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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter VII. Premonition

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CHAPTER VII.

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MARGUERITE neither moved nor spoke. She felt two pairs of eyes fixed upon her, and with all the strength of will at her command she forced the very blood in her veins not to quit her cheeks, forced her eyelids not to betray by a single quiver the icy pang of a deadly premonition which at sight of Chauvelin seemed to have chilled her entire soul.

There he stood before her, dressed in his usual sombre garments, a look almost of humility in those keen grey eyes of his, which a year ago on the cliffs of Calais had peered down at her with such relentless hate.

Strange that at this moment she should have felt an instinct of fear. What cause had she to throw more than a pitiful glance at the man who had tried so cruelly to wrong her and who had so signally failed?

Having bowed very low and very respectfully, Chauvelin advanced towards her, with all the airs of a disgraced courtier craving audience from his queen.

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As he approached she instinctively drew back.

"Would you prefer not to speak to me, Lady Blakeney?" he said humbly.

She could scarcely believe her ears, or trust her eyes. It seemed impossible that a man could have so changed in a few months. He even looked shorter than last year, more shrunken within himself. His hair, which he wore free from powder, was perceptibly tinged with grey.

"Shall I withdraw?" he added after a pause, seeing that Marguerite made no movement to return his salutation.

"It would be best, perhaps," she replied coldly. "You and I, Monsieur Chauvelin, have so little to say to one another."

"Very little indeed," he rejoined quietly. "The triumphant and happy have ever very little to say to the humiliated and the defeated. But I had hoped that Lady Blakeney, in the midst of her victory, would have spared one thought of pity and one of pardon."

"I did not know that you had need of either from me, Monsieur."

"Pity, perhaps not; but forgiveness, certainly."

"You have that, if you so desire it."

"Since I failed, you might try to forget."

"That is beyond my power. But, believe me, I have ceased to think of the infinite wrong which you tried to do to me."

"But I failed," he insisted, "and I meant no harm to you."

"To those I care for, Monsieur Chauvelin."

"I had to serve my country as best I could. I meant

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no harm to your brother. He is safe in England now. And the Scarlet Pimpernel was nothing to you."

She tried to read his face, tried to discover in those inscrutable eyes of his some hidden meaning to his words. Instinct had warned her, of course, that this man could be nothing but an enemy, always and at all times. But he seemed so broken, so abject now, that contempt for his dejected attitude, and for the defeat which had been inflicted on him, chased the last remnant of fear from her heart.

"I did not even succeed in harming that enigmatical personage," continued Chauvelin with the same self-abasement. "Sir Percy Blakeney, you remember, threw himself across my plans—quite innocently, of course. I failed where you succeeded. Luck has deserted me. Our Government offered me a humble post, away from France. I look after the interests of French subjects settled in England. My days of power are over. My failure is complete. I do not complain, for I failed in a combat of wits . . . but I failed . . . I failed . . . I failed . . . I am almost a fugitive and I am quite disgraced. That is my present history, Lady Blakeney," he concluded, taking once more a step towards her; "and you will understand that it would be a solace if you extended your hand to me just once more, and let me feel that although you would never willingly look upon my face again, you have enough womanly tenderness in you to force your heart to forgiveness, and mayhap to pity."

Marguerite hesitated. He held out his hand, and her warm, impulsive nature prompted her to be kind. But instinct would not be gainsaid: a curious instinct

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to which she refused to respond. What had she to fear from this miserable and cringing little worm, who had not even in him the pride of defeat? What harm could he do to her, or to those whom she loved? Her brother was in England! Her husband!! Bah! not the enmity of the entire world could make her fear for him!

Nay! that instinct, which caused her to draw away from Chauvelin, as she would from a venomous asp, was certainly not fear. It was hate! She hated this man!—hated him for all that she had suffered because of him; for that terrible night on the cliffs of Calais! the peril to her husband who had become so infinitely dear! the humiliations and self-reproaches which she had endured.

Yes! it was hate! and hate was of all emotions the one she most despised.

Hate? Does one hate a slimy but harmless toad, or a stinging fly? It seemed ridiculous, contemptible, and pitiable to think of hate in connection with the melancholy figure of this discomfited intriguer, this fallen leader of revolutionary France.

He was holding out his hand to her. If she placed even the tips of her fingers upon it, she would be making the compact of mercy and forgiveness which he was asking of her. The woman Désirée Candeille roused within her the last lingering vestige of her slumbering wrath. False, theatrical, and stagey—as Marguerite had originally suspected—she appeared to have been in league with Chauvelin to bring about this undesirable meeting.

Lady Blakeney turned from one to another, trying

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to conceal her contempt beneath a mask of passionless indifference. Candeille was standing close by, looking obviously distressed and not a little puzzled. An instant's reflection was sufficient to convince Marguerite that the whilom actress of the Variétés Theatre was obviously ignorant of the events to which Chauvelin had been alluding: she was, therefore, of no serious consequence—a mere tool, mayhap, in the ex-ambassador's hands. At the present moment she looked like a silly child who does not understand the conversation of the "grown-ups."

Marguerite had promised her help and protection, had invited her to her house, and offered her a munificent gift in aid of a deserving cause. She was too proud to go back now on that promise, to rescind the contract because of an unexplainable fear. With regard to Chauvelin the matter stood differently; she had made him no direct offer of hospitality; she had agreed to receive in her house the official chaperon of an unprotected girl, but she was not called upon to show cordiality to her own and her husband's most deadly enemy.

She was ready to dismiss him out of her life with a cursory word of pardon and a half-expressed promise of oblivion; on that understanding, and that only, she was ready to let her hand rest for the space of one second in his.

She had looked upon her fallen enemy, seen his discomfiture and his humiliation! Very well! now let him pass out of her life, all the more easily since the last vision of him would be one of such utter abjection as would even be unworthy of hate.

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All these thoughts, feelings, and struggles passed through her mind with great rapidity. Her hesitation had lasted less than five seconds: Chauvelin still wore the look of doubting entreaty, with which he had first begged permission to take her hand in his. With an impulsive toss of the head, she had turned straight towards him, ready with the phrase with which she meant to dismiss him from her sight now and for ever, when suddenly a well-known laugh broke in upon her ear, and a lazy, drawly voice said pleasantly:

"La! I vow the air is fit to poison you! Your Royal Highness, I entreat, let us turn our backs upon these gates of Inferno, where lost souls would feel more at home than doth your humble servant."

The next moment His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had entered the tent, closely followed by Sir Percy Blakeney.