

**THE TRIUMPH OF  
THE SCARLET  
PIMPERNEL**

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**CHAPTER I**  
**"THE EVERLASTING STARS LOOK**  
**DOWN, LIKE**  
**GLISTENING EYES BRIGHT WITH**  
**IMMORTAL PITT, OVER THE LOT OF**  
**MAN."**

**§1**

Nearly five years have gone by!

Five years, since the charred ruins of grim Bastille—stone image of Absolutism and of Autocracy—set the seal of victory upon the expression of a people's will and marked the beginning of that marvellous era of Liberty and of Fraternity which has led us step by step from the dethronement of a King, through the martyrdom of countless innocents, to the tyranny of an oligarchy more arbitrary, more relentless, above all more cruel, than any that the dictators of Rome or Stamboul ever dreamed of in their wildest thirst for power. An era that sees a populace always clamouring for the Millennium, which ranting demagogues have never ceased to promise: a Millennium to be achieved alternatively through the extermination of Aristocracy, of Titles, of Riches, and the abrogation of Priesthood: through dethroned royalty and desecrated altars, through an army without leadership, or an Assembly without power.

They have never ceased to prate, these frothy rhetoricians! And the people went on, vaguely believing that one day, soon, that

Millennium would surely come, after seas of blood had purged the soil of France from the last vestige of bygone oppression, and after her sons and daughters had been massacred in their thousands and their tens of thousands, until their headless bodies had built up a veritable scaling ladder for the tottering feet of lustful climbers, and these in their turn had perished to make way for other ranters, other speech-makers, a new Demosthenes or long-tongued Cicero.

Inevitably these too perished, one by one, irrespective of their virtues or their vices, their errors or their ideals: Vergniaud, the enthusiast, and Desmoulins, the irresponsible; Barnave, the just, and Chaumette, the blasphemer; Hébert, the carrion, and Danton, the power. All, all have perished, one after the other: victims of their greed and of their crimes—they and their adherents and their enemies. They slew and were slain in their turn. They struck blindly, like raging beasts, most of them for fear lest they too should be struck by beasts more furious than they. All have perished; but not before their iniquities have for ever sullied what might have been the most glorious page in the history of France—her fight for Liberty. Because of these monsters—and of a truth there were only a few—the fight, itself sublime in its ideals, noble in its conception, has become abhorrent to the rest of mankind.

But they, arraigned at the bar of history, what have they to say, what to show as evidence of their patriotism, the purity of their intentions?

On this day of April, 1794, year II of the New Calendar, eight thousand men, women, and not a few children, are crowding the prisons of Paris to overflowing. Four thousand heads have fallen under the guillotine in the past three months. All the great names of France, her noblesse, her magistracy, her clergy, members of

past Parliaments, shining lights in the sciences, the arts, the Universities, men of substance, poets, brain-workers, have been torn from their homes, their churches or their places of refuge, dragged before a travesty of justice, judged, condemned and slaughtered; not singly, not individually, but in batches—whole families, complete hierarchies, entire households; one lot for the crime of being rich, another for being nobly born; some because of their religion, others because of professed free-thought. One man for devotion to his friend, another for perfidy; one for having spoken, another for having held his tongue, and another for no crime at all—just because of his family connexions, his profession or his ancestry.

For months it had been the innocents; but since then it has also been the assassins. And the populace, still awaiting the Millennium, clamour for more victims and for more—for the aristocrat and for the sans-culotte, and howl with execration impartially at both.

## §2

But through this mad orgy of murder and of hatred, one man survives, stands apart indeed, wielding a power which the whole pack of infuriated wolves thirsting for his blood are too cowardly to challenge. The Girondists and the Extremists have fallen. Hébert, the idol of the mob, Danton, its hero and its mouthpiece, have been hurled from their throne, sent to the scaffold along with ci-devant nobles, aristocrats, royalists and traitors. But this one man remains, calm in the midst of every storm, absolute in his will, indigent where others have grasped riches with both hands, adored, almost deified, by a few, dreaded by all, sphinx-like, invulnerable, sinister—Robespierre!

Robespierre at this time was at the height of his popularity and of his power. The two great Committees of Public Safety and of General Security were swayed by his desires, the Clubs worshipped him, the Convention was packed with obedient slaves to his every word. The Dantonists, cowed into submission by the bold coup which had sent their leader, their hero, their idol, to the guillotine, were like a tree that has been struck at the root. Without Danton, the giant of the Revolution, the colossus of crime, the maker of the Terror, the thunderbolt of the Convention, the party was atrophied, robbed of its strength and its vitality, its last few members hanging, servile and timorous, upon the great man's lips.

