

El Dorado

by

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Foreword

There has of late years crept so much confusion into the mind of the student as well as of the general reader as to the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel with that of the Gascon Royalist plotter known to history as the Baron de Batz, that the time seems opportune for setting all doubts on that subject at rest.

The identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel is in no way whatever connected with that of the Baron de Batz, and even superficial reflection will soon bring the mind to the conclusion that great fundamental differences existed in these two men, in their personality, in their character, and, above all, in their aims.

According to one or two enthusiastic historians, the Baron de Batz was the chief agent in a vast network of conspiracy, entirely supported by foreign money--both English and Austrian--and which had for its object the overthrow of the Republican Government and the restoration of the monarchy in France.

In order to attain this political goal, it is averred that he set himself the task of pitting the members of the revolutionary Government one against the other, and bringing hatred and dissensions amongst them, until the cry of "Traitor!" resounded from one end of the Assembly of the Convention to the other, and the Assembly itself became as one vast den of wild beasts wherein wolves and hyenas devoured one another and, still unsatiated, licked their streaming jaws hungering for more prey.

Those same enthusiastic historians, who have a firm belief in the so-called "Foreign Conspiracy," ascribe every important event of the Great Revolution--be that event the downfall of the Girondins, the escape of the Dauphin from the Temple, or the death of Robespierre--to the intrigues of Baron de Batz. He it was, so they say, who egged the Jacobins on against the Mountain, Robespierre against Danton, Hebert against Robespierre. He it was who instigated the massacres of September, the atrocities of Nantes, the horrors of Thermidor, the sacrileges, the noyades: all with the view of causing every section of the National Assembly to vie with the other in excesses and in cruelty, until the makers of the Revolution, satiated with their own lust, turned on one another, and Sardanapalus-like buried themselves and their orgies in the vast hecatomb of a self-consumed anarchy.

Whether the power thus ascribed to Baron de Batz by his historians is real or imaginary it is not the purpose of this preface to investigate. Its sole object is to point out the difference between the career of this plotter and that of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

The Baron de Batz himself was an adventurer without substance, save that which he derived from abroad. He was one of those men who have nothing to lose and everything to gain by throwing themselves headlong in the seething cauldron of internal politics.

Though he made several attempts at rescuing King Louis first, and then the Queen and Royal Family from prison and from death, he never succeeded, as we know, in any of these undertakings, and he never once so much as attempted the rescue of other equally innocent, if not quite so distinguished, victims of the

most bloodthirsty revolution that has ever shaken the foundations of the civilised world.

Nay more; when on the 29th Prairial those unfortunate men and women were condemned and executed for alleged complicity in the so-called " Foreign Conspiracy," de Batz, who is universally admitted to have been the head and prime-mover of that conspiracy --if, indeed, conspiracy there was--never made either the slightest attempt to rescue his confederates from the guillotine, or at least the offer to perish by their side if he could not succeed in saving them.

And when we remember that the martyrs of the 29th Prairial included women like Grandmaison, the devoted friend of de Batz, the beautiful Emilie de St. Amaranthe, little Cecile Renault--a mere child not sixteen years of age--also men like Michonis and Roussell, faithful servants of de Batz, the Baron de Lezardiere, and the Comte de St. Maurice, his friends, we no longer can have the slightest doubt that the Gascon plotter and the English gentleman are indeed two very different persons.

The latter's aims were absolutely non-political. He never intrigued for the restoration of the monarchy, or even for the overthrow of that Republic which he loathed.

His only concern was the rescue of the innocent, the stretching out of a saving hand to those unfortunate creatures who had fallen into the nets spread out for them by their fellow-men; by those who--godless, lawless, penniless themselves--had sworn to exterminate all those who clung to their belongings, to their religion, and to their beliefs.

The Scarlet Pimpernel did not take it upon himself to punish the guilty; his care was solely of the helpless and of the innocent.

For this aim he risked his life every time that he set foot on French soil, for it he sacrificed his fortune, and even his personal happiness, and to it he devoted his entire existence.

