

THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

by Baroness Orczy

Marguerite said nothing for a moment or two, as she surveyed with obvious delight the not very prepossessing little figure before her. Chauvelin was then nearer forty than thirty--a clever, shrewd-looking personality, with a curious fox-like expression in the deep, sunken eyes. He was the same stranger who an hour or two previously had joined Mr. Jellyband in a friendly glass of wine.

“Chauvelin . . . my friend . . .” said Marguerite, with a pretty little sigh of satisfaction. “I am mightily pleased to see you.”

No doubt poor Marguerite St. Just, lonely in the midst of her grandeur, and of her starchy friends, was happy to see a face that brought back memories of that happy time in Paris, when she reigned--a queen—over the intellectual coterie of the Rue de Richelieu. She did not notice the sarcastic little smile, however, that hovered round the thin lips of Chauvelin.

“But tell me,” she added merrily, “what in the world, or whom in the world, are you doing here in England?”

“I might return the subtle compliment, fair lady,” he said. “What of yourself?”

“Oh, I?” she said, with a shrug of the shoulders. “Je m’ennuie, mon ami, that is all.”

They had reached the porch of “The Fisherman’s Rest,” but Marguerite seemed loth to go within. The evening air was lovely after the storm, and she had found a friend who exhaled the breath of Paris, who knew Armand well, who could talk of all the merry, brilliant friends whom she had left behind. So she lingered on under the pretty porch, while through the gaily-lighted dormer-window of the coffee-room sounds of laughter, of calls for “Sally” and for beer, of tapping of mugs, and clinking of dice, mingled with Sir Percy Blakeney’s inane and mirthless laugh. Chauvelin stood beside her, his shrewd, pale, yellow eyes fixed on the pretty face, which looked so sweet and childlike in this soft English summer twilight.

“You surprise me, citoyenne,” he said quietly, as he took a pinch of snuff.

“Do I now?” she retorted gaily. “Faith, my little Chauvelin, I should have thought

that, with your penetration, you would have guessed that an atmosphere composed of fogs and virtues would never suit Marguerite St. Just."

"Dear me! is it as bad as that?" he asked, in mock consternation.

"Quite," she retorted, "and worse."

"Strange! Now, I thought that a pretty woman would have found English country life peculiarly attractive."

"Yes! so did I," she said with a sigh, "Pretty women," she added meditatively, "ought to have a good time in England, since all the pleasant things are forbidden them--the very things they do every day."

"Quite so!"

"You'll hardly believe it, my little Chauvelin," she said earnestly, "but I often pass a whole day--a whole day--without encountering a single temptation."

"No wonder," retorted Chauvelin, gallantly, "that the cleverest woman in Europe is troubled with ENNUI."

She laughed one of her melodious, rippling, childlike laughs.

"It must be pretty bad, mustn't it?" she asked archly, "or I should not have been so pleased to see you."

"And this within a year of a romantic love match . . . that's just the difficulty . . ."

"Ah! . . . that idyllic folly," said Chauvelin, with quiet sarcasm, "did not then survive the lapse of . . . weeks?"

"Idyllic follies never last, my little Chauvelin . . . They come upon us like the measles . . . and are as easily cured."

Chauvelin took another pinch of snuff: he seemed very much addicted to that pernicious habit, so prevalent in those days; perhaps, too, he found the taking of snuff a convenient veil for disguising the quick, shrewd glances with which he strove to read the very souls of those with whom he came in contact.

"No wonder," he repeated, with the same gallantry, "that the most active brain in Europe is troubled with ENNUI."

“I was in hopes that you had a prescription against the malady, my little Chauvelin.”

“How can I hope to succeed in that which Sir Percy Blakeney has failed to accomplish?”

“Shall we leave Sir Percy out of the question for the present, my dear friend?” she said drily.

“Ah! my dear lady, pardon me, but that is just what we cannot very well do,” said Chauvelin, whilst once again his eyes, keen as those of a fox on the alert, darted a quick glance at Marguerite. “I have a most perfect prescription against the worst form of ENNUI, which I would have been happy to submit to you, but--”

“But what?”

“There IS Sir Percy.”

“What has he to do with it?”

“Quite a good deal, I am afraid. The prescription I would offer, fair lady, is called by a very plebeian name: Work!”

“Work?”

Chauvelin looked at Marguerite long and scrutinisingly. It seemed as if those keen, pale eyes of his were reading every one of her thoughts. They were alone together; the evening air was quite still, and their soft whispers were drowned in the noise which came from the coffee-room. Still, Chauvelin took a step or two from under the porch, looked quickly and keenly all round him, then seeing that indeed no one was within earshot, he once more came back close to Marguerite.

“Will you render France a small service, citoyenne?” he asked, with a sudden change of manner, which lent his thin, fox-like face a singular earnestness.

“La, man!” she replied flippantly, “how serious you look all of a sudden. . . . Indeed I do not know if I WOULD render France a small service--at any rate, it depends upon the kind of service she—or you--want.”

“Have you ever heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Citoyenne St. Just?”