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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter VIII. The invitation

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CHAPTER VIII.

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IT was in truth a strange situation, this chance meeting between Percy Blakeney and ex-Ambassador Chauvelin.

Marguerite looked up at her husband. She saw him shrug his broad shoulders as he first caught sight of Chauvelin and glance down in his usual lazy, good-humoured manner at the shrunken figure of the silent Frenchman. The words she meant to say never crossed her lips ; she was waiting to hear what the two men would say to one another.

The instinct of the grande dame in her, the fashionable lady accustomed to the exigencies of society, just gave her sufficient presence of mind to make the requisite low curtsey before His Royal Highness. But the Prince, forgetting his accustomed gallantry, was also absorbed in the little scene before him. He, too, was looking from the sable-clad figure of Chauvelin to that of gorgeously arrayed Sir Percy. He, too, like

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Marguerite, was wondering what was passing behind the low, smooth forehead of that inimitable dandy, what behind the inscrutably good-humoured expression of those sleepy eyes.

Of the five persons thus present in the dark and stuffy booth, certainly Sir Percy Blakeney seemed the least perturbed. He had paused just long enough to allow Chauvelin to become fully conscious of a feeling of supreme irritation and annoyance, then he strolled up to the ex-ambassador, with hand outstretched and the most engaging of smiles.

"Ha!" he said, with his half shy, half pleasant-tempered smile, "my engaging friend from France! I hope, sir, that our demmed climate doth find you well and hearty to-day."

The cheerful voice seemed to ease the tension. Marguerite sighed a sigh of relief. After all, what was more natural than that Percy, with his amazing fund of pleasant irresponsibility, should thus greet the man who had once vowed to bring him to the guillotine? Chauvelin himself, accustomed by now to the audacious coolness of his enemy, was scarcely taken by surprise. He bowed low to His Highness, who, vastly amused at Blakeney's sally, was inclined to be gracious to everyone, even though the personality of Chauvelin, as a well-known leader of a regicide government, was inherently distasteful to him. But the Prince saw in the wizened little figure before him an obvious butt for his friend Blakeney's impertinent shafts, and although historians have been unable to assert positively whether or no George Prince of Wales knew aught of Sir Percy's dual life, yet there is no doubt that he was

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always ready to enjoy a situation which brought about the discomfiture of any of the Scarlet Pimpernel's avowed enemies.

"I, too, have not met M. Chauvelin for many a long month," said His Royal Highness with an obvious show of irony. "An I mistake not, sir, you left my father's Court somewhat abruptly last year?"

"Nay, your Royal Highness," said Sir Percy gaily, "my friend Monsieur . . . er . . . Chabertin and I had serious business to discuss, which could only be dealt with in France. . . . Am I not right, Monsieur?"

"Quite right, Sir Percy," replied Chauvelin curtly.

"We had to discuss abominable soup in Calais, had we not?" continued Blakeney in the same tone of easy banter, "and wine that I vowed was vinegar. Monsieur . . . er . . . Chabertin . . . no, no, I beg pardon . . . Chauvelin . . . Monsieur Chauvelin and I quite agreed upon that point. The only matter on which we were not quite at one was the question of snuff."

"Snuff?" laughed His Royal Highness, who seemed vastly amused.

"Yes, your Royal Highness . . . snuff . . . Monsieur Chauvelin here has—if I may be allowed to say so—so vitiated a taste in snuff that he prefers it with an admixture of pepper. . . . Is that not so, Monsieur . . . er . . . Chabertin?"

"Chauvelin, Sir Percy," remarked the ex-ambassador drily.

He was determined not to lose his temper, and looked urbane and pleasant, whilst his impudent enemy was enjoying a joke at his expense. Marguerite the while had not taken her eyes off the keen, shrewd face.

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Whilst the three men talked, she seemed suddenly to have lost her sense of the reality of things. The present situation appeared to her strangely familiar, like a dream which she had dreamt oftentimes before.

Suddenly it became absolutely clear to her that the whole scene had been arranged and planned: the booth with its flaring placard, Demoiselle Candeille soliciting her patronage, her invitation to the young actress, Chauvelin's sudden appearance—all, all had been concocted and arranged, not here, not in England at all, but out there in Paris, in some dark gathering of bloodthirsty ruffians, who had invented a final trap for the destruction of the bold adventurer, who went by the name of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

And she also was only a puppet, enacting a part which had been written for her: she had acted just as *they* had anticipated, had spoken the very words they had meant her to say: and when she looked at Percy he seemed supremely ignorant of it all, unconscious of this trap, of the existence of which everyone here present was aware save, indeed, himself. She would have fought against this weird feeling of obsession, of being a mechanical toy wound up to do certain things, but this she could not do; her will appeared paralysed, her tongue even refused her service.

As in a dream, she heard His Royal Highness ask for the name of the young actress, who was soliciting alms for the poor of Paris.

That also had been pre-arranged. His Royal Highness for the moment was also a puppet, made to dance, to speak, and to act as Chauvelin and his colleagues over in France had decided that he should. Quite

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mechanically Marguerite introduced Demoiselle Candieille to the Prince's gracious notice.

"If your Highness will permit," she said, "Mademoiselle Candieille will give us some of her charming old French songs at my rout to-morrow."

"By all means! By all means!" said the Prince. "I used to know some in my childhood's days. Charming and poetic... I know... I know.... We shall be delighted to hear Mademoiselle sing. Eh, Blakeney?" he added good-humouredly, "and for your rout to-morrow, will you not also invite M. Chauvelin?"

"Nay! but that goes without saying, your Royal Highness," responded Sir Percy, with hospitable alacrity and a most approved bow directed at his arch-enemy. "We shall expect M. Chauvelin. He and I have not met for so long, and he shall be made right welcome at Blakeney Manor."