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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XXVI. The terms of the bargain

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CHAPTER XXVI.

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LESS than three minutes later, there came to Chauvelin's expectant ears the soft sound made by a woman's skirts against the stone floor. During those three minutes, which had seemed an eternity to his impatience, he had sat silently watching the slumber—affected or real—of his enemy.

Directly he heard the word "Halt!" outside the door, he jumped to his feet. The next moment Marguerite had entered the room.

Hardly had her foot crossed the threshold than Sir Percy rose, quietly and without haste but evidently fully awake, and, turning towards her, made her a low obeisance.

She, poor woman, had, of course, caught sight of him at once. His presence here, Chauvelin's demand for her reappearance, the soldiers in a small, compact group outside the door—all these were unmistakable proofs that the awful cataclysm had at last occurred.

The Scarlet Pimpernel, Percy Blakeney, her

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husband, was in the hands of the Terrorists of France, and, though face to face with her now, with an open window close to him, and an apparently helpless enemy under his hand, he could not—owing to the fiendish measures taken by Chauvelin—raise a finger to save himself and her.

Mercifully for her, nature—in the face of this appalling tragedy—deprived her of the full measure of her senses. She could move and speak and see, she could hear and in a measure understand what was said, but she was really an automaton or a sleep-walker, moving and speaking mechanically and without due comprehension.

Possibly, if she had then and there fully realised all that the future meant, she would have gone mad with the horror of it all.

"Lady Blakeney," began Chauvelin after he had quickly dismissed the soldiers from the room, "when you and I parted from one another just now, I had no idea that I should so soon have the pleasure of a personal conversation with Sir Percy. . . . There is no occasion yet, believe me, for sorrow or for fear. . . . Another twenty-four hours at most, and you will be on board the 'Day Dream' outward bound for England. Sir Percy himself might perhaps accompany you, he does not desire that you should journey to Paris, and I may safely say that, in his mind, he has already accepted certain little conditions which I have been forced to impose upon him, ere I sign the order for your absolute release."

"Conditions?" she repeated vaguely and stupidly, looking in bewilderment from one to the other.

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"You are tired, m'dear," said Sir Percy quietly; "will you not sit down?"

He held the chair gallantly for her. She tried to read his face, but could not catch even a flash from beneath the heavy lids which obstinately veiled his eyes.

"Oh! it is a mere matter of exchanging signatures," continued Chauvelin, in response to her inquiring glance, and toying with the papers which were scattered on the table. "Here, you see, is the order to allow Sir Percy Blakeney and his wife, née Marguerite St. Just, to quit the town of Boulogne unmolested."

He held a paper out towards Marguerite, inviting her to look at it. She caught sight of an official-looking document, bearing the motto and seal of the Republic of France, and of her own name and Percy's written thereon in full.

"It is perfectly en règle, I assure you," continued Chauvelin, "and only awaits my signature."

He now took up another paper, which looked like a long, closely-written letter. Marguerite watched his every movement, for instinct told her that the supreme moment had come. There was a look of almost super-human cruelty and malice in the little Frenchman's eyes as he fixed them on the impassive figure of Sir Percy, the while, with slightly trembling hands, he fingered that piece of paper and smoothed out its creases with loving care.

"I am quite prepared to sign the order for your release, Lady Blakeney," he said, keeping his gaze still keenly fixed upon Sir Percy. "When it is signed,

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you will understand that our measures against the citizens of Boulogne will no longer hold good, and that, on the contrary, the general amnesty and free pardon will come into force."

"Yes, I understand that," she replied.

"And all that will come to pass, Lady Blakeney, the moment Sir Percy will write me in his own hand a letter, in accordance with the draft which I have prepared, and sign it with his name."

"Shall I read it to you?" he asked.

"If you please."

"You will see how simple it all is. . . . A mere matter of form. . . . I pray you, do not look upon it with terror, but only as the prelude to that general amnesty and free pardon, which I feel sure will satisfy the philanthropic heart of the noble Scarlet Pimpernel, since three-score at least of the inhabitants of Boulogne will owe their life and freedom to him."

"I am listening, Monsieur," she said calmly.