Robespierre was in truth absolute master of France. The man who had dared to drag his only rival down to the scaffold was beyond the reach of any attack. By this final act of unparalleled despotism he had revealed the secrets of his soul, shown himself to be rapacious as well as self-seeking. Something of his aloofness, of his incorruptibility, had vanished, yielding to that ever-present and towering ambition which hitherto none had dared to suspect. But ambition is the one vice to which the generality of mankind will always accord homage, and Robespierre, by gaining the victory over his one rival, had virtually begun to rule, whilst his colleagues in the Convention, in the Clubs and in the Committees, had tacitly agreed to obey. The tyrant out of his vaulting ambition had brought forth the slaves.

Faint hearted and servile, they brooded over their wrongs, gazed with smouldering wrath on Danton's vacant seat in the Convention, which no one cared to fill. But they did not murmur, hardly dared to plot, and gave assent to every decree, every measure, every suggestion promulgated by the dictator who held their lives in the hollow of his thin white hand; who with a word, a

gesture, could send his enemy, his detractor, a mere critic of his actions, to the guillotine.



## CHAPTER II

### FEET OF CLAY

#### §1

On this 26th day of April, 1794, which in the newly constituted calendar is the 7th Floreal, year II of the Republic, three women and one man were assembled in a small, closely curtained room on the top floor of a house in the Rue de la Planchette, which is situated in a remote and dreary quarter of Paris. The man sat upon a chair which was raised on a dais. He was neatly, indeed, immaculately dressed, in dark cloth coat and tan breeches, with clean linen at throat and wrists, white stockings and buckled shoes. His own hair was concealed under a mouse-coloured wig. He sat quite still, with one leg crossed over the other, and his thin, bony hands were clasped in front of him.

Behind the dais there was a heavy curtain which stretched right across the room, and in front of it, at opposite corners, two young girls, clad in grey, clinging draperies, sat upon their heels, with the palms of their hands resting flat upon their thighs. Their hair hung loose down their backs, their chins were uplifted, their eyes fixed, their bodies rigid in an attitude of contemplation. In the centre of the room a woman stood, gazing upwards at the ceiling, her arms folded across her breast. Her grey hair, lank and unruly, was partially hidden by an ample floating veil of an indefinite shade of grey, and from her meagre shoulders and arms, her garment—it was hardly a gown—descended in straight, heavy, shapeless folds. In front of her was a small table, on it a large crystal globe, which

rested on a stand of black wood, exquisitely carved and inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and beside it a small metal box.

Immediately above the old woman's head an oil lamp, the flame of which was screened by a piece of crimson silk, shed a feeble and lurid light upon the scene. Against the wall half a dozen chairs, on the floor a threadbare carpet, and in one corner a broken-down chiffonier represented the sum total of the furniture in the stuffy little room. The curtains in front of the window, as well as the portières which masked both the doors, were heavy and thick, excluding all light and most of the outside air.

The old woman, with eyes fixed upon the ceiling, spoke in a dull, even monotone.

"Citizen Robespierre, who is the Chosen of the Most High, hath deigned to enter the humble abode of his servant," she said. "What is his pleasure to-day?"

"The shade of Danton pursues me," Robespierre replied, and his voice too sounded toneless, as if muffled by the heavily weighted atmosphere. "Can you not lay him to rest?"

The woman stretched out her arms. The folds of her woollen draperies hung straight from shoulder to wrist down to the ground, so that she looked like a shapeless, bodiless, grey ghost in the dim, red light.

"Blood!" she exclaimed in a weird, cadaverous wail. "Blood around thee and blood at thy feet! But not upon thy head, O Chosen of the Almighty! Thy decrees are those of the Most High! Thy hand wields His avenging Sword! I see thee walking upon a sea of blood, yet thy feet are as white as lilies and thy garments are

spotless as the driven: snow. Avaunt," she cried in sepulchral tones, "ye spirits of evil! Avaunt, ye vampires and ghouls! and venture not with your noxious breath to disturb the serenity of our Morning Star!"

The girls in front of the dais raised their arms above their heads and echoed the old soothsayer's wails.

"Avaunt!" they cried solemnly. "Avaunt!"

