

## From Hero to Criminal (and Back Again): The Yellow Adventures of Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* in Indonesia<sup>1</sup>

William Bradley HORTON

*Akita University*

This is the story of a story. Our story starts in England around 1900, when the Hungarian Baroness Emma Orczy began to write an adventure novel about a mysterious and heroic figure who rescued aristocrats facing the *guillotine* during the “reign of terror” following the French revolution (1789-1799).

Baroness Orczy was born into an aristocratic family in Hungary in 1865. Fleeing their rural home in Orci due to fear of peasant revolts in 1868, the Orczy family eventually settled briefly in Brussels and Paris, where Emma tried to study music, perhaps because her father, Baron Felix Orczy de Orci, was a composer. In 1880, the family moved to England where Emma studied art and met her future husband, Montagu Barstow. The couple worked together, translating and illustrating, but during the late 1890s Emma began to write fiction—short stories, novels, and plays. After one relatively unsuccessful novel (*The Emperor's Candlesticks* (1899)) and a few short stories, Emma Orczy wrote her first version of *Scarlet Pimpernel*.



Figure 1. Baroness Orczy (1865-1947), photo by Bassano (1920)

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the keynote lecture presented at the annual meeting of the Akita Association of English Studies held at Akita University on 1 December 2019. Thanks are due to Cavin Yeo for assistance in collecting material for this article, and to Sylvie Probowati for the use of her amazing 1957 book. Part of this research was supported by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research B #19H01321 (Mayumi Yamamoto, Principle Investigator).

The idea behind this novel was simple—innocent aristocrats were being executed in revolutionary France, and something had to be done about it. A mysterious figure, a bilingual British aristocrat, of course, began to rescue them, disappearing before the authorities closed in. Before vanishing, the Scarlet Pimpernel would leave his calling card, a drawing of a small, simple flower, the scarlet pimpernel. A French official, Citizen Chauvelin, was tasked with capturing the Scarlet Pimpernel, but as he was unable to identify the gallant Scarlet Pimpernel, a master of disguise, Chauvelin blackmailed Marguerite, the young wife of a foppish and rather stupid British aristocrat, Sir Percy Blakeney, to get her assistance in unmasking him. In fact, although Marguerite did not yet realize it, her husband Sir Percy *was* the elusive Scarlet Pimpernel.



Figure 2: Climax of the Nottingham Theatre Royal version, 1903.

<https://pimpernelobsessed.wordpress.com/theatrical-adaptations/>

Rejected by twelve esteemed publishers, Baroness Orczy and her husband turned the novel into a stage play which was first performed at the Nottingham Theatre Royal in 1903. The 1905 London West End debut of the play with a new ending was tremendously successful, and it was subsequently performed thousands of times. Thanks to the play's success, Baroness Orczy's novel was quickly published, and a series of 11 sequels were published over the next 35 years.

Table 1: Novels in the Scarlet Pimpernel Series

Number	Year	Title
1	1905	<i>The Scarlet Pimpernel</i>
2	1936	<i>Sir Percy Leads the Band</i>
3	1906	<i>I Will Repay</i>
4	1908	<i>The Elusive Pimpernel</i>
5	1917	<i>Lord Tony's Wife</i>
6	1933	<i>The Way of the Scarlet Pimpernel</i>
7	1913	<i>Eldorado</i>
8	1940	<i>Mam'zelle Guillotine</i>
9	1927	<i>Sir Percy Hits Back</i>
10	1929	<i>Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel</i>
11	1922	<i>The Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel</i>
12	1932	<i>A Child of the Revolution</i>

Table 2: Novels Related to the Scarlet Pimpernel

Title	Year	Setting
<i>The Fighting Cavalier</i>	1913	Haarlem, 1623-34, ancestor of Sir Percy
<i>The First Sir Percy: An Adventure of the Laughing Cavalier</i>	1920	Haarlem, 1624, ancestor of Sir Percy
<i>Pimpernel and Rosemary</i>	1924	Post-WWI, Hungary, descendant of Sir Percy

Figure 3: *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905).

