opening extract from

The Pale Assassin (Pimpernelles 1)

written by

Patricia Elliott

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The Beginning

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One summer evening outside Paris, a coach drawn by four black horses was creaking and swaying through the soft country twilight. Cool grassy scents drifted in through the windows, refreshing after the stench of the capital, but the cold-eyed man seated inside was oblivious to them. His mind was on murder.

His name was Raoul Goullet, and he had killed before. Tonight he would kill Sébastien de Boncoeur, the Marquis of Chauvais.

The Marquis had beaten him at cards. His hard-won fortune, accumulated over years, had been lost in an evening to a mere novice. He pictured for the umpteenth time those mocking young aristocratic faces round the green-topped gaming table as he, Raoul Goullet, experienced gambler, discovered he was left with –

nothing. In desperation he had tried to cheat, and then – the humiliation of it! – they had stripped him of his breeches and booted him naked into the street.

But tonight he intended both to keep his money and to be avenged.

The coach turned into a long avenue shadowed by trees, and the chateau of Chauvais, built of white stone, rose ghostly in the distance. The rising moon shone on pointed towers, lines of shuttered windows, steps leading to a terrace bordered by a balustrade.

The assassin sat back and gave a tight-lipped smile. As the coach rolled to a halt and from somewhere dogs began to bark, his gloved fingers felt the outline of the dagger in the pocket of his white brocade coat.

It was the young Marquis himself who opened the great wooden doors. He appeared much taken aback to see who it was, though he bowed stiffly. There was a tiny, ravishingly pretty child clinging to his silk breeches; she gave the visitor a baleful glare from sky-blue eyes.

'I did not expect you, monsieur,' the Marquis said, holding a candlestick aloft in the echoing stone hall and quietening the pair of tall wolfhounds with a single raised finger of his other hand. He bent to whisper to the child. 'Eugénie, *chérie*, run along to Nurse.' She pouted but obeyed, skipping off into the shadows.

'You wish for satisfaction, I take it?' said the Marquis reluctantly, once the soft sound of her slippers on the stone floor had died away. He did not wish to be challenged to a duel, but he knew that he and his friends had gone too far the other night, and he had been the ringleader. This man was a cheat, but he was dangerous, and the Marquis had a wife and two young children to consider.

Goullet shook his head. 'I have brought the money I owe you,' he said, his pale face glistening in the candlelight; it was an unattractive face, almost reptilian.

He beckoned, and his coachman appeared, eyeing the dogs nervously, a money-bag hanging heavily from each hand.

'In the library, please,' said the Marquis. He did not want his wife to know of an evening spent at the notorious gaming-house run by the Baron de Batz. Indeed, he would much rather have forgone his winnings altogether, for now he would have to think of somewhere to hide them away. *Cheat's gold*, he thought with revulsion. He could never touch it.

But already the coachman had hauled the money-bags into the library and returned for more; and now they sat beneath the bookshelves like a row of malignant and bloated slugs while the coachman himself, a powerfully built and disconcertingly

savage-looking fellow, lurked over them as if on guard.

Raoul Goullet eyed the dogs askance. 'I do not like dogs. Shut them away if you please, while we check the money.'

'Of course,' said the Marquis, and he shut the dogs the other side of the library door.

But his sense of danger was alerted. He had recently returned on leave from fighting the British in America, but he had never seen such malevolence in a man's eyes.

Goullet waved towards the bags. 'All that I owe you is there. Go ahead and count. Gaston will open the bags for you.'

'There is no need. I am sure the amount is correct.'

'No, I insist.'

The Marquis went across to the money-bags and appeared to bend over them. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the candles flicker on the card table. There was a minute movement of air behind him.

He whirled.

The flash of a blade.

An experienced army officer, the Marquis's reactions were swift. The dagger dropped to the waxed floorboards and slid with a whisper to the wall.

'I do not understand your game this time, monsieur,' said the Marquis evenly, though he was breathing fast and had hold of the visitor's arm in a vice-like grip.

'But I believe you have just tried to cheat again.'

'I do not lose twice!' hissed the assassin. He jerked his head at the coachman. 'Gaston!'

Snarling something, the coachman moved forward to tackle the Marquis, but before he could reach him, the Marquis gave a long, low whistle. The library door shook, as heavy weights were thrust against it from the other side, then with a shower of wood splinters it burst open and the dogs hurled themselves through. At the Marquis's command they halted, paws juddering, ready to spring; jaws open and dripping; their eyes moving from their master to their two quarries, and back again.

'Go, before I set them on you,' said the Marquis curtly.

The coachman gave one horrified glance at the dogs, turned and ran.

