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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XII. Time-place-conditions

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CHAPTER XII.

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

IT would be very difficult indeed to say why—at Blakeney's lightly-spoken words—an immediate silence should have fallen upon all those present. All the actors in the little drawing-room drama, who had played their respective parts so unerringly up to now, had paused awhile, just as if an invisible curtain had come down, marking the end of a scene, and the interval during which the players might recover strength and energy to resume their rôles. The Prince of Wales as foremost spectator said nothing for the moment, and, beyond the doorway, the audience there assembled seemed suddenly to be holding its breath, waiting—eager, expectant, palpitating—for what would follow now.

Only here and there the gentle frou-frou of a silk skirt, the rhythmic flutter of a fan, broke those few seconds' deadly, stony silence.

Yet it all was simple enough. A fracas between two ladies, the gentlemen interposing, a few words of angry expostulation, then the inevitable suggestion of Bel-

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

gium or of some other country where the childish and barbarous custom of settling such matters with a couple of swords had not been as yet systematically stamped out.

The whole scene—with but slight variations—had occurred scores of times in London drawing-rooms. English gentlemen had, scores of times, crossed the Channel for the purpose of settling similar quarrels in Continental fashion.

Why should the present situation appear so abnormal? Sir Percy Blakeney—an accomplished gentleman—was past master in the art of fence, and looked more than a match in strength and dexterity for the meagre, sable-clad little opponent who had so summarily challenged him to cross over to France, in order to fight a duel.

But somehow everyone had a feeling at this moment that this proposed duel would be unlike any other combat ever fought between two antagonists. Perhaps it was the white, absolutely stony and unexpressive face of Marguerite which suggested a latent tragedy; perhaps it was the look of unmistakable horror in Juliette's eyes, or that of triumph in those of Chauvelin, or even that certain something in His Royal Highness' face, which seemed to imply that the Prince, careless man of the world as he was, would have given much to prevent this particular meeting from taking place.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that a certain wave of electrical excitement swept over the little crowd assembled there, the while the chief actor in the little drama, the inimitable dandy, Sir Percy Blakeney himself, appeared deeply engrossed in

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

removing a speck of powder from the wide black satin ribbon which held his gold-rimmed eyeglass.

“Gentlemen!” said His Royal Highness suddenly, “we are forgetting the ladies. My lord Hastings,” he added, turning to one of the gentlemen who stood close to him, “I pray you to remedy this unpardonable neglect. Men’s quarrels are not fit for ladies’ dainty ears.”

Sir Percy looked up from his absorbing occupation. His eyes met those of his wife; she was like a marble statue, hardly conscious of what was going on round her. But he, who knew every emotion which swayed that ardent and passionate nature, guessed that beneath that stony calm there lay a mad, almost unconquerable impulse; and that was to shout to all these puppets here the truth, the awful, the unanswerable truth, to tell them what this challenge really meant; a trap wherein one man, consumed with hatred and desire for revenge, hoped to entice a brave and fearless foe into a death-dealing snare.

Full well did Percy Blakeney guess that for the space of one second his most cherished secret hovered upon his wife’s lips, one turn of the balance of Fate, one breath from the mouth of an unseen sprite, and Marguerite was ready to shout:

“Do not allow this monstrous thing to be! The Scarlet Pimpernel, whom you all admire for his bravery, and love for his daring, stands before you now, face to face with his deadliest enemy, who is here to lure him to his doom!”

For that momentous second, therefore, Percy Blakeney held his wife’s gaze with the magnetism of his

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

own; all there was in him of love, of entreaty, of trust, and of command went out to her through that look with which he kept her eyes riveted upon his face.

Then he saw the rigidity of her attitude relax. She closed her eyes in order to shut out the whole world from her suffering soul. She seemed to be gathering all the mental force of which her brain was capable for one great effort of self-control. Then she took Juliette's hand in hers, and turned to go out of the room; the gentlemen bowed as she swept past them, her rich silken gown making a soft hush-sh-sh as she went. She nodded to some, curtsied to the Prince, and had at the last moment the supreme courage and pride to turn her head once more towards her husband, in order to re-assure him finally that his secret was as safe with her now, in this hour of danger, as it had been in the time of triumph.

She smiled and passed out of his sight, preceded by Désirée Candeille, who, escorted by one of the gentlemen, had become singularly silent and subdued.

In the little room now there only remained a few men. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had taken the precaution of closing the door after the ladies had gone.

