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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter IV. The Richmond gala

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CHAPTER IV.

THE RICHMOND GALA.

IT was perhaps the most brilliant September ever known in England, where the last days of dying summer are nearly always golden and beautiful.

Strange that in this country, where that same season is so peculiarly radiant with a glory all its own, there should be no special expression in the language with which to accurately name it.

So we needs must call it "*fin d'été*"—the ending of the summer; not the absolute end, not yet the ultimate departure, but the tender lingering of a friend obliged to leave us anon, yet who fain would steal a day here and there, a week or so in which to stay with us: who would make that last pathetic farewell of his endure a little while longer still, and brings forth in gorgeous array for our final gaze all that he has which is most luxuriant, most desirable, most worthy of regret.

And in this year of grace 1793, departing summer had lavished the treasures of her palette upon wood-

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land and river banks ; had tinged the once crude green of larch and elm with a tender hue of gold, had brushed the oaks with tones of warm russet, and put patches of sienna and crimson on the beech.

In the gardens the roses were still in bloom—not the delicate blush or lemon ones of June, nor yet the pale Banksias and climbers, but the full-blooded red roses of late summer, and deep-coloured apricot ones, with crinkled outside leaves faintly kissed by the frosty dew. In sheltered spots the purple clematis still lingered, whilst the dahlias, brilliant of hue, seemed overbearing in their gorgeous insolence, flaunting their crudely coloured petals against sober backgrounds of mellow leaves, or the dull, mossy tones of ancient, encircling walls.

The Gala had always been held about the end of September. The weather, on the riverside, was most dependable then, and there was always sufficient sunshine as an excuse for bringing out madam's last new muslin gown, or her pale-coloured, quilted petticoat. Then the ground was dry and hard, good alike for walking and for setting up tents and booths. And of these there was of a truth a most goodly array this year: mountebanks and jugglers from every corner of the world, so it seemed, for there was a man with a face as black as my lord's tricorn, and another with such flat, yellow cheeks as made one think of batter pudding and spring aconite, of eggs and other very yellow things.

There was a tent wherein dogs—all sorts of dogs, big, little, black, white, or tan—did things which no Christian with respect for his own backbone would

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have dared to perform, and another where a weird-faced old man made bean stalks and walking sticks, coins of the realm and lace 'kerchiefs, vanish into thin air.

And as it was nice and hot, one could sit out upon the green and listen to the strains of the band, which discoursed sweet music, and watch the young people tread a measure on the sward.

The quality had not yet arrived, for humbler folk had partaken of very early dinner, so as to get plenty of fun and long hours of delight for the sixpenny toll demanded at the gates.

There was so much to see and so much to do: games of bowls on the green, and a beautiful Aunt Sally; there was a skittle alley, and two merry-go-rounds; there were performing monkeys and dancing bears, a woman so fat that three men with arms outstretched could not get round her, and a man so thin that he could put a lady's bracelet round his neck and her garter round his waist.

There were some funny little dwarfs, with pinched faces and a knowing manner, and a giant come all the way from Russia—so 'twas said.

The mechanical toys, too, were a great attraction. You dropped a penny into a little slit in a box, and a doll would begin to dance and play the fiddle; and there was the Magic Mill, where, for another modest copper, a row of tiny figures, wrinkled and old and dressed in the shabbiest of rags, marched in weary procession up a flight of steps into the mill, only to emerge again the next moment at a further door of this wonderful building looking young and gay, dressed

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in gorgeous finery and tripping a dance measure as they descended some steps and were finally lost to view.

But what was most wonderful of all, and collected the goodliest crowd of gazers and the largest amount of coins, was a miniature representation of what was going on in France even at this very moment.

And you could not help but be convinced of the truth of it all, so cleverly was it done. There was a background of houses and a very red-looking sky. "Too red!" some people said, but were immediately quashed by the dictum of the wise, that the sky represented a sunset, as anyone who looked could see. Then there were a number of little figures, no taller than your hand, but with little wooden faces and arms and legs, just beautifully made little dolls, and these were dressed in kirtles and breeches—all rags mostly—and little coats and wooden shoes. They were massed together in groups with their arms all turned upwards.