<https://pimpernelobsessed.wordpress.com/the-novels/> (accessed on 30 November 2019)

No less important than the series of novels were film adaptations which reached even larger audiences. Seven American and British film adaptations of *Scarlet Pimpernel* novels were produced between 1917-1950, as well as the 1941 film starring director Leslie Howard, who also played the 1934 *Scarlet Pimpernel*, as “Pimpernel” Smith, who rescued innocent people from the vile Nazis. In the late-1920s, sound performances came into vogue, and unknown numbers of sound recordings and radio programs were produced. Radio adaptations probably began in the 1930s, including the Lux Radio Theatre in Hollywood, which presented Leslie Howard as “the ‘Robin Hood’ of the reign of terror” (1938) and the Canadian RCA Victor “London Playhouse” recording of the *Scarlet Pimpernel* starring James Mason, an extremely popular film star who played a villain in the 1937 movie.<sup>2</sup> By the early 1950s, TV and radio adaptations of stories about this hero were frequently produced, as well as at least one graphic novel.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For information and a transcript of the Lux Radio performance, see the website of the Generic Radio Workshop, <https://www.genericradio.com/show/1OOTRAI6GA> (accessed on 20 June 2020). For the RCA Victor “London Playhouse,” James Mason version (date unknown), see the archive.org website, <https://archive.org/details/thescarletpimpernell> (accessed on 19 June 2020).

<sup>3</sup> A radio series of more than 50 episodes was produced in the UK in 1952-53. Recordings are available from the Archive.org website ([https://archive.org/details/The\\_Scarlet\\_Pimpernel](https://archive.org/details/The_Scarlet_Pimpernel)) and the Radio Echoes website (<http://www.radioechoes.com/>) (accessed on 20 June 2020).

Figure 4: Advertisement for the 1934 “talkie” film starring Leslie Howard.

<https://pimpernelobsessed.wordpress.com/film-adaptations/the-scarlet-pimpernel-1934/> [accessed on 21 June 2020]

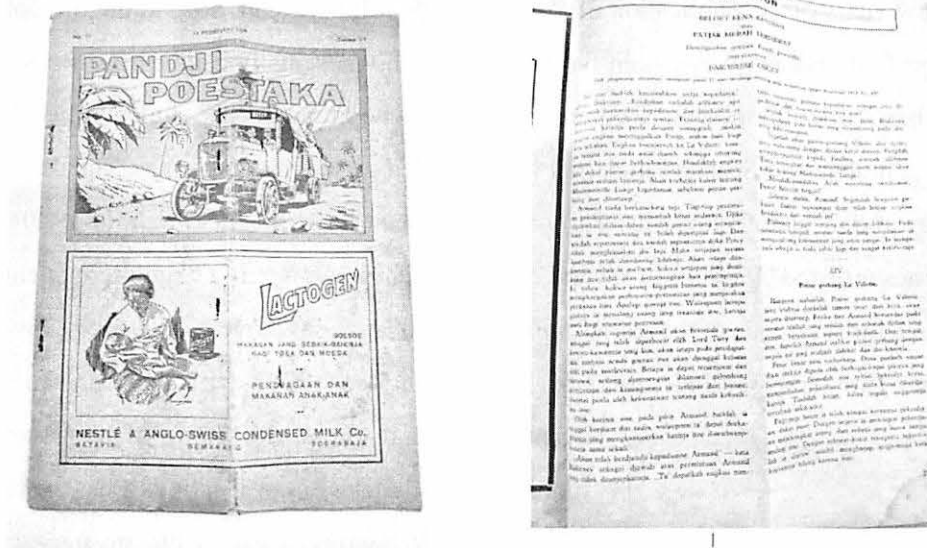


Table 3: Film/TV Scarlet Pimpernel Adaptations (1917-1956)

