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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XV. Farewell

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CHAPTER XV.

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AS she neared the terrace, she became conscious of several forms moving about at the foot of the steps, some few feet below where she was standing. Soon she saw the glimmer of lanthorns, heard whispering voices, and the lapping of the water against the side of a boat.

Anon a figure, laden with cloaks and sundry packages passed down the steps close beside her. Even in the darkness Marguerite recognised Benyon, her husband's confidential valet. Without a moment's hesitation, she flew along the terrace towards the wing of the house occupied by Sir Percy. She had not gone far before she discerned his tall figure walking leisurely along the path which here skirted part of the house.

He had on his large caped coat, which was thrown open in front, displaying a grey travelling suit of fine cloth; his hands were as usual buried in the pockets

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of his breeches, and on his head he wore the folding chapeau-bras which he habitually affected.

Before she had time to think, or to realise that he was going, before she could utter one single word, she was in his arms, clinging to him with passionate intensity, trying in the gloom to catch every expression of his eyes, every quiver of the face now bent down so close to her.

“Percy, you cannot go . . . you cannot go! . . .” she pleaded.

She had felt his strong arms closing round her, his lips seeking hers, her eyes, her hair, her clinging hands, which dragged at his shoulders in a wild agony of despair.

“If you really loved me, Percy,” she murmured, “you would not go, you would not go. . . .”

He would not trust himself to speak; it well-nigh seemed as if his sinews cracked with the violent effort at self-control. Oh! how she loved him, when she felt in him the passionate lover, the wild, untamed creature that he was at heart, on whom the frigid courtliness of manner sat but as a thin veneer. This was his own real personality, and there was little now of the elegant and accomplished gentleman of fashion, schooled to hold every emotion in check, to hide every thought, every desire save that for amusement or for display.

She—feeling her power and his weakness now—gave herself wholly to his embrace, not grudging one single, passionate caress, yielding her lips to him, the while she murmured:

“You cannot go . . . you cannot . . . why should

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you go? . . . It is madness to leave me. . . . I cannot let you go. . . .”

Her arms clung tenderly round him, her voice was warm and faintly shaken with suppressed tears, and as he wildly murmured: “Don’t! for pity’s sake!” she almost felt that her love would be triumphant.

“For pity’s sake, I’ll go on pleading, Percy!” she whispered; “oh! my love, my dear! do not leave me! . . . we have scarce had time to savour our happiness . . . we have such arrears of joy to make up. . . . Do not go, Percy . . . there’s so much I want to say to you. . . . Nay! you shall not! you shall not!” she added with sudden vehemence. “Look me straight in the eyes, my dear, and tell me if you can leave me now?”

He did not reply, but, almost roughly, he placed his hand over her tear-dimmed eyes, which were turned up to his in an agony of tender appeal. Thus he blindfolded her with that wild caress. She should not see—no, not even she!—that for the space of a few seconds stern manhood was well-nigh vanquished by the magic of her love.

All that was most human in him, all that was weak in this strong and untamed nature, cried aloud for peace and luxury and idleness: for long summer afternoons spent in lazy content, for the companionship of horses and dogs and of flowers, with no thought or cares save those for the next evening’s gavotte, no graver occupation save that of sitting at *her* feet.

And during these few seconds, whilst his hand lay across her eyes, the lazy, idle fop of fashionable London was fighting a hand to hand fight with the

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bold leader of a band of adventurers: and his own passionate love for his wife ranged itself with fervent intensity on the side of his weaker self. Forgotten were the horrors of the guillotine, the calls of the innocent, the appeal of the helpless, forgotten the daring adventures, the excitements, the hair's-breadth escapes: for those few seconds, heavenly in themselves, he only remembered her—his wife—her beauty and her tender appeal to him.

She would have pleaded again, for she felt that she was winning in this fight: her instinct—that unerring instinct of the woman who loves and feels herself beloved—told her that for the space of an infinitesimal fraction of time, his iron will was inclined to bend; but he checked her pleading with a kiss.

Then there came the change.

Like a gigantic wave carried inwards by the tide, his turbulent emotion seemed suddenly to shatter itself against a rock of self-control. Was it a call from the boatmen below? a distant scrunching of feet upon the gravel?—who knows, perhaps only a sigh in the midnight air, a ghostly summons from the land of dreams that recalled him to himself.

Even as Marguerite was still clinging to him, with the ardent fervour of her own passion, she felt the rigid tension of his arms relax, the power of his embrace weaken, the wild love-light become dim in his eyes.

He kissed her fondly, tenderly, and with infinite gentleness smoothed away the little damp curls from her brow. There was a wistfulness now in his caress, and in his kiss there was the finality of a long farewell.

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“ ‘Tis time I went,” he said, “ or we shall miss the tide.”

These were the first coherent words he had spoken since first she had met him here in this lonely part of the garden, and his voice was perfectly steady, conventional, and cold. An icy pang shot through Marguerite’s heart. It was as if she had been abruptly wakened from a beautiful dream.

“ You are not going, Percy! ” she murmured, and her own voice now sounded hollow and forced. “ Oh! if you loved me you would not go! ”

“ If I loved you! ”

Nay! in this at least there was no dream! no coldness in his voice when he repeated those words with such a sigh of tenderness, such a world of longing, that the bitterness of her great pain vanished, giving place to tears. He took her hand in his. The passion was momentarily conquered, forced within his innermost soul, by his own alter ego, that second personality in him, the cold-blooded and coolly-calculating adventurer who juggled with his life and tossed it recklessly upon the sea of chance ‘twixt a doggrel and a smile. But the tender love lingered on, fighting the enemy a while longer, the wistful desire was there for her kiss, the tired longing for the exquisite repose of her embrace.

