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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter V. Sir Percy and his lady

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CHAPTER V.

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TO all appearances he had not changed since those early days of matrimony when his young wife dazzled London society by her wit and by her beauty, and he was one of the many satellites that helped to bring into bold relief the brilliance of her presence, of her sallies, and of her smiles.

His friends alone, mayhap—and of these only an intimate few—had understood that beneath that self-same lazy manner, those shy and awkward ways, that half-inane, half-cynical laugh, there now lurked an undercurrent of tender and passionate happiness.

That Lady Blakeney was in love with her own husband nobody could fail to see, and in the more frivolous cliques of fashionable London, this extraordinary phenomenon had oft been eagerly discussed.

"A monstrous thing, of a truth, for a woman of fashion to adore her own husband!" was the universal pronouncement of the gaily-decked little world that centred around Carlton House and Ranelagh.

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Not that Sir Percy Blakeney was unpopular with the fair sex. Far be it from the veracious chronicler's mind even to suggest such a thing. The ladies would have voted any gathering dull if Sir Percy's witty sallies did not ring from end to end of the dancing hall, if his new satin coat and brodered waistcoat did not call for comment or admiration.

But that was the frivolous set, to which Lady Blakeney had never belonged.

It was well-known that she had always viewed her good-natured husband as the most willing and most natural butt for her caustic wit; she still was fond of aiming a shaft or two at him, and he was still equally ready to let the shaft glance harmlessly against the flawless shield of his own imperturbable good humour; but now, contrary to all precedent, to all usages and customs of London society, Marguerite seldom was seen at routs or at the opera without her husband; she accompanied him to all the races, and even one night—oh, horror!—had danced the gavotte with him.

Society shuddered and wondered!—tried to put Lady Blakeney's sudden infatuation down to foreign eccentricity, and finally consoled itself with the thought that, after all, this nonsense could not last, and that she was too clever a woman and he too perfect a gentleman to keep up this abnormal state of things for any length of time.

In the meanwhile, the ladies averred that this matrimonial love was a very one-sided affair. No one could assert that Sir Percy was anything but politely indifferent to his wife's obvious attentions. His lazy eyes never once lighted up when she entered a ball-

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room, and there were those who knew for a fact that her ladyship spent many lonely days in her beautiful home at Richmond, whilst her lord and master absented himself with persistent if unchivalrous regularity.

His presence at the Gala had been a surprise to everyone, for all thought him still away fishing in Scotland or shooting in Yorkshire, anywhere save close to the apron-strings of his doting wife. He himself seemed conscious of the fact that he had not been expected at this end-of-summer fête, for as he strolled forward to meet his wife and Juliette Marny, and acknowledged with a bow here and a nod there the many greetings from subordinates and friends, there was quite an apologetic air about his good-looking face, and an obvious shyness in his smile.

But Marguerite gave a happy little laugh when she saw him coming towards her:

"Oh, Sir Percy!" she said gaily, "and pray have you seen the show? I vow 'tis the maddest, merriest throng I've seen for many a day. Nay! but for the sighs and shudders of my poor little Juliette, I should be enjoying one of the liveliest days of my life."

She patted Juliette's arm affectionately.

"Do not shame me before Sir Percy," murmured the young girl, casting shy glances at the elegant cavalier before her, vainly trying to find in the indolent, foppish personality of this society butterfly some trace of the daring man of action, the bold adventurer who had snatched her and her lover from out the very tumbril that bore them both to death.

"I know I ought to be gay," she continued, with an

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attempt at a smile; "I ought to forget everything, save what I owe to——"

Sir Percy's laugh broke in on her half-finished sentence.

