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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XXV. The unexpected

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CHAPTER XXV.

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CHAUVELIN heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction when Collot d'Herbois finally left him to himself. He listened for awhile until the heavy footsteps died away in the distance, then leaning back in his chair, he gave himself over to the delights of the present situation.

Marguerite in his power. Sir Percy Blakeney compelled to treat for her rescue if he did not wish to see her die a miserable death.

"Aye! my elusive hero," he muttered to himself, "methinks that we shall be able to cry quits at last."

Outside everything had become still. Even the wind in the trees out there on the ramparts had ceased their melancholy moaning. The man was alone with his thoughts. He felt secure and at peace, sure of victory, content to await the events of the next twenty-four hours. The other side of the door, the guard, which he had picked out from amongst the more feeble and ill-fed garrison of the little city for atten-

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dance on his own person, were ranged ready to respond to his call.

"Dishonour and ridicule! Derision and scorn!" he murmured, gloating over the very sound of these words, which expressed all that he hoped to accomplish, "utter abjection, then perhaps a suicide's grave. . . ."

He loved the silence around him, for he could murmur these words and hear them echoing against the bare stone walls like the whisperings of all the spirits of hate which were waiting to lend him their aid.

How long he had remained thus absorbed in his meditations he could not afterwards have said; a minute or two perhaps at most, whilst he leaned back in his chair with eyes closed, savouring the sweets of his own thoughts, when suddenly the silence was interrupted by a loud and pleasant laugh and a drawly voice speaking in merry accents:

"The Lud love you, Monsieur Chaubertin! and pray how do you propose to accomplish all these pleasant things?"

In a moment Chauvelin was on his feet, and with eyes dilated, lips parted in awed bewilderment, he was gazing towards the open window, where, astride upon the sill, one leg inside the room, the other out, and with the moon shining full on his suit of delicate-coloured cloth, his wide-caped coat and elegant chapeau-bras, sat the imperturbable Sir Percy.

"I heard you muttering such pleasant words, Monsieur," continued Blakeney calmly, "that the temptation seized me to join in the conversation. A

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man talking to himself is ever in a sorry plight . . . he is either a madman or a fool. . . .”

He laughed his own quaint and inane laugh, and added, apologetically:

“Far be it from me, sir, to apply either epithet to you . . . demmed bad form calling another fellow names . . . just when he does not quite feel himself, eh? . . . You don't feel quite yourself, I fancy, just now . . . eh, Monsieur Chaubertin . . . er . . . beg pardon, Chauvelin? . . .”

He sat there quite comfortably, one slender hand resting on the gracefully-fashioned hilt of his sword—the sword of Lorenzo Cenci—the other holding up the gold-rimmed eyeglass, through which he was regarding his avowed enemy; he was dressed as for a ball, and his perpetually amiable smile lurked round the corners of his firm lips.

Chauvelin had undoubtedly for the moment lost his presence of mind. He did not even think of calling to his picked guard, so completely taken aback was he by this unforeseen move on the part of Sir Percy. Yet, obviously, he should have been ready for this eventuality. Had he not caused the town crier to loudly proclaim throughout the city that if *one* female prisoner escaped from Fort Gayole the entire able-bodied population of Boulogne would suffer.

The moment Sir Percy entered the gates of the town, he could not help but hear the proclamation, and hear at the same time that this one female prisoner who was so precious a charge was the wife of the English spy, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Moreover, was it not a fact that whenever

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or wherever the Scarlet Pimpernel was least expected, there and then would he surely appear? Having once realised that it was his wife who was incarcerated in Fort Gayole, was it not natural that he would go and prowl around the prison, and along the avenue on the summit of the southern ramparts, which was accessible to every passer-by? No doubt he had lain in hiding among the trees, had perhaps caught snatches of Chauvelin's recent talk with Collot.

Aye! it was all so natural, so simple! Strange that it should have been so unexpected!

Furious at himself for his momentary stupor, he now made a vigorous effort to face his impudent enemy with the same sang-froid of which the latter had so inexhaustible a fund.

He walked quietly towards the window, compelling his nerves to perfect calm and his mood to indifference. The situation had ceased to astonish him; already his keen mind had seen its possibilities, its grimness, and its humour, and he was quite prepared to enjoy these to the full.

Sir Percy now was dusting the sleeve of his coat with a lace-edged handkerchief, but just as Chauvelin was about to come near him, he stretched out one leg, turning the point of a dainty boot towards the ex-ambassador.

