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## The elusive Pimpernel

Orczy, Emmuska

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Chapter XVI. The passport

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### THE PASSPORT.

THE rhythmic clapper of oars roused Marguerite from this trance-like swoon.

In a moment she was on her feet, all her fatigue gone, her numbness of soul and body vanished as in a flash. She was fully conscious now!—conscious that he had gone!—that, according to every probability under heaven and every machination concocted in hell, he would never return from France alive, and that she had failed to hear the last words which he spoke to her, had failed to glean his last look or to savour his final kiss.

Though the night was starlit and balmy, it was singularly dark, and vainly did Marguerite strain her eyes to catch sight of that boat which was bearing him away so swiftly now: she strained her ears, vaguely hoping to catch one last, lingering echo of his voice. But all was silence, save that monotonous clapper,

## THE PASSPORT.

which seemed to beat against her heart like a rhythmic knell of death.

She could hear the oars distinctly: there were six or eight she thought: certainly no fewer. Eight oarsmen probably, which meant the larger boat, and undoubtedly the longer journey . . . not to London only, with a view to posting to Dover, but to Tilbury Fort where the "Day Dream" would be in readiness to start with a favourable tide.

Thought was returning to her, slowly and coherently: the pain of the last farewell was still there, bruising her very senses with its dull and heavy weight; but it had become numb and dead, leaving her, herself, her heart and soul, stunned and apathetic, whilst her brain was gradually resuming its activity.

And the more she thought it over, the more certain she grew that her husband was going as far as Tilbury by river, and would embark on the "Day Dream" there. Of course, he would go to Boulogne at once. The duel was to take place there, Candeille had told her that . . . adding that she thought, she, Marguerite, would wish to go with him.

To go with him!

Heavens above! was not that the only real, tangible thought in that whirling chaos which was raging in her mind?

To go with him! Surely there must be some means of reaching him yet! Fate, Nature, God Himself would never permit so monstrous a thing as this: that she should be parted from her husband, now when his life was not only in danger, but forfeit already . . . lost . . . a precious thing all but gone from this world.



## THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

Percy was going to Boulogne . . . she must go too. By posting at once to Dover, she could get the tidal boat on the morrow and reach the French coast quite as soon as the "Day Dream." Once at Boulogne, she would have no difficulty in finding her husband, of that she felt sure. She would have but to dog Chauvelin's footsteps, find out something of his plans, of the orders he gave to troops or to spies—oh! she would find him!—of that she was never for a moment in doubt!

How well she remembered her journey to Calais just a year ago, in company with Sir Andrew Ffoulkes! Chance had favoured her then, had enabled her to be of service to her husband, if only by distracting Chauvelin's attention for awhile to herself. Heaven knows! she had but little hope of being of use to him now: an aching sense was in her that fate had at last been too strong!—that the daring adventurer had staked once too often, had cast the die and had lost.

In the bosom of her dress she felt the sharp edge of the paper left for her by Désirée Candaille among the roses in the park. She had picked it up almost mechanically then, and tucked it away, hardly heeding what she was doing. Whatever the motive of the French actress had been in placing the passport at her disposal, Marguerite blessed her in her heart for it. To the woman she had mistrusted, she would owe the last supreme happiness of her life.

Her resolution never once wavered. Percy would not take her with him: that was understandable. She could neither expect it nor think it. But she, on the other hand, could not stay in England, at Blakeney

## THE PASSPORT.

Manor, whilst any day, any hour, the death-trap set by Chauvelin for the Scarlet Pimpernel might be closing upon the man whom she worshipped. She would go mad if she stayed. As there could be no chance of escape for Percy now, as he had agreed to meet his deadly enemy face to face at a given place, and a given hour, she could not be a hindrance to him: and she knew enough subterfuges, enough machinations and disguises by now, to escape Chauvelin's observation, unless . . . unless Percy wanted her, and then she would be there.

No! she could not be a hindrance. She had a passport in her pocket, everything en règle, nobody could harm her, and she could come and go as she pleased. There were plenty of swift horses in the stables, plenty of devoted servants to do her bidding quickly and discreetly: moreover, at moments like these, conventionalities and the possible conjectures and surmises of others became of infinitesimally small importance. The household of Blakeney Manor were accustomed to the master's sudden journeys and absences of several days, presumably on some shooting or other sporting expeditions, with no one in attendance on him, save Benyon, his favourite valet. These passed without any comments now! Bah! let everyone marvel for once at her ladyship's sudden desire to go to Dover, and let it all be a nine days' wonder; she certainly did not care. Skirting the house, she reached the stables beyond. One or two men were still astir. To these she gave the necessary orders for her coach and four, then she found her way back to the house.



## THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

Walking along the corridor, she went past the room occupied by Juliette de Marny. For a moment she hesitated, then she turned and knocked at the door.

Juliette was not yet in bed, for she went to the door herself and opened it. Obviously she had been quite unable to rest, her hair was falling loosely over her shoulders, and there was a look of grave anxiety on her young face.

"Juliette," said Marguerite in a hurried whisper, the moment she had closed the door behind her and she and the young girl were alone, "I am going to France to be near my husband. He has gone to meet that fiend in a duel which is nothing but a trap, set to capture him and lead him to his death. I want you to be of help to me, here in my house, in my absence."

"I would give my life for you, Lady Blakeney," said Juliette simply, "is it not *his* since he saved it?"

"It is only a little presence of mind, a little coolness and patience, which I will ask of you, dear," said Marguerite. "You, of course, know who your rescuer was, therefore you will understand my fears. Until to-night I had vague doubts as to how much Chauvelin really knew, but now these doubts have naturally vanished. He and the French Revolutionary Government know that the Scarlet Pimpernel and Percy Blakeney are one and the same. The whole scene to-night was pre-arranged: you and I and all the spectators, and that woman Candeille—we were all puppets piping to that devil's tune. The duel, too, was pre-arranged! . . . that woman wearing your mother's jewels! . . . Had you not provoked her, a quarrel

## THE PASSPORT.

between her and me, or one of my guests, would have been forced somehow. . . . I wanted to tell you this, lest you should fret, and think that you were in any way responsible for what has happened. . . . You were not. . . . He had arranged it all. . . . You were only the tool . . . just as I was. . . . You must understand and believe that. . . . Percy would hate to think that you felt yourself to blame. . . . You are not that, in any way. . . . The challenge was bound to come. . . . Chauvelin had arranged that it should come, and if you had failed him as a tool he soon would have found another! Do you believe that?"

"I believe that you are an angel of goodness, Lady Blakeney," replied Juliette, struggling with her tears, "and that you are the only woman in the world worthy to be his wife."

"But," insisted Marguerite firmly, as the young girl took her cold hand in her own, and, gently fondling it, covered it with grateful kisses, "but if . . . if anything happens . . . anon . . . you will believe firmly that you were in no way responsible? . . . that you were innocent . . . and merely a blind tool? . . ."

"God bless you for that!"

"You will believe it?"

"I will."

"And now for my request," rejoined Lady Blakeney in a more quiet, more matter-of-fact tone of voice. "You must represent me, here, when I am gone: explain as casually and as naturally as you can that I have gone to join my husband on his yacht for a few days. Lucie, my maid, is devoted, and a tower of secrecy; she will stand between you and the rest of



## THE ELUSIVE PIMPERNEL.

the household in concocting some plausible story. To every friend who calls, to anyone of our world whom you may meet, you must tell the same tale, and if you note an air of incredulity in anyone, if you hear whispers of there being some mystery—well! let the world wag its busy tongue—I care less than nought: it will soon tire of me and my doings, and having torn my reputation to shreds, will quickly leave me in peace. But to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes,” she added earnestly, “tell the whole truth from me. He will understand and do as he thinks right.”

“I will do all you ask, Lady Blakeney, and am proud to think that I shall be serving you, even in so humble and easy a capacity. When do you start?”

“At once. Good-bye, Juliette.”

She bent down to the young girl and kissed her tenderly on the forehead, then she glided out of the room as rapidly as she had come. Juliette, of course, did not try to detain her, or to force her help or companionship on her when, obviously, she would wish to be alone.

Marguerite quickly reached her room. Her maid Lucie was already waiting for her. Devoted and silent as she was, one glance at her mistress' face told her that trouble—grave and imminent—had reached Blakeney Manor.

Marguerite, whilst Lucie undressed her, took up the passport and carefully perused the personal description of one Céline Dumont, maid to Citizeness Désirée Candeille, which was given therein: tall, blue eyes, light hair, age about twenty-five. It all might have been vaguely meant for her. She had a dark cloth



## THE PASSPORT.

gown, and long black cloak with hood to come well over the head. These she now donned, with some thick shoes, and a dark-coloured handkerchief tied over her head under the hood, so as to hide the golden glory of her hair.

She was quite calm and in no haste. She made Lucie pack a small hand valise with some necessaries for the journey, and provided herself plentifully with money—French and English notes—which she tucked well away inside her dress.

Then she bade her maid, who was struggling with her tears, a kindly farewell, and quickly went down to her coach.