'You do not trust me?'

'I trust you absolutely, dear lady, but St Just's life is forfeit to his country... it rests with you to redeem it.'

'I may be powerless to help you,' she pleaded, 'were I ever so willing.'

'That would be terrible indeed,' he said quietly, 'for you... and for St Just.'

Marguerite shuddered. She felt that from this man she could expect no mercy. All-powerful, he held the beloved life in the hollow of his hand. She knew him too well not to know that, if he failed in gaining his own ends, he would be pitiless.

She felt cold in spite of the oppressive air of the opera-house. The heart-appealing strains of the music seemed to reach her, as from a distant land. She drew her costly lace scarf up around her shoulders, and sat silently watching the brilliant scene, as if in a dream.

For a moment her thoughts wandered away from the loved one who was in danger, to that other man who also had a claim on her confidence and her affection. She felt lonely, frightened for Armand's sake; she longed to seek comfort and advice from someone who would know how to help and console. Sir Percy Blakeney had loved her once; he was her husband; why should she stand alone through this terrible ordeal? He had very little brains, it is true, but he had plenty of muscle: surely, if she provided the thought, and he the manly energy and pluck, together they could outwit the astute diplomatist, and save the hostage from his vengeful hands, without imperilling the life of the noble leader of that gallant little band of heroes. Sir Percy knew St Just well—he seemed attached to him—she was sure that he could help.

Chauvelin was taking no further heed of her. He had said his cruel 'Either—or— ' and left her to decide. He, in his turn now, appeared to be absorbed in the soul-stirring melodies of *Orpheus*, and was beating time to the music with his sharp, ferret-like head.

A discreet rap at the door roused Marguerite from her thoughts. It was Sir Percy Blakeney, tall, sleepy, good-humoured, and wearing that half-shy, half-inane smile, which just now seemed to irritate her every nerve.

'Er... your chair is outside... m'dear,' he said, with his most exasperating drawl, 'I suppose you will want to go to that demmed ball... Excuse me—er—Monsieur Chauvelin—I had not observed you...'

He extended two slender, white fingers towards Chauvelin, who had risen when Sir Percy entered the box.

'Are you coming, m'dear?'

'Hush! Sh! Sh!' came in angry remonstrance from different parts of the house.

'Demmed impudence,' commented Sir Percy with a good-natured smile.

Marguerite sighed impatiently. Her last hope seemed suddenly to have vanished away. She wrapped her cloak round her and without looking at her husband:

'I am ready to go,' she said, taking his arm. At the door of the box she turned and looked straight at Chauvelin, who, with his *chapeau-bras* under his arm, and a curious smile round his thin lips, was preparing to follow the strangely ill-assorted couple.

'It is only *au revoir*, Chauvelin,' she said pleasantly, 'we shall meet at my Lord Grenville's ball, anon.'

And in her eyes the astute Frenchman read, no doubt, something which caused him profound satisfaction, for, with a sarcastic smile, he took a delicate pinch of snuff, then, having dusted his dainty lace jabot, he rubbed his thin, bony hands contentedly together.

'Nay, citoyenne, I offer you a chance of saving the brother you love from the consequences of his own folly.'

Marguerite's face softened, her eyes at last grew moist, as she murmured, half to herself:

'The only being in the world who has loved me truly and constantly... But what do you want me to do, Chauvelin?' she said, with a world of despair in her tear-choked voice. 'In my present position, it is well-nigh impossible!'

'Nay, citoyenne,' he said drily and relentlessly, not heeding that despairing, childlike appeal, which might have melted a heart of stone, 'as Lady Blakeney, no one suspects you, and with your help to-night I may—who knows?—succeed in finally establishing the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel... You are going to the ball anon... Watch for me there, citoyenne, watch and listen... You can tell me if you hear a chance word or whisper... You can note everyone to whom Sir Andrew Ffoulkes or Lord Antony Dewhurst will speak. You are absolutely beyond suspicion now. The Scarlet Pimpernel will be at Lord Grenville's ball to-night. Find out who he is, and I will pledge the word of France that your brother shall be safe.'