"Would you like to take hold of me by the leg, Monsieur Chaubertin?" he said gaily. "'Tis more effectual than a shoulder, and your picked guard of six stalwart fellows can have the other leg. . . . Nay! I pray you, sir, do not look at me like that. . . . I vow

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that it is myself and not my ghost. . . . But if you still doubt me, I pray you call the guard . . . ere I fly out again towards that fitful moon. . . .”

“Nay, Sir Percy,” said Chauvelin, with a steady voice, “I have no thought that you will take flight just yet. . . . Methinks you desire conversation with me, or you had not paid me so unexpected a visit.”

“Nay, sir, the air is too oppressive for lengthy conversation. . . . I was strolling along these ramparts, thinking of our pleasant encounter at the hour of the Angelus to-morrow . . . when this light attracted me. . . . I feared I had lost my way, and climbed the window to obtain information.”

“As to your way to the nearest prison cell, Sir Percy?” queried Chauvelin drily.

“As to anywhere, where I could sit more comfortably than on this demmed sill. . . . It must be very dusty, and I vow ’tis terribly hard. . . .”

“I presume, Sir Percy, that you did my colleague and myself the honour of listening to our conversation?”

“An you desired to talk secrets, Monsieur . . . er . . . Chaubertin . . . you should have shut this window . . . and closed this avenue of trees against the chance passer-by.”

“What we said was no secret, Sir Percy. It is all over the town to-night.”

“Quite so . . . you were only telling the devil your mind . . . eh?”

“I had also been having conversation with Lady Blakeney. . . . Did you hear any of that, sir?”

But Sir Percy had evidently not heard the question,

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for he seemed quite absorbed in the task of removing a speck of dust from his immaculate chapeau-bras.

"These hats are all the rage in England just now," he said airily, "but they have had their day, do you not think so, Monsieur? When I return to town, I shall have to devote my whole mind to the invention of a new headgear. . . ."

"When will you return to England, Sir Percy?" queried Chauvelin with good-natured sarcasm.

"At the turn of the tide to-morrow eve, Monsieur," replied Blakeney.

"In company with Lady Blakeney?"

"Certainly, sir . . . and yours, if you will honour us with your company."

"If you return to England to-morrow, Sir Percy, Lady Blakeney, I fear me, cannot accompany you."

"You astonish me, sir," rejoined Blakeney, with an exclamation of genuine and unaffected surprise. "I wonder, now, what would prevent her?"

"All those whose death would be the result of her flight, if she succeeded in escaping from Boulogne. . . ."

But Sir Percy was staring at him, with wide open eyes, expressive of utmost amazement.

"Dear, dear, dear . . . Lud! but that sounds most unfortunate. . . ."

"You have not heard of the measures which I have taken to prevent Lady Blakeney quitting this city without our leave?"

"No, Monsieur Chaubertin . . . no. . . . I have heard nothing . . ." rejoined Sir Percy blandly. "I lead a very retired life when I come abroad, and . . ."

"Would you wish to hear them now?"

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"Quite unnecessary, sir, I assure you . . . and the hour is getting late. . . ."

"Sir Percy, are you aware of the fact that unless you listen to what I have to say, your wife will be dragged before the Committee of Public Safety in Paris within the next twenty-four hours?" said Chauvelin firmly.

"What swift horses you must have, sir," quoth Blakeney pleasantly. "Lud! to think of it! . . . I always heard that these demmed French horses would never beat ours across country."

But Chauvelin now would not allow himself to be ruffled by Sir Percy's apparent indifference. Keen reader of emotions as he was, he had not failed to note a distinct change in the drawly voice, a sound of something hard and trenchant in the flippant laugh, ever since Marguerite's name was first mentioned. Blakeney's attitude was apparently as careless, as audacious as before, but Chauvelin's keen eyes had not missed the almost imperceptible tightening of the jaw and the rapid clenching of one hand on the sword hilt, even whilst the other toyed in graceful idleness with the filmy Mechlin lace cravat.

Sir Percy's head was well thrown back, and the pale rays of the moon caught the edge of the clear-cut profile, the low massive brow, the drooping lids through which the audacious plotter was lazily regarding the man who held not only his own life, but that of the woman who was infinitely dear to him, in the hollow of his hand.

"I am afraid, Sir Percy," continued Chauvelin drily, "that you are under the impression that bolts and bars

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will yield to your usual good luck, now that so precious a life is at stake as that of Lady Blakeney."

"I am a great believer in impressions, Monsieur Chauvelin."