"As I have already had the honour of explaining, this little document is in the form of a letter addressed personally to me, and, of course, in French," he said finally; then he looked down on the paper and began to read:

CITIZEN CHAUVELIN,—In consideration of a further sum of one million francs, and on the understanding that this ridiculous charge brought against me of conspiring against the Republic of France is immediately withdrawn, and I am allowed to return to England unmolested, I am quite prepared to acquaint you with the names and whereabouts of certain persons who, under the guise of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, are even now conspiring to free the woman Marie Antoinette and her son from prison, and to

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place the latter upon the throne of France. You are quite well aware that under the pretence of being the leader of a gang of English adventurers, who never did the Republic of France and her people any real harm, I have actually been the means of unmasking many a Royalist plot before you, and of bringing many persistent conspirators to the guillotine. I am surprised that you should cavil at the price I am asking this time for the very important information with which I am able to furnish you, whilst you have often paid me similar sums for work which was a great deal less difficult to do. In order to serve your Government effectually, both in England and in France, I must have a sufficiency of money, to enable me to live in a costly style befitting a gentleman of my rank. Were I to alter my mode of life I could not continue to mix in that same social milieu to which all my friends belong, and wherein, as you are well aware, most of the Royalist plots are hatched.

Trusting, therefore, to receive a favourable reply to my just demands within the next twenty-four hours, whereupon the names in question shall be furnished you forthwith,—I have the honour to remain, citizen, your humble and obedient servant.

When he had finished reading, Chauvelin quietly folded the paper up again, and then only did he look at the man and the woman before him.

Marguerite sat very erect, her head thrown back, her face very pale, and her hands tightly clutched in her lap. She had not stirred whilst Chauvelin read out the infamous document, with which he desired to brand a brave man with the ineradicable stigma of dishonour and of shame. After she heard the first words, she looked up swiftly and questioningly at her husband, but he stood at some little distance from her, right out of the flickering circle of yellowish light made by the burning tallow candles. He was as rigid

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as a statue, standing in his usual attitude, with legs apart and hands buried in his breeches pockets.

She could not see his face.

Whatever she may have felt with regard to the letter, as the meaning of it gradually penetrated into her brain, she was, of course, convinced of one thing, and that was that never for a moment would Percy dream of purchasing his life or even hers at such a price. But she would have liked some sign from him, some look by which she could be guided as to her immediate conduct: as, however, he gave neither look nor sign, she preferred to assume an attitude of silent contempt.

But even before Chauvelin had had time to look from one face to the other, a prolonged and merry laugh echoed across the squalid room.

Sir Percy, with head thrown back, was laughing whole-heartedly.

"A magnificent epistle, sir," he said gaily. "Lud love you, where did you learn to wield the pen so gracefully? . . . I vow that if I signed this interesting document, no one would believe I could have expressed myself with such perfect ease . . . and in French, too . . ."

"Nay, Sir Percy," rejoined Chauvelin drily, "I have thought of all that, and lest in the future there should be any doubt as to whether your own hand had or had not penned the whole of this letter, I also make it a condition that you write out every word of it yourself, and sign it here in this very room, in the presence of Lady Blakeney, of myself, of my colleague, and of at least half a dozen other persons whom I will select."

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"It is indeed admirably thought out, Monsieur," rejoined Sir Percy, "and what is to become of the charming epistle, may I ask, after I have written and signed it? . . . Pardon my curiosity. . . . I take a natural interest in the matter . . . and truly your ingenuity passes belief . . ."

"Oh! the fate of this letter will be as simple as was the writing thereof. . . . A copy of it will be published in our 'Gazette de Paris,' as a bait for enterprising English journalists. . . . They will not be backward in getting hold of so much interesting matter. . . . Can you not see the attractive headlines in 'The London Gazette,' Sir Percy? 'The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel unmasked! A gigantic hoax! The origin of the Blakeney millions!' . . . I believe that journalism in England has reached a high standard of excellence . . . and even the 'Gazette de Paris' is greatly read in certain towns of your charming country. . . . His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, and various other influential gentlemen in London, will, on the other hand, be granted a private view of the original, through the kind offices of certain devoted friends whom we possess in England. . . . I don't think that you need have any fear, Sir Percy, that your caligraphy will sink into oblivion. It will be our business to see that it obtains the full measure of publicity which it deserves. . . ."

He paused a moment, then his manner suddenly changed: the sarcastic tone died out of his voice, and there came back into his face that look of hatred and cruelty which Blakeney's persiflage had always the power to evoke.