Chauvelin was putting the knife to her throat. Marguerite felt herself entangled in one of those webs, from which she could hope for no escape. A precious hostage was being held for her obedience: for she knew that this man would never make an empty threat. No doubt Armand was already signalled to the Committee of Public Safety as one of the 'suspect'; he would not be allowed to leave France again, and would be ruthlessly struck, if she refused to obey Chauvelin. For a moment—woman-like—she still hoped to temporise. She held out her hand to this man, whom she now feared and hated.

'If I promise to help you in this matter, Chauvelin,' she said pleasantly, 'will you give me that letter of St Just's?'

'If you render me useful assistance to-night, citoyenne,' he replied with a sarcastic smile, 'I will give you that letter... to-morrow.'

attacked by Chauvelin's minions. Marguerite took it mechanically and stooped to read it. There were only two lines, written in a distorted, evidently disguised, handwriting; she read them half aloud—

'Remember we must not meet more often than is strictly necessary. You have all instructions for the 2nd. If you wish to speak to me again, I shall be at G.'s ball.'

'What does it mean?' she asked.

'Look again, citoyenne, and you will understand.'

'There is a device here in the corner, a small red flower...'

'Yes.'

'The Scarlet Pimpernel,' she said eagerly, 'and G.'s ball means Grenville's ball... He will be at my Lord Grenville's ball to-night.'

'That is how I interpret the note, citoyenne,' concluded Chauvelin, blandly. 'Lord Antony Dewhurst and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, after they were pinioned and searched by my spies, were carried by my orders to a lonely house on the Dover Road, which I had rented for the purpose: there they remained close prisoners until this morning. But having found this tiny scrap of paper, my intention was that they should be in London, in time to attend my Lord Grenville's ball. You see, do you not? that they must have a great deal to say to their chief... and thus they will have an opportunity of speaking to him to-night, just as he directed them to do. Therefore, this morning, those two young gallants found every bar and bolt open in that lonely house on the Dover Road, their jailers disappeared, and two good horses standing ready saddled and tethered in the yard. I have not seen them yet, but I think we may safely conclude that they did not draw rein until they reached London. Now you see how simple it all is, citoyenne!'

'It does seem simple, doesn't it?' she said, with a final bitter attempt at flippancy, 'when you want to kill a chicken... you take hold of it... then you wring its neck... it's only the chicken who does not find it quite so simple. Now you hold a knife at my throat, and a hostage for my obedience... You find it simple... I don't.'

Chapter 11

Lord Grenville's Ball

The historic ball given by the then Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs—Lord Grenville—was the most brilliant function of the year. Though the autumn season had only just begun, everybody who was anybody had contrived to be in London in time to be present there, and to shine at this ball, to the best of his or her respective ability.

His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had promised to be present. He was coming on presently from the opera. Lord Grenville himself had listened to the two first acts of *Orpheus*, before preparing to receive his guests. At ten o'clock—an unusually late hour in those days—the grand rooms of the Foreign Office, exquisitely decorated with exotic palms and flowers, were filled to overflowing. One room had been set apart for dancing, and the dainty strains of the minuet made a soft accompaniment to the gay chatter, the merry laughter of the numerous and brilliant company.

In a smaller chamber, facing the top of the fine stairway, the distinguished host stood ready to receive his guests. Distinguished men, beautiful women, notabilities from every European country had already filed past him, had exchanged the elaborate bows and curtsies with him, which the extravagant fashion of the time demanded, and then, laughing and talking, had dispersed in the ball, reception, and card rooms beyond.

Not far from Lord Grenville's elbow, leaning against one of the console tables, Chauvelin, in his irreproachable black costume, was taking a quiet survey of the brilliant throng. He noted that Sir Percy

and Lady Blakeney had not yet arrived, and his keen, pale eyes glanced quickly towards the door every time a newcomer appeared.