Release year	Film Title	Notes
1917	The Scarlet Pimpernel	USA
1917	The Laughing Cavalier	UK
1919	The Elusive Pimpernel	UK
1923 (1924)	I Will Repay	UK
1924	Swords and the Woman	US
1928	The Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel	UK
1929	The Scarlet Daredevil	US
1934	The Scarlet Pimpernel	UK, 1 <sup>st</sup> talkie
1937	The Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel	UK
1950	The Elusive Pimpernel	UK
1953	The Fighting Pimpernel	US
1955	快傑紅はこべ	Japan
1956	The Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel	UK, 18 episode TV series
1941	"Pimpernel" Smith	UK, anti-Nazi propaganda film by the star of The Scarlet Pimpernel (1934), Leslie Howard

Sources: IMDB, Wikipedia (English)

Key to the success of these stories in England and the US was a mix of familiar history (the French revolution), dramatic adventure, a dose of mystery and magic, and a new type of hero—the rich elite man with a secret alter ego. This character type later became a staple of the “superhero” industry, with Batman being the best example.



Figures 5-6: 1928 issue of *Pandji Poestaka* with part of the serialized Indonesian translation of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Baroness Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* has had an influence far beyond the city limits of London and Hollywood. The speed and extent of the dissemination of these stories can be seen in the way the works spread to the far corners of the globe. The first silent film adaptation, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1917) starring Dustin Farnum, was already being shown in the Dutch colony of the Netherlands East Indies (Indonesia) in October 1919, and presumably all the early *Scarlet Pimpernel* films were screened there, including the first “talkie,” *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934). English and Dutch editions of the novels were already being sold in Indonesia from the 1910s. However, the stories were first translated into Malay/Indonesian in 1928, appearing as *Beloet Kena Randjau atau Patjar Merah Terdjerat* [Like an Eel Caught in a Net or the *Scarlet Pimpernel* Entangled], published by the government publishing house Balai Pustaka. The same translation appeared in the Balai Pustaka periodical *Pandji Poestaka* in around 1928, probably before the book. Of course, it's possible that *Scarlet Pimpernel* also appeared in serialized stories in other periodicals, but none have yet been identified. A Balai Pustaka translation listing a different translator appeared in 1930 and was republished several times in independent Indonesia, including an imprint for schools.



Figure 7: 1950<sup>2nd</sup> edition of *Patjar Merah*.



Within a few years of the publication of *Patjar Merah* in Indonesian, around the time of the screening of the first “talkie” versions in the mid-1930s, Indonesians began writing stories about the “Indonesian Scarlet Pimpernel,” a communist leader who miraculously eluded police in many countries. The Indonesian Scarlet Pimpernel was modeled on a real person, Tan Malaka, a former leader of the Indonesian Communist Party who had been in exile since the mid-1920s, chased and sometimes arrested by police in several countries, while serving as a Comintern agent in Asia.<sup>4</sup> The first and most famous of the stories, *Spionage-dienst: Pacar Merah Indonesia* [Spy-service: The Scarlet Pimpernel of Indonesia] by Matu Mona was filled with Tan Malaka’s



adventures around the world. Some of the other “Indonesian Scarlet Pimpernel” stories were realistic, others merely filled with mysterious magic and escapes from police.<sup>5</sup> One of the keys to the novels’ success may have been the hero’s clever disguises and escapes—an element of the original English language books and films as well.

Figure 8. Cover of one of the Yellow Pimpernel books, *A Strange Occurrence*

In late 1940 or early 1941 there was a new innovation in Indonesia: stories appeared about the *Yellow Pimpernel*, the mysterious head of a criminal gang. Private investigator Raden Panji Subrata often found crimes which he was investigating involved this mysterious figure, who in the end always escaped to fight another day. In one story, an Indonesian political figure, Husain Damiri, dies while under house arrest, alone in his bedroom with the door guarded by police. Believing something is not right, the family asks Subrata to investigate. He discovers that *sabon dama* [soap bubbles] filled with poison gas had been blown through the space over the window

