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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XXII. Not death

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CHAPTER XXII.

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TWO days of agonising suspense, of alternate hope and despair, had told heavily on Marguerite Blakeney.

Her courage was still indomitable, her purpose firm and her faith secure, but she was without the slightest vestige of news, entirely shut off from the outside world, left to conjecture, to scheme, to expect and to despond alone.

The Abbé Fouquet had tried in his gentle way to be of comfort to her, and she in her turn did her very best not to render his position more cruel than it already was.

'A message came to him twice during those forty-eight hours from François and Félicité, a little note scribbled by the boy, or a token sent by the blind girl, to tell the abbé that the children were safe and well: that they would be safe and well so long as the citizeness with the name unknown remained closely guarded by him in room No. 6.

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When these messages came, the old man would sigh and murmur something about the good God: and hope, which perhaps had faintly risen in Marquerite's heart within the last hour or so, would once more sink back into the abyss of uttermost despair.

Outside the monotonous walk of the sentry sounded like the perpetual thud of a hammer beating upon her bruised temples.

"What's to be done? My God! what's to be done?"

Where was Percy now?

"How to reach him! . . . Oh, God! grant me light!"

The one real terror which she felt was that she would go mad.. Nay! that she was in a measure mad already. For hours now—or was it days? . . . or years? . . . she had heard nothing save that rhythmic walk of the sentinel, and the kindly, tremulous voice of the abbé whispering consolations, or murmuring prayers in her ears, she had seen nothing save that prison door of rough deal, painted a dull gray, with great old-fashioned lock, and hinges rusty with the damp of ages.

She had kept her eyes fixed on that door until they burned and ached with well-nigh intolerable pain; yet she felt that she could not look elsewhere, lest she missed the golden moment when the bolts would be drawn, and that dull, gray door would swing slowly on its rusty hinges.

Surely, surely, that was the commencement of madness!

Yet for Percy's sake, because he might want her,

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because he might have need of her courage and of her presence of mind, she tried to keep her wits about her. But it was difficult! oh! terribly difficult! especially when the shades of evening began to gather in, and peopled the squalid, white-washed room with innumerable, threatening ghouls.

Then when the moon came up, a silver ray crept in through the tiny window and struck full upon that gray door, making it look weird and spectral, like the entrance to a house of ghosts.

Even now, as there was a distinct sound of the pushing of bolts and bars, Marguerite thought that she was the prey of hallucinations. The Abbé Fouquet was sitting in the remote and darkest corner of the room, quietly telling his beads. His serene philosophy and gentle placidity could in no way be disturbed by the opening or shutting of a door, or by the bearer of good or evil tidings.

The room now seemed strangely gloomy and cavernous, with those deep, black shadows all around and that white ray of the moon which struck so weirdly on the door.

Marguerite shuddered with one of those unaccountable premonitions of something evil about to come, which oftentimes assail those who have a nervous and passionate temperament.

The door swung slowly open upon its hinges: there was a quick word of command, and the light of a small oil lamp struck full into the gloom. Vaguely Marguerite discerned a group of men, soldiers no doubt, for there was the glint of arms and the suggestion of tricolour cockades and scarves. One of the

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men was holding the lamp aloft, another took a few steps forward into the room. He turned to Marguerite, entirely ignoring the presence of the old priest, and addressed her peremptorily.

"Your presence is desired by the citizen governor," he said curtly; "stand up and follow me."

"Whither am I to go?" she asked.

"To where my men will take you. Now then, quick's the word. The citizen governor does not like to wait."

At a word of command from him, two more soldiers now entered the room and placed themselves one on each side of Marguerite, who, knowing that resistance was useless, had already risen and was prepared to go.

The abbé tried to utter a word of protest, and came quickly forward towards Marguerite, but he was summarily and very roughly pushed aside.

"Now then, calotin," said the first soldier with an oath, "this is none of your business. Forward! march!" he added, addressing his men, "and you, citizeness, will find it wiser to come quietly along and not to attempt any tricks with me, or the gag and manacles will have to be used."

But Marguerite had no intention of resisting. She was too tired even to wonder as to what they meant to do with her or whither they were going; she moved as in a dream and felt a hope within her that she was being led to death: summary executions were the order of the day, she knew that, and sighed for this simple solution of the awful problem which had been harassing her these past two days.

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She was being led along a passage, stumbling ever and anon as she walked, for it was but dimly lighted by the same little oil lamp, which one of the soldiers was carrying in front, holding it high up above his head: then they went down a narrow flight of stone steps, until she and her escort reached a heavy oak door.

