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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XIV. The ruling passion

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CHAPTER XIV.

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IN the meanwhile silence had fallen over the beautiful old manorial house. One by one the guests had departed, leaving that peaceful sense of complete calm and isolation which follows the noisy chatter of any great throng bent chiefly on enjoyment.

The evening had been universally acknowledged to have been brilliantly successful. True, the much-talked-of French artiste had not sung the promised ditties, but in the midst of the whirl and excitement of dances, of the inspiriting tunes of the string band, the elaborate supper and recherché wines, no one had paid much heed to this change in the programme of entertainments.

And everyone had agreed that never had Lady Blakeney looked more radiantly beautiful than on this night. She seemed absolutely indefatigable; a perfect hostess, full of charming little attentions towards everyone, although more than ordinarily absorbed by her duties towards her many Royal guests.

The dramatic incident which had taken place in the small boudoir had not been much bruited abroad. It

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was always considered bad form in those courtly days to discuss men's quarrels before ladies, and in this instance those who were present when it all occurred instinctively felt that their discretion would be appreciated in high circles, and held their tongues accordingly.

Thus the brilliant evening was brought to a happy conclusion, without a single cloud to mar the enjoyment of the guests. Marguerite performed a veritable miracle of fortitude, forcing her very smiles to seem natural and gay, chatting pleasantly, even wittily, upon every known fashionable topic of the day, laughing merrily the while her poor, aching heart was filled with unspeakable misery.

Now, when everybody had gone, when the last of her guests had bobbed before her the prescribed curtsey, to which she had invariably responded with the same air of easy self-possession, now at last she felt free to give rein to her thoughts, to indulge in the luxury of looking her own anxiety straight in the face and to let the tension of her nerves relax.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes had been the last to leave, and Percy had strolled out with him as far as the garden gate, for Lady Ffoulkes had left in her chaise some time ago, and Sir Andrew meant to walk to his home, not many yards distant from Blakeney Manor.

In spite of herself Marguerite felt her heartstrings tighten as she thought of this young couple so lately wedded. People smiled a little when Sir Andrew Ffoulkes' name was mentioned: some called him effeminate, others uxorious, his fond attachment for his pretty little wife was thought to pass the bounds of decorum. There was no doubt that since his marriage

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the young man had greatly changed. His love of sport and adventure seemed to have died out completely, yielding evidently to the great, more overpowering love, that for his young wife.

Suzanne was nervous for her husband's safety. She had sufficient influence over him to keep him at home, when other members of the brave little League of the Scarlet Pimpernel followed their leader with mad zest on some bold adventure.

Marguerite, too, at first had smiled in kindly derision when Suzanne Ffoulkes, her large eyes filled with tears, had used her wiles to keep Sir Andrew tied to her own dainty apron-strings. But somehow, lately, with that gentle contempt which she felt for the weaker man, there had mingled a half-acknowledged sense of envy.

How different 'twixt her and her husband.

Percy loved her truly and with a depth of passion proportionate to his own curious dual personality: it were sacrilege almost, to doubt the intensity of his love. But, nevertheless she had at all times a feeling as if he were holding himself and his emotions in check, as if his love, as if she, Marguerite, his wife, were but secondary matters in his life; as if her anxieties, her sorrow when he left her, her fears for his safety, were but small episodes in the great book of life which he had planned out and conceived for himself.

Then she would hate herself for such thoughts: they seemed like doubts of him. Did any man ever love a woman, she asked herself, as Percy loved her? He was difficult to understand, and perhaps—oh! that was an awful "perhaps"—perhaps there lurked somewhere in his mind a slight mistrust of her. She had betrayed

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him once!—unwittingly, 'tis true! Did he fear she might do so again?

And to-night, after her guests had gone, she threw open the great windows that gave on the beautiful terrace, with its marble steps leading down to the cool river beyond. Everything now seemed so peaceful and still; the scent of the heliotrope made the midnight air swoon with its intoxicating fragrance; the rhythmic murmur of the waters came gently echoing from below, and from far away there came the melancholy cry of a night-bird on the prowl.

That cry made Marguerite shudder: her thoughts flew back to the episodes of this night and to Chauvelin, the dark bird of prey, with his mysterious, death-dealing plans, his subtle intrigues, which all tended towards the destruction of one man: his enemy, the husband whom Marguerite loved.

Oh! how she hated these wild adventures which took Percy away from her side. Is not a woman who loves—be it husband or child—the most truly selfish, the most cruelly callous creature in the world—there, where the safety and the well-being of the loved one is in direct conflict with the safety and well-being of others.

