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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter IX. Demoiselle Candeille

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CHAPTER IX.

DEMOISELLE CANDEILLE.

HER origin was of the humblest, for her mother—
so it was said—had been kitchen-maid in the
household of the Duc de Marny, but Désirée had re-
ceived some kind of education, and though she began
life as a dresser in one of the minor theatres of
Paris, she became ultimately one of its most popular
stars.

She was small and dark, dainty in her manner and
her ways, and with a graceful little figure, peculiarly
supple and sinuous. Her humble origin certainly did
not betray itself in her hands and feet, which were ex-
quisite in shape and lilliputian in size.

Her hair was soft and glossy, always free from
powder, and cunningly arranged so as to slightly over-
shadow the upper part of the face.

The chin was small and round, the mouth extra-
ordinarily red, the neck slender and long. But she was
not pretty: so said all the women. Her skin was

DEMOISELLE CANDEILLE.

rather coarse in texture and darkish in colour, her eyes were narrow and slightly turned upwards at the corners ; no ! she was distinctly not pretty.

Yet she pleased the men ! Perhaps because she was so artlessly determined to please them. The women said that Demoiselle Candeille never left a man alone until she had succeeded in captivating his fancy, if only for five minutes ; an interval in a dance . . . the time to cross a muddy road.

But for five minutes she was determined to hold any man's complete attention, and to exact his admiration. And she nearly always succeeded.

Therefore the women hated her. The men were amused. It is extremely pleasant to have one's admiration compelled, one's attention so determinedly sought after.

And Candeille could be extremely amusing, and as Madelon in Molière's "Les Précieuses" was quite inimitable.

This, however, was in the olden days, just before Paris went quite mad, before the Reign of Terror had set in, and ci-devant Louis the King had been executed.

Candeille had taken it into her frolicsome little head that she would like to go to London. The idea was, of course, in the nature of an experiment. Those dull English people over the water knew so little of what good acting really meant. Tragedy ? Well ! passons ! their heavy, large-boned actresses might manage one or two big scenes, where a commanding presence and a powerful voice would not come amiss, and where prominent teeth would pass unnoticed in the agony of a dramatic climax.

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

But comedy!

Ah! ça non, par example! Demoiselle Candeille had seen several English gentlemen and ladies in those same olden days at the Tuileries, but she really could not imagine any of them enacting the piquant scenes of Molière or Beaumarchais.

Demoiselle Candeille thought of every English-born individual as having very large teeth. Now large teeth do not lend themselves to well-spoken comedy scenes, to smiles, or to double-entendre.

Her own teeth were exceptionally small and white, and very sharp, like those of a kitten.

Yes! Demoiselle Candeille thought it would be extremely interesting to go to London and to show to a nation of shopkeepers how daintily one can be amused in a theatre.

Permission to depart from Paris was easy to obtain. In fact, the fair lady had never really found it difficult to obtain anything she very much wanted.

In this case, she had plenty of friends in high places. Marat was still alive, and a great lover of the theatre. Tallien was a personal admirer of hers, and Deputy Dupont would do anything she asked.

She wanted to act in London, at a theatre called Drury Lane. She wanted to play Molière in England in French, and had already spoken with several of her colleagues, who were ready to join her. They would give public representations in aid of the starving population of France; there were plenty of Socialistic clubs in London quite Jacobin and Revolutionary in tendency: their members would give her full support.

DEMOISELLE CANDEILLE.

She would be serving her country and her countrymen, and incidentally see something of the world and amuse herself. She was being bored in Paris.

Then she thought of Marguerite St. Just, once of the Maison Molière, who had captivated an English milor of enormous wealth. Demoiselle Candeille had never been of the Maison Molière; she had been the leading star at one of the minor—yet much-frequented—theatres of Paris, but she felt herself quite able and ready to captivate some other unattached milor, who would load her with English money and incidentally bestow an English name upon her.

So she went to London.

