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The elusive Pimpernel

Orczy, Emmuska

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Chapter XI. The challenge

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CHAPTER XI.

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IT all occurred just before midnight, in one of the smaller rooms, which lead in enfilade from the principal ball-room.

Dancing had been going on for some time, but the evening was close, and there seemed to be a growing desire on the part of Lady Blakeney's guests to wander desultorily through the gardens and glass-houses, or to sit about where some measure of coolness could be obtained.

There was a rumour that a new and charming French artiste was to sing a few peculiarly ravishing songs, unheard in England before. Close to the main ball-room was the octagon music-room, which was brilliantly illuminated, and in which a large number of chairs had been obviously disposed for the comfort of an audience. Into this room many of the guests had already assembled. It was quite clear that a chamber-concert—select and attractive as were all Lady Blakeney's entertainments—was in contemplation.

Marguerite herself, released for a moment from her constant duties near her royal guests, had strolled through the smaller rooms, accompanied by Juliette,

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in order to search for Mademoiselle Candeille and to suggest the commencement of the improvised concert.

Désirée Candeille had kept herself very much aloof throughout the evening, only talking to the one or two gentlemen whom her hostess had presented to her on her arrival, and with M. Chauvelin always in close attendance upon her every movement.

Presently, when dancing began, she retired to a small boudoir, and there sat down, demurely waiting, until Lady Blakeney should require her services.

When Marguerite and Juliette Marny entered the little room, she rose and came forward a few steps.

"I am ready, Madame," she said pleasantly, "when-ever you wish me to begin. I have thought out a short programme—shall I start with the gay or the sentimental songs?"

But before Marguerite had time to utter a reply, she felt her arm nervously clutched by a hot and trembling hand.

"Who . . . who is this woman?" murmured Juliette Marny close to her ear.

The young girl looked pale and very agitated, and her large eyes were fixed in unmistakable wrath upon the French actress before her. A little startled, not understanding Juliette's attitude, Marguerite tried to reply lightly:

"This is Mademoiselle Candeille, Juliette dear," she said, effecting the usual formal introduction, "of the Variétés Theatre of Paris—Mademoiselle Désirée Candeille who will sing some charming French ditties for us to-night."

While she spoke she kept a restraining hand on

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Juliette's quivering arm. Already, with the keen intuition which had been on the qui-vive the whole evening, she scented some mystery in this sudden outburst on the part of her young protégée.

But Juliette did not heed her: she felt surging up in her young, overburdened heart all the wrath and the contempt of the persecuted, fugitive aristocrat against the triumphant usurper. She had suffered so much from that particular class of the risen kitchen-wench, of which the woman before her was so typical an example: years of sorrow, of poverty were behind her: loss of fortune, of kindred, of friends—she, even now a pauper, living on the bounty of strangers.

And all this through no fault of her own: the fault of her class mayhap! but not hers!

She had suffered much, and was still overwrought and nerve-strung: for some reason she could not afterwards have explained, she felt spiteful and uncontrolled, goaded into stupid fury by the look of insolence and of triumph with which Candeille calmly regarded her.

Afterwards she would willingly have bitten out her tongue for her vehemence, but for the moment she was absolutely incapable of checking the torrent of her own emotions.

"Mademoiselle Candeille, indeed?" she said in wrathful scorn. "Désirée Candeille, you mean, Lady Blakeney! My mother's kitchen-maid, flaunting shamelessly my dear mother's jewels, which she has stolen mayhap . . ."

The young girl was trembling from head to foot, tears of anger obscured her eyes; her voice, which

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fortunately remained low—not much above a whisper—was thick and husky.

"Juliette! Juliette! I entreat you," admonished Marguerite; "you must control yourself, you must, indeed you must. . . . Mademoiselle Candaille, I beg of you to retire . . ."

But Candaille—well-schooled in the part she had to play—had no intention of quitting the field of battle. The more wrathful and excited Mademoiselle de Marny became the more insolent and triumphant waxed the young actress's whole attitude. An ironical smile played round the corners of her mouth, her almond-shaped eyes were half-closed, regarding through drooping lashes the trembling figure of the young impoverished aristocrat. Her head was thrown well back, in obvious defiance of the social conventions, which should have forbidden a fracas in Lady Blakeney's hospitable house, and her fingers, provocatively toyed with the diamond necklace which glittered and sparkled round her throat.

She had no need to repeat the words of a well-learned part: her own wit, her own emotions and feelings helped her to act just as her employer would have wished her to do. Her native vulgarity helped her to assume the very bearing which he would have desired. In fact, at this moment Désirée Candaille had forgotten everything save the immediate present: a more than contemptuous snub from one of those penniless aristocrats, who had rendered her own sojourn in London so unpleasant and unsuccessful.

