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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter X. Lady Blakeney's rout

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CHAPTER X.

LADY BLAKENEY'S ROUT.

THERE are several accounts extant, in the fashionable chronicles of the time, of the gorgeous reception given that autumn by Lady Blakeney in her magnificent riverside home.

Never had the spacious apartments of Blakeney Manor looked more resplendent than on this memorable occasion—memorable because of the events which brought the brilliant evening to a close.

The Prince of Wales had come over by water from Carlton House; the Royal Princesses came early, and all fashionable London was there, chattering and laughing, displaying elaborate gowns and priceless jewels, dancing, flirting, listening to the strains of the string band, or strolling listlessly in the gardens, where the late roses and clumps of heliotrope threw soft fragrance on the balmy air.

But Marguerite was nervous and agitated. Strive how she might, she could not throw off that foreboding of something evil to come, which had assailed her from the first moment when she met Chauvelin face to face.

That unaccountable feeling of unreality was still

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upon her, that sense that she, and the woman Candeille, Percy, and even His Royal Highness, were, for the time being, the actors in a play written and stage-managed by Chauvelin. The ex-ambassador's humility, his offers of friendship, his quietude under Sir Percy's good-humoured banter, everything was a sham. Marguerite knew it; her womanly instinct, her passionate love, all cried out to her in warning; but there was that in her husband's nature which rendered her powerless in the face of such dangers, as, she felt sure, were now threatening him.

Just before her guests had begun to assemble, she had been alone with him for a few minutes. She had entered the room in which he sat, looking radiantly beautiful in a shimmering gown of white and silver, with diamonds in her golden hair and round her exquisite neck.

Moments like this, when she was alone with him, were the joy of her life. Then, and then only, did she see him as he really was, with that wistful tenderness in his deep-set eyes, that occasional flash of passion from beneath the lazily-drooping lids. For a few minutes—seconds, mayhap—the spirit of the reckless adventurer was laid to rest, relegated into the furthest background of his senses by the powerful emotions of the lover.

Then he would seize her in his arms, and hold her to him, with a strange longing to tear from out his heart all other thoughts, feelings, and passions save those which made him a slave to her beauty and her smiles.

"Percy!" she whispered to him to-night, when

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freeing herself from his embrace she looked up at him, and for this one heavenly second felt him all her own. "Percy, you will do nothing rash, nothing foolhardy, to-night. That man had planned all that took place yesterday. He hates you, and . . ."

In a moment his face and attitude had changed, the heavy lids drooped over the eyes, the rigidity of the mouth relaxed, and that quaint, half shy, half inane smile played around the firm lips.

"Of course he does, m'dear," he said, in his usual affected, drawly tones, "of course he does, but that is so demmed amusing. He does not really know what or how much he knows, or what I know. . . In fact . . . er . . . we none of us know anything . . . just at present. . ."

He laughed lightly and carelessly, then deliberately readjusted the set of his lace tie.

"Percy!" she said reproachfully.

"Yes, m'dear."

"Lately, when you brought Déroulède and Juliette Marny to England . . . I endured agonies of anxiety . . . and . . ."

He sighed, a quick, short, wistful sigh, and said very gently:

"I know you did, m'dear, and that is where the trouble lies. I know that you are fretting, so I have to be so demmed quick about the business, so as not to keep you in suspense too long . . . And now I can't take Ffoulkes away from his young wife, and Tony and the others are so mighty slow."

"Percy!" she said once more with tender earnestness.

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"I know, I know," he said, with a slight frown of self-reproach. "La! but I don't deserve your solicitude. Heaven knows what a brute I was for years, whilst I neglected you, and ignored the noble devotion which I, alas! do even now so little to deserve."

She would have said something more, but was interrupted by the entrance of Juliette Marny into the room.

"Some of your guests have arrived, Lady Blakeney," said the young girl, apologising for her seeming intrusion. "I thought you would wish to know."

Juliette looked very young and girlish in a simple white gown, without a single jewel on her arms or neck. Marguerite regarded her with unaffected approval.

"You look charming to-night, Mademoiselle, does she not, Sir Percy?"