The experiment, however, had not proved an unmitigated success. At first she and her company did obtain a few engagements at one or two of the minor theatres, to give representations of some of the French classical comedies in the original language.

But these never quite became the fashion. The feeling against France and all her doings was far too keen in that very set which Demoiselle Candeille had desired to captivate with her talents, to allow the English *jeunesse dorée* to flock and see Molière being played in French by a French troupe, whilst Candeille's own compatriots resident in England had given her but scant support.

One section of these—the aristocrats and émigrés—looked upon the actress who was a friend of all the Jacobins in Paris as nothing better than *canaille*. They sedulously ignored her presence in this country, and snubbed her whenever they had an opportunity.

The other section—chiefly consisting of agents and

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

spies of the Revolutionary Government—she would gladly have ignored. They had at first made a constant demand on her purse, her talents, and her time; then she grew tired of them, and felt more and more chary of being identified with a set which was in such ill-odour with that very same *jeunesse dorée* whom Candeille had desired to please.

In her own country she was, and always had been, a good Republican: Marat had given her her first start in life by his violent praises of her talent in his widely-circulated paper; she had been associated in Paris with the whole coterie of artists and actors: every one of them Republican to a man. But in London, although one might be snubbed by the émigrés and aristocrats, it did not do to be mixed up with the sans-culotte journalists and pamphleteers who haunted the Socialistic clubs of the English capital, and who were the prime organisers of all those seditious gatherings and treasonable unions that caused Mr. Pitt and his colleagues so much trouble and anxiety.

One by one Désirée Candeille's comrades, male and female, who had accompanied her to England returned to their own country. When war was declared, some of them were actually sent back under the provisions of the Aliens Bill.

But Désirée had stayed on.

Her old friends in Paris had managed to advise her that she would not be very welcome there just now. The sans-culotte journalists of England, the agents and spies of the Revolutionary Government, had taken their revenge of the frequent snubs inflicted upon them by the young actress, and in those days the fact of

DEMOISELLE CANDEILLE.

being unwelcome in France was apt to have a more lurid and more dangerous significance.

Candeille did not dare return: at any rate, not for the present.

She trusted to her own powers of intrigue, and her well-known fascinations, to re-conquer the friendship of the Jacobin clique, and she once more turned her attention to the affiliated Socialistic clubs of England. But between the proverbial two stools Demoiselle Candeille soon came to the ground. Her machinations became known in official quarters, her connection with all the seditious clubs of London was soon bruited abroad, and one evening Désirée found herself confronted with a document addressed to her: "From the Office of His Majesty's Privy Seal," wherein it was set forth that, pursuant to the Statute 33 George III., cap. 5, she, Désirée Candeille, a French subject now resident in England, was required to leave this kingdom by order of His Majesty within seven days, and that in the event of the said Désirée Candeille refusing to comply with this order, she would be liable to commitment, brought to trial, and sentenced to imprisonment for a month, and afterwards to removal within a limited time under pain of transportation for life.

This meant that Demoiselle Candeille had exactly seven days in which to make complete her reconciliation with her former friends, who now ruled Paris and France with a relentless and perpetually blood-stained hand. No wonder that during the night which followed the receipt of this momentous document, Demoiselle Candeille suffered gravely from insomnia.

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

She dared not go back to France, she was ordered out of England! What was to become of her?

This was just three days before the eventful afternoon of the Richmond Gala, and twenty-four hours after ex-Ambassador Chauvelin had landed in England. Candeille and Chauvelin had since then met at the "Cercle des Jacobins Français" in Soho Street, and now fair Désirée found herself in lodgings in Richmond, the evening of the day following the Gala, feeling that her luck had not altogether deserted her.

One conversation with Citizen Chauvelin had brought the fickle jade back to Demoiselle Candeille's service. Nay, more, the young actress saw before her visions of intrigue, of dramatic situations, of pleasant little bits of revenge—all of which was meat and drink and air to breathe for Mademoiselle Désirée.