And in the centre of this little stage, on an elevated platform, there were miniature wooden posts close together, and with a long, flat board at right angles at the foot of the posts, and all painted a bright red. At the further end of the board was a miniature basket, and between the two posts, at the top, was a miniature knife, which ran up and down in a groove and was drawn by a miniature pulley. Folk who knew said that this was a model of a guillotine.

And lo and behold! when you dropped a penny into a slot just below the wooden stage, the crowd of little figures started waving their arms up and down, and another little doll would ascend the elevated platform

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and lie down on the red board at the foot of the wooden posts. Then a figure dressed in brilliant scarlet put out an arm, presumably to touch the pulley, and the tiny knife would rattle down on to the poor little reclining doll's neck, and its head would roll off into the basket beyond.

Then there was a loud whirr of wheels, a buzz of internal mechanism, and all the little figures would stop dead, with arms outstretched, whilst the beheaded doll rolled off the board and was lost to view, no doubt preparatory to going through the same gruesome pantomime again.

It was very thrilling, and very terrible: a certain air of hushed awe reigned in the booth where this mechanical wonder was displayed.

The booth itself stood in a secluded portion of the grounds, far from the toll-gates, and the bandstand, and the noise of the merry-go-round, and there were great texts, written in red letters on a black ground, pinned all along the walls:—

"Please spare a copper for the starving poor of Paris."

A lady, dressed in grey quilted petticoat and pretty grey and black striped paniers, could be seen walking in the booth from time to time, then disappearing through a partition beyond. She would emerge again presently, carrying an embroidered reticule, and would wander round among the crowd, holding out the bag by its chain, and repeating in tones of somewhat monotonous appeal: "For the starving poor of Paris, if you please!"

She had fine, dark eyes, rather narrow and tending

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upwards at the outer corners, which gave her face a not altogether pleasant expression. Still, they *were* fine eyes, and when she went round soliciting alms most of the men put a hand into their breeches pocket and dropped a coin into her embroidered reticule.

She said the word "poor" in rather a funny way, rolling the "r" at the end, and she also said "please" as if it were spelt with a long line of "e's," and so it was concluded that she was French and was begging for her poorer sisters. At stated intervals during the day the mechanical toy was rolled into a corner, and the lady in grey stood up on a platform and sang queer little songs, the words of which nobody could understand.

"Il était une bergère, et ron et ron petit patapon . . ."

But it all left an impression of sadness and of suppressed awe upon the minds and susceptibilities of the worthy Richmond yokels, come with their wives or sweethearts to enjoy the fun of the fair, and gladly did everyone emerge out of that melancholy booth into the sunshine, the brightness, and the noise.

"Lud! but she do give me the creeps," said Mistress Polly, the pretty barmaid from the Bell Inn down by the river. "And I must say that I don't see why we English folk should send our hard-earned pennies to those murdering ruffians over the water. Bein' starving, so to speak, don't make a murderer a better man if he goes on murdering," she added with indisputable if ungrammatical logic. "Come, let's look at something more cheerful now."

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And without waiting for anyone else's assent, she turned towards the more lively portion of the grounds, closely followed by a ruddy-faced, somewhat sheepish-looking youth, who very obviously was her attendant swain.

It was getting on for three o'clock now, and the quality were beginning to arrive. Lord Anthony Dewhurst was already there, chucking every pretty girl under the chin, to the annoyance of her beau. Ladies were arriving all the time, and the humbler feminine hearts were constantly set a-flutter at sight of rich brocaded gowns, and the new Charlottes, all crinkled velvet and soft marabout, which were so becoming to the pretty faces beneath.

There was incessant and loud talking and chattering, with here and there the shriller tones of a French voice being distinctly noticeable in the din. There were a good many French ladies and gentlemen present, easily recognisable, even in the distance, for their clothes were of more sober hue and of lesser richness than those of their English compeers.

But they were great lords and ladies, nevertheless—dukes and duchesses and countesses, come to England for fear of being murdered by those devils in their own country. Richmond was full of them just now, as they were made right welcome both at the Palace and at the magnificent home of Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney.

Ah! here comes Sir Andrew Ffoulkes with his lady! So pretty and dainty does she look, like a little china doll, in her new-fashioned, short-waisted gown, her brown hair in soft waves above her smooth forehead,

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her great, hazel eyes fixed in unaffected admiration on the gallant husband by her side.