He stood somewhat isolated: the envoy of the Revolutionary Government of France was not likely to be very popular in England, at a time when the news of the awful September massacres, and of the Reign of Terror and Anarchy, had just begun to filtrate across the Channel.

In his official capacity he had been received courteously by his English colleagues: Mr Pitt had shaken him by the hand; Lord Grenville had entertained him more than once; but the more intimate circles of London society ignored him altogether; the women openly turned their backs upon him; the men who held no official position refused to shake his hand.

But Chauvelin was not the man to trouble himself about these social amenities, which he called mere incidents in his diplomatic career. He was blindly enthusiastic for the revolutionary cause, he despised all social inequalities, and he had a burning love for his own country: these three sentiments made him supremely indifferent to the snubs he received in this fog-ridden, loyalist, old-fashioned England.

But, above all, Chauvelin had a purpose at heart. He firmly believed that the French aristocrat was the most bitter enemy of France; he would have wished to see every one of them annihilated: he was one of those who, during this awful Reign of Terror, had been the first to utter the historic and ferocious desire 'that aristocrats might have but one head between them, so that it might be cut off with a single stroke of the guillotine.' And thus he looked upon every French aristocrat, who had succeeded in escaping from France, as so much prey of which the guillotine had been unwarrantably cheated. There is no doubt that those royalist *émigrés*, once they had managed to cross the frontier, did their very best to stir up foreign indignation against France. Plots without end were hatched in England, in Belgium, in Holland, to try and induce some great power to send troops into revolutionary Paris,

Inside the orchestra box all was silent for a moment or two. Marguerite sat, straight upright, rigid and inert, trying to think, trying to face the situation, to realise what had best be done.

In the house Storace had finished the *aria*, and was even now bowing in her classic garb, but in approved eighteenth-century fashion, to the enthusiastic audience, who cheered her to the echo.

'Chauvelin,' said Marguerite Blakeney at last, quietly, and without that touch of bravado which had characterised her attitude all along, 'Chauvelin, my friend, shall we try to understand one another. It seems that my wits have become rusty by contact with this damp climate. Now, tell me, you are very anxious to discover the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel, isn't that so?'

'France's most bitter enemy, citoyenne... all the more dangerous, as he works in the dark.'

'All the more noble, you mean... Well!—and you would now force me to do some spying work for you in exchange for my brother Armand's safety?—Is that it?'

'Fie! two very ugly words, fair lady,' protested Chauvelin, urbanely. 'There can be no question of force, and the service which I would ask of you, in the name of France, could never be called by the shocking name of spying.'

'At any rate, that is what it is called over here,' she said drily. 'That is your intention, is it not?'

'My intention is, that you yourself win a free pardon for Armand St Just by doing me a small service.'

'What is it?'

'Only watch for me to-night, Citoyenne St Just,' he said eagerly. 'Listen: among the papers which were found about the person of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes there was a tiny note. See!' he added, taking a tiny scrap of paper from his pocket-book and handing it to her.

It was the same scrap of paper which, four days ago, the two young men had been in the act of reading, at the very moment when they were

tiously smothering an imaginary yawn, 'had you not spoken about my brother...'

'I am coming to him now, citoyenne. Among the papers there was a letter to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, written by your brother, St Just.'

'Well? And?'

'That letter shows him to be not only in sympathy with the enemies of France, but actually a helper, if not a member, of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.'

The blow had been struck at last. All along, Marguerite had been expecting it; she would not show fear, she was determined to seem unconcerned, flippant even. She wished, when the shock came, to be prepared for it, to have all her wits about her—those wits which had been nicknamed the keenest in Europe. Even now she did not flinch. She knew that Chauvelin had spoken the truth; the man was too earnest, too blindly devoted to the misguided cause he had at heart, too proud of his countrymen, of those makers of revolutions, to stoop to low, purposeless falsehoods.