Burning with fury and humiliation, the assassin followed him, stumbling through the darkness of the hall to the great doors. As they were slammed behind him, he lost his footing and fell heavily on to the flagged stones of the terrace.

In the hall the Marquis fondled his two hounds. They were the gentlest bitches he had ever trained, brought over from England by his wife. 'Bravo, *mes belles*,' he murmured as they fawned around him. 'What a show you put on!'

Outside, the assassin brushed dirt from his coat, his eyes glittering in the moonlight. At that moment he looked what he truly was: an extremely dangerous man who had been thwarted of revenge.

A wail came from an unshuttered window high above his head. The child Eugénie, protesting at being put to bed. The assassin cocked his head to listen.

'I shall win yet, Marquis,' he said softly, venomously, his words creeping like a curse along the moonlit terrace. 'I shall destroy you and your family.'

And the thought of what he would do made him grind his teeth with pleasure.

Part One

Watched

One

12 July 1789

Ten years later, on a sultry Sunday afternoon in Paris, Eugénie de Boncoeur was walking with her governess beneath the horse-chestnut trees in the gardens of the Palais-Royal, gorging herself on marshmallow. In half an hour, though she did not know it yet, a revolution would ignite around her as if lighted kindling had been pushed into a vast, waiting bonfire.

'I think we should sit down, Mademoiselle Eugénie,' said her governess, Hortense, whose pale olive face had flushed unusually pink with the heat. 'There are empty chairs in the shade over there.'

Eugénie spoke thickly through another delicious mouthful of her marshmallow, *pâté de guimauve*. 'We could go into a café and have some lemonade.'

Hortense shook her head, but Eugénie pretended

not to notice. She was wearing her new dress *à la reine*, in the simple shepherdess style made fashionable by the Queen, and as she walked its white muslin skirts floated out so that she felt she was walking in the middle of a cloud. She was far too excited to care about being hot.

All around her the crowds were flooding through the arcades and tented pavilions. She had never seen so many people, nor heard such a din. As they went on groups began to gather, and they had to skirt round them; she could not even hear the water playing in the little fountains any more above the angry voices.

'See, what did I tell you?' whispered Hortense. 'I said this was not a good time to come!'

It was true that earlier, back at her guardian's old mansion-house near the Tuileries Gardens, Eugénie had had a great deal of trouble persuading her governess that today was the day for their long-planned secret expedition. Eugénie was not used to being thwarted, and she had longed for this visit to the Palais-Royal ever since Hortense had told her about its shops and stalls, cafés, restaurants and entertainments, all packed together beneath covered walkways. It was where you went to hear the latest news and to listen to revolutionary speeches. Hortense had been there and so had everyone in Paris, it seemed, except for Eugénie.

But Hortense had looked grave at first.

'I'm certain that Monsieur le Comte would not approve, mademoiselle! It's not a suitable place for young girls.'

'But the Duc d'Orléans opened it for everyone,' protested Eugénie. 'Didn't you tell me it's called the People's Palace now? Besides, it's our only chance, with my guardian away at his estate! Oh, please, Hortense!'

And so eventually Hortense had agreed.

But it had been impossible to walk to the Palais-Royal through the Tuileries Gardens because it was blocked with crowds, milling about in a threatening way. They had had to catch a hansom cab. As it bowled away, Eugénie had caught a glimpse of the great dusty square of the Place Louis XV, lined with the figures of soldiers on horseback, shimmering darkly in the heat. The sun glinted on their swords.

'Why are they there?' she said, already a little unnerved by the crowds in the Tuileries.

'German cavalry!' said Hortense with contempt. 'The King has filled Paris with foreign troops to make him feel safer. He thinks they will stop the people rioting about the price of bread, but it's only made them angrier. They've formed their own militia to defend Paris from the troops. They've even begun to hack down the customs wall!'

The hated customs wall that snaked round Paris had

been built to levy high duties on farmers' produce entering the city, and made food very expensive. But there was always plenty to eat in her guardian's house; Eugénie knew she would never starve like the beggars in the street. Forgetting the angry crowds and the soldiers, she craned forward in the cab, impatient to see her first glimpse of the Palais-Royal.

But she had not expected to see quite so many people there as well.

She began to be frightened by the wild look in their eyes and the raised voices above her head. In the oppressive heat they stank of sweat and fear.

Looking down she saw with dismay that her white shoes and the hem of her new dress were covered in dust.

'Why is everyone shouting, Hortense?'

'The King has dismissed his Finance Minister.'

'Everyone is always cross with King Louis, aren't they?' said Eugénie tiredly.

'He has got rid of the only man who could have saved the country from bankruptcy,' said Hortense, sounding cross herself. 'Monsieur Necker. The people call him the Miracle Maker.'

'Then why did the King dismiss him?'