She would right gladly have closed her eyes to every horror perpetrated in France; she would not have known what went on in Paris; she wanted her husband! And yet, month after month, with but short intervals, she saw him risk that precious life of his, which was the very essence of her own soul, for others! for others! always for others!

And she! she! Marguerite, his wife, was powerless

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to hold him back! Powerless to keep him beside her, when that mad fit of passion seized him to go on one of those wild quests, wherefrom she always feared he could not return alive: and this, although she might use every noble artifice, every tender wile of which a loving and beautiful wife is capable.

At times like those her own proud heart was filled with hatred and with envy towards everything that took him away from her: and to-night all these passionate feelings, which she felt were quite unworthy of her and of him, seemed to surge within her soul more tumultuously than ever. She was longing to throw herself in his arms, to pour out into his loving ear all that she suffered, in fear and anxiety, and to make one more appeal to his tenderness and to that passion which had so often made him forget the world at her feet.

And so instinctively she walked along the terrace towards that more secluded part of the garden just above the river bank, where she had so oft wandered hand in hand with him in the honeymoon of their love. There great clumps of old-fashioned cabbage roses grew in untidy splendour, and belated lilies sent intoxicating odours into the air, whilst the heavy masses of Egyptian and Michaelmas daisies looked like ghostly constellations in the gloom.

She thought Percy must soon be coming this way. Though it was so late, she knew that he would not go to bed. After the events of the night, his ruling passion, strong in death, would be holding him in its thrall.

She, too, felt wide awake and unconscious of

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fatigue; when she reached the secluded path beside the river, she peered eagerly up and down, and listened for a sound.

Presently it seemed to her that above the gentle clapper of the waters she could hear a rustle and the crunching of the fine gravel under carefully measured footsteps. She waited awhile. The footsteps seemed to draw nearer, and soon, although the starlit night was very dark, she perceived a cloaked and hooded figure approaching cautiously towards her.

"Who goes there?" she called suddenly.

The figure paused: then came rapidly forward, and a voice said timidly:

"Ah! Lady Blakeney!"

"Who are you?" asked Marguerite peremptorily.

"It is I . . . Désirée Candeille," replied the midnight prowler.

"Demoiselle Candeille!" ejaculated Marguerite, wholly taken by surprise. "What are you doing here, alone, and at this hour?"

"Sh-sh-sh . . ." whispered Candeille eagerly, as she approached quite close to Marguerite and drew her hood still lower over her eyes. "I am all alone . . . I wanted to see some one—you, if possible, Lady Blakeney . . . for I could not rest. . . . I wanted to know what had happened."

"What had happened? When? I don't understand."

"What happened between Citizen Chauvelin and your husband?" asked Candeille.

"What is that to you?" replied Marguerite haughtily.

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"I pray you, do not misunderstand me . . ." pleaded Candeille eagerly. "I know my presence in your house . . . the quarrel which I provoked must have filled your heart with hatred and suspicion towards me. . . . But oh! how can I persuade you? . . . I acted unwillingly . . . will you not believe me? . . . I was that man's tool . . . and . . . Oh God!" she added with sudden, wild vehemence, "if only you could know what tyranny that accursed Government of France exercises over poor helpless women or men who happen to have fallen within reach of its relentless clutches . . ."

Her voice broke down in a sob. Marguerite hardly knew what to say or think. She had always mistrusted this woman, with her theatrical ways and stagey airs, from the very first moment that she saw her in the tent on the green: and she did not wish to run counter against her instinct in anything pertaining to the present crisis. And yet, in spite of her mistrust, the actress's vehement words found an echo in the depths of her own heart. How well she knew that tyranny of which Candeille spoke with such bitterness. Had she not suffered from it, endured terrible sorrow and humiliation, when under the ban of that same appalling tyranny she had betrayed the identity—then unknown to her—of the Scarlet Pimpernel?

Therefore when Candeille paused after those last excited words, she said with more gentleness than she had shown hitherto, though still quite coldly:

"But you have not yet told me why you came back here to-night? If Citizen Chauvelin was your task-master, then you must know all that has occurred."

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"I had a vague hope that I might see you."

"For what purpose?"

"To warn you if I could."

"I need no warning."

"Or are you too proud to take one. . . . Do you know, Lady Blakeney, that Citizen Chauvelin has a personal hatred against your husband?"

"How do you know that?" asked Marguerite, with her suspicions once more on the qui-vive. She could not understand Candeille's attitude. This midnight visit, the vehemence of her language, the strange mixture of knowledge and ignorance which she displayed. What did this woman know of Chauvelin's secret plans? Was she his open ally, or his helpless tool? And was she even now playing a part taught her or commanded her by that prince of intriguers?