A halt was ordered at this point: and the man in command of the little party pushed the door open and walked in. Marguerite caught sight of a room beyond, dark and gloomy-looking, as was her own prison cell. Somewhere on the left there was obviously a window; she could not see it, but guessed that it was there because the moon struck full upon the floor, ghostlike and spectral, well fitting in with the dreamlike state in which Marguerite felt herself to be.

In the centre of the room she could discern a table with a chair close beside it, also a couple of tallow-candles, which flickered in the draught caused, no doubt, by that open window which she could not see.

All these little details impressed themselves on Marguerite's mind, as she stood there, placidly waiting until she should once more be told to move along. The table, the chair, that unseen window, trivial objects though they were, assumed before her overwrought fancy an utterly disproportionate importance. She caught herself presently counting up the number of boards visible on the floor, and watching the smoke of the tallow-candles rising up towards the grimy ceiling.

After a few minutes' weary waiting, which seemed

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endless to Marguerite, there came a short word of command from within, and she was roughly pushed forward into the room by one of the men. The cool air of a late September's evening gently fanned her burning temples. She looked round her, and now perceived that some one was sitting at the table, the other side of the tallow-candles—a man, with head bent over a bundle of papers and shading his face against the light with his hand.

He rose as she approached, and the flickering flame of the candles played weirdly upon the slight, sable-clad figure, illumining the keen, ferret-like face, and throwing fitful gleams across the deep-set eyes and the narrow, cruel mouth.

It was Chauvelin.

Mechanically Marguerite took the chair which the soldier drew towards her, ordering her curtly to sit down. She seemed to have but little power to move. Though all her faculties had suddenly become preternaturally alert at sight of this man, whose very life now was spent in doing her the most grievous wrong that one human being can do to another, yet all these faculties were forcefully centred in the one mighty effort not to flinch before him, not to let him see for a moment that she was afraid.

She compelled her eyes to look at him fully and squarely, her lips not to tremble, her very heart to stop its wild, excited beating. She felt his keen eyes fixed intently upon her, but more in curiosity than in hatred or satisfied vengeance.

When she had sat down he came round the table and moved towards her. When he drew quite near,

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she instinctively recoiled. It had been an almost imperceptible action on her part, and certainly an involuntary one, for she did not wish to betray a single thought or emotion, until she knew what he wished to say.

But he had noted her movement—a sort of drawing up and stiffening of her whole person as he approached. He seemed pleased to see it, for he smiled sarcastically, but with evident satisfaction, and—as if his purpose was now accomplished—he immediately withdrew and went back to his former seat on the other side of the table.

After that he ordered the soldiers to go.

“But remain at attention outside, you and your men,” he added, “ready to enter if I call.”

It was Marguerite’s turn to smile at this obvious sign of a lurking fear on Chauvelin’s part, and a line of sarcasm and contempt curled her full lips.

The soldiers having obeyed, and the oak door having closed upon them, Marguerite was now alone with the man whom she hated and loathed beyond every living thing on earth.

She wondered when he would begin to speak and why he had sent for her. But he seemed in no hurry to begin. Still shading his face with his hand, he was watching her with utmost attention: she, on the other hand, was looking through and beyond him, with contemptuous indifference, as if his presence here did not interest her in the least.

She would give him no opening for this conversation which he had sought, and which she felt would prove either purposeless or else deeply wounding to

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her heart and to her pride. She sat, therefore, quite still with the flickering and yellow light fully illumining her delicate face, with its childlike curves, and delicate features, the noble, straight brow, the great blue eyes and halo of golden hair.

"My desire to see you here to-night must seem strange to you Lady Blakeney," said Chauvelin at last.

Then, as she did not reply, he continued, speaking quite gently, almost deferentially:

"There are various matters of grave importance, which the events of the next twenty-four hours will reveal to your ladyship, and believe me that I am actuated by motives of pure friendship towards you in this my effort to mitigate the unpleasantness of such news as you might hear to-morrow perhaps, by giving you due warning of what its nature might be."

She turned great questioning eyes upon him, and in their expression she tried to put all the contempt which she felt, all the bitterness, all the defiance and the pride.

He quietly shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah! I fear me," he said, "that your ladyship, as usual, doth me grievous wrong. It is but natural that you should misjudge me, yet, believe me . . ."

"A truce on this foolery, M. Chauvelin," she broke in, with sudden impatient vehemence, "pray, leave your protestations of friendship and courtesy alone, there is no one here to hear them. I pray you proceed with what you have to say."

"Ah!" It was a sigh of satisfaction on the part of Chauvelin. Her anger and impatience, even at this

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early stage of the interview, proved sufficiently that her icy restraint was only on the surface.

And Chauvelin always knew how to deal with vehemence. He loved to play with the emotions of a passionate fellow-creature: it was only the imperturbable calm of a certain enemy of his that was wont to shake his own impenetrable armour of reserve.