'They say the King is trying to prevent the reform of

taxes. The poor people pay too much and starve while the nobility pays nothing. It's not right.'

Hortense always knew everything. She pored over all the newspapers and political pamphlets as they came out and tried to pass the information on to Eugénie, whose education was her responsibility. But the news did not interest Eugénie in the slightest; she could not see that it had anything to do with her.

'I think we should go home before things get worse, mademoiselle.'

But Eugénie had noticed a gilded salon where people sat at marble-topped tables around a counter laden with bottles. Its doors were open on to its own gardens. 'Can we have a glass of lemonade first? Please, Hortense.'

'The Café Foy. The most expensive,' sighed Hortense, but she set off up the path because, as Eugénie knew, she too was thirsty. 'Don't move, mademoiselle!' she shouted back over her shoulder.

Eugénie had wanted to drink her lemonade inside the Café Foy, for she had never been in a café before; but she could see that all the tables were taken. Indeed, there were people pressed up against them, listening or talking to those sitting down. So, instead, she stayed motionless on the sun-parched grass, clinging to the rough bark of a tree in case she was crushed underfoot by all the hot bodies pushing past her.

Then the church clocks all over Paris began to strike three and she had the strangest feeling: she thought she could feel the vibration through the tree, and stretching out all around her, as if the whole city was shaking itself to destruction.

There was a man in a white coat standing at one of the upper windows of the Café Foy. His gaze travelled around and lighted on Eugénie, clutching her tree in the middle of a swelling sea of people. She felt a curious sense of chill in spite of the fact that sweat was trickling down her back. But by the time Hortense returned, flustered, but triumphantly bearing two lemonades that had half spilt from their glasses, he was not looking in her direction any more. He was staring at a young man who had come out on to the terrace.

Hortense, too, looked at the young man, who had long dark curls and a thin, pale face. A green ribbon was tied around his hat and its ends fluttered in the hot breeze.

'I have seen him here before,' Hortense said. 'Camille Desmoulins, a journalist. He writes the most stirring articles.' Her eyes shone, and she paused in handing Eugénie her lemonade.

'Robert will be jealous,' teased Eugénie.

Robert was one of her guardian's footmen. Eugénie had surprised Hortense and Robert together, kissing,

and had somehow been rather shocked that her governess, with her gravely beautiful face and passionate, intellectual ideas, should succumb to such an ordinary emotion as love.

'Shall you marry Robert, Hortense?'

Hortense made a little face. 'Pouf! Robert! He is nothing to me. I want to be free!' A faraway look came into her dark eyes. 'One day I'll visit England. Even a governess may find freedom there.' She added, with sudden disconcerting fierceness, 'In England the king has to listen to his people. He doesn't hold all the power to govern and impose taxes like our king, but is bound by a constitution.'

'What's a constitution?' said Eugénie, but she only half listened to Hortense's answer. A stab of jealousy went through her as she pictured Hortense showing an English girl newspaper articles and pamphlets, or even that book by Monsieur Rousseau, that she, Eugénie, had found so dull. Perhaps an English girl would be cleverer than she was, and Hortense would love her more.

'A constitution prevents the king having complete power and allows the people their say,' said Hortense.

'But England is so far away! I may never see you again.'

Hortense looked at Eugénie with pity. 'Soon there

will be no governesses in Paris, *ma petite mademoiselle*. Nor in the countryside. And perhaps no footmen like Robert, who can tell? Unless things change.'

'What do you mean?'

'Why do you think your guardian has left Paris for his estate at the moment? He's worried that the peasants may seize and destroy it. In the country they're taking power into their own hands, rebelling against the tyranny of the aristocrats they work for and refusing to pay them rent.'

'But surely not at Haut-bois?' said Eugénie, distressed. 'They are loyal on my guardian's estate – and at Chauvais too.'

Hortense looked at her intently, then put her mouth close to Eugénie's ear.

'But there are also many aristocrats who want change,' Hortense whispered, making Eugénie's ear hot and wet. 'They want a fair constitution like everyone else. Your guardian is one of them, and your brother, Armand. I keep my ears open, listen to servants' talk so I know.' She paused. 'If nobles, like your guardian, could talk to the King, perhaps they could persuade him . . .'

There was sudden commotion over by the doorway of the Café Foy, where some men were bringing out a table. The dark young man, who had been talking and gesticulating excitedly and had drawn a small crowd

around him, was lifted up on to it, and then someone brought a chair and he climbed precariously on to that. He was now so high that even Eugénie could see him.

'What's he going to do, Hortense?' she asked, wondering if he was an acrobat and would suddenly stand on his hands, like the circus performers she had heard came to the Palais-Royal.