Then His Royal Highness turned once more to Monsieur Chauvelin and said with an obvious show of indifference:

"Faith, Monsieur! meseems we are all enacting a farce, which can have no final act. I vow that I cannot allow my friend Blakeney to go over to France at your bidding. Your government now will not allow my father's subjects to land on your shores

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

without a special passport, and then only for a specific purpose."

"La, your Royal Highness," interposed Sir Percy, "I pray you have no fear for me on that score. . . . My engaging friend here has—an I mistake not—a passport ready for me in the pocket of his sable-hued coat, and as we are hoping effectually to spit one another over there . . . gadzooks! but there's the specific purpose. . . . Is it not true, sir," he added, turning once more to Chauvelin, "that in the pocket of that exquisitely-cut coat of yours you have a passport—name in blank perhaps—which you had specially designed for me?"

It was so carelessly, so pleasantly said, that no one save Chauvelin guessed the real import of Sir Percy's words. Chauvelin, of course, knew their inner meaning: he understood that Blakeney wished to convey to him the fact that he was well aware that the whole scene to-night had been pre-arranged, and that it was willingly and with eyes wide open that he walked into the trap which the revolutionary patriot had so carefully laid for him.

"The passport will be forthcoming in due course, sir," retorted Chauvelin evasively, "when our seconds have arranged all formalities."

"Seconds be demmed, sir," rejoined Sir Percy placidly. "You do not propose, I trust, that we travel a whole caravan to France?"

"Time, place, and conditions must be settled, Sir Percy," replied Chauvelin; "you are too accomplished a cavalier, I feel sure, to wish to arrange such formalities yourself."

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

"Nay! neither you nor I, Monsieur . . . er . . . Chauvelin," quoth Sir Percy blandly, "could, I own, settle such things with persistent good-humour; and good-humour in such cases is the most important of all formalities. Is it not so?"

"Certainly, Sir Percy."

"As for seconds, perish the thought! One second only, I entreat, and that one a lady—the most adorable—the most detestable—the most true—the most fickle amidst all her charming sex. . . . Do you agree, sir?"

"You have not told me her name, Sir Percy?"

"Chance, Monsieur, Chance. . . . With His Royal Highness' permission, let the wilful jade decide."

"I do not understand."

"Three throws of the dice, Monsieur. . . . Time. . . . Place. . . . Conditions, you said—three throws and the winner names them. . . . Do you agree?"

Chauvelin hesitated. Sir Percy's bantering mood did not quite fit in with his own elaborate plans; moreover, the ex-ambassador feared a pitfall of some sort, and did not quite like to trust to this arbitration of the dice-box.

He turned, quite involuntarily, in appeal to the Prince of Wales and the other gentlemen present.

But the Englishman of those days was a born gambler. He lived with the dice-box in one pocket and a pack of cards in the other. The Prince himself was no exception to this rule, and the first gentleman in England was the most avowed worshipper of Hazard in the land.

"Chance, by all means," quoth His Highness gaily.

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

“Chance! Chance!” repeated the others eagerly.

In the midst of so hostile a crowd, Chauvelin felt it unwise to resist. Moreover, one second's reflection had already assured him that this throwing of the dice could not seriously interfere with the success of his plans. If the meeting took place at all—and Sir Percy now had gone too far to draw back—then of necessity it would have to take place in France.

The question of time and conditions of the fight, which at best would be only a farce—only a means to an end—could not be of paramount importance.

Therefore he shrugged his shoulders with well-marked indifference, and said lightly:

“As you please.”

There was a small table in the centre of the room with a settee and two or three chairs arranged close to it. Around this table now an eager little group had congregated: the Prince of Wales in the forefront, unwilling to interfere, scarce knowing what madcap plans were floating through Blakeney's adventurous brain, but excited in spite of himself at this momentous game of hazard, the issues of which seemed so nebulous, so vaguely fraught with dangers. Close to him were Sir Andrew Foulkes, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Lord Grenville, and perhaps a half score gentlemen, young men about town mostly, gay and giddy butterflies of fashion, who did not even attempt to seek, in this strange game of chance, any hidden meaning save that it was one of Blakeney's irresponsible pranks.

And in the centre of the compact group, Sir Percy Blakeney, in his gorgeous suit of shimmering white

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

satin, one knee bent upon a chair, and leaning with easy grace—dice-box in hand—across the small gilt-legged table; beside him ex-Ambassador Chauvelin, standing with arms folded behind his back, watching every movement of his brilliant adversary, like some dark-plumaged hawk hovering near a bird of paradise.

“Place first, Monsieur?” suggested Sir Percy.

“As you will, sir,” assented Chauvelin.