<sup>4</sup> On the relationship between Tan Malaka and the novels written by Matu Mona, see Oshikawa Noriaki’s brilliant paper on this series (Oshikawa 1990). See also Harry Poeze’s introduction to Matu Mona (2001).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the biting critique of one of these novels by a longtime political activist, the Marxist-nationalist Abdoe’Ixxarim, see Horton (2012).

by someone perched on the long branches of a large tree planted outside the gate. Thinking about who could have had the motivation to kill this beloved community leader, Subrata recalls a bitter debate in the press between a journalist and Husain a few months earlier which ended abruptly. Subrata suspects that this journalist could have been involved. Subrata discovers that the killer is indeed this journalist (bottles of the same poison were in his home), but too late to catch him, because the journalist had been killed moments before by a knife thrown by an unknown person! Papers discovered in the home office indicated that the journalist had been blackmailing Husain, as well as a young woman who Subrata sees fleeing the journalist's home. Suspecting his old nemesis, the Yellow Pimpernel, had killed a member of his gang who had gone "rogue," Subrata goes in search of the Yellow Pimpernel's gang's hide-out, which he discovers in a hidden cellar below the living-room of a small house. Raden Pandji Subrata is bludgeoned as he enters the hidden chamber, and only survives because his wife alerted the police who then raid the house and find the trapdoor. When the police enter the lair, the Yellow Pimpernel magically escapes!! this and other stories, the hero is the detective who is assisted by his wife (who he met in an earlier adventure) and is always working in cooperation with the police. Rather than being a master of disguises, Raden Pandji Soebrata is extremely clever, and is always able to crack the cases. The villain, the Yellow Pimpernel, often in the employ of some unknown foreign power, is a master of disguises who invariably escapes at the end of the story.

Table 4: The *Patjar Koenig* [Yellow Pimpernel] Series by Ketjindoean

Serie I	<i>Rahasia Pemboenoehan jang Gelap</i>	[1941]
Serie II	<i>Gadis Hilang</i>	[1941]
Serie III	<i>Pemboenoehan Diatas Panggoeng Komidi</i>	[1941]
Serie IV	<i>Rahasia Oeang Palsoe</i>	[1941]
Serie V	<i>Kedjadian Jang Aneh</i>	[July 1941]
Serie VI	<i>Rahsia Tas Hitam</i>	[1941]
Serie VII	<i>Pembongkaran Toko Mas Intan</i>	[1941]
Serie VIII	<i>Dalam Perangkap</i>	[adv.]

This series was published by a uniquely multi-racial publishing house in the city of Yogyakarta in South Central Java. Developed out of two Eurasian publishing houses with long histories, in the late 1930s Kabe was developing a network of capable writers and growing set of popular magazines and novels. One popular new set of publications were the novelizations of new films made in Indonesia. Some of the novel writers for Kabe included A. A. Achsien, a native Muslim who was close to the Chinese community and published in Chinese publications as well,

the native journalist Saeroen who had recently been jailed for his involvement in an attempt to establish a pro-Japanese newspaper, a popular actor named Ferry Kok, and a prominent playwright and novelist Njoo Cheong Seng. With friendly, colorful covers, appealing topics, a blatant disregard for racial divisions in society, Kabe was one of the premier Indonesian publishers in 1939-41, and this series of entertaining adventure-detective novels set in a clearly modern, urban setting was a good fit for this publisher.

Oddly enough, it seems that the story elements which are “real facts” seem to have been made deliberately vague in this story, like the description of Husein Damiri in the first two pages, and including his residence in the city of S. Anyone familiar with Indonesia at that time would recognize this as an abbreviation for the large famous cities of Semarang or Surabaya, though the central Javanese city of Solo (Surakarta) was possible (Horton 2018). In fact, the author probably meant to be tricky, as it seems he was thinking about Sawah Besar, an area in Batavia (Jakarta). On the other hand, more detailed descriptions have little relationship to the real world. While there could be an aesthetic to this, there also could be more critical issues.



Figure 9. Husni Thamrin.

