue, the unknown quantity of the Scarlet Pimpernel and his devoted band, the fear of their imminent capture and death. And in the life of the author tragic experiences and insights came—with the Second World War. The Baroness and her husband, Lord Montague Barstow, were living in Monte Carlo when the Nazis invaded France, and for the next five years the headquarters of the German Gestapo were established in the quarters adjacent to their villa. Her husband died there in 1943, and their home was bombed by the R.A.F. just before the town was liberated. What, then, was a genuine vision of aristocratic suffering and life in a novel became an early parallel to the tragic experiences of its titled author.

Although Baroness Orczy's rare education, social success, and great personal talents never rose to the full artistic synthesis of great literature, they did, nevertheless, produce immensely popular writings whose themes of romance and adventure are stimulating still the minds of this generation. Of its author and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, the *London Times* said: "Both have become household words for a grateful multitude." In fact, for a period of close to fifty years (1900 to 1947), she produced more than fifty books, stories, and magazine articles.

Nor was the Baroness' literary range confined to the romantic narrative. Along with Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur

Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie, she delved into the writing of detective stories. Three volumes were published of the kind of problem in which the hero solves the most baffling mysteries almost without budging from his armchair. These were *The Old Man in the Corner* (1909), its sequel, *Unravelled Knots* (1925), and *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* (1910).

And ultimately came her tender and perceptive autobiography, *Links in the Chain of Life*, in 1947, the year of her death.

Like Robert Louis Stevenson, the Baroness Orczy had the priceless gift of generalizing a private life into the universal terms of humanity, of extracting from one's thoughts, emotions, and the mundane course of life the rare moments of beauty, of synthesizing these into a pattern, into literary creations charged with an imaginative dynamism that carries their readers into new worlds of adventure, romanticism, and changeless brightness. Indeed, the *New York Herald Tribune* once said of her: "She has a natural gift for swift narration, a vivid imagination, an appropriately flamboyant style." These might themselves be the qualities from which the Baroness forged her super-subtle hero in *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, the champion of perjured aristocracy.

—B. ALLEN BENTLEY

The Scarlet Pimpernel

BARONESS ORCZY



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An Airmont Classic
specially selected for the Airmont Library
from the immortal literature of the world

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To
JULIA NEILSON AND FRED TERRY
whose genius created the roles of Sir Percy
and Lady Blakeney on the stage,
this book
is affectionately dedicated

Chapter I

PARIS: SEPTEMBER 1792

A SURGING, seething, murmuring crowd of beings that are human only in name, for to the eye and ear they seem naught but savage creatures, animated by vile passions and by the lust of vengeance and of hate. The hour, some little time before sunset, and the place, the West Barricade, at the very spot where, a decade later, a proud tyrant raised an undying monument to the nation's glory and his own vanity.

During the greater part of the day the guillotine had been kept busy at its ghastly work: all that France had boasted of in the past centuries of ancient names and blue blood, had paid toll to her desire for liberty and for fraternity. The carnage had only ceased at this late hour of the day because there were other more interesting sights for the people to witness, a little while before the final closing of the barricades for the night.

And so the crowd rushed away from the Place de la Grève and made for the various barricades in order to watch this interesting and amusing sight.

It was to be seen every day, for those aristos were such fools! They were traitors to the people of course, all of them, men, women, and children, who happened to be descendants of the great men who since the Crusades had made the glory of France: her old *noblesse*. Their ancestors had oppressed the people, had crushed them under the scarlet heels of their dainty buckled shoes, and now the people had become the rulers of France and crushed their former masters—not beneath their heels, for they went shoeless mostly in these days

—but beneath a more effectual weight, the knife of the guillotine.

And daily, hourly, the hideous instrument of torture claimed its many victims—old men, young women, tiny children, even until the day when it would finally demand the head of a King and of a beautiful young Queen.

But this was as it should be: were not the people now the rulers of France? Every aristocrat was a traitor, as his ancestors had been before him: for two hundred years now the people had sweated, and toiled, and starved, to keep a lustful court in lavish extravagance; now the descendants of those who had helped to make those courts brilliant had to hide for their lives—to fly, if they wished to avoid the tardy vengeance of the people.