That letter of Armand's—foolish, imprudent Armand—was in Chauvelin's hands. Marguerite knew that as if she had seen the letter with her own eyes; and Chauvelin would hold that letter for purposes of his own, until it suited him to destroy it or to make use of it against Armand. All that she knew, and yet she continued to laugh more gaily, more loudly than she had done before.

'La, man!' she said, speaking over her shoulder and looking him full and squarely in the face, 'did I not say it was some imaginary plot... Armand in league with that enigmatic Scarlet Pimpernel!... Armand busy helping those French aristocrats whom he despises!... Faith, the tale does infinite credit to your imagination!'

'Let me make my point clear, citoyenne,' said Chauvelin, with the same unruffled calm, 'I must assure you that St Just is compromised beyond the slightest hope of pardon.'

to free King Louis, and to summarily hang the bloodthirsty leaders of that monster republic.

Small wonder, therefore, that the romantic and mysterious personality of the Scarlet Pimpernel was a source of bitter hatred to Chauvelin. He and the few young jackanapes under his command, well furnished with money, armed with boundless daring, and acute cunning, had succeeded in rescuing hundreds of aristocrats from France. Nine-tenths of the *émigrés*, who were *fêted* at the English court, owed their safety to that man and to his league.

Chauvelin had sworn to his colleagues in Paris that he would discover the identity of that meddlesome Englishman, entice him over to France, and then... Chauvelin drew a deep breath of satisfaction at the very thought of seeing that enigmatic head falling under the knife of the guillotine, as easily as that of any other man.

Suddenly there was a great stir on the handsome staircase, all conversation stopped for a moment as the major-domo's voice outside announced,—

'His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and suite, Sir Percy Blakeney, Lady Blakeney.'

Lord Grenville went quickly to the door to receive his exalted guest.

The Prince of Wales, dressed in a magnificent court suit of salmon-coloured velvet richly embroidered with gold, entered with Marguerite Blakeney on his arm; and on his left Sir Percy, in gorgeous shimmering cream satin, cut in the extravagant 'Incroyable' style, his fair hair free from powder, priceless lace at his neck and wrists, and the flat *chapeau-bras* under his arm.

After the few conventional words of deferential greeting, Lord Grenville said to his royal guest,—

'Will your Highness permit me to introduce M. Chauvelin, the accredited agent of the French Government?'

Chauvelin, immediately the Prince entered, had stepped forward, expecting this introduction. He bowed very low, whilst the Prince returned his salute with a curt nod of the head.

'Monsieur,' said His Royal Highness coldly, 'we will try to forget the government that sent you, and look upon you merely as our guest—a private gentleman from France. As such you are welcome, Monsieur.'

'Monseigneur,' rejoined Chauvelin, bowing once again. 'Madame,' he added, bowing ceremoniously before Marguerite.

'Ah! my little Chauvelin!' she said with unconcerned gaiety, and extending her tiny hand to him. 'Monsieur and I are old friends, your Royal Highness.'

'Ah, then,' said the Prince, this time very graciously, 'you are doubly welcome, Monsieur.'

'There is someone else I would crave permission to present to your Royal Highness,' here interposed Lord Grenville.

'Ah! who is it?' asked the Prince.

'Madame la Comtesse de Tournay de Basserive and her family, who have but recently come from France.'

'By all means!—They are among the lucky ones then!'

Lord Grenville turned in search of the Comtesse, who sat at the further end of the room.

'Lud love me!' whispered His Royal Highness to Marguerite, as soon as he had caught sight of the rigid figure of the old lady; 'Lud love me! she looks very virtuous and very melancholy.'

'Faith, your Royal Highness,' she rejoined with a smile, 'virtue is like precious odours, most fragrant when it is crushed.'

'Virtue, alas!' sighed the Prince, 'is mostly unbecoming to your charming sex, Madame.'

'Madame la Comtesse de Tournay de Basserive,' said Lord Grenville, introducing the lady.

'A little patience, I entreat, citoyenne,' he continued imperturbably. 'Two gentlemen, Lord Antony Dewhurst and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes were at "The Fisherman's Rest" at Dover that same night.'