He took her hand in his, and bent his lips to it, and with the warmth of his kiss upon it, she felt a moisture like a tear.

“ I must go, dear,” he said after a little while.

“ Why? Why? ” she repeated obstinately. “ Am I nothing, then? Is my life of no account? My

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sorrows? My fears? My misery? Oh!" she added, with vehement bitterness, "why should it always be others? What are others to you and to me, Percy? . . . Are we not happy here? . . . Have you not fulfilled to its uttermost that self-imposed duty to people who can be nothing to us. . . . Is not your life ten thousand times more precious to me than the lives of ten thousand others?"

Even through the darkness, and because his face was so close to hers, she could see a quaint little smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

"Nay, m'dear," he said gently, "'tis not ten thousand lives that call to me to-day . . . only one at best. . . . Don't you hate to think of that poor little old curé sitting in the midst of his ruined pride and hopes: the jewels so confidently entrusted to his care stolen from him, he waiting, perhaps, in his little presbytery for the day when those brutes will march him to prison and to death. . . . Nay! I think a little sea voyage and English country air would suit the Abbé Fouquet, m'dear, and I only mean to ask him to cross the Channel with me? . . ."

"Percy!" she pleaded.

"Oh! I know! I know!" he rejoined with that short deprecatory sigh of his, which seemed always to close any discussion between them on that point, "you are thinking of that absurd duel. . . ." He laughed lightly, good-humouredly, and his eyes gleamed with merriment.

"La, m'dear!" he said gaily, "will you not reflect a moment? Could I refuse the challenge before His Royal Highness and the ladies? I couldn't. . . .

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Faith! that was it . . . Just a case of couldn't . . . Fate did it all . . . the quarrel . . . my interference, the challenge . . . *He* had planned it all, of course. . . . Let us own that he is a brave man, seeing that he and I are not even yet for that beating he gave me on the Calais cliffs."

"Yes! he has planned it all," she retorted vehemently. "The quarrel to-night, your journey to France, your meeting with him face to face at a given hour and place where he can most readily, most easily close the death-trap upon you."

This time he broke into a laugh. A good, hearty laugh, full of the joy of living, of the madness and intoxication of a bold adventure, a laugh that had not one particle of anxiety or of tremor in it.

"Nay! m'dear!" he said, "but your ladyship is astonishing. . . . Close a death-trap upon your humble servant? . . . Nay! the governing citizens of France will have to be very active and mighty wide-awake ere they succeed in stealing a march on me. . . . Zounds! but we'll give them an exciting chase this time. . . . Nay, little woman, do not fear!" he said with sudden infinite gentleness; "those demmed murderers have not got me yet."

Oh! how often she had fought with him thus: with him, the adventurer, the part of his dual nature that was her bitter enemy, and which took him, the lover, away from her side. She knew so well the finality of it all, the amazing hold which that unconquerable desire for these mad adventures had upon him. Impulsive, ardent as she was, Marguerite felt in her very soul an overwhelming fury against herself for her own

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weakness, her own powerlessness in the face of that which for ever threatened to ruin her life and her happiness.

Yes! and his also! for he loved her! he loved her! he loved her! the thought went on hammering in her mind, for she knew of its great truth. He loved her and went away! And she, poor puny weakling, was unable to hold him back; the tendrils which fastened his soul to hers were not so tenacious as those which made him cling to suffering humanity, over there in France, where men and women were in fear of death and torture, and looked upon the elusive and mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel as a heaven-born hero sent to save them from their doom. To them at these times his very heart-strings seemed to turn with unconquerable force, and when, with all the ardour of her own passion, she tried to play upon the cords of his love for her, he could not respond, for they—the strangers—had the stronger claim.

And yet through it all she knew that this love of humanity, this mad desire to serve and to help, in no way detracted from his love for her. Nay, it intensified it, made it purer and better, adding to the joy of perfect intercourse the poetic and subtle fragrance of ever-recurring pain.

But now at last she felt weary of the fight: her heart was aching, bruised and sore. An infinite fatigue seemed to weigh like lead upon her very soul. This seemed so different to any other parting, that had perforce been during the past year. The presence of Chauvelin in her house, the obvious planning of this departure for France, had filled her with a foreboding,

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nay, almost a certitude of a gigantic and deadly cataclysm.

Her senses began to reel; she seemed not to see anything very distinctly: even the loved form took on a strange and ghostlike shape. He now looked preternaturally tall, and there was a mist between her and him.

She thought that he spoke to her again, but she was not quite sure, for his voice sounded like some weird and mysterious echo. A bouquet of climbing heliotrope close by threw a fragrance into the evening air, which turned her giddy with its overpowering sweetness.

She closed her eyes, for she felt as if she must die, if she held them open any longer; and as she closed them it seemed to her as if he folded her in one last, long, heavenly embrace.

He felt her graceful figure swaying in his arms like a tall and slender lily bending to the wind. He saw that she was but half-conscious, and thanked heaven for this kindly solace to this heart-breaking farewell.

There was a sloping, mossy bank close by, there where the marble terrace yielded to the encroaching shrubbery: a tangle of pale pink monthly roses made a bower overhead. She was just sufficiently conscious to enable him to lead her to this soft green couch. There he laid her amongst the roses, kissed the dear, tired eyes, her hands, her lips, her tiny feet, and went.