He took up a dice-box which one of the gentlemen handed to him, and the two men threw.

“‘Tis mine, Monsieur,” said Blakeney carelessly, “mine to name the place where shall occur the historic encounter, ‘twixt the busiest man in France and the most idle fop that e'er disgraced these three kingdoms. . . . Just for the sake of argument, sir, what place would you suggest?”

“Oh! the exact spot is immaterial, Sir Percy,” replied Chauvelin coldly, “the whole of France stands at your disposal.”

“Aye! I thought as much, but could not be quite sure of such boundless hospitality,” retorted Blakeney imperturbably.

“Do you care for the woods around Paris, sir?”

“Too far from the coast, sir. I might be seasick crossing over the Channel, and glad to get the business over as soon as possible. . . . No, not Paris, sir—rather let us say Boulogne. . . . Pretty little place, Boulogne . . . do you not think so . . .?”

“Undoubtedly, Sir Percy.”

“Then Boulogne it is . . . the ramparts, an you will, on the south side of the town.”

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

"As you please," rejoined Chauvelin drily. "Shall we thrown again?"

A murmur of merriment had accompanied this brief colloquy between the adversaries, and Blakeney's bland sallies were received with shouts of laughter. Now the dice rattled again, and once more the two men threw.

"'Tis yours this time, Monsieur Chauvelin," said Blakeney, after a rapid glance at the dice. "See how evenly Chance favours us both. Mine, the choice of place . . . admirably done you'll confess. . . . Now yours the choice of time. I wait upon your pleasure, sir. . . . The southern ramparts at Boulogne —when?"

"The fourth day from this, sir, at the hour when the Cathedral bell chimes the evening Angelus," came Chauvelin's ready reply.

"Nay! but methought that your demmed government had abolished Cathedrals, and bells and chimes. . . . The people of France have now to go to hell their own way . . . for the way to heaven has been barred by the National Convention. . . . Is that not so? . . . Methought the Angelus was forbidden to be rung."

"Not at Boulogne, I think, Sir Percy," retorted Chauvelin drily, "and I'll pledge you my word that the evening Angelus shall be rung that night."

"At what hour is that, sir?"

"One hour after sundown."

"But why four days after this? Why not two or three?"

"I might have asked, why the southern ramparts?

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

Sir Percy ; why not the western ? I chose the fourth day—does it not suit you ?" asked Chauvelin ironically.

" Suit me ! Why, sir, nothing could suit me better," rejoined Blakeney with his pleasant laugh. " Zounds ! but I call it marvellous . . . demmed marvellous. . . . I wonder now," he added blandly, " what made you think of the Angelus ? "

Everyone laughed at this, a little irreverently perhaps.

" Ah ! " continued Blakeney gaily, " I remember now. . . . Faith ! to think that I was nigh forgetting that when last you and I met, sir, you had just taken or were about to take Holy Orders. . . . Ah ! how well the thought of the Angelus fits in with your clerical garb. . . . I recollect that the latter was mightily becoming to you, sir. . . . "

" Shall we proceed to settle the conditions of the fight, Sir Percy," said Chauvelin, interrupting the flow of his antagonist's gibes, and trying to disguise his irritation beneath a mask of impassive reserve.

" The choice of weapons, you mean," here interposed His Royal Highness ; " but I thought that swords had already been decided on."

" Quite so, your Highness," assented Blakeney, " but there are various little matters in connection with this momentous encounter which are of vast importance. . . . Am I not right, Monsieur ? . . . Gentlemen, I appeal to you. . . . Faith ! one never knows. . . . My engaging opponent here might desire that I should fight him in green socks, and I that he should wear a scarlet flower in his coat."

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

“ The Scarlet Pimpernel, Sir Percy ? ”

“ Why not, Monsieur ? It would look so well in your buttonhole, against the black of the clerical coat, which I understand you sometimes affect in France . . . and when it is withered and quite dead you would find that it would leave an overpowering odour in your nostrils, far stronger than that of incense.”

There was general laughter after this. The hatred which every member of the French revolutionary government—including, of course, ex-Ambassador Chauvelin—bore to the national hero was well known.

“ The conditions then, Sir Percy,” said Chauvelin, without seeming to notice the taunt conveyed in Blakeney’s last words. “ Shall we throw again ? ”

“ After you, sir,” acquiesced Sir Percy.