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"You may rest assured of one thing, Sir Percy," he said with a harsh laugh, "that enough mud will be thrown at that erstwhile glorious Scarlet Pimpernel . . . some of it will be bound to stick. . . ."

"Nay, Monsieur . . . er . . . Chaubertin," quoth Blakeney lightly, "I have no doubt that you and your colleagues are past masters in the graceful art of mud-throwing. . . . But pardon me . . . er . . . I was interrupting you. . . . Continue, Monsieur . . . continue, I pray. 'Pon my honour, the matter is vastly diverting."

"Nay, sir. After the publication of this diverting epistle, meseems your honour will cease to be a marketable commodity."

"Undoubtedly, sir," rejoined Sir Percy, apparently quite unruffled; "pardon a slip of the tongue . . . we are so much the creatures of habit. . . . As you were saying . . . ?"

"I have but little more to say, sir. . . . But lest there should even now be lurking in your mind a vague hope that, having written this letter, you could easily in the future deny its authorship, let me tell you this: my measures are well taken: there will be witnesses to your writing of it. . . . You will sit here in this room, unfettered, uncoerced in any way . . . and the money spoken of in the letter will be handed over to you by my colleague, after a few suitable words spoken by him, and you will take the money from him, Sir Percy . . . and the witnesses will see you take it, after having seen you write the letter . . . they will understand that you are being *paid* by the French Government for giving information anent Royalist plots in this

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country and in England . . . they will understand that your identity as the leader of that so-called band is not only known to me and to my colleague, but that it also covers your real character and profession as the paid spy of France."

"Marvellous, I call it . . . demmed marvellous," quoth Sir Percy blandly.

Chauvelin had paused, half-choked by his own emotion, his hatred, and prospective revenge. He passed his handkerchief over his forehead, which was streaming with perspiration.

"Warm work, this sort of thing . . . eh . . . Monsieur . . . er . . . Chaubertin? . . ." queried his imperturbable enemy.

Marguerite said nothing; the whole thing was too horrible for words; but she kept her large eyes fixed upon her husband's face . . . waiting for that look, that sign from him which would have eased the agonising anxiety in her heart, and which never came.

With a great effort now, Chauvelin pulled himself together, and though his voice still trembled, he managed to speak with a certain amount of calm:

"Probably, Sir Percy, you know," he said, "that throughout the whole of France we are inaugurating a series of national fêtes, in honour of the new religion which the people are about to adopt. . . . Demoiselle Désirée Candaille, whom you know, will at these festivals impersonate the Goddess of Reason, the only deity whom we admit now in France. . . . She has been specially chosen for this honour, owing to the services which she has rendered us recently . . . and as Boulogne happens to be the lucky city in which we have

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succeeded in bringing the Scarlet Pimpernel to justice, the national fête will begin within these city walls, with Demoiselle Candaille as the thrice-honoured goddess."

"And you will be very merry here in Boulogne, I dare swear. . . ."

"Aye, merry, sir," said Chauvelin with an involuntary and savage snarl, as he placed a long, claw-like finger upon the momentous paper before him, "merry, for we here in Boulogne will see that which will fill the heart of every patriot in France with gladness. . . . Nay! 'twas not the death of the Scarlet Pimpernel we wanted . . . not the noble martyrdom of England's chosen hero . . . but his humiliation and defeat . . . derision and scorn . . . contumely and contempt. You asked me airily just now, Sir Percy, how I proposed to accomplish this object. . . . Well! you know it now—by forcing you . . . aye, *forcing*—to write and sign a letter, and to take money from my hands which will brand you for ever as a liar and an informer, and cover you with the thick and slimy mud of irreclaimable infamy. . . ."

"Lud! sir," said Sir Percy pleasantly, "what a wonderful command you have of our language. . . . I wish I could speak French half as well. . . ."

Marguerite had risen like an automaton from her chair. She felt that she could no longer sit still; she wanted to scream out at the top of her voice all the horror she felt for this dastardly plot, which surely must have had its origin in the brain of devils. She could not understand Percy. This was one of those awful moments, which she had been destined to ex-

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perience once or twice before, when the whole personality of her husband seemed to become shadowy before her, to slip, as it were, past her comprehension, leaving her indescribably lonely and wretched, trusting, yet terrified.