And they did try to hide, and tried to fly: that was just the fun of the whole thing. Every afternoon before the gates closed and the market carts went out in procession by the various barricades, some fool of an aristo endeavored to evade the clutches of the Committee of Public Safety. In various disguises, under various pretexts, they tried to slip through the barriers which were so well guarded by citizen soldiers of the Republic. Men in women's clothes, women in male attire, children disguised in beggars' rags: there were some of all sorts: *ci-devant* counts, marquises, even dukes, who wanted to fly from France, reach England or some other equally accursed country, and there try to rouse foreign feeling against the glorious Revolution, or to raise an army in order to liberate the wretched prisoners in the Temple, who had once called themselves sovereigns of France.

But they were nearly always caught at the barricades. Sergeant Bibot especially at the West Gate had a wonderful nose for scenting an aristo in the most perfect disguise. Then, of course, the fun began. Bibot would look at his prey as a cat looks upon the mouse, play with him, sometimes for quite a quarter of an hour, pretend to be hoodwinked by the disguise, by the wigs and other bits of theatrical make-up which hid the identity of a *ci-devant* noble marquise or count.

Oh! Bibot had a keen sense of humor, and it was well worth hanging round that West Barricade, in order to see him catch an aristo in the very act of trying to flee from the vengeance of the people.

Sometimes Bibot would let his prey actually out by the

gates, allowing him to think for the space of two minutes at least that he really had escaped out of Paris, and might even manage to reach the coast of England in safety; but Bibot would let the unfortunate wretch walk about ten meters towards the open country, then he would send two men after him and bring him back, stripped of his disguise.

Oh! that was extremely funny, for as often as not the fugitive would prove to be a woman, some proud marchioness, who looked terribly comical when she found herself in Bibot's clutches after all, and knew that a summary trial would await her the next day and after that, the fond embrace of Madame la Guillotine.

No wonder that on this fine afternoon in September the crowd round Bibot's gate was eager and excited. The lust of blood grows with its satisfaction, there is no satiety; the crowd had seen a hundred noble heads fall beneath the guillotine today, it wanted to make sure that it would see another hundred fall on the morrow.

Bibot was sitting on an overturned and empty cask close by the gate of the barricade; a small detachment of citizen soldiers was under his command. The work had been very hot lately. Those cursed aristos were becoming terrified and tried their hardest to slip out of Paris; men, women and children, whose ancestors, even in remote ages, had served those traitorous Bourbons, were all traitors themselves and right food for the guillotine. Every day Bibot had had the satisfaction of unmasking some fugitive royalists and sending them back to be tried by the Committee of Public Safety, presided over by that good patriot, Citizen Fouquier-Tinville.

Robespierre and Danton both had commended Bibot for his zeal, and Bibot was proud of the fact that he on his own initiative had sent at least fifty aristos to the guillotine.

But today all the sergeants in command at the various barricades had had special orders. Recently a very great number of aristos had succeeded in escaping out of France and in reaching England safely. There were curious rumors about these escapes; they had become very frequent and singularly daring; the people's minds were becoming strangely excited about it all. Sergeant GrosPierre had been sent to the guillotine for allowing a whole family of aristos to slip out of the North Gate under his very nose.

It was asserted that these escapes were organized by a band

of Englishmen, whose daring seemed to be unparalleled, and who, from sheer desire to meddle in what did not concern them, spent their spare time in snatching away lawful victims destined for Madame la Guillotine. These rumors soon grew in extravagance; there was no doubt that this band of meddlesome Englishmen did exist; moreover, they seemed to be under the leadership of a man whose pluck and audacity were almost fabulous. Strange stories were afloat of how he and those aristos whom he rescued became suddenly invisible as they reached the barricades and escaped out of the gates by sheer supernatural agency.

No one had seen these mysterious Englishmen; as for their leader, he was never spoken of, save with a superstitious shudder. Citoyen Fouquier-Tinville would in the course of the day receive a scrap of paper from some mysterious source; sometimes he would find it in the pocket of his coat, at others it would be handed to him by someone in the crowd, whilst he was on his way to the sitting of the Committee of Public Safety. The paper always contained a brief notice that the band of meddlesome Englishmen were at work, and it was always signed with a device drawn in red—a little star-shaped flower, which we in England call the Scarlet Pimpernel. Within a few hours of the receipt of this impudent notice, the citoyens of the Committee of Public Safety would hear that so many royalists and aristocrats had succeeded in reaching the coast, and were on their way to England and safety.