"No wonder she dotes on him!" sighed pretty Mistress Polly, after she had bobbed her curtsy to my lady. "The brave deeds he did for love of her! Rescued her from those murderers over in France, and brought her to England safe and sound, having fought no end of them single-handed, so I've heard it said. Have not you, Master Thomas Jezzard?"

And she looked defiantly at her meek-looking cavalier.

"Bah!" replied Master Thomas with quite unusual vehemence in response to the disparaging look in her brown eyes, "'tis not he who did it all, as you well know, Mistress Polly. * Sir Andrew Ffoulkes is a gallant gentleman, you may take your Bible oath on that, but he that fights the murdering frog-eaters single-handed is he whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel: the bravest gentleman in all the world."

Then, as at mention of the national hero, he thought that he detected in Mistress Polly's eyes an enthusiasm which he could not very well ascribe to his own individuality, he added with some pique:

"But they do say that this same Scarlet Pimpernel is mightily ill-favoured, and that's why no one ever sees him. They say he is fit to scare the crows away, and that no Frenchy can look twice at his face, for it's so ugly, and so they let him get out of the country rather than look at him again."

"Then they do say a mighty lot of nonsense," retorted Mistress Polly, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders, "and if that be so, then why don't you go

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over to France and join hands with the Scarlet Pimpernel? I'll warrant no Frenchman'll want to look twice at your face."

A chorus of laughter greeted this sally, for the two young people had in the meanwhile been joined by several of their friends, and now formed part of a merry group near the band, some sitting, others standing, but all bent on seeing as much as there was to see in Richmond Gala this day. There was Johnny Cullen, the grocer's apprentice from Twickenham, and Ursula Quekett, the baker's daughter, and several "young 'uns" from the neighbourhood, as well as some older folk.

And all of them enjoyed a joke when they heard one, and thought Mistress Polly's retort mightily smart. But then Mistress Polly was possessed of two hundred pounds, all her own, left to her by her grandmother, and on the strength of this extensive fortune had acquired a reputation for beauty and wit not easily accorded to a wench that had been penniless.

But Mistress Polly was also very kind-hearted. She loved to tease Master Jezzard, who was an indefatigable hanger-on at her pretty skirts, and whose easy conquest had rendered her somewhat contemptuous; but at the look of perplexed annoyance and bewildered distress in the lad's face, her better nature soon got the upper hand. She realised that her remark had been unwarrantably spiteful, and, wishing to make atonement, she said with a touch of coquetry which quickly spread balm over the honest yokel's injured vanity:

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"La! Master Jezzard, you do seem to make a body say some queer things. But there! you must own 'tis mighty funny about that Scarlet Pimpernel!" she added, appealing to the company in general, just as if Master Jezzard had been disputing the fact. "Why won't he let anyone see who he is? And those who know him won't tell. Now I have it for a fact from my lady's own maid Lucy, that the young lady as is stopping at Lady Blakeney's house has actually spoken to the man. She came over from France, come a fortnight to-morrow; she and the gentleman they call Mossoo Déroulède. They both saw the Scarlet Pimpernel and spoke to him. *He* brought them over from France. Then why won't they say?"

"Say what?" commented Johnny Cullen, the apprentice.

"Who this mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel is."

"Perhaps he isn't," said old Clutterbuck, who was clerk of the vestry at the church of St. John the Evangelist.

"Yes!" he added sententiously, for he was fond of his own sayings and usually liked to repeat them before he had quite done with them, "that's it, you may be sure. Perhaps he isn't."

"What do you mean, Master Clutterbuck?" asked Ursula Quekett, for she knew the old man liked to explain his wise saws, and as she wanted to marry his son, she indulged him whenever she could. "What do you mean? He isn't what?"

"He isn't—that's all," explained Clutterbuck with vague solemnity.

Then, seeing that he had gained the attention of the

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little party round him, he condescended to come to more logical phraseology.

"I mean, that perhaps we must not ask, 'Who *is* this mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel?' but 'Who *was* that poor and unfortunate gentleman?'"

"Then you think——" suggested Mistress Polly, who felt unaccountably low-spirited at this oratorical pronouncement.