She had suffered from these snubs before, but had never had the chance of forcing an *esclandre* as a result

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of her own humiliation. That spirit of hatred for the rich and idle classes, which was so characteristic of revolutionary France, was alive and hot within her: she had never had an opportunity—she, the humble fugitive actress from a minor Paris theatre—to retort with forcible taunts to the ironical remarks made at and before her by the various poverty-stricken but haughty émigrés, who swarmed in those very same circles of London society into which she herself had vainly striven to penetrate.

Now at last one of this same hated class, provoked beyond self-control, was allowing childish and unreasoning fury to outstrip the usual calm irony of aristocratic rebuffs.

Juliette had paused awhile, in order to check the wrathful tears which, much against her will, were choking the words in her throat and blinding her eyes.

"Hoity! toity!" laughed Candeille. "Hark at the young baggage!"

But Juliette had turned to Marguerite and began explaining volubly:

"My mother's jewels!" she said in the midst of her tears. "Ask her how she came by them? When I was obliged to leave the home of my fathers—stolen from me by the Revolutionary Government—I contrived to retain my mother's jewels . . . you remember, I told you just now. . . . The Abbé Fouquet—dear old man!—saved them for me . . . that and a little money which I had . . . he took charge of them . . . he said he would place them in safety with the ornaments of his church, and now I see them round that

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woman's neck. . . . I know that he would not have parted with them save with his life."

All the while that the young girl spoke in a voice half-choked with sobs, Marguerite tried with all the physical and mental will at her command to drag her out of the room and thus to put a summary ending to this unpleasant scene. She ought to have felt angry with Juliette for this childish and senseless outburst, were it not for the fact that somehow she knew within her innermost heart that all this had been arranged and pre-ordained: not by Fate, not by a Higher Hand, but by the most skilful intriguer present-day France had ever known.

And even now, as she was half-succeeding in turning Juliette away from the sight of Candaille, she was not the least surprised or startled at seeing Chauvelin standing in the very doorway through which she had hoped to pass. One glance at his face had made her fears tangible and real: there was a look of satisfaction and triumph in his pale, narrow eyes, a flash in them of approbation directed at the insolent attitude of the French actress: he looked like the stage-manager of a play, content with the effect his own well-arranged scenes were producing.

What he hoped to gain by this—somewhat vulgar—quarrel between the two women, Marguerite, of course, could not guess: that something was lurking in his mind, inimical to herself and to her husband, she did not for a moment doubt, and at this moment she felt that she would have given her very life to induce Candaille and Juliette to cease this passage of arms, without further provocation on either side.

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But though Juliette might have been ready to yield to Lady Blakeney's persuasion, Désirée Candeille, under Chauvelin's eye, and fired by her own desire to further humiliate this overbearing aristocrat, did not wish the little scene to end so tamely just yet.

"Your old calotin was made to part with his booty, m'dear," she said, with a contemptuous shrug of her bare shoulders. "Paris and France have been starving these many years past: a paternal Government seized all it could with which to reward those that served it well, whilst all that would have bought bread and meat for the poor was being greedily stowed away by shameless traitors!"

Juliette winced at the insult.

"Oh!" she moaned, as she buried her flaming face in her hands.

Too late now did she realise that she had deliberately stirred up a mud-heap and sent noisome insects buzzing about her ears.

"Mademoiselle," said Marguerite authoritatively, "I must ask you to remember that Mlle. de Marny is my friend, and that you are a guest in my house."

"Aye! I try not to forget it," rejoined Candeille lightly; "but of a truth you must admit, Citizeness, that it would require the patience of a saint to put up with the insolence of a penniless baggage, who but lately has had to stand her trial in her own country for impurity of conduct."

There was a moment's silence, whilst Marguerite distinctly heard a short sigh of satisfaction escaping from the lips of Chauvelin. Then a pleasant laugh broke upon the ears of the four actors who were enacting the

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dramatic little scene, and Sir Percy Blakeney, immaculate in his rich white satin coat and filmy lace ruffles, exquisite in manners and courtesy, entered the little boudoir, and with his long back slightly bent, his arm outstretched in a graceful and well-studied curve, he approached Mademoiselle Désirée Candeille.

"May I have the honour," he said with his most elaborate air of courtly deference, "of conducting Mademoiselle to her chaise?"

In the doorway, just behind him, stood His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, chatting with apparent carelessness to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Anthony Dewhurst. A curtain beyond the open door was partially drawn aside, disclosing one or two brilliantly dressed groups, strolling desultorily through the further rooms.

The four persons assembled in the little boudoir had been so absorbed by their own passionate emotions and the violence of their quarrel, that they had not noticed the approach of Sir Percy Blakeney and of his friends. Juliette and Marguerite certainly were startled, and Candeille was evidently taken unawares. Chauvelin alone seemed quite indifferent, and stood back a little when Sir Percy advanced, in order to allow him to pass.

But Candeille recovered quickly enough from her surprise: without heeding Blakeney's proffered arm, she turned with all the airs of an insulted tragedy queen towards Marguerite.

"So 'tis I," she said with affected calm, "who am to bear every insult in a house in which I was bidden as a

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guest. I am turned out like some intrusive and importunate beggar, and I, the stranger in this land, am destined to find that amidst all these brilliant English gentlemen there is not one man of honour."