'I know. I saw them there.'

'They were already known to my spies as members of that accursed league. It was Sir Andrew Ffoulkes who escorted the Comtesse de Tournay and her children across the Channel. When the two young men were alone, my spies forced their way into the coffee-room of the inn, gagged and pinioned the two gallants, seized their papers, and brought them to me.'

In a moment she had guessed the danger. Papers?... Had Armand been imprudent?... The very thought struck her with nameless terror. Still she would not let this man see that she feared; she laughed gaily and lightly.

'Faith! and your impudence passes belief,' she said merrily. 'Robbery and violence!—in England!—in a crowded inn! Your men might have been caught in the act!'

'What if they had? They are children of France, and have been trained by your humble servant. Had they been caught they would have gone to jail, or even to the gallows, without a word of protest or indiscretion; at any rate it was well worth the risk. A crowded inn is safer for these little operations than you think, and my men have experience.'

'Well? And those papers?' she asked carelessly.

'Unfortunately, though they have given me cognisance of certain names... certain movements... enough, I think, to thwart their projected *coup* for the moment, it would only be for the moment, and still leaves me in ignorance of the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel.'

'La! my friend,' she said, with the same assumed flippancy of manner, 'then you are where you were before, aren't you? and you can let me enjoy the last strophe of the *aria*. Faith!' she added, ostenta-

did not move from his seat; he quietly watched that tiny nervous hand, the only indication that his shaft had indeed struck home.

'Well?' she said suddenly and irrelevantly, and with the same feigned unconcern.

'Well, citoyenne?' he rejoined placidly.

'About my brother?'

'I have news of him for you which, I think, will interest you, but first let me explain... May I?'

The question was unnecessary. He felt, though Marguerite still held her head steadily averted from him, that her every nerve was strained to hear what he had to say.

'The other day, citoyenne,' he said, 'I asked for your help... France needed it, and I thought I could rely on you, but you gave me your answer... Since then the exigencies of my own affairs and your own social duties have kept us apart... although many things have happened...'

'To the point, I pray you, citoyen,' she said lightly; 'the music is entrancing, and the audience will get impatient of your talk.'

'One moment, citoyenne. The day on which I had the honour of meeting you at Dover, and less than an hour after I had your final answer, I obtained possession of some papers, which revealed another of those subtle schemes for the escape of a batch of French aristocrats —that traitor de Tournay amongst others—all organised by that arch-meddler, the Scarlet Pimpernel. Some of the threads, too, of this mysterious organisation have fallen into my hands, but not all, and I want you—nay! you *must* help me to gather them together.'

Marguerite seemed to have listened to him with marked impatience; she now shrugged her shoulders and said gaily—

'Bah! man. Have I not already told you that I care nought about your schemes or about the Scarlet Pimpernel. And had you not spoken about my brother...'

'This is a pleasure, Madame; my royal father, as you know, is ever glad to welcome those of your compatriots whom France has driven from her shores.'

'Your Royal Highness is ever gracious,' replied the Comtesse with becoming dignity. Then, indicating her daughter, who stood timidly by her side: 'My daughter Suzanne, Monseigneur,' she said.

'Ah! charming!—charming!' said the Prince, 'and now allow me, Comtesse, to introduce to you, Lady Blakeney, who honours us with her friendship. You and she will have much to say to one another, I vow. Every compatriot of Lady Blakeney's is doubly welcome for her sake... her friends are our friends... her enemies, the enemies of England.'

Marguerite's blue eyes had twinkled with merriment at this gracious speech from her exalted friend. The Comtesse de Tournay, who lately had so flagrantly insulted her, was here receiving a public lesson, at which Marguerite could not help but rejoice. But the Comtesse, for whom respect of royalty amounted almost to a religion, was too well-schooled in courtly etiquette to show the slightest sign of embarrassment, as the two ladies curtsied ceremoniously to one another.