"Lud! and to think of all that I ought not to forget!" he said loudly. "Tony here has been clamouring for iced punch this last half-hour, and I promised to find a booth wherein the noble liquid is properly dispensed. Within half an hour from now His Royal Highness will be here. I assure you, Mlle. Juliette, that from that time onwards I have to endure the qualms of the damned, for the heir to Great Britain's throne always contrives to be thirsty when I am satiated, which is Tantalus' torture magnified a thousandfold, or to be satiated when my parched palate most requires solace; in either case I am a most pitiable man."

"In either case you contrive to talk a deal of nonsense, Sir Percy," said Marguerite gaily.

"What else would your ladyship have me do this lazy, hot afternoon?"

"Come and view the booths with me," she said. "I am dying for a sight of the fat woman and the lean man, the pig-faced child, the dwarfs, and the giants. There! Monsieur Déroulède," she added, turning to the young Frenchman who was standing close beside her, "take Mlle. Juliette to hear the clavecin players. I vow she is tired of my company."

The gaily-dressed group was breaking up. Juliette and Paul Déroulède were only too ready to stroll off arm-in-arm together, and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was ever in attendance on his young wife.

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For one moment Marguerite caught her husband's eye. No one was within earshot.

"Percy," she said.

"Yes, m'dear."

"When did you return?"

"Early this morning."

"You crossed over from Calais?"

"From Boulogne."

"Why did you not let me know sooner?"

"I could not, dear. I arrived at my lodgings in town looking a disgusting object. . . . I could not appear before you until I had washed some of the French mud from off my person. Then His Royal Highness demanded my presence. He wanted news of the Duchesse de Verneuil, whom I had the honour of escorting over from France. By the time I had told him all that he wished to hear, there was no chance of finding you at home, and I thought I should see you here."

Marguerite said nothing for a moment, but her foot impatiently tapped the ground, and her fingers were fidgeting with the gold fringe of her scarf. The look of joy, of exquisite happiness, seemed to have suddenly vanished from her face; there was a deep furrow between her brows.

She sighed a short, sharp sigh, and cast a rapid upward glance at her husband.

He was looking down at her, smiling good-naturedly, a trifle sarcastically perhaps, and the frown on her face deepened.

"Percy," she said abruptly.

"Yes, m'dear."

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"These anxieties are terrible to bear. You have been twice over to France within the last month, dealing with your life as lightly as if it did not now belong to me. When will you give up these mad adventures, and leave others to fight their own battles and to save their own lives as best they may?"

She had spoken with increased vehemence, although her voice was scarce raised above a whisper. Even in her sudden, passionate anger, she was on her guard not to betray his secret. He did not reply immediately, but seemed to be studying the beautiful face on which heart-broken anxiety was now distinctly imprinted.

Then he turned and looked at the solitary booth in the distance, across the frontal of which a large placard had been recently affixed, bearing the words: "Come and see the true representation of the guillotine!"

In front of the booth a man, dressed in ragged breeches, with Phrygian cap on his head, adorned with a tricolour cockade, was vigorously beating a drum, shouting volubly the while:

"Come in and see, come in and see! The only realistic presentation of the original guillotine. Hundreds perish in Paris every day! Come and see! Come and see! the perfectly vivid performance of what goes on hourly in Paris at the present moment."

Marguerite had followed the direction of Sir Percy's eyes. She, too, was looking at the booth; she heard the man's monotonous, raucous cries. She gave a slight shudder and once more looked imploringly at her husband. His face—though outwardly as lazy and calm as before—had a strange, set look about the

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mouth and firm jaw, and his slender hand, the hand of a dandy accustomed to handle cards and dice and to play lightly with the foils, was clutched tightly beneath the folds of the priceless Mechlin frills.

It was but a momentary stiffening of the whole, powerful frame, an instant's flash of the ruling passion hidden within that very secretive soul. Then he once more turned towards her, the rigid lines of his face relaxed, he broke into a pleasant laugh, and with the most elaborate and most courtly bow he took her hand in his and, raising her fingers to his lips, he gave the answer to her question:

"When your ladyship has ceased to be the most admired woman in Europe—namely, when I am in my grave."