"M. Chauvelin," she added loudly, "our beautiful country has, meseems, deputed you to guard the honour as well as the worldly goods of your unprotected compatriots. I call upon you, in the name of France, to avenge the insults offered to me to-night."

She looked round defiantly from one to the other of the several faces which were now turned towards her, but no one, for the moment, spoke or stirred. Juliette, silent and ashamed, had taken Marguerite's hand in hers, and was clinging to it as if wishing to draw strength of character and firmness of purpose through the pores of the other woman's delicate skin.

Sir Percy, with backbone still bent in a sweeping curve, had not relaxed his attitude of uttermost deference. The Prince of Wales and his friends were viewing the scene with slightly amused aloofness.

For a moment—seconds at most—there was dead silence in the room, during which time it almost seemed as if the beating of several hearts could be distinctly heard.

Then Chauvelin, courtly and urbane, stepped calmly forward.

"Believe me, Citizeness," he said, addressing Candaille directly and with marked emphasis, "I am entirely at your command, but am I not helpless, seeing that those who have so grossly insulted you are of your own irresponsible, if charming, sex?"

Like a great dog after a nap, Sir Percy Blakeney

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straightened his long back and stretched it out to its full length.

"La!" he said pleasantly, "my ever-engaging friend from Calais. Sir, your servant. Meseems we are ever destined to discuss amiable matters, in an amiable spirit. . . . A glass of punch, Monsieur . . . er . . . Chauvelin?"

"I must ask you, Sir Percy," rejoined Chauvelin sternly, "to view this matter with becoming seriousness."

"Seriousness is never becoming, sir," said Blakeney, politely smothering a slight yawn, "and it is vastly unbecoming in the presence of ladies."

"Am I to understand, then, Sir Percy," said Chauvelin, "that you are prepared to apologise to Mademoiselle Candaille for the insults offered to her by Lady Blakeney?"

Sir Percy again tried to smother that tiresome little yawn, which seemed most distressing when he desired to be most polite. Then he flicked off a grain of dust from his immaculate lace ruffle and buried his long, slender hands in the capacious pockets of his white satin breeches; finally he said, with the most good-natured of smiles:

"Sir, have you seen the latest fashion in cravats? I would wish to draw your attention to the novel way in which we in England tie a Mechlin-edged bow."

"Sir Percy," retorted Chauvelin firmly, "since you will not offer Mademoiselle Candaille the apology which she has the right to expect from you, are you prepared that you and I should cross swords like two honourable gentlemen?"

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Blakeney laughed his usual pleasant, somewhat shy laugh, shook his powerful frame, and looked from his altitude of six foot three inches down on the small, sable-clad figure of ex-Ambassador Chauvelin.

"The question is, sir," he said slowly, "should we then be two honourable gentlemen crossing swords?"

"Sir Percy . . ."

"Sir?"

Chauvelin, who for one moment had seemed ready to lose his temper, now made a sudden effort to resume a calm and easy attitude, and said quietly:

"Of course, if one of us is coward enough to shirk the contest . . ."

He did not complete the sentence, but shrugged his shoulders expressive of contempt. The other side of the curtained doorway a little crowd had gradually assembled, attracted hither by the loud and angry voices which came from that small boudoir. Host and hostess had been missed from the reception rooms for some time; His Royal Highness, too, had not been seen for the last quarter of an hour. Like flies attracted by the light, one by one, or in small, isolated groups, some of Lady Blakeney's guests had found their way to the room adjoining the Royal presence.

As His Highness was standing in the doorway itself, no one could, of course, cross the threshold, but everyone could see into the room, and could take stock of the various actors in the little comedy. They were witnessing a quarrel between the French envoy and Sir Percy Blakeney, wherein the former was evidently in deadly earnest and the latter merely politely bored. Amused comments flew to and fro: laughter and a

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Babel of irresponsible chatter made an incessant chirruping accompaniment to the duologue between the two men.

But at this stage the Prince of Wales, who hitherto had seemingly kept aloof from the quarrel, suddenly stepped forward and abruptly interposed the weight of his authority and of his social position between the bickering adversaries.

"Tush, man!" he said impatiently, turning more especially towards Chauvelin, "you talk at random. Sir Percy Blakeney is an English gentleman, and the laws of this country do not admit of duelling, as you understand it in France; and I for one certainly could not allow . . ."

"Pardon, your Royal Highness," interrupted Sir Percy, with irresistible bonhomie, "your Highness does not understand the situation. My engaging friend here does not propose that I should transgress the laws of this country, but that I should go over to France with him, and fight him there, where duelling and . . . er . . . other little matters of that sort are allowed."

"Yes! quite so!" rejoined the Prince. "I understand M. Chauvelin's desire. . . . But what about you, Blakeney?"

"Oh!" replied Sir Percy lightly, "I have accepted his challenge, of course!"