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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter VI. For the poor of Paris

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CHAPTER VI.

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THREE was no time to say more then. For the laughing, chatting groups of friends had once more closed up round Marguerite and her husband, and she, ever on the alert, gave neither look nor sign that any serious conversation had taken place between Sir Percy and herself.

Whatever she might feel or dread with regard to the foolhardy adventures in which he still persistently embarked, no member of the League ever guarded the secret of his chief more loyally than did Marguerite Blakeney.

Though her heart overflowed with a passionate pride in her husband, she was clever enough to conceal every emotion save that which Nature had insisted on imprinting on her face, her present radiant happiness and her irresistible love. And thus before the world she kept up that bantering way with him, which had characterised her earlier matrimonial life, that good-natured, easy contempt which he had so readily

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accepted in those days, and which their entourage would have missed and would have enquired after, if she had changed her manner towards him too suddenly.

In her heart she knew full well that within Percy Blakeney's soul she had a great and powerful rival: his wild, mad, passionate love of adventure. For it he would sacrifice everything, even his life; she dared not ask herself if he would sacrifice his love.

Twice in a few weeks he had been over to France: every time he went she could not know if she would ever see him again. She could not imagine how the French Committee of Public Safety could so clumsily allow the hated Scarlet Pimpernel to slip through its fingers. But she never attempted either to warn him or to beg him not to go. When he brought Paul Déroulède and Juliette Marny over from France, her heart went out to the two young people in sheer gladness and pride because of *his* precious life, which *he* had risked for them.

She loved Juliette for the dangers Percy had passed, for the anxieties she herself had endured; only to-day, in the midst of this beautiful sunshine, this joy of the earth, of summer and of the sky, she had suddenly felt a mad, overpowering anxiety, a deadly hatred of the wild, adventurous life, which took him so often away from her side. His pleasant, bantering reply precluded her following up the subject, whilst the merry chatter of people round her warned her to keep her words and looks under control.

But she seemed now to feel the want of being alone, and, somehow, that distant booth with its flaring

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placard, and the crier in the Phrygian cap, exercised a weird fascination over her.

Instinctively she bent her steps thither, and equally instinctively the idle throng of her friends followed her. Sir Percy alone had halted in order to converse with Lord Hastings who had just arrived.

"Surely, Lady Blakeney, you have no thought of patronising that gruesome spectacle?" said Lord Anthony Dewhurst, as Marguerite almost mechanically had paused within a few yards of the solitary booth.

"I don't know," she said, with enforced gaiety, "the place seems to attract me. And I need not look at the spectacle," she added significantly, as she pointed to a roughly-scribbled notice at the entrance of the tent: "In aid of the starving poor of Paris."

"There's a good-looking woman who sings, and a hideous mechanical toy that moves," said one of the young men in the crowd. "It is very dark and close inside the tent. I was lured in there for my sins, and was in a mighty hurry to come out again."

"Then it must be my sins that are helping to lure me, too, at the present moment," said Marguerite lightly. "I pray you all to let me go in there. I want to hear the good-looking woman sing, even if I do not see the hideous toy on the move."

"May I escort you then, Lady Blakeney?" said Lord Tony.

"Nay! I would rather go in alone," she replied a trifle impatiently. "I beg of you not to heed my whim, and to await my return, there, where the music is at its merriest."

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It had been bad manners to insist. Marguerite, with a little comprehensive nod to all her friends, left the young cavaliers still protesting, and quickly passed beneath the roughly-constructed doorway that gave access into the booth.

A man, dressed in theatrical rags and wearing the characteristic scarlet cap, stood immediately within the entrance, and ostentatiously rattled a money-box at regular intervals.

"For the starving poor of Paris," he drawled out in nasal, monotonous tones the moment he caught sight of Marguerite and of her rich gown. She dropped some gold into the box and then passed on.

The interior of the booth was dark and lonely-looking after the glare of the hot September sun and the noisy crowd that thronged the sward outside. Evidently a performance had just taken place on the elevated platform beyond, for a few yokels seemed to be lingering in a desultory manner as if preparatory to going out.

A few disjointed comments reached Marguerite's ears as she approached, and the small groups parted to allow her to pass. One or two women gaped in astonishment at her beautiful dress, whilst others bobbed a respectful curtsey.

The mechanical toy arrested her attention immediately. She did not find it as gruesome as she expected, only singularly grotesque, with all those wooden little figures in their quaint, arrested action.

She drew nearer to have a better look, and the yokels who had lingered behind, paused, wondering if she would make any remark.

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"Her ladyship was born in France," murmured one of the men close to her; "she would know if the thing really looks like that."

"She do seem interested," quoth another in a whisper.

"Lud love us all!" said a buxom wench, who was clinging to the arm of a nervous-looking youth, "I believe they're coming for more money."

On the elevated platform at the further end of the tent, a slim figure had just made its appearance, that of a young woman dressed in peculiarly sombre colours, and with a black lace hood thrown lightly over her head.