"I told her just now that if she quitted Boulogne ere the Scarlet Pimpernel is in our hands, we should summarily shoot one member of every family in the town—the bread-winner."

"A pleasant conceit, Monsieur . . . and one that does infinite credit to your inventive faculties."

"Lady Blakeney, therefore, we hold safely enough," continued Chauvelin, who no longer heeded the mocking observations of his enemy, "as for the Scarlet Pimpernel. . . ."

"You have but to ring a bell, to raise a voice, and he, too, will be under lock and key within the next two minutes, eh? . . . Passons, Monsieur . . . you are dying to say something further. . . . I pray you proceed . . . your engaging countenance is becoming quite interesting in its seriousness."

"What I wish to say to you, Sir Percy, is in the nature of a proposed bargain."

"Indeed? . . . Monsieur, you are full of surprises . . . like a pretty woman. . . . And pray, what are the terms of this proposed bargain?"

"Your side of the bargain, Sir Percy, or mine? Which will you hear first?"

"Oh, yours, Monsieur . . . yours, I pray you. . . . Have I not said that you are like a pretty woman? . . . Place aux dames, sir! always!"

"My share of the bargain, sir, is simple enough: Lady Blakeney, escorted by yourself and any of your

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friends who might be in this city at the time, shall leave Boulogne harbour at sunset to-morrow, free and unmolested, if you on the other hand will do your share. . . .”

“I don't yet know what my share in this interesting bargain is to be, sir . . . but, for the sake of argument, let us suppose that I do not carry it out. . . . What then? . . .”

“Then, Sir Percy . . . putting aside for the moment the question of the Scarlet Pimpernel altogether . . . then, Lady Blakeney will be taken to Paris, and will be incarcerated in the prison of the Temple, lately vacated by Marie Antoinette—there she will be treated in exactly the same way as the ex-queen is now being treated in the Conciergerie. . . . Do you know what that means, Sir Percy? . . . It does not mean a summary trial and a speedy death, with the halo and glory of martyrdom thrown in . . . it means days, weeks, nay, months, perhaps, of misery and humiliation . . . it means, that, like Marie Antoinette, she will never be allowed solitude for one single instant of the day or night . . . it means the constant proximity of soldiers, drunk with cruelty and with hate . . . the insults, the shame. . . .”

“You hound! . . . you dog! . . . you cur! . . . do you not see that I must strangle you for this. . . .”

The attack had been so sudden and so violent that Chauvelin had not the time to utter the slightest call for help. But a second ago, Sir Percy Blakeney had been sitting on the window-sill, outwardly listening with perfect calm to what his enemy had to say; now, he was at the latter's throat, pressing with long and

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slender hands the breath out of the Frenchman's body, his usually placid face distorted into a mask of hate.

"You cur! . . . you cur! . . ." he repeated; "am I to kill you, or will you unsay those words?"

Then, suddenly, he relaxed his grip. The habits of a lifetime would not be gainsaid even now. A second ago his face had been livid with rage and hate, now a quick flush overspread it, as if he were ashamed of this loss of self-control. He threw the little Frenchman away from him like he would a beast which had snarled, and passed his hand across his brow.

"Lud forgive me!" he said quaintly, "I had almost lost my temper."

Chauvelin was not slow in recovering himself. He was plucky and alert, and his hatred for this man was so great that he had actually ceased to fear him. Now he quietly readjusted his cravat, made a vigorous effort to reconquer his breath, and said, firmly, as soon as he could contrive to speak at all:

"And if you did strangle me, Sir Percy, you would do yourself no good. The fate which I have mapped out for Lady Blakeney would then irrevocably be hers, for she is in our power, and none of my colleagues are disposed to offer you a means of saving her from it, as I am ready to do."

Blakeney was now standing in the middle of the room, with his hands buried in the pockets of his breeches, his manner and attitude once more calm, debonnair, expressive of lofty self-possession and of absolute indifference. He came quite close to the

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meagre, little figure of his exultant enemy, thereby forcing the latter to look up at him.

"Oh! . . . ah! . . . yes!" he said airily, "I had nigh forgotten . . . you were talking of a bargain . . . my share of it . . . eh? . . . Is it me you want? . . . Do you wish to see me in your Paris prisons? . . . I assure you, sir, that the propinquity of drunken soldiers may disgust me, but it would in no way disturb the equanimity of my temper."

"I am quite sure of that, Sir Percy—and I can but repeat what I had the honour of saying to Lady Blakeney just now—I do not desire the death of so accomplished a gentleman as yourself."