Now from a distant corner of the room, a small figure detached itself out of the murky shadows. It was the figure of a young negro, clad in white from head to foot. In the semi-darkness the draperies which he wore were alone visible, and the whites of his eyes. Thus he seemed to be walking without any feet, to have eyes without any face, and to be carrying a heavy vessel without using any hands. His appearance indeed was so startling and so unearthly that the man upon the dais could not suppress an exclamation of terror. Whereupon a wide row of dazzling white teeth showed somewhere between the folds of the spectral draperies, and further enhanced the spook-like appearance of the blackamoor. He carried a deep bowl fashioned of chased copper, which he placed upon the table in front of the old woman, immediately behind the crystal globe and the small metal box. The seer then opened the box, took out a pinch of something brown and powdery, and holding it between finger and thumb, she said solemnly:

"From out the heart of France rises the incense of faith, of hope, and of love!" and she dropped the powder into the bowl. "May it prove acceptable to him who is her chosen Lord!"

A bluish flame shot up from out the depth of the vessel, shed for the space of a second or two its ghostly light upon the gaunt

features of the old hag, the squat and grinning face of the negro, and toyed with will-o'-the-wisp-like fitfulness with the surrounding gloom. A sweet-scented smoke rose upwards to the ceiling. Then the flame died down again, making the crimson darkness around appear by contrast more lurid and more mysterious than before.

Robespierre had not moved. His boundless vanity, his insatiable ambition, blinded him to the effrontery, the ridicule of this mysticism. He accepted the tangible incense, took a deep breath, as if to fill his entire being with its heady fumes, just as he was always ready to accept the fulsome adulation of his devotees and of his sycophants.

The old charlatan then repeated her incantations. Once more she took powder from the box, threw some of it into the vessel, and spoke in a sepulchral voice:

"From out the heart of those who worship thee rises the incense of their praise!"

A delicate white flame rose immediately out of the vessel. It shed a momentary, unearthly brightness around, then as speedily vanished again. And for the third time the witch spoke the mystic words:

"From out the heart of an entire nation rises the incense of perfect joy in thy triumph over thine enemies!"

This time, however, the magic powder did not act quite so rapidly as it had done on the two previous occasions. For a few seconds the vessel remained dark and unresponsive; nothing came to dispel the surrounding gloom. Even the light of the oil lamp overhead appeared suddenly to grow dim. At any rate, so it seemed

to the autocrat who, with nerves on edge, sat upon his throne-like seat, his bony hands, so like the talons of a bird of prey, clutching the arms of his chair, his narrow eyes fixed upon the sybil, who in her turn was gazing on the metal vessel as if she would extort some cabalistic mystery from its depth.

All at once a bright red flame shot out of the bowl. Everything in the room became suffused with a crimson glow. The old witch bending over her cauldron looked as if she were smeared with blood, her eyes appeared bloodshot, her long hooked nose cast a huge black shadow over her mouth, distorting the face into a hideous, cadaverous grin. From her throat issued strange sounds like those of an animal in the throes of pain.

"Red! Red!" she lamented, and gradually as the flame subsided and finally flickered out altogether, her words became more distinct. She raised the crystal globe and gazed fixedly into it. "Always red," she went on slowly. "Thrice yesterday did I cast the spell in the name of Our Chosen . . . thrice did the spirits cloak their identity in a blood-red flame . . . red . . . always red . . . not only blood . . . but danger . . . danger of death through that which is red. . . ."

Robespierre had risen from his seat, his thin lips were murmuring hasty imprecations. The kneeling figurants looked scared, and strange wailing sounds came from their mouths. The young blackamoor alone looked self-possessed. He stood by, evidently enjoying the scene, his white teeth gleaming in a huge, broad grin.

"A truce on riddles, Mother!" Robespierre exclaimed at last impatiently, and descended hastily from the dais. He approached

the old necromancer, seized her by the arm, thrust his head in front of hers in an endeavour to see something which apparently was revealed to her in the crystal globe. "What is it you see in there?" he queried harshly.

But she pushed him aside, gazed with rapt intentness into the globe.

"Red!" she murmured. "Scarlet . . . aye, scarlet! And now it takes shape . . . Scarlet . . . and it obscures the Chosen One . . . the shape becomes more clear . . . the Chosen One appears more dim. . . ." Then she gave a piercing shriek.

"Beware! . . . beware! . . . that which is Scarlet is shaped like a flower . . . five petals, I see them distinctly . . . and the Chosen One I see no more. . . ."

"Malediction!" the man exclaimed. "What foolery is this?"

"No foolery," the old charlatan resumed in a dull monotone. "Thou didst consult the oracle, oh thou, who art the Chosen of the people of France! and the oracle has spoken. Beware of a scarlet flower! From that which is scarlet comes danger of death for thee!"