She was to sing in one of the most fashionable salons of England: that was very pleasant. The Prince of Wales would hear and see her! That opened out a vista of delightful possibilities! And all she had to do was to act a part dictated to her by Citizen Chauvelin, to behave as he directed, to move in the way he wished! Well! that was easy enough, since the part which she would have to play was one peculiarly suited to her talents.

She looked at herself critically in the glass. Her maid Fanchon—a little French waif picked up in the slums of Soho—helped to readjust a stray curl which had rebelled against the comb.

"Now for the necklace, Mademoiselle," said Fanchon with suppressed excitement.

It had just arrived by messenger: a large morocco

DEMOISELLE CANDEILLE.

case, which now lay open on the dressing-table, displaying its dazzling contents.

Candeille scarcely dared to touch it, and yet it was for her. Citizen Chauvelin had sent a note with it.

“Citizeness Candeille will please accept this gift from the Government of France, in acknowledgment of useful services past and to come.”

The note was signed with Robespierre’s own name, followed by that of Citizen Chauvelin. The morocco case contained a necklace of diamonds worth the ransom of a king.

“For useful services past and to come!” and there were promises of still further rewards, a complete pardon for all defalcations, a place within the charmed circle of the *Comédie Française*, a grand pageant and apotheosis, with Citizeness Candeille impersonating the Goddess of Reason, in the midst of a grand national fête, and the acclamations of excited Paris: and all in exchange for the enactment of a part—simple and easy—outlined for her by Chauvelin! . . .

How strange! How inexplicable! Candeille took the necklace up in her trembling fingers and gazed musingly at the priceless gems. She had seen the jewels before, long, long ago! round the neck of the Duchesse de Marny, in whose service her own mother had been. She—as a child—had often gazed at and admired the great lady, who seemed like a wonderful fairy from an altogether different world to that inhabited by the poor little kitchen slut.

How wonderful are the vagaries of fortune! Désirée Candeille, the kitchen-maid’s daughter, now wearing her ex-mistress’s jewels. She supposed that these had

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

been confiscated when the last of the Marnys—the girl Juliette—had escaped from France!—confiscated, and now sent to her, Candeille, as a reward or as a bribe!

In either case they were welcome. The actress's vanity was soothed. She knew Juliette Marny was in England, and that she would meet her to-night at Lady Blakeney's. After the many snubs which she had endured from the French aristocrats settled in England, the actress felt that she was about to enjoy an evening of triumph.

The intrigue excited her. She did not quite know what schemes Chauvelin was aiming at, what ultimate end he had had in view when he commanded her services and taught her the part which he wished her to play.

That the schemes were vast and the end mighty she could not doubt. The reward she had received was proof enough of that.

Little Fanchon stood there in speechless admiration, whilst her mistress still fondly fingered the magnificent necklace.

"Mademoiselle will wear the diamonds to-night?" she asked with evident anxiety: she would have been bitterly disappointed to have seen the beautiful thing once more relegated to its dark morocco case.

"Oh! yes, Fanchon!" said Candeille with a sigh of great satisfaction. "See that they are fastened quite securely, my girl."

She put the necklace round her shapely neck, and Fanchon looked to see that the clasp was quite secure.

There came the sound of loud knocking at the street door.

DEMOISELLE CANDEILLE.

"That is M. Chauvelin come to fetch me with the chaise. Am I quite ready, Fanchon?" asked Désirée Candeille.

"Oh! yes, Mademoiselle!" sighed the little maid; "and Mademoiselle looks very beautiful to-night."

"Lady Blakeney is very beautiful, too, Fanchon," rejoined the actress naïvely; "but I wonder if she will wear anything as fine as the Marny necklace?"

The knocking at the street door was repeated. Candeille took a final, satisfied survey of herself in the glass. She knew her part and felt that she had dressed well for it. She gave a final, affectionate little tap to the diamonds round her neck, took her cloak and hood from Fanchon, and was ready to go.