In fact, as all Indonesian readers in 1941 certainly understood, this particular episode (*Kedjadian Jang Aneh* [A Strange Event]) was about the famous nationalist Husni Thamrin, who died under house arrest while supposedly “not under suspicion of working with a foreign power” in January 1941. Thamrin was a native of Batavia (Jakarta), a leader of the nationalist political party Parindra, a member of the Batavia City Council and the Netherlands East Indies Council (Volksraad), as well as a very wealthy landlord. He was suspected by the Dutch of assisting Japan, which was then negotiating with the Dutch administration about trade issues, especially about oil. The similarity of names (Husni Thamrin and Husein Damiri) and background provided left little doubt for Indonesian readers of 1941. Furthermore, technically, the police were investigating a public scandal involving Thamrin and the prominent journalist M. Tabrani which erupted following a police raid on Tabrani’s newspaper office earlier in 1940. Tabrani demanded substantial cash payments for “damages” from Thamrin who he blamed for the closure of the newspaper for several days. Of course, rather than dying from knife wounds like the journalist in the novel, Tabrani was instead hired by the Dutch government to be their top



Indonesian in the new anti-Axis Royal Propaganda Service—possibly a reward for serviced received.

The author, Ketjindoean, had actually been a colleague of Thamrin on the Batavia City Council during the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> Even more interesting, both his family and Japanese (who wanted to help him escape from Indonesia) believed Thamrin was poisoned. A survey of Malay and Indonesian literature written by the linguist Miyatake Seido in Nara and published in 1943 described this novel as being about Thamrin's death. A Japanese journalist who lived near Thamrin in 1940 also wrote a short article in the 1970s in which he recalls a conversation with Thamrin's nephew indicating that when he died, Thamrin had black saliva, for this journalist a sure sign of poisoning with a medicine for Euthanasia known to be used by doctors in Indonesia (Horton 2018, Horton n.d.). More recently, in March 2019, a close relative of Thamrin told me that the family still believes he was killed.

One might speculate that “Ketjindoean” may have truly believed that Thamrin was killed by the Dutch, and sought to communicate this to his audience while preserving plausible deniability by using thinly disguised names, and a partially fantastic story about a fictional character “the Yellow Pimpernel” which “couldn't be true.” Given the revolving door of jails for some writers during the late colonial period, this would have been very prudent. However, even if “Ketjindoean” was just making up a wild, entertaining story to earn money, some of his readers—like the Japanese linguist Miyatake—could have still believed that Thamrin was poisoned, something which could never have been discussed in the Dutch and Indonesian press in 1941.

As this story was published months before the beginning of the Pacific War, one might also speculate about what happened during the Japanese occupation (1942-45). We know that the Patjar Koenig novels continued to circulate via some lending libraries, and may have continued to be sold, but there were no new publications. We can safely assume that the Japanese military police, the Kenpeitai, would also have heard rumors about the poisoning of Thamrin. In fact, the

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<sup>6</sup> The entire series were written by “Ketjindoean,” a pseudonym taken from the childhood name of a character in a traditional Minangkabau story (Cindur Mata). The real identity of the author would not have been known to the general public in 1941. See Horton (2018 and n.d.).

Ambonese Dr. Kayadoe, the last doctor known to have seen Thamrin, reportedly *not* at the family's request, was detained by the Kenpeitai for an unknown reason and died in their custody. Could there have been a connection? It is an amazing stretch of imagination to speculate that the Kempeitai would have released the murderer of the pro-Japanese Thamrin!!

Figure 10: *The Plot to Bring Down the Country* (c. 1950s).

Figure 11: *The Golden Pimpernel: The Secret of Mr. Bono* (c.1950s).