"Strange, Monsieur," retorted Blakeney, with a return of his accustomed flippancy. "Now I do desire your death very strongly indeed—there would be so much less vermin on the face of the earth. . . . But pardon me—I was interrupting you. . . . Will you be so kind as to proceed?"

Chauvelin had not winced at the insult. His enemy's attitude now left him completely indifferent. He had seen that self-possessed man of the world, that dainty and fastidious dandy, in the throes of an overmastering passion. He had very nearly paid with his life for the joy of having roused that supercilious and dormant lion. In fact, he was ready to welcome any insults from Sir Percy Blakeney now, since these would be only additional evidences that the Englishman's temper was not yet under control.

"I will try to be brief, Sir Percy," he said, setting himself the task of imitating his antagonist's affected manner. "Will you not sit down? . . . We must try

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and discuss these matters like two men of the world. . . . As for me, I am always happiest beside a board littered with papers. . . . I am not an athlete, Sir Percy . . . and serve my country with my pen rather than with my fists."

Whilst he spoke he had reached the table, and once more took the chair whereon he had been sitting lately, when he dreamed the dreams which were so near realisation now. He pointed with a graceful gesture to the other vacant chair, which Blakeney took without a word.

"Ah!" said Chauvelin, with a sigh of satisfaction, "I see that we are about to understand one another. . . . I have always felt that it was a pity, Sir Percy, that you and I could not discuss certain matters pleasantly with one another. . . . Now, about this unfortunate incident of Lady Blakeney's incarceration, I would like you to believe that I had no part in the arrangements which have been made for her detention in Paris. My colleagues have arranged it all . . . and I have vainly tried to protest against the rigorous measures which are to be enforced against her in the Temple prison. . . . But these are answering so admirably in the case of the ex-queen, they have so completely broken her spirit and her pride, that my colleagues felt that they would prove equally useful in order to bring the Scarlet Pimpernel—through his wife—to an humbler frame of mind."

He paused a moment, distinctly pleased with his peroration, satisfied that his voice had been without a tremor and his face impassive, and wondering what effect this somewhat lengthy preamble had upon Sir

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Percy, who through it all had remained singularly quiet. Chauvelin was preparing himself for the next effect which he hoped to produce, and was vaguely seeking for the best words with which to fully express his meaning, when he was suddenly startled by a sound as unexpected as it was disconcerting.

It was the sound of a loud and prolonged snore. He pushed the candle aside, which somewhat obstructed his line of vision, and casting a rapid glance at the enemy, with whose life he was toying, even as a cat doth with that of a mouse, he saw that the aforesaid mouse was calmly and unmistakably asleep.

An impatient oath escaped Chauvelin's lips, and he brought his fist heavily down on the table, making the metal candlesticks rattle and causing Sir Percy to open one sleepy eye.

"A thousand pardons, sir," said Blakeney, with a slight yawn. "I am so demmed fatigued, and your preface was unduly long. . . . Beastly bad form, I know, going to sleep during a sermon . . . but I haven't had a wink of sleep all day. . . . I pray you to excuse me. . . ."

"Will you condescend to listen, Sir Percy?" queried Chauvelin peremptorily, "or shall I call the guard and give up all thoughts of treating with you?"

"Just which ever you demmed well prefer, sir," rejoined Blakeney imperturbably.

And once more stretching out his long limbs, he buried his hands in the pockets of his breeches and apparently prepared himself for another quiet sleep. Chauvelin looked at him for a moment, vaguely wondering what to do next. He felt strangely irritated

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at what he firmly believed was mere affectation on Blakeney's part, and although he was burning with impatience to place the terms of the proposed bargain before this man, yet he would have preferred to be interrogated, to deliver his "either—or" with becoming sternness and decision, rather than to take the initiative in this discussion, where he should have been calm and indifferent, whilst his enemy should have been nervous and disturbed.

Sir Percy's attitude had disconcerted him, a touch of the grotesque had been given to what should have been a tense moment, and it was terribly galling to the pride of the ex-diplomatist that with this elusive enemy, and in spite of his own preparedness for any eventuality, it was invariably the unforeseen that happened.

After a moment's reflection, however, he decided upon a fresh course of action. He rose and crossed the room, keeping as much as possible an eye upon Sir Percy, but the latter sat placid and dormant, and evidently in no hurry to move. Chauvelin, having reached the door, opened it noiselessly, and to the sergeant in command of his bodyguard who stood at attention outside, he whispered hurriedly:

"The prisoner from No. 6. . . . Let two of the men bring her hither back to me at once."