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The elusive Pimpernel

Orczy, Emmuska

London, 1908

Chapter XXXIV. The angelus

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ANGELUS.

AND gradually all noises died away around the old Fort Gayole. The shouts and laughter of the merry-makers, who had quickly recovered from their fright, now came only as the muffled rumble of a distant storm, broken here and there by the shrill note of a girl's loud laughter, or a vigorous fanfare from the brass trumpets.

The room where so much turmoil had taken place, where so many hearts had beaten with torrent-like emotions, where the awesome tragedy of revenge and hate, of love and passion had been consummated, was now silent and at peace.

The soldiers had gone: some in pursuit of the revellers, some with Collot d'Herbois, others with Hébert and the calotin who was to ring the Angelus.

Chauvelin, overcome with the intensity of his exultation and the agony of the suspense which he had endured, sat, vaguely dreaming, hardly conscious, but wholly happy and content. Fearless, too, for his triumph was complete, and he cared not now if he lived or died.

THE ANGELUS.

He had lived long enough to see the complete annihilation and dishonour of his enemy.

What had happened to Sir Percy Blakeney now, what to Marguerite, he neither knew nor cared. No doubt the Englishman had picked himself up and got away through the window or the door: he would be anxious to get his wife out of the town as quickly as possible. The Angelus would ring directly, the gates would be opened, the harbour made free to everyone. . . .

And Collot was a league outside Boulogne by now . . . a league nearer to Paris.

So what mattered the humble wayside English flower, the damaged and withered Scarlet Pimpernel? . . .

A slight noise suddenly caused him to start. He had been dreaming, no doubt, having fallen into some kind of torpor, akin to sleep, after the deadly and restless fatigue of the past four days. He certainly had been unconscious of everything around him, of time and of place. But now he felt fully awake.

And again he heard that slight noise, as if something or someone was moving in the room.

He tried to peer into the darkness, but could distinguish nothing. He rose and went to the door. It was still open, and close behind it, against the wall, a small oil lamp was fixed, which lit up the corridor.

Chauvelin detached the lamp and came back with it into the room. Just as he did so there came to his ears the first sound of the little church bell ringing the Angelus.

He stepped into the room, holding the lamp high

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

above his head; its feeble rays fell full upon the brilliant figure of Sir Percy Blakeney.

He was smiling pleasantly, bowing slightly towards Chauvelin, and in his hand he held the sheathed sword, the blade of which had been fashioned in Toledo for Lorenzo Cenci, and the fellow of which was lying now—Chauvelin himself knew not where.

"The day and the hour, Monsieur, I think," said Sir Percy with courtly grace, "when you and I are to cross swords together; those are the southern ramparts, meseems. Will you precede, sir? and I will follow."

At sight of this man, of his impudence, and of his daring, Chauvelin felt like an icy grip on his heart. His cheeks became ashen white, his thin lips closed with a snap, and the hand which held the lamp aloft trembled visibly. Sir Percy stood before him, still smiling, and with a graceful gesture pointing towards the ramparts.

From the church of Saint Joseph the gentle, melancholy tones of the Angelus sounding the second Ave Maria came faintly echoing in the evening air.

With a violent effort Chauvelin forced himself to self-control, and tried to shake off the strange feeling of obsession which had overwhelmed him in the presence of this extraordinary man. He walked quite quietly up to the table and placed the lamp upon it. As in a flash recollection had come back to him . . . the past few minutes! . . . the letter! and Collot well on his way to Paris!

Bah! he had nothing to fear now, save perhaps death at the hand of this adventurer, turned assassin in his misery and humiliation!

THE ANGELUS.

"A truce on this folly, Sir Percy," he said roughly. "As you well know, I had never any intention of fighting you with these poisoned swords of yours, and . . ."

"I knew that, M. Chauvelin. . . . But do *you* know that I have the intention of killing you now . . . as you stand . . . like a dog! . . ."

And, throwing down the sword with one of those uncontrolled outbursts of almost animal passion which for one instant revealed the real, inner man, he went up to Chauvelin, and, towering above him like a great avenging giant, he savoured for one second the joy of looking down on that puny, slender figure which he could crush with sheer brute force with one blow from his powerful hands.

But Chauvelin at this moment was beyond fear.

"And if you killed me now, Sir Percy," he said quietly, and looking the man whom he so hated fully in the eyes, "you could not destroy that letter which my colleague is taking to Paris at this very moment."

As he had anticipated, his words seemed to change Sir Percy's mood in an instant. The passion in the handsome, aristocratic face faded in a trice, the hard lines round the jaw and lips relaxed, the fire of revenge died out from the lazy blue eyes, and the next moment a long, loud, merry laugh raised the dormant echoes of the old fort.