'He's going to make a speech!' There was a glazed, exalted look in Hortense's eyes and she clasped her hands together, taking a step forward as if to be nearer the speaker. Eugénie, frightened that she had forgotten her and that she would be abandoned to the crowd, clutched at her skirts. Waves of people were bearing down on them to join the throng around the young man's table. He had a pistol in each hand and was making wild movements so that they flashed silver in the sun.

Hortense grabbed at Eugénie's arm. 'Come!' she said urgently.

The crowd was yelling, hoarse with passion, and the upper-storey windows of the cafés all around were filled with people hanging out and shouting, too; only the man who still watched from his window did not open his mouth.

'To arms! We need weapons!'

'Let's protect ourselves against the foreigners!'

'To the arsenal, then! To Les Invalides!'

A ragged boy leapt up into the chestnut tree above Eugénie's head and began tearing off the bright-green papery leaves. He threw them out to the crowd; broken twigs almost hit her. People began to stuff them into their hats like cockades: green, the colour of hope and liberty.

'Come!' cried Hortense again, and pulled Eugénie away.

Clinging together, they battled through an oncoming surge of people, eager to hear the rest of the speech. An old man was knocked to the ground. No one stopped to help him and he was trampled over as if he were a piece of rubbish. A red wound opened in his bald, sunburnt head.

Eugénie gasped and bit her tongue. The inside of her mouth, coated with sweetness from marshmallow and lemonade, filled with blood.

The crowd had become a mob: a bellowing, mindless beast.

It took them a long time to escape and they were forced to go in the wrong direction. In the theatre district Hortense looked for a cab. They were both dishevelled and exhausted, their clothes and hair sticking to them with sweat and dust. Hortense had stuck leaves in their

hats to avoid the crowds molesting them, and these had turned into wilting green rags. It was no cooler, though dark clouds hid the sun.

They passed empty theatres, their façades barricaded. At the top of the street they paused, frozen by the sound of commotion behind them: shouts and yells and unearthly cries.

Hortense gasped and put her hand to her mouth. She had gone white with shock.

'Don't look, mademoiselle!' Then her colour came back patchily and her hand dropped. 'They must have broken into Monsieur Curteius's waxworks.' She dragged Eugénie on. 'Hurry! Hurry before they are on us!'

Eugénie looked back and, in a single instant that she never forgot, saw the waxen heads on poles carried by the triumphant mob: disembodied heads, jerking and bobbing against the darkening sky.

And that was when Raoul Goullet, the pale assassin, encountered Eugénie de Boncoeur again: on his way from the Palais-Royal, his coach taking the back streets behind the theatre district to avoid the mob.

He did not, of course, recognize her at first. He looked out and saw a dark-haired young woman pulling a girl in a white dress over the dusty cobbles, and as he

saw them, the young woman raised her hand in a pleading way.

He ordered the driver to stop and opened the door reluctantly: he did not like children.

'Thank you, monsieur!' exclaimed the young woman. She sank down trembling on the seat opposite and clutched the girl to her. 'They are going to Les Invalides to search for muskets! There'll be a riot!'

'The Revolution has begun,' said Goullet.

There was satisfaction in his tone, and Hortense looked at him with interest.

He was richly dressed in a white brocade coat and lace ruffles, but the coach bore no aristocratic crest. Under his powdered hair his face was unhealthy-looking in its extreme pallor and with something chilling about it, the cruel mouth, perhaps, or the cold, narrowed eyes.

All the same she ventured, 'You would support a revolution then, monsieur?'

'I believe that it will present . . . opportunities,' Goullet said.

His gaze was caught by the child, who was staring at his black-gloved fingers. She looked away as if she knew she had been rude. She was exquisite, even though her dress was dirty and her mouth crusted with sugar. Her skin was like porcelain, smooth,

unblemished, translucent; she reminded him of one of his own precious figurines. He had the largest and most valuable collection of china in Paris, kept in locked glass cabinets.

'You like *pâté de guimauve*?' he said to the child, who had pulled an empty *papier* from the pocket hanging on her blue sash.

The governess nudged her, and she nodded her head unsmiling.

'Where shall I take you?' he said to the governess.

Flustered, Hortense told him, and belatedly introduced them both. She saw something enter the man's icy eyes, but he said nothing more and when they reached the lane off the rue Saint-Honoré and the coach had stopped, he pulled out the steps and helped Hortense down, taking her hand in his gloved one. She tried to suppress a shudder; inside the black silk, there was something very wrong with his fingers.

The pale assassin leant back as the coach swayed away, and a small smile played on his thin lips. He had been watching the brother for some time, but now fate had brought him the sister too.

Eugénie de Boncoeur might be a child now, but one day she would grow up.

He had only to wait a little.