Moreover, whereas the French plotter is said to have had confederates even in the Assembly of the Convention, confederates who were sufficiently influential and powerful to secure his own immunity, the Englishman when he was bent on his errands of mercy had the whole of France against him.

The Baron de Batz was a man who never justified either his own ambitions or even his existence; the Scarlet Pimpernel was a personality of whom an entire nation might justly be proud.

1. In The Theatre National

And yet people found the opportunity to amuse themselves, to dance and to go to the theatre, to enjoy music and open-air cafes and promenades in the Palais Royal.

New fashions in dress made their appearance, milliners produced fresh "creations," and jewellers were not idle. A grim sense of humour, born of the very intensity of ever-present danger, had dubbed the cut of certain tunics "tete tranche," or a favourite ragout was called "a la guillotine."

On three evenings only during the past memorable four and a half years did the theatres close their doors, and these evenings were the ones immediately following that terrible 2nd of September the day of the butchery outside the Abbaye prison, when Paris herself was aghast with horror, and the cries of the massacred might have drowned the calls of the audience whose hands upraised for plaudits would still be dripping with blood.

On all other evenings of these same four and a half years the theatres in the Rue de Richelieu, in the Palais Royal, the Luxembourg, and others, had raised their curtains and taken money at their doors. The same audience that earlier in the day had whiled away the time by witnessing the ever-recurrent dramas of the Place de la Revolution assembled here in the evenings and filled stalls, boxes, and tiers, laughing over the satires of Voltaire or weeping over the sentimental tragedies of persecuted Romeos and innocent Juliets.

Death knocked at so many doors these days! He was so constant a guest in the houses of relatives and friends that those who had merely shaken him by the hand, those on whom he had smiled, and whom he, still smiling, had passed indulgently by, looked on him with that subtle contempt born of familiarity, shrugged their shoulders at his passage, and envisaged his probable visit on the morrow with lighthearted indifference.

Paris--despite the horrors that had stained her walls had remained a city of pleasure, and the knife of the guillotine did scarce descend more often than did the drop-scenes on the stage.

On this bitterly cold evening of the 27th Nivose, in the second year of the Republic--or, as we of the old style still persist in calling it, the 16th of January, 1794--the auditorium of the Theatre National was filled with a very brilliant company.

The appearance of a favourite actress in the part of one of Moliere's volatile heroines had brought pleasure-loving Paris to witness this revival of "Le Misanthrope," with new scenery, dresses, and the aforesaid charming actress to add piquancy to the master's mordant wit.

The Moniteur, which so impartially chronicles the events of those times, tells us under that date that the Assembly of the Convention voted on that same day a new law giving fuller power to its spies, enabling them to effect domiciliary searches at their discretion without previous reference to the Committee of General Security, authorising them to proceed against all enemies of public happiness, to send them to prison at their own discretion, and assuring them the

sum of thirty-five livres "for every piece of game thus beaten up for the guillotine." Under that same date the Moniteur also puts it on record that the Theatre National was filled to its utmost capacity for the revival of the late citizen Moliere's comedy.

The Assembly of the Convention having voted the new law which placed the lives of thousands at the mercy of a few human bloodhounds, adjourned its sitting and proceeded to the Rue de Richelieu.

Already the house was full when the fathers of the people made their way to the seats which had been reserved for them. An awed hush descended on the throng as one by one the men whose very names inspired horror and dread filed in through the narrow gangways of the stalls or took their places in the tiny boxes around.

Citizen Robespierre's neatly bewigged head soon appeared in one of these; his bosom friend St. Just was with him, and also his sister Charlotte. Danton, like a big, shaggy-coated lion, elbowed his way into the stalls, whilst Sauterre, the handsome butcher and idol of the people of Paris, was loudly acclaimed as his huge frame, gorgeously clad in the uniform of the National Guard, was sighted on one of the tiers above.

The public in the parterre and in the galleries whispered excitedly; the awe-inspiring names flew about hither and thither on the wings of the overheated air. Women craned their necks to catch sight of heads which mayhap on the morrow would roll into the gruesome basket at the foot of the guillotine.