Candeille, however, seemed quite unaware of the spirit of antagonism and mistrust which Marguerite took but little pains now to disguise. She clasped her hands together, and her voice shook with the earnestness of her entreaty:

"Oh!" she said eagerly, "have I not seen that look of hatred in Chauvelin's cruel eyes? . . . He hates your husband I tell you. . . . Why I know not . . . but he hates him . . . and means that great harm shall come to Sir Percy through this absurd duel. . . . Oh! Lady Blakeney, do not let him go . . . I entreat you, do not let him go!"

But Marguerite proudly drew back a step or two, away from the reach of those hands, stretched out towards her in such vehement appeal.

"You are overwrought, Mademoiselle," she said

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coldly. "Believe me, I have no need either of your entreaties or of your warning. . . . I should like you to think that I have no wish to be ungrateful . . . that I appreciate any kind thought you may have harboured for me in your mind. . . . But beyond that . . . please forgive me if I say it somewhat crudely—I do not feel that the matter concerns you in the least. . . . The hour is late," she added more gently, as if desiring to attenuate the harshness of her last words. "Shall I send my maid to escort you home? She is devoted and discreet . . ."

"Nay!" retorted the other in tones of quiet sadness, "there is no need of discretion. . . . I am not ashamed of my visit to you to-night. . . . You are very proud, and for your sake I will pray to God that sorrow and humiliation may not come to you, as I feared. . . . We are never likely to meet again, Lady Blakeney . . . you will not wish it, and I shall have passed out of your life as swiftly as I had entered into it. . . . But there was another thought lurking in my mind when I came to-night. . . . In case Sir Percy goes to France . . . the duel is to take place in or near Boulogne . . . this much I do know . . . would you not wish to go with him?"

"Truly, Mademoiselle, I must repeat to you . . ."

"That 'tis no concern of mine. . . . I know . . . I own that. . . . But, you see, when I came back here to-night in the silence and the darkness—I had not guessed that you would be so proud. . . . I thought that I, a woman, would know how to touch your womanly heart. . . . I was clumsy I suppose . . . I made so sure that you would wish to go with your hus-

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band, in case . . . in case he insisted on running his head into the noose, which I feel sure Chauvelin has prepared for him. . . . I myself start for France shortly. Citizen Chauvelin has provided me with the necessary passport for myself and my maid, who was to have accompanied me. . . . Then, just now, when I was all alone . . . and thought over all the mischief which that fiend had forced me to do for him, it seemed to me that perhaps . . . ”

She broke off abruptly, and tried to read the other woman's face in the gloom. But Marguerite, who was taller than the Frenchwoman, was standing, very stiff and erect, giving the young actress neither discouragement nor confidence. She did not interrupt Candeille's long and voluble explanation: vaguely she wondered what it all was about, and even now, when the Frenchwoman paused, Marguerite said nothing, but watched her quietly as she took a folded paper from the spacious pocket of her cloak and then held it out with a look of timidity towards Lady Blakeney.

“ My maid need not come with me,” said Désirée Candeille humbly; “ I would far rather travel alone . . . this is her passport, and. . . . Oh! you need not take it out of my hand,” she added in tones of bitter self-deprecation, as Marguerite made no sign of taking the paper from her. “ See! I will leave it here among the roses! . . . You mistrust me now . . . it is only natural . . . presently, perhaps, calmer reflection will come . . . you will see that my purpose now is selfless . . . that I only wish to serve you and him.”

She stooped and placed the folded paper in the midst of a great clump of centifolium roses, and then

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without another word she turned and went her way. For a few moments, whilst Marguerite still stood there, puzzled and vaguely moved, she could hear the gentle frou-frou of the other woman's skirts against the soft sand of the path, and then a long-drawn sigh that sounded like a sob.

Then all was still again. The gentle midnight breeze caressed the tops of the ancient oaks and elms behind her, drawing murmurs from their dying leaves like unto the whisperings of ghosts.

Marguerite shuddered with a slight sense of cold. Before her, amongst the dark clump of leaves and the roses invisible in the gloom, there fluttered with a curious, melancholy flapping, the folded paper placed there by Candeille. She watched it for awhile, as, disturbed by the wind, it seemed ready to take its flight towards the river. Anon it fell to the ground, and Marguerite, with sudden overpowering impulse, stooped and picked it up. Then, clutching it nervously in her hand, she walked rapidly back towards the house.