For the third and last time the two opponents rattled the dice-box and threw. Chauvelin was now absolutely unmoved. These minor details quite failed to interest him. What mattered the conditions of the fight which was only intended as a bait with which to lure his enemy in the open. The hour and place were decided on, and Sir Percy would not fail to come. Chauvelin knew enough of his opponent’s boldly adventurous spirit not to feel in the least doubtful on that point. Even now, as he gazed with grudging admiration at the massive, well-knit figure of his arch-enemy, noted the thin nervy hands and square jaw, the low, broad forehead, and deep-set half-veiled eyes, he knew that in this matter wherein Percy Blakeney was obviously playing with his very

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

life, the only emotion that really swayed him at this moment was his passionate love of adventure.

The ruling passion strong in death!

Yes! Sir Percy would be on the southern ramparts of Boulogne one hour after sunset on the day named, trusting, no doubt, in his usual marvellous good-fortune, his own presence of mind and his great physical and mental strength, to escape from the trap into which he was so ready to walk.

That remained beyond a doubt! Therefore, what mattered details?

But, even at this moment, Chauvelin had already resolved on one great thing: namely, that on that eventful day nothing whatever should be left to Chance; he would meet his cunning enemy not only with cunning but also with power, and if the entire force of the Republican army then available in the north of France had to be requisitioned for the purpose, the ramparts of Boulogne would be surrounded and no chance of escape left for the daring Scarlet Pimpernel.

His wave of meditation, however, was here abruptly stemmed by Blakeney's pleasant voice.

"Lud! Monsieur Chauvelin," he said, "I fear me your luck has deserted you. Chance, as you see, has turned to me once more."

"Then it is for you, Sir Percy," rejoined the Frenchman, "to name the conditions under which we are to fight."

"Ah! that is so, is it not, Monsieur?" quoth Sir Percy lightly. "By my faith! I'll not plague you with formalities. . . . We'll fight with our coats on if it

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

be cold, in our shirt-sleeves if it be sultry. . . . I'll not demand either green socks or scarlet ornaments. I'll even try and be serious for the space of two minutes, sir, and confine my whole attention—the product of my infinitesimal brain—to thinking out some pleasant detail for this duel, which might be acceptable to you. Thus, sir, the thought of weapons springs to my mind. . . . Swords, you said, I think. Sir! I will e'en restrict my choice of conditions to that of the actual weapons with which we are to fight. . . . Ffoulkes, I pray you," he added, turning to his friend, "the pair of swords which lie across the top of my desk at this moment. . . ."

"We'll not ask a menial to fetch them, eh, Monsieur?" he continued gaily, as Sir Andrew Ffoulkes at a sign from him had quickly left the room. "What need to bruit our pleasant quarrel abroad? You will like the weapons, sir, and you shall have your own choice from the pair. . . . You are a fine fencer, I feel sure . . . and you shall decide if a scratch or two or a more serious wound shall be sufficient to avenge Mademoiselle Candeille's wounded vanity."

Whilst he prattled so gaily on, there was dead silence among all those present. The Prince had his shrewd eyes steadily fixed upon him, obviously wondering what this seemingly irresponsible adventurer held at the back of his mind. There is no doubt that everyone felt oppressed, and that a strange murmur of anticipatory excitement went round the little room, when, a few seconds later, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes returned, with two sheathed swords in his hand.

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

Blakeney took them from his friend and placed them on the little table in front of ex-Ambassador Chauvelin. The spectators strained their necks to look at the two weapons. They were exactly similar one to the other: both encased in plain black leather sheaths, with steel ferrules polished to shine like silver; the handles, too, were of plain steel, with just the grip fashioned in a twisted basket pattern of the same highly-tempered metal.

"What think you of these weapons, Monsieur?" asked Blakeney, who was carelessly leaning against the back of a chair.

Chauvelin took up one of the two swords, and slowly drew it from out its scabbard, carefully examining the brilliant, narrow steel blade as he did so.

"A little old-fashioned in style and make, Sir Percy," he said, closely imitating his opponent's easy demeanour, "a trifle heavier, perhaps, than we in France have been accustomed to lately, but, nevertheless, a beautifully-tempered piece of steel."

"Of a truth there's not much the matter with the tempering, Monsieur," quoth Blakeney, "the blades were fashioned at Toledo, just two hundred years ago."

"Ah! here I see an inscription," said Chauvelin, holding the sword close to his eyes, the better to see the minute letters engraved in the steel.

"The name of the original owner. I myself bought them—when I travelled in Italy—from one of his descendants."

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

“Lorenzo Giovanni Cenci,” said Chauvelin, spelling the Italian names quite slowly.