"Nay, Monsieur Chaubertin," said Sir Percy gaily, "but this is marvellous . . . demmed marvellous . . . do you hear that, m'dear? . . . Gadzooks! but 'tis the best joke I have heard this past twelve months. . . . Monsieur here thinks. . . . Lud! but I shall die of laughing. . . . Monsieur here thinks . . . that 'twas

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

that demmed letter which went to Paris . . . and that an English gentleman lay scuffling on the floor and allowed a letter to be filched from him . . .”

“Sir Percy! . . .” gasped Chauvelin, as an awful thought seemed suddenly to flash across his fevered brain.

“Lud, sir, you are astonishing!” said Sir Percy, taking a very much crumpled sheet of paper from the capacious pocket of his elegant caped coat and holding it close to Chauvelin’s horror-stricken gaze. “*This* is the letter which I wrote at that table yonder, in order to gain time and in order to fool you. . . . But by the Lord, you are a bigger demmed fool than ever I took you to be, if you thought it would serve any other purpose save that of my hitting you in the face with it.”

And with a quick and violent gesture he struck Chauvelin full in the face with the paper.

“You would like to know, Monsieur Chaubertin, would you not . . .” he added pleasantly, “what letter it is that your friend, Citizen Collot, is taking in such hot haste to Paris for you? . . . Well! the letter is not long, and ’tis written in verse. . . . I wrote it myself upstairs to-day, whilst you thought me sodden with brandy and three-parts asleep. But brandy is easily flung out of the window. . . . Did you think I drank it all? . . . Nay! as you remember, I told you that I was not so drunk as you thought? . . . Aye! the letter is writ in English verse, Monsieur, and it reads thus:

“We seek him here! we seek him there!

Those Frenchies seek him everywhere!

Is he in heaven? is he in hell?

That demmed elusive Pimpernel?”

THE ANGELUS.

"A neat rhyme I fancy, Monsieur, and one which will, if rightly translated, greatly please your friend and ruler, Citizen Robespierre. . . . Your colleague, Citizen Collot is well on his way to Paris with it by now. . . . No, no, Monsieur . . . as you rightly said just now . . . I really could not kill you . . . God having blessed me with the saving sense of humour. . . ."

Even as he spoke the third Ave Maria of the Angelus died away on the evening air. From the harbour and the Old Château there came the loud boom of cannon.

The hour of the opening of the gates, of the general amnesty and free harbour, was announced throughout Boulogne.

Chauvelin was livid with rage, fear, and baffled revenge. He made a sudden rush for the door in a blind desire to call for help, but Sir Percy had toyed long enough with his prey. The hour was speeding on: Hébert and some of the soldiers might return, and it was time to think of safety and of flight. Quick as a hunted panther, he had interposed his tall figure between his enemy and the latter's chance of calling for aid, then, seizing the little man by the shoulders, he pushed him back into that portion of the room where Marguerite and the Abbé Fouquet had been lately sitting.

The gag, with cloth and cord, which had been intended for a woman, were lying on the ground close by, just where Hébert had dropped them when he marched the old abbé off to the church.

With quick and dexterous hands, Sir Percy soon

THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

reduced Chauvelin to an impotent and silent bundle. The ex-ambassador, after four days' of harrowing nerve-tension, followed by so awful a climax, was weakened physically and mentally, whilst Blakeney, powerful, athletic, and always absolutely unperturbed, was fresh in body and spirit. He had slept calmly all the afternoon, having quietly thought out all his plans, left nothing to chance, and acted methodically and quickly, and invariably with perfect repose.

Having fully assured himself that the cords were well fastened, the gag secure, and Chauvelin completely helpless, he took the now inert mass up in his arms and carried it into the adjoining room, where Marguerite for twelve hours had endured a terrible martyrdom.

He laid his enemy's helpless form upon the couch, and for one moment looked down on it with a strange feeling of pity, quite unmixed with contempt. The light from the lamp in the further room struck vaguely upon the prostrate figure of Chauvelin. He seemed to have lost consciousness, for the eyes were closed, only the hands, which were tied securely to his body, had a spasmodic, nervous twitch in them.

With a good-natured shrug of the shoulders, the imperturbable Sir Percy turned to go, but just before he did so, he took a scrap of paper from his waistcoat pocket and slipped it between Chauvelin's trembling fingers. On the paper were scribbled the four lines of verse which in the next four-and-twenty hours Robespierre himself and his colleague would read.

Then Blakeney finally went out of the room.