In one of the tiny avant-scene boxes two men had taken their seats long before the bulk of the audience had begun to assemble in the house. The inside of the box was in complete darkness, and the narrow opening which allowed but a sorry view of one side of the stage helped to conceal rather than display the occupants.

The younger one of these two men appeared to be something of a stranger in Paris, for as the public men and the well-known members of the Government began to arrive he often turned to his companion for information regarding these notorious personalities.

"Tell me, de Batz," he said, calling the other's attention to a group of men who had just entered the house, "that creature there in the green coat--with his hand up to his face now--who is he?"

"Where? Which do you mean?"

"There! He looks this way now, and he has a playbill in his hand. The man with the protruding chin and the convex forehead, a face like a marmoset, and eyes like a jackal. What?"

The other leaned over the edge of the box, and his small, restless eyes wandered over the now closely-packed auditorium.

"Oh!" he said as soon as he recognised the face which his friend had pointed out to him, "that is citizen Fouquier-Tinville."

"The Public Prosecutor?"

"Himself. And Heron is the man next to him."

"Heron?" said the younger man interrogatively.

"Yes. He is chief agent to the Committee of General Security now."

"What does that mean?"

Both leaned back in their chairs, and their sombrely-clad figures were once more merged in the gloom of the narrow box. Instinctively, since the name of the Public Prosecutor had been mentioned between them, they had allowed their voices to sink to a whisper.

The older man--a stoutish, florid-looking individual, with small, keen eyes, and skin pitted with small-pox--shrugged his shoulders at his friend's question, and then said with an air of contemptuous indifference:

"It means, my good St. Just, that these two men whom you see down there, calmly conning the programme of this evening's entertainment, and preparing to enjoy themselves to-night in the company of the late M. de Moliere, are two hell-hounds as powerful as they are cunning."

"Yes, yes," said St. Just, and much against his will a slight shudder ran through his slim figure as he spoke. "Fouquier-Tinville I know; I know his cunning, and I know his power--but the other?"

"The other?" retorted de Batz lightly. "Heron? Let me tell you, my friend, that even the might and lust of that damned Public Prosecutor pale before the power of Heron!"

"But how? I do not understand."

"Ah! you have been in England so long, you lucky dog, and though no doubt the main plot of our hideous tragedy has reached your ken, you have no cognisance of the actors who play the principal parts on this arena flooded with blood and carpeted with hate. They come and go, these actors, my good St. Just--they come and go. Marat is already the man of yesterday, Robespierre is the man of to-morrow. To-day we still have Danton and Fouquier-Tinville; we still have Pere Duchesne, and your own good cousin Antoine St. Just, but Heron and his like are with us always."

"Spies, of course?"

"Spies," assented the other. "And what spies! Were you present at the sitting of the Assembly to-day?"

"I was. I heard the new decree which already has passed into law. Ah! I tell you, friend, that we do not let the grass grow under our feet these days. Robespierre wakes up one morning with a whim; by the afternoon that whim has become law, passed by a servile body of men too terrified to run counter to his will, fearful lest they be accused of moderation or of humanity--the greatest crimes that can be committed nowadays."

"But Danton?"

"Ah! Danton? He would wish to stem the tide that his own passions have let loose; to muzzle the raging beasts whose fangs he himself has sharpened. I told you that Danton is still the man of to-day; to-morrow he will be accused of moderation. Danton and moderation! --ye gods! Eh? Danton, who thought the guillotine too slow in its work, and armed thirty soldiers with swords, so that thirty heads might fall at one and the same time. Danton, friend, will perish to-morrow accused of treachery against the Revolution, of moderation towards her enemies; and curs like Heron will feast on the blood of lions like Danton and his crowd."

He paused a moment, for he dared not raise his voice, and his whispers were being drowned by the noise in the auditorium. The curtain, timed to be raised at eight o'clock, was still down, though it was close on half-past, and the public was growing impatient. There was loud stamping of feet, and a few shrill whistles of disapproval proceeded from the gallery.

"If Heron gets impatient," said de Batz lightly, when the noise had momentarily subsided, the manager of this theatre and mayhap his leading actor and actress will spend an unpleasant day to-morrow."