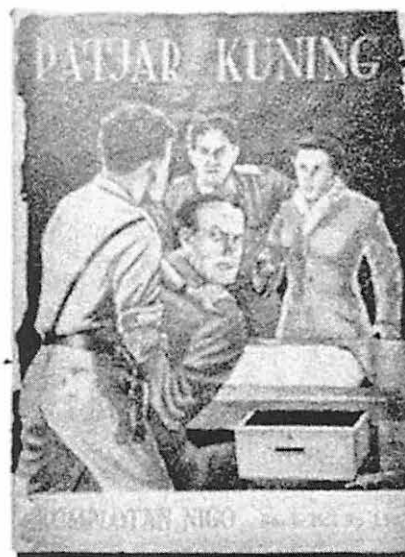
After World War II, The Yellow Pimpernel seems to have laid low for some time. While detective novels began to boom in Indonesia, and The Scarlet Pimpernel returned in print, Indonesia struggled in facing challenges in creating a new nation out of the various ethnic groups and colonial education.

In the late 1957s, Indonesia again faced the issue of decolonization (vis-à-vis the Netherlands and its colony in West New Guinea), the cold war (the US), and more challenges internally as President Sukarno took more power into his hands and tried to create a leftist movement to create a balance with the military which was growing stronger and stronger.

In 1957, more Yellow Pimpernel stories appeared. This time, issue number 3, one of the only two surviving stories, features the Yellow Pimpernel as the “good-guy,” helping police to investigate a foreign government’s plot to kill the president. The details of this 1957 story which are similar to a rumored plot in 1961—also interesting in the local political context—will be the subject of a future study.

Figure 12: *The Yellow Pimpernel: The NIGO Plot* (1957).

While this is not the appropriate time to go into the details of the story, the issue of the Yellow Pimpernel changing roles from villain to investigator is particularly worthy of consideration. Indonesia now having become independent, there was a chance for redemption. Even native Indonesians formerly part of the Dutch colonial military, KNIL, were incorporated into the new Indonesian military, though many were subsequently demobilized due to the large number of soldiers in the



military. Gangs during the revolutionary period could also be merged into the military, as they were all working towards the same goal—*independence!* The Yellow Pimpernel also could apply his skills for the benefit of society.<sup>7</sup>



Figures 13: Pelamis (at the European Marine Energy Test Centre (EMEC) in 2008).

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Scarlet Pimpernel stories from England traveled around the world, spreading by way of novels in English or in translation, movies, and even possibly TV programs, stage dramas and radio programs. In a number of different societies, the Scarlet Pimpernel put down roots, becoming part of local culture, and in some societies became something entirely new.

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, as the author was almost certainly different, the new author may have not remembered details of the old stories, and so this could be just a result of the imagination of the new author. Nonetheless, the readers and author would likely have felt the Yellow Pimpernel should indeed have cooperated in fighting the foreign-sponsored revolts.

In Indonesia, the Scarlet Pimpernel became the communist Indonesian Scarlet Pimpernel on the run, then the criminal gang leader Yellow Pimpernel working for foreign governments for cash, and finally after independence again a hero, the Yellow Pimpernel, helping to defeat a plot to kill its president! However, in all the Yellow Pimpernel stories, the bad-guy was always discovered because of “normal” criminal activities like murder, robbery, or counterfeiting money. This is often how James Bond stories start as well, with clues leading Bond to the main villain. This local adaptation was not merely in Indonesia, as Singapore had a Pacar Putih (White Pimpernel), and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, two of the all-women Takarazuka troupes in Japan performed an adaptation of the story as well. Once we look at the local context in different places, we can perceive the twists and turns of this highly successful piece of “middle-brow” English literature.

The world has now changed. By way of example, on 9 January 2011, the Chinese Vice-Premier’s delegation visited Edinburgh, Scotland to see the innovative Pelamis Wave Energy Converter. Three months later, on 22 March, there was a burglary at Pelamis Headquarters, and laptop computers with the plans were stolen. Fast-forward five years: the Chinese company Huawei unveils their new wave energy converter in the South China Sea!! If this were hacking, it would have become a famous story, but ordinary burglary is no longer interesting to the media or the public. To me, it is obvious that the “Yellow Pimpernel,” working for a foreign power, was alive in Scotland in 2011! Sadly, stories about normal crimes are now forgotten by the public and as a result the great investigators like Raden Panji Subrata and James Bond are now truly dead or at least have retired to Jamaica.

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