Marguerite thought that the face seemed familiar to her, she also noticed that the woman carried a large embroidered reticule, in her be-mitten hand.

There was a general exodus the moment she appeared. The Richmond yokels did not like the look of that reticule. They felt that sufficient demand had already been made upon their scant purses, considering the meagreness of the entertainment, and they dreaded being lured to further extravagance.

When Marguerite turned away from the mechanical toy, the last of the little crowd had disappeared, and she was alone in the booth with the woman in the dark kirtle and black lace hood.

"For the poor of Paris, madame," said the latter mechanically, holding out her reticule.

Marguerite was looking at her intently. The face certainly seemed familiar, recalling to her mind the far-off days in Paris, before she married. Some young actress no doubt driven out of France by that terrible

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turmoil which had caused so much sorrow and so much suffering. The face was pretty, the figure slim and elegant, and the look of obvious sadness in the dark, almond-shaped eyes was calculated to inspire sympathy and pity.

Yet strangely enough Lady Blakeney felt repelled and chilled by this sombrely-dressed young person: an instinct, which she could not have explained and which she felt had no justification, warned her that somehow or other the sadness was not quite genuine, the appeal for the poor not quite heartfelt.

Nevertheless, she took out her purse, and dropped some few sovereigns into the capacious reticule; then she said very kindly:

“I hope that you are satisfied with your day’s work, madame; I fear me our British country folk hold the strings of their purses somewhat tightly these times.”

The woman sighed and shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, madame!” she said with a tone of great dejection, “one does what one can for one’s starving countrymen, but it is very hard to elicit sympathy over here for them, poor dears!”

“You are a Frenchwoman, of course,” rejoined Marguerite, who had noted that though the woman spoke English with a very pronounced foreign accent, she had nevertheless expressed herself with wonderful fluency and correctness.

“Just like Lady Blakeney herself,” replied the other.

“You know who I am?”

“Who could come to Richmond and not know Lady Blakeney by sight?”

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"But what made you come to Richmond on this philanthropic errand of yours?"

"I go where I think there is a chance of earning a little money, for the cause which I have at heart," replied the Frenchwoman with the same gentle simplicity, the same tone of mournful dejection.

What she said was undoubtedly noble and selfless. Lady Blakeney felt in her heart that her keenest sympathy should have gone out to this young woman—pretty, dainty, hardly more than a girl—who seemed to be devoting her young life to a purely philanthropic and unselfish cause. And yet in spite of herself, Marguerite seemed unable to shake off that curious sense of mistrust which had assailed her from the first, nor that feeling of unreality and stageiness with which the Frenchwoman's attitude had originally struck her.

Yet she tried to be kind and to be cordial, tried to hide that coldness in her manner which she felt was unjustified.

"It is all very praiseworthy on your part, madame," she said, somewhat lamely. "Madame . . . ?" she added interrogatively.

"My name is Candeille—Désirée Candeille," replied the Frenchwoman.

"Candeille?" exclaimed Marguerite with sudden alacrity, "Candeille? . . . surely . . . ?"

"Yes . . . of the Variétés."

"Ah! then I know why your face from the first seemed familiar to me," said Marguerite, this time with unaffected cordiality. "I must have applauded you many a time in the olden days. I am an ex-

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colleague, you know. My name was St. Just before I married, and I was of the *Maison Molière*."

"I knew that," said *Désirée Candeille*, "and half hoped that you would remember me."

"Nay! who could forget *Demoiselle Candeille*, the most popular star in the theatrical firmament?"

"Oh! that was so long ago."

"Only four years."

"A fallen star is soon lost out of sight."

"Why fallen?"

"It was a choice for me between exile from France and the guillotine," rejoined *Candeille* simply.

"Surely not?" queried *Marguerite* with a touch of genuine sympathy. With characteristic impulsiveness she had now cast aside her former misgivings: she had conquered her mistrust, at any rate had relegated it to the background of her mind. This woman was a colleague: she had suffered and was in distress, she had every claim therefore on a compatriot's help and friendship. She stretched out her hand and took *Désirée Candeille's* in her own; she forced herself to feel nothing but admiration for this young woman, whose whole attitude spoke of sorrows nobly borne, of misfortunes proudly endured.

"I don't know why I should sadden you with my story," rejoined *Désirée Candeille* after a slight pause, during which she seemed to be waging war against her own emotion. "It is not a very interesting one. Hundreds have suffered as I did. I had enemies in Paris. God knows how that happened. I had never harmed any one, but some one must have hated me and must have wished me ill. Evil is so easily

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wrought in France these days. A denunciation—a perquisition—an accusation. Then the flight from Paris...the forged passports...the disguise...the bribe...the hardships...the squalid hiding-places. Oh! I have gone through it all...tasted every kind of humiliation...endured every kind of insult...Remember! that I was not a noble aristocrat...a Duchess or an impoverished Countess..." she added with marked bitterness, "or perhaps the English cavaliers whom the popular voice has called the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel would have taken some interest in me. I was only a poor actress, and had to find my way out of France alone, or else perish on the guillotine."