She thought that long ere this he would have flung back every insult in his opponent's teeth; she did not know what inducements Chauvelin had held out in exchange for the infamous letter, what threats he had used. That her own life and freedom were at stake was, of course, evident; but she cared nothing for life, and he should know that certainly she would care still less, if such a price had to be paid for it.

She longed to tell him all that was in her heart, longed to tell him how little she valued her life, how highly she prized his honour! But how could she, before this fiend, who snarled and sneered in his anticipated triumph? And surely, surely Percy knew!

And, knowing all that, why did he not speak? Why did he not tear that infamous paper from out that devil's hands and fling it in his face? Yet, though her loving ear caught every intonation of her husband's voice, she could not detect the slightest harshness in his airy laugh; his tone was perfectly natural, and he seemed to be, indeed—just as he appeared—vastly amused.

Then she thought that perhaps he would wish her to go now, that he felt a desire to be alone with this man, who had outraged him in everything that he held most holy and most dear—his honour and his wife . . . that perhaps, knowing that his own temper was no longer under control, he did not wish her to

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witness the rough-and-ready chastisement which he was intending to mete out to this dastardly intriguer.

Yes! that was it, no doubt! Herein she could not be mistaken; she knew his fastidious notions of what was due and proper in the presence of a woman, and that even at a moment like this he would wish the manners of London drawing-rooms to govern his every action.

Therefore she rose to go, and as she did so, once more tried to read the expression in his face . . . to guess what was passing in his mind.

"Nay, madam," he said, whilst he bowed gracefully before her, "I fear me this lengthy conversation hath somewhat fatigued you. . . . This merry jest 'twixt my engaging friend and myself should not have been prolonged so far into the night. . . . Monsieur, I pray you, will you not give orders that her ladyship be escorted back to her room?"

He was still standing outside the circle of light, and Marguerite instinctively went up to him. For this one second she was oblivious of Chauvelin's presence, she forgot her well-schooled pride, her firm determination to be silent and to be brave: she could no longer restrain the wild beatings of her heart, the agony of her soul, and with sudden impulse she murmured, in a voice broken with intense love and subdued, passionate appeal:

"Percy!"

He drew back a step further into the gloom: this made her realise the mistake she had made in allowing her husband's most bitter enemy to get this brief glimpse into her soul. Chauvelin's thin lips curled

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with satisfaction, the brief glimpse had been sufficient for him, the rapidly whispered name, the broken accent had told him what he had not known hitherto, namely, that between this man and woman there was a bond far more powerful than that which usually existed between husband and wife, and merely made up of chivalry on the one side and trustful reliance on the other.

Marguerite, having realised her mistake, ashamed of having betrayed her feelings even for a moment, threw back her proud head and gave her exultant foe a look of defiance and of scorn. He responded with one of pity, not altogether unmixed with deference. There was something almost unearthly and sublime in this beautiful woman's agonising despair.

He lowered his head and made her a deep obeisance, lest she should see the satisfaction and triumph which shone through his pity.

As usual, Sir Percy remained quite imperturbable, and now it was he who, with characteristic impudence, touched the handbell on the table:

"Excuse this intrusion, Monsieur," he said lightly; "her ladyship is over-fatigued and would be best in her room."

Marguerite threw him a grateful look. After all, she was only a woman and was afraid of breaking down. In her mind there was no issue to the present deadlock save in death. For this she was prepared, and had but one great hope, that she could lie in her husband's arms just once again before she died. Now, since she could not speak to him, scarcely dared to look into the loved face, she was quite ready to go.

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In answer to the bell, the soldier had entered.

"If Lady Blakeney desires to go. . . ." said Chauvelin.

She nodded, and Chauvelin gave the necessary orders: two soldiers stood at attention ready to escort Marguerite back to her prison cell. As she went towards the door she came to within a couple of steps from where her husband was standing, bowing to her as she passed.

She stretched out an icy cold hand towards him, and he, in the most approved London fashion, with the courtly grace of a perfect English gentleman, took the little hand in his and, stooping very low, kissed the delicate finger-tips.

Then only did she notice that the strong, nervy hand which held hers trembled perceptibly, and that his lips—which for an instant rested on her fingers—were burning hot.