Whereat Robespierre tried to laugh.

"Some one has filled thy head, Mother," he said in a voice which he vainly tried to steady, "with tales of the mysterious Englishman who goes by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel——"

"Thy mortal enemy, O Messenger of the Most High!" the old blasphemer broke in solemnly. "In far-off fog-bound England he hath sworn thy death. Beware——"

"If that is the only danger which threatens me——" the other began, striving to speak carelessly.

"The only one, and the greatest one," the hag went on insistently. "Despise it not because it seems small and remote."

"I do not despise it; neither do I magnify it. A gnat is a nuisance, but not a danger."

"A gnat may wield a poisoned dart. The spirits have spoken. Heed their warning, O Chosen of the People! Destroy the Englishman ere he destroy thee!"

"Pardi!" Robespierre retorted, and despite the stuffiness of the room he gave a shiver as if he felt cold. "Since thou dost commune with the spirits, find out from them how I can accomplish that."

The woman once more raised the crystal globe to the level of her breast. With her elbows stretched out and her draperies falling straight all around her, she gazed into it for a while in silence. Then she began to murmur.

"I see the Scarlet Flower quite plainly . . . a small Scarlet Flower. . . . And I see the great Light which is like an aureole, the Light of the Chosen One. It is of dazzling brightness—but over it the Scarlet Flower casts a Stygian shadow."

"Ask them," Robespierre broke in peremptorily, "ask thy spirits how best I can overcome mine enemy."

"I see something," the witch went on in an even monotone, still gazing into the crystal globe, "white and rose and tender . . . is it a woman . . .?"

"A woman?"

"She is tall, and she is beautiful . . . a stranger in the land . . . with eyes dark as the night and tresses black as the raven's wing. . . . Yes, it is a woman. . . . She stands between the Light and that blood-red flower. She takes the flower in her hand . . . she fondles it, raises it to her lips. . . . Ah!" and the old seer gave a loud cry of triumph. "She tosses it mangled and bleeding into the consuming Light. . . . And now it lies faded, torn, crushed, and the Light grows in radiance and in brilliancy, and there is none now to dim its pristine glory——"

"But the woman? Who is she?" the man broke in impatiently. "What is her name?"

"The spirits speak no names," the seer replied. "Any woman would gladly be thy handmaid, O Elect of France! The spirits have spoken," she concluded solemnly. "Salvation will come to thee by the hand of a woman."

"And mine enemy?" he insisted. "Which of us two is in danger of death now—now that I am warned—which of us two?—mine English enemy, or I?"

Nothing loth, the old hag was ready to continue her sortilege. Robespierre hung breathless upon her lips. His whole personality seemed transformed. He appeared eager, fearful, credulous—a different man to the cold, calculating despot who sent thousands to their death with his measured oratory, the mere power of his presence. Indeed, history has sought in vain for the probable motive which drove this cynical tyrant into consulting this pitiable charlatan. That Catherine Théot had certain psychic powers has never been gainsaid, and since the philosophers of the eighteenth century had undermined the religious superstitions of the Middle



Ages, it was only to be expected that in the great upheaval of this awful Revolution, men and women should turn to the mystic and the supernatural as to a solace and respite from the fathomless misery of their daily lives.

In this world of ours, the more stupendous the events, the more abysmal the catastrophes, the more do men realize their own impotence and the more eagerly do they look for the Hidden Hand that is powerful enough to bring about such events and to hurl upon them such devastating cataclysms. Indeed, never since the dawn of history had so many theosophies, demonologies, occult arts, spiritualism, exorcism of all sorts, flourished as they did now: the Theists, the Rosicrucians, the Illuminati, Swedenborg, the Count of Saint Germain, Weishaupt, and scores of others, avowed charlatans or earnest believers, had their neophytes, their devotees, and their cults.

Catherine Théot was one of many: for the nonce, one of the most noteworthy in Paris. She believed herself to be endowed with the gift of prophecy, and her fetish was Robespierre. In this at least she was genuine. She believed him to be a new Messiah, the Elect of God. Nay! she loudly proclaimed him as such, and one of her earliest neophytes, an ex-Carthusian monk named Gerle, who sat in the Convention next to the great man, had whispered in the latter's ear the insidious flattery which had gradually led his footsteps to the witch's lair.

Whether his own vanity—which was without limit and probably without parallel—caused him to believe in his own heaven-sent mission, or whether he only desired to strengthen his own popularity by endowing it with supernatural prestige, is a matter of conjecture. Certain it is that he did lend himself to

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