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The elusive Pimpernel

Orczy, Emmuska

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Chapter XXVII. The decision

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CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DECISION.

ONCE more the two men were alone. As far as Chauvelin was concerned he felt that everything was not yet settled, and until a moment ago he had been in doubt as to whether Sir Percy would accept the infamous conditions which had been put before him, or allow his pride and temper to get the better of him and throw the deadly insults back into his adversary's teeth.

But now a new secret had been revealed to the astute diplomatist. A name, softly murmured by a broken-hearted woman, had told him a tale of love and passion which he had not even suspected before.

Since he had made this discovery he knew that the ultimate issue was no longer in doubt. Sir Percy Blakeney, the bold adventurer, ever ready for a gamble where lives were at stake, might have demurred before he subscribed to his own dishonour in order to save his wife from humiliation and the shame of the terrible fate that had been mapped out for her.

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But the same man passionately in love with such a woman as Marguerite Blakeney would count the world well lost for her sake.

One sudden fear alone had shot through Chauvelin's heart when he stood face to face with the two people whom he had so deeply and cruelly wronged, and that was that Blakeney, throwing aside all thought of the scores of innocent lives that were at stake, might forget everything, risk everything, dare everything in order to get his wife away there and then.

For the space of a few seconds Chauvelin had felt that his own life was in jeopardy, and that the Scarlet Pimpernel would indeed make a desperate effort to save himself and his wife. But the fear was short lived; Marguerite—as he had well foreseen—would never save herself at the expense of others, and she was tied! tied! tied! That was his triumph and his joy!

When Marguerite finally left the room Sir Percy made no motion to follow her, but turned once more quietly to his antagonist.

"As you were saying, Monsieur? . . ." he queried lightly.

"Oh! there is nothing more to say, Sir Percy," rejoined Chauvelin; "my conditions are clear to you, are they not? Lady Blakeney's and your own immediate release in exchange for a letter written to me by your own hand, and signed here by you—in this room—in my presence and that of sundry other persons whom I need not name just now. Also certain money passing from my hand to yours. Failing

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the letter, a long, hideously humiliating sojourn in the Temple prison for your wife, a prolonged trial and the guillotine as a happy release! . . . I would add the same thing for yourself, only that I will do you the justice to admit that you probably do not care."

"Nay! a grave mistake, Monsieur. . . . I do care . . . vastly care, I assure you . . . and would seriously object to ending my life on your demmed guillotine . . . a nasty, uncomfortable thing, I should say . . . and I am told that an inexperienced barber is deputed to cut one's hair. . . . Brrr! . . . Now, on the other hand, I like the idea of a national fête . . . that pretty wench, Candaille, dressed as a goddess . . . the boom of the cannon when your amnesty comes into force. . . . You *will* boom the cannon, will you not, Monsieur? . . . Cannons are demmed noisy, but they are effective sometimes, do you not think so, Monsieur?"

"Very effective certainly, Sir Percy," sneered Chauvelin; "and we will certainly boom the cannon from this very fort, an it so please you. . . ."

"At what hour, Monsieur, is my letter to be ready?"

"Why! at any hour you please, Sir Percy."

"The 'Day-Dream' could weigh anchor at eight o'clock . . . would an hour before that be convenient to yourself?"

"Certainly, Sir Percy . . . if you will honour me by accepting my hospitality in these uncomfortable quarters until seven o'clock to-morrow eve? . . ."

"I thank you, Monsieur. . . ."

"Then am I to understand, Sir Percy, that . . ."

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A loud and ringing laugh broke from Blakeney's lips.

"That I accept your bargain, man! . . . Zounds! I tell you I accept . . . I'll write the letter, I'll sign it . . . an you have our free passes ready for us in exchange. . . . At seven o'clock to-morrow eve, did you say? . . . Man! do not look so astonished. . . . The letter, the signature, the money . . . all your witnesses . . . have everything ready . . . I accept, I say. . . . And now, in the name of all the evil spirits in hell let me have some supper and a bed, for I vow that I am demmed fatigued."

And without more ado Sir Percy once more rang the handbell, laughing boisterously the while; then suddenly, with quick transition of mood, his laugh was lost in a gigantic yawn, and throwing his long body on to a chair, he stretched out his legs, buried his hands in his pockets, and the next moment was peacefully asleep.