"As your ladyship desires," he said, with a slight and ironical bow of the head. "But before proceeding according to your wish, I am compelled to ask your ladyship just one question."

"And that is?"

"Have you reflected what your present position means to that inimitable prince of dandies, Sir Percy Blakeney?"

"Is it necessary for your present purpose, Monsieur, that you should mention my husband's name at all?" she asked.

"It is indispensable, fair lady," he replied suavely, "for is not the fate of your husband so closely intertwined with yours, that his actions will inevitably be largely influenced by your own?"

Marguerite gave a start of surprise, and as Chauvelin had paused she tried to read what hidden meaning lay behind these last words of his. Was it his intention then to propose some bargain, one of those terrible "either—ors" of which he seemed to possess the malignant secret? Oh! if that was so; if, indeed, he had sent for her in order to suggest one of those terrible alternatives of his, then—be it what it may, be it the wildest conception which the insane brain of a fiend could invent, she would accept it, so long as

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the man she loved were given one single chance of escape.

Therefore she turned to her arch-enemy in a more conciliatory spirit now, and even endeavoured to match her own diplomatic cunning against his.

"I do not understand," she said tentatively. "How can my actions influence those of my husband? I am a prisoner in Boulogne; he probably is not aware of that fact yet, and . . ."

"Sir Percy Blakeney may be in Boulogne at any moment now," he interrupted quietly. "An I mistake not, few places can offer such great attractions to that peerless gentleman of fashion than doth this humble provincial town of France just at this present.

. . . Hath it not the honour of harbouring Lady Blakeney within its gates? . . . And your ladyship may indeed believe me when I say, that the day that Sir Percy lands in our hospitable port, two hundred pairs of eyes will be fixed upon him, lest he should wish to quit it again."

"And if there were two thousand, sir," she said impulsively, "they would not stop his coming or going as he pleased."

"Nay, fair lady," he said, with a smile, "are you then endowing Sir Percy Blakeney with the attributes which, as popular fancy has it, belong exclusively to that mysterious English hero, the Scarlet Pimpernel?"

"A truce to your diplomacy, Monsieur Chauvelin," she retorted, goaded by his sarcasm; "why should we try to fence with one another? What was the object of your journey to England? of the farce which you

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enacted in my house, with the help of the woman Candeille? of that duel and that challenge, save that you desired to entice Sir Percy Blakeney to France?"

"And also his charming wife," he added, with an ironical bow.

She bit her lip and made no comment.

"Shall we say that I succeeded admirably?" he continued, speaking with persistent urbanity and calm, "and that I have strong cause to hope that that elusive Pimpernel will soon be a guest on our friendly shores? . . . There! you see I, too, have laid down the foils. . . . As you say, why should we fence? Your ladyship is now in Boulogne, soon Sir Percy will come to try and take you away from us, but, believe me, fair lady, that it would take more than the ingenuity and the daring of the Scarlet Pimpernel magnified a thousandfold to get him back to England again . . . unless . . ."

"Unless? . . ."

Marguerite held her breath. She felt now as if the whole universe must stand still during the next supreme moment, until she had heard what Chauvelin's next words would be.

There was to be an "unless" then? An "either—or" more terrible, no doubt, than the one he had formulated before her just a year ago.

Chauvelin, she knew, was pastmaster in the art of putting a knife at his victim's throat, and of giving it just the necessary twist with his cruel and relentless "unless"!

But she felt quite calm, because her purpose was resolute. There is no doubt that during this agonising

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moment of suspense she was absolutely firm in her determination to accept any and every condition, which Chauvelin would put before her as the price of her husband's safety. After all, these conditions, since he placed them before *her*, could but resolve themselves into questions of her own life as against her husband's.

With that unreasoning impulse, which was one of her most salient characteristics, she never paused to think that, to Chauvelin, her own life or death were only the means to the great end which he had in view: the complete annihilation of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

That end could only be reached by Percy Blakeney's death—not by her own.

Even now, as she was watching him with eyes glowing and lips tightly closed, lest a cry of impatient agony should escape her throat, he, like a snail that has shown its slimy horns too soon, and is not ready to face the enemy as yet, seemed suddenly to withdraw within his former shell of careless suavity. The earnestness of his tone vanished, giving place to light and easy conversation, just as if he were discussing social topics with a woman of fashion in a Paris drawing-room.

"Nay!" he said pleasantly, "is not your ladyship taking this matter in too serious a spirit? Of a truth, you repeated my innocent word 'unless,' even as if I were putting a knife at your dainty throat. Yet I meant naught that need disturb you yet. Have I not said that I am your friend? Let me try and prove it to you."

"You will find it a difficult task, Monsieur," she said drily.