“The greatest blackguard that ever trod this earth. You, no doubt, Monsieur, know his history better than we do. Rapine, theft, murder, nothing came amiss to Signor Lorenzo . . . neither the deadly drug in the cup nor the poisoned dagger.”

He had spoken lightly, carelessly, with that same tone of easy banter, which he had not forsaken throughout the evening, and the same drawly manner, which was habitual to him. But at these last words of his, Chauvelin gave a visible start, and then abruptly replaced the sword—which he had been examining—upon the table.

He threw a quick, suspicious glance at Blakeney, who, leaning back against the chair and one knee resting on the cushioned seat, was idly toying with the other blade, the exact pair to the one which the ex-ambassador had so suddenly put down.

“Well, Monsieur,” quoth Sir Percy, after a slight pause, and meeting with a swift glance of lazy irony his opponent’s fixed gaze. “Are you satisfied with the weapons? Which of the two shall be yours, and which mine?”

“Of a truth, Sir Percy. . . .” murmured Chauvelin still hesitating.

“Nay, Monsieur,” interrupted Blakeney with pleasant bonhomie, “I know what you would say . . . of a truth, there is no choice between this pair of perfect twins: one is as exquisite as the other. . . . And yet you must take one and I the other . . . this or that, whichever you prefer. . . . You shall take it home

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

with you to-night and practise thrusting at a haystack or at a bobbin. . . . The sword is yours to command until you have used it against my unworthy person . . . yours until you bring it out four days hence—on the southern ramparts of Boulogne, when the Cathedral bells chime the evening Angelus; then you shall cross it against its faithless twin. . . . There, Monsieur—they are of equal length . . . of equal strength and temper . . . a perfect pair. . . . Yet I pray you choose."

He took up both the swords in his hands, and carefully balancing them by the extreme tip of their steel-bound scabbards, he held them out towards the Frenchman. Chauvelin's eyes were fixed upon him, and he from his towering height was looking down at the little sable-clad figure before him.

The Terrorist seemed uncertain what to do. Though he was one of those men who, by the force of their intellect, the strength of their enthusiasm, the power of their cruelty, had built a new anarchical France, had overturned a throne and murdered a king, yet now, face to face with this affected fop, this lazy and debonnair adventurer, he hesitated—trying in vain to read what was going on behind that low, smooth forehead or within the depths of those lazy, blue eyes.

He would have given several years of his life at this moment for one short glimpse into the innermost brain cells of this daring mind, to see the man start, quiver but for the fraction of a second, betray himself by a tremor of the eyelid. What counter-plan was lurking in Percy Blakeney's head, as he offered to his

TIME—PLACE—CONDITIONS.

opponent the two swords, which had once belonged to Lorenzo Cenci?

Did any thought of foul play, of dark and deadly poisonings linger in the fastidious mind of this accomplished English gentleman?

Surely not!

Chauvelin tried to chide himself for such fears. It seemed madness even to think of Italian poisons, of the Cencis or the Borgias in the midst of this brilliantly-lighted English drawing-room.

But because he was above all a diplomatist, a fencer with words and with looks, the envoy of France determined to know, to probe, and to read. He forced himself once more to careless laughter and nonchalance of manner and schooled his lips to smile up with gentle irony at the good-humoured face of his arch-enemy.

He tapped one of the swords with his long-pointed finger.

"Is this the one you choose, sir?" asked Blakeney.

"Nay! which do you advise, Sir Percy?" replied Chauvelin lightly. "Which of those two blades think you is most like to hold after two hundred years the poison of the Cenci?"

But Blakeney neither started nor winced. He broke into a laugh, his own usual pleasant laugh, half shy and somewhat inane, then said in tones of lively astonishment:

"Zounds! sir, but you are full of surprises. . . . Faith! I never would have thought of that. . . . Marvellous I call it. . . . demmed marvellous. . . . What say you, gentlemen? . . . Your Royal Highness, what

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

think you? . . . Is not my engaging friend here of a most original turn of mind. . . . Will you have this sword or that, Monsieur? . . . Nay, I must insist—else we shall weary our friends if we hesitate too long. . . . This one, then, sir, since you have chosen it," he continued, as Chauvelin finally took one of the swords in his hand. "And now for a bowl of punch. . . . Nay, Monsieur, 'twas demmed smart what you said just now. . . . I must insist on your joining us in a bowl. . . . Such wit as yours, Monsieur, must need whetting at times. . . . I pray you repeat that same sally again. . . ."

Then, finally turning to the Prince and to his friends, he added :

"And after that bowl, gentlemen, shall we rejoin the ladies?"