"I am so sorry," said Marguerite, simply.

"Tell me how you got on, once you were in England," she continued, after a while, seeing that Désirée Candeille seemed absorbed in thought.

"I had a few engagements at first," replied the Frenchwoman. "I played at Sadler's Wells and with Mrs. Jordan at Covent Garden, but the Aliens' Bill put an end to my chances of livelihood. No manager cared to give me a part, and so..."

"And so?"

"Oh! I had a few jewels, and I sold them.... A little money, and I live on that.... But when I played at Covent Garden I contrived to send part of my salary over to some of the poorer clubs of Paris. My heart aches for those that are starving.... Poor wretches, they are misguided and misled by self-seeking demagogues.... It hurts me to feel that I can do nothing more to help them.... and eases my self-

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respect if, by singing at public fairs, I can still send a few francs to those who are poorer than myself."

She had spoken with ever-increasing passion and vehemence. Marguerite with eyes fixed into vacancy, seeing neither the speaker nor her surroundings, seeing only visions of those same poor wreckages of humanity, who had been goaded into thirst for blood, when their shrunken bodies should have been clamouring for healthy food, Marguerite thus absorbed had totally forgotten her earlier prejudices, and now completely failed to note all that was unreal, stagey, theatrical, in the oratorical declamations of the ex-actress from the *Variétés*.

Pre-eminently true and loyal herself, in spite of the many deceptions and treacheries which she had witnessed in her life, she never looked for falsehood or for cant in others. Even now she only saw before her a woman who had been wrongfully persecuted, who had suffered and had forgiven those who had caused her to suffer. She bitterly upbraided herself for her original mistrust of this noble-hearted, unselfish woman, who was content to tramp around in an alien country, bartering her talents for a few coins, in order that some of those, who were the originators of her sorrows, might have bread to eat and a bed in which to sleep.

"Mademoiselle," she said warmly, "truly you shame me, who am also French born, with the many sacrifices you so nobly make for those who should have first claim on my own sympathy. Believe me, if I have not done as much as duty demanded of me in the cause of my starving compatriots, it has not been for

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lack of good-will. Is there any way now," she added eagerly, " in which I can help you? Putting aside the question of money, wherein I pray you to command my assistance, what can I do to be of useful service to you?"

" You are very kind, Lady Blakeney. . ." said the other hesitatingly.

" Well? What is it? I see there is something in your mind. . ."

" It is perhaps difficult to express . . . but people say I have a good voice . . . I sing some French ditties . . . they are a novelty in England I think. . . If I could sing them in fashionable salons . . . I might perhaps . . ."

" Nay! you shall sing in fashionable salons," exclaimed Marguerite eagerly; " you shall become the fashion, and I'll swear the Prince of Wales himself shall bid you sing at Carlton House . . . and you shall name you own fee, Mademoiselle . . . and London society shall vie with the élite of Bath, as to which shall lure you to its most frequented routs. . . There! there! you shall make a fortune for the Paris poor . . . and to prove to you that I mean every word I say, you shall begin your triumphant career in my own salon to-morrow night. His Royal Highness will be present. You shall sing your most engaging songs . . . and for your fee you must accept a hundred guineas, which you shall send to the poorest workmen's club in Paris in the name of Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney."

" I thank your ladyship, but . . ."

" You'll not refuse?"

" I'll accept gladly . . . but . . . you will understand . . . I am not very old," said Candeille quaintly,

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"I . . . I am only an actress . . . but if a young actress is unprotected . . . then . . ."

"I understand," replied Marguerite gently, "that you are far too pretty to frequent the world all alone, and that you have a mother, a sister, or a friend . . . which? . . . whom you would wish to escort you tomorrow. Is that it?"

"Nay," rejoined the actress, with marked bitterness, "I have neither mother, nor sister, but our revolutionary government, with tardy compassion for those it has so relentlessly driven out of France, has deputed a representative of theirs in England to look after the interests of French subjects over here."

"Yes?"

"They have realised over in Paris that my life here has been devoted to the welfare of the poor people of France. The representative whom the Government has sent to England is specially interested in me and in my work. He is a stand-by for me in case of trouble . . . in case of insults. . . . A woman alone is oft subject to those, even at the hands of so-called gentlemen . . . and the official representative of my own country becomes in such cases my most natural protector."

"I understand."

"You will receive him?"

"Certainly."

"Then may I present him to your ladyship?"

"Whenever you like."

"Now, an it please you."

"Now?"

"Yes. Here he comes, at your ladyship's service."

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Désirée Candeille's almond-shaped eyes were fixed upon a distant part of the tent, behind Lady Blakeney, in the direction of the main entrance to the booth. There was a slight pause after she had spoken, and then Marguerite slowly turned in order to see who this official representative of France was, whom, at the young actress's request, she had just agreed to receive in her house.

In the doorway of the tent, framed by its gaudy draperies, and with the streaming sunshine as a brilliant background behind him, stood the sable-clad figure of Chauvelin.