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"Difficult tasks always have had a great fascination for your humble servant. May I try?"

"Certainly."

"Shall we then touch at the root of this delicate matter? Your ladyship, so I understand, is at this moment under the impression that I desire to encompass—shall I say? the death of an English gentleman for whom, believe me, I have the greatest respect. That is so, is it not?"

"What is so, M. Chauvelin?" she asked almost stupidly, for truly she had not even begun to grasp his meaning. "I do not understand."

"You think that I am at this moment taking measures for sending the Scarlet Pimpernel to the guillotine? Eh?"

"I do."

"Never was so great an error committed by a clever woman. Your ladyship must believe me when I say that the guillotine is the very last place in the world where I would wish to see that enigmatic and elusive personage."

"Are you trying to fool me, M. Chauvelin? If so, for what purpose? And why do you lie to me like that?"

"On my honour, 'tis the truth. The death of Sir Percy Blakeney—I may call him that, may I not—would ill suit the purpose which I have in view."

"What purpose? You must pardon me, Monsieur Chauvelin," she added with a quick, impatient sigh, "but of a truth, I am getting confused, and my wits must have become dull in the past few days. I pray you to add to your many protestations of friendship

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a little more clearness in your speech, and, if possible, a little more brevity. What, then, is the purpose which you had in view when you enticed my husband to come over to France?"

"My purpose was the destruction of the Scarlet Pimpernel, not the death of Sir Percy Blakeney. Believe me, I have a great regard for Sir Percy. He is a most accomplished gentleman, witty, brilliant, an inimitable dandy. Why should he not grace with his presence the drawing-rooms of London or of Brighton for many years to come?"

She looked at him with puzzled inquiry. For one moment the thought flashed through her mind that, after all, Chauvelin might be still in doubt as to the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel. . . . But no! that hope was madness. . . . It was preposterous and impossible. . . . But then, why? why? why? . . . Oh, God! for a little more patience!

"What I have just said may seem a little enigmatic to your ladyship," he continued blandly, "but surely so clever a woman as yourself, so great a lady as is the wife of Sir Percy Blakeney, Baronet, will be aware that there are other means of destroying an enemy than the taking of his life."

"For instance, Monsieur Chauvelin?"

"There is the destruction of his honour," he replied slowly.

A long, bitter laugh, almost hysterical in its loud outburst, broke from the very depths of Marguerite's convulsed heart.

"The destruction of his honour! . . . ha! ha! ha! ha! . . . of a truth, Monsieur Chauvelin, your inventive

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powers have led you beyond the bounds of dreamland! . . . Ha! ha! ha! ha! . . . It is in the land of madness that you are wandering, sir, when you talk in one breath of Sir Percy Blakeney and the possible destruction of his honour!"

But he remained apparently quite unruffled, and when her laughter had somewhat subsided, he said placidly:

"Perhaps! . . ."

Then he rose from his chair, and once more approached her. This time she did not shrink from him. The suggestion which he had made just now, this talk of attacking her husband's honour rather than his life seemed so wild and preposterous—the conception truly of a mind unhinged—that she looked upon it as a sign of extreme weakness on his part, almost as an acknowledgment of impotence.

But she watched him as he moved round the table more in curiosity now than in fright. He puzzled her, and she still had a feeling at the back of her mind that there must be something more definite and more evil lurking at the back of that tortuous brain.

"Will your ladyship allow me to conduct you to yonder window?" he said, "the air is cool, and what I have to say can best be done in sight of yonder sleeping city."

His tone was one of perfect courtesy, even of respectful deference, through which not the slightest trace of sarcasm could be discerned, and she, still actuated by curiosity and interest, not in any way by fear, quietly rose to obey him. Though she ignored the hand which he was holding out towards her, she

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followed him readily enough as he walked up to the window.

All through this agonising and soul-stirring interview she had felt heavily oppressed by the close atmosphere of the room, rendered nauseous by the evil smell of the smoky tallow-candles, which were left to spread their grease and smoke abroad unchecked. Once or twice she had gazed longingly towards the suggestion of pure air outside.

Chauvelin evidently had still much to say to her: the torturing, mental rack to which she was being subjected had not yet fully done its work. It still was capable of one or two turns, a twist or so which might succeed in crushing her pride and her defiance. Well! so be it! she was in the man's power: had placed herself therein through her own unreasoning impulse. This interview was but one of the many soul-agonies which she had been called upon to endure, and, if by submitting to it all she could in a measure mitigate her own faults and be of help to the man she loved, she would find the sacrifice small and the mental torture easy to bear.

Therefore, when Chauvelin beckoned to her to draw near, she went up to the window, and leaning her head against the deep stone embrasure, she looked out into the night.