The guards at the gates had been doubled, the sergeants in command had been threatened with death, whilst liberal rewards were offered for the capture of these daring and impudent Englishmen. There was a sum of five thousand francs promised to the man who laid hands on the mysterious and elusive Scarlet Pimpernel.

Everyone felt that Bibot would be that man, and Bibot allowed that belief to take firm root in everybody's mind; and so, day after day, people came to watch him at the West Gate, so as to be present when he laid hands on any fugitive aristo who perhaps might be accompanied by that mysterious Englishman.

"Bah!" he said to his trusted corporal, "Citoyen GrosPierre was a fool! Had it been me now, at that North Gate last week . . ."

Citoyen Bibot spat on the ground to express his contempt for his comrade's stupidity.

"How did it happen, citoyen?" asked the corporal.

"GrosPierre was at the gate, keeping good watch," began Bibot, pompously, as the crowd closed in round him, listening eagerly to his narrative. "We've all heard of this meddlesome Englishman, this accursed Scarlet Pimpernel. He won't get through *my* gate, *morbleu!* unless he be the devil himself. But GrosPierre was a fool. The market carts were going through the gates; there was one laden with casks, and driven by an old man, with a boy beside him. GrosPierre was a bit drunk, but he thought himself very clever; he looked into the casks—most of them, at least—and saw they were empty, and let the cart go through."

A murmur of wrath and contempt went round the group of ill-clad wretches, who crowded round Citoyen Bibot.

"Half an hour later," continued the sergeant, "up comes a captain of the guard with a squad of some dozen soldiers with him. 'Has a cart gone through?' he asks of GrosPierre, breathlessly. 'Yes,' says GrosPierre, 'not half an hour ago.' 'And you have let them escape,' shouts the captain furiously. 'You'll go to the guillotine for this, citoyen sergeant! that cart held concealed the *ci-devant* Duc de Chalis and all his family!' 'What!' thunders GrosPierre, aghast. 'Aye! And the driver was none other than that cursed Englishman, the Scarlet Pimpernel.'"

A howl of execration greeted this tale. Citoyen GrosPierre had paid for his blunder on the guillotine, but what a fool! oh! what a fool!

Bibot was laughing so much at his own tale that it was some time before he could continue.

"'After them, my men,' shouts the captain," he said, after a while. "'Remember the reward; after them, they cannot have gone far!' And with that he rushes through the gate, followed by his dozen soldiers."

"But it was too late!" shouted the crowd, excitedly.

"They never got them!"

"Curse that GrosPierre for his folly!"

"He deserved his fate!"

"Fancy not examining those casks properly!"

But these sallies seemed to amuse Citoyen Bibot exceed-

ingly; he laughed until his sides ached, and the tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Nay, nay!" he said at last, "those aristos weren't in the cart; the driver was not the Scarlet Pimpernel!"

"What?"

"No! The captain of the guard was that cursed Englishman in disguise, and every one of his soldiers aristos!"

The crowd this time said nothing: the story certainly savored of the supernatural, and though the Republic had abolished God, it had not quite succeeded in killing the fear of the supernatural in the hearts of the people. Truly that Englishman must be the devil himself.

The sun was sinking low down in the west. Bibot prepared himself to close the gates.

"*En avant* the carts," he said.

Some dozen covered carts were drawn up in a row, ready to leave town, in order to fetch the produce from the country close by, for market the next morning. They were mostly well known to Bibot, as they went through his gate twice every day on their way to and from the town. He spoke to one or two of their drivers—mostly women—and was at great pains to examine the inside of the carts.

"You never know," he would say, "and I'm not going to be caught like that fool GrosPierre."

The women who drove the carts usually spent their day on the Place de la Grève, beneath the platform of the guillotine, knitting and gossiping, whilst they watched the rows of tumbrils arriving with the victims the Reign of Terror claimed every day. It was great fun to see the aristos arriving for the reception of Madame la Guillotine, and the places close by the platform were very much sought after. Bibot, during the day, had been on duty on the Place. He recognized most of the old hags, "tricoteuses," as they were called, who sat there and knitted, whilst head after head fell beneath the knife, and they themselves got quite bespattered with the blood of those cursed aristos.

"Hè! la mère!" said Bibot to one of these horrible hags, "what have you got there?"

He had seen her earlier in the day, with her knitting and the whip of her cart close beside her. Now she had fastened a row of curly locks to the whip handle, all colors, from gold