"Thanks to your bounty," smiled Juliette, a trifle sadly. "Whilst I dressed to-night, I felt how I should have loved to wear my dear mother's jewels, of which she used to be so proud."

"We must hope that you will recover them, dear, some day," said Marguerite vaguely, as she led the young girl out of the small study towards the larger reception rooms.

"Indeed, I hope so," sighed Juliette. "When times became so troublous in France after my dear father's death, his confessor and friend, the Abbé Foucquet, took charge of all my mother's jewels for me. He said they would be safe with the ornaments of his own little church at Boulogne. He feared no sacrilege, and thought they would be most effectually hidden

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there, for no one would dream of looking for the Marny diamonds in the crypt of a country church."

Marguerite said nothing in reply. Whatever her own doubts might be upon such a subject, it could serve no purpose to disturb the young girl's serenity.

"Dear Abbé Foucquet," said Juliette after awhile, "his is the kind of devotion which I feel sure will never be found under the new régimes of anarchy and of so-called equality. He would have laid down his life for my father or for me. And I know that he would never part with the jewels which I entrusted to his care, whilst he had breath and strength to defend them."

Marguerite would have wished to pursue the subject a little further. It was very pathetic to witness poor Juliette's hopes and confidence, which she felt sure would never be realised.

Lady Blakeney knew so much of what was going on in France just now: spoliations, confiscations, official thefts, open robberies, all in the name of equality, of fraternity, and of patriotism. She knew nothing, of course, of the Abbé Foucquet, but the tender little picture of the devoted old man, painted by Juliette's loving words, had appealed strongly to her sympathetic heart.

*Instinct and knowledge of the political aspect of France told her that by entrusting valuable family jewels to the old Abbé, Juliette had most unwittingly placed the man she so much trusted in danger of persecution at the hands of a government which did not even admit the legality of family possessions. However, there was neither time nor opportunity now

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to enlarge upon the subject. Marguerite resolved to recur to it a little later, when she would be alone with Mdlle. de Marny, and, above all, when she could take counsel with her husband as to the best means of recovering the young girl's property for her, whilst relieving a devoted old man from the dangerous responsibility which he had so selflessly undertaken.

In the meanwhile the two women had reached the first of the long line of State apartments wherein the brilliant fête was to take place. The staircase and the hall below were already filled with the early arrivals. Bidding Juliette to remain in the ballroom, Lady Blakeney now took up her stand on the exquisitely-decorated landing, ready to greet her guests. She had a smile and a pleasant word for all, as, in a constant stream, the élite of London fashionable society began to file past her, exchanging the elaborate greetings which the stilted mode of the day prescribed to this butterfly world.

The lacqueys in the hall shouted the names of the guests as they passed up the stairs: names celebrated in politics, in worlds of sport, of science, or of art, great historic names, humble, newly-made ones, noble illustrious titles. The spacious rooms were filling fast. His Royal Highness, so 'twas said, had just stepped out of his barge. The noise of laughter and chatter was incessant, like unto a crowd of gaily-plumaged birds.

Huge bunches of apricot-coloured roses in silver vases made the air heavy with their subtle perfume. Fans began to flutter. The string band struck the preliminary cords of the gavotte.

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At that moment the lacqueys at the foot of the stairs called out in stentorian tones:

"Mademoiselle Désirée Candeille and Monsieur Chauvelin!"

Marguerite's heart gave a slight flutter; she felt a sudden tightening of the throat. She did not see Candeille at first, only the slender figure of Chauvelin dressed all in black, as usual, with head bent and hands clasped behind his back; he was slowly mounting the wide staircase, between a double row of brilliantly attired men and women, who looked with no small measure of curiosity at the ex-ambassador from revolutionary France.

Demoiselle Candeille was leading the way up the stairs. She paused on the landing, in order to make before her hostess a most perfect and most elaborate curtsey. She looked smiling and radiant, beautifully dressed, a small wreath of wrought gold leaves in her hair, her only jewel an absolutely regal one, a magnificent necklace of diamonds round her shapely throat.