"I have it for a fact," said Mr. Clutterbuck solemnly, "that he whom they call the Scarlet Pimpernel no longer exists now; that he was collared by the Frenchies, as far back as last fall, and, in the language of the poets, has never been heard of no more."

Mr. Clutterbuck was very fond of quoting from the works of certain writers whose names he never mentioned, but who went by the poetical generality of "the poets." Whenever he made use of phrases which he was supposed to derive from these great and unnamed authors, he solemnly and mechanically raised his hat, as a tribute of respect to these giant minds.

"You think that the Scarlet Pimpernel is dead, Mr. Clutterbuck? That those horrible Frenchies murdered him? Surely you don't mean that?" sighed Mistress Polly ruefully.

Mr. Clutterbuck put his hand up to his hat, preparatory, no doubt, to making another appeal to the mysterious poets, but was interrupted in the very act of uttering great thoughts by a loud and prolonged laugh, which came echoing from a distant corner of the grounds.

"Lud! but I'd know that laugh anywhere," said

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Mistress Quekett, whilst all eyes were turned in the direction whence the merry noise had come.

Half a head taller than any of his friends around him, his lazy blue eyes scanning from beneath their drooping lids the motley throng around him, stood Sir Percy Blakeney, the centre of a gaily-dressed little group which seemingly had just crossed the toll-gate.

"A fine specimen of a man, for sure," remarked Johnny Cullen, the apprentice.

"Aye! you may take your Bible oath on that!" sighed Mistress Polly, who was inclined to be sentimental.

"Speakin' as the poets," pronounced Mr. Clutterbuck sententiously, "inches don't make a man."

"Nor fine clothes neither," added Master Jezzard, who did not approve of Mistress Polly's sentimental sigh.

"There's my lady!" gasped Miss Barbara suddenly, clutching Master Clutterbuck's arm vigorously. "Lud! but she is beautiful to-day!"

Beautiful indeed, and radiant with youth and happiness, Marguerite Blakeney had just gone through the gates and was walking along the sward towards the bandstand. She was dressed in clinging robes of shimmery green texture, the new-fashioned, high-waisted effect suiting her graceful figure to perfection. The large Charlotte, made of velvet to match the gown, cast a deep shadow over the upper part of her face, and gave a peculiar softness to the outline of her forehead and cheeks.

Long lace mittens covered her arms and hands, and

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a scarf of diaphanous material, edged with dull gold, hung loosely around her shoulders.

Yes! she was beautiful! No captious chronicler has ever denied that! and no one who knew her before, and who saw her again on this late summer's afternoon, could fail to mark the additional charm of her magnetic personality. There was a tenderness in her face as she turned her head to and fro, a joy of living in her eyes that was quite irresistibly fascinating.

Just now she was talking animatedly with the young girl who was walking beside her, and laughing merrily the while:

"Nay! we'll find your Paul, never fear! Lud! child, have you forgotten he is in England now, and that there's no fear of his being kidnapped here on the green in broad daylight?"

The young girl gave a slight shudder, and her child-like face became a shade paler than before. Marguerite took her hand and gave it a kindly pressure. Juliette Marny, but lately come to England, saved from under the very knife of the guillotine by a timely and daring rescue, could scarcely believe as yet that she and the man she loved were really out of danger.

"There is Monsieur Déroulède," said Marguerite after a slight pause, giving the young girl time to recover herself and pointing to a group of men close by. "He is among friends, as you see."

They made such a pretty picture, these two women, as they stood together for a moment on the green, with the brilliant September sun throwing golden reflections and luminous shadows on their slender forms. Marguerite, tall and queen-like in her rich gown, and

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costly jewels, wearing with glorious pride the invisible crown of happy wifehood ; Juliette, slim and girlish, dressed all in white, with a soft, straw hat on her fair curls, and bearing on an otherwise young and childlike face the hard imprint of the terrible sufferings she had undergone, of the deathly moral battle her tender soul had had to fight.

Soon a group of friends joined them. Paul Déroulède among these, also Sir Andrew and Lady Ffoulkes, and, strolling slowly towards them, his hands buried in the pockets of his fine cloth breeches, his broad shoulders set to advantage in a coat of immaculate cut, priceless lace ruffles at neck and wrist, came the inimitable Sir Percy.