"Always Heron!" said St. Just, with a contemptuous smile.

"Yes, my friend," rejoined the other imperturbably, "always Heron. And he has even obtained a longer lease of existence this afternoon."

"By the new decree?"

"Yes. The new decree. The agents of the Committee of General Security, of whom Heron is the chief, have from to-day powers of domiciliary search; they have full powers to proceed against all enemies of public welfare. Isn't that beautifully vague? And they have absolute discretion; every one may become an enemy of public welfare, either by spending too much money or by spending too little, by laughing to-day or crying to-morrow, by mourning for one dead relative or rejoicing over the execution of another. He may be a bad example to the public by the cleanliness of his person or by the filth upon his clothes, he may offend by walking to-day and by riding in a carriage next week; the agents of the Committee of General Security shall alone decide what constitutes enmity against public welfare. All prisons are to be opened at their bidding to receive those whom they choose to denounce; they have henceforth the right to examine prisoners privately and without witnesses, and to send them to trial without further warrants; their duty is clear--they must 'beat up game for the guillotine.' Thus is the decree worded; they must furnish the Public Prosecutor with work to do, the tribunals with victims to condemn, the Place de la Revolution with death-scenes to amuse the people, and for their work they will be rewarded thirty-five livres for every head that falls under the guillotine Ah! if Heron and his like and his myrmidons work hard and well they can make a comfortable income of four or five thousand livres a week. We are getting on, friend St. Just--we are getting on."

He had not raised his voice while he spoke, nor in the recounting of such inhuman monstrosity, such vile and bloodthirsty conspiracy against the liberty, the dignity, the very life of an entire nation, did he appear to feel the slightest indignation; rather did a tone of amusement and even of triumph strike through his speech; and now he laughed good-humouredly like an indulgent parent who is watching the naturally cruel antics of a spoiled boy.

"Then from this hell let loose upon earth," exclaimed St. Just hotly, "must we rescue those who refuse to ride upon this tide of blood."

His cheeks were glowing, his eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. He looked very young and very eager. Armand St. Just, the brother of Lady Blakeney, had something of the refined beauty of his lovely sister, but the features though manly--had not the latent strength expressed in them which characterised every line of Marguerite's exquisite face. The forehead suggested a dreamer rather

than a thinker, the blue-grey eyes were those of an idealist rather than of a man of action.

De Batz's keen piercing eyes had no doubt noted this, even whilst he gazed at his young friend with that same look of good-humoured indulgence which seemed habitual to him.

"We have to think of the future, my good St. Just," he said after a slight pause, and speaking slowly and decisively, like a father rebuking a hot-headed child, "not of the present. What are a few lives worth beside the great principles which we have at stake?"

"The restoration of the monarchy--I know," retorted St. Just, still unsobered, "but, in the meanwhile--"

"In the meanwhile," rejoined de Batz earnestly, "every victim to the lust of these men is a step towards the restoration of law and order--that is to say, of the monarchy. It is only through these violent excesses perpetrated in its name that the nation will realise how it is being fooled by a set of men who have only their own power and their own advancement in view, and who imagine that the only way to that power is over the dead bodies of those who stand in their way. Once the nation is sickened by these orgies of ambition and of hate, it will turn against these savage brutes, and gladly acclaim the restoration of all that they are striving to destroy. This is our only hope for the future, and, believe me, friend, that every head snatched from the guillotine by your romantic hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel, is a stone laid for the consolidation of this infamous Republic."

"I'll not believe it," protested St. Just emphatically.

De Batz, with a gesture of contempt indicative also of complete self-satisfaction and unalterable self-belief, shrugged his broad shoulders. His short fat fingers, covered with rings, beat a tattoo upon the ledge of the box.

Obviously, he was ready with a retort. His young friend's attitude irritated even more than it amused him. But he said nothing for the moment, waiting while the traditional three knocks on the floor of the stage proclaimed the rise of the curtain. The growing impatience of the audience subsided as if by magic at the welcome call; everybody settled down again comfortably in their seats, they gave up the contemplation of the fathers of the people, and turned their full attention to the actors on the boards.

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