'His Royal Highness is ever gracious, Madame,' said Marguerite, demurely, and with a wealth of mischief in her twinkling blue eyes, 'but here there is no need for his kind mediation... Your amiable reception of me at our last meeting still dwells pleasantly in my memory.'

'We poor exiles, Madame,' rejoined the Comtesse, frigidly, 'show our gratitude to England by devotion to the wishes of Monseigneur.'

'Madame!' said Marguerite, with another ceremonious curtsey.

'Madame,' responded the Comtesse with equal dignity.

The Prince in the meanwhile was saying a few gracious words to the young Vicomte.

'I am happy to know you, Monsieur le Vicomte,' he said. 'I knew your father well when he was ambassador in London.'

'Ah, Monseigneur!' replied the Vicomte, 'I was a leetle boy then... and now I owe the honour of this meeting to our protector, the Scarlet Pimpernel.'

'Hush!' said the Prince, earnestly and quickly, as he indicated Chauvelin, who had stood a little on one side throughout the whole of this little scene, watching Marguerite and the Comtesse with an amused, sarcastic little smile around his thin lips.

'Nay, Monseigneur,' he said now, as if in direct response to the Prince's challenge, 'pray do not check this gentleman's display of gratitude; the name of that interesting red flower is well known to me —and to France.'

The Prince looked at him keenly for a moment or two.

'Faith, then, Monsieur,' he said, 'perhaps you know more about our national hero than we do ourselves... perchance you know who he is... See!' he added, turning to the groups round the room, 'the ladies hang upon your lips... you would render yourself popular among the fair sex if you were to gratify their curiosity.'

'Ah, Monseigneur,' said Chauvelin, significantly, 'rumour has it in France that your Highness could—an you would—give the truest account of that enigmatical wayside flower.'

He looked quickly and keenly at Marguerite as he spoke; but she betrayed no emotion, and her eyes met his quite fearlessly.

'Nay, man,' replied the Prince, 'my lips are sealed! and the members of the league jealously guard the secret of their chief... so his fair adorers have to be content with worshipping a shadow. Here in England, Monsieur,' he added, with wonderful charm and dignity, 'we but name the Scarlet Pimpernel, and every fair cheek is suffused with a blush of enthusiasm. None have seen him save his faithful lieutenants. We know not if he be tall or short, fair or dark, handsome or ill-formed; but we know that he is the bravest gentleman in all the world, and we all feel a little proud, Monsieur, when we remember that he is an Englishman.'

without being seen, in the dark background of the box. 'This is my only opportunity,' he repeated, as she vouchsafed him no reply, 'Lady Blakeney is always so surrounded, so *fêted* by her court, that a mere old friend has but very little chance.'

'Faith, man!' she said impatiently, 'you must seek for another opportunity then. I am going to Lord Grenville's ball to-night after the opera. So are you, probably. I'll give you five minutes then...'

'Three minutes in the privacy of this box are quite sufficient for me,' he rejoined placidly, 'and I think that you would be wise to listen to me, Citoyenne St Just.'

Marguerite instinctively shivered. Chauvelin had not raised his voice above a whisper; he was now quietly taking a pinch of snuff, yet there was something in his attitude, something in those pale, foxy eyes, which seemed to freeze the blood in her veins, as would the sight of some deadly hitherto unguessed peril.

'Is that a threat, citoyen?' she asked at last.

'Nay, fair lady,' he said gallantly, 'only an arrow shot into the air.'

He paused a moment, like a cat which sees a mouse running heedlessly by, ready to spring, yet waiting with that feline sense of enjoyment of mischief about to be done. Then he said quietly—

'Your brother, St Just, is in peril.'

Not a muscle moved in the beautiful face before him. He could only see it in profile, for Marguerite seemed to be watching the stage intently, but Chauvelin was a keen observer; he noticed the sudden rigidity of the eyes, the hardening of the mouth, the sharp, almost paralysed tension of the beautiful, graceful figure.

'Lud, then,' she said, with affected merriment, 'since 'tis one of your imaginary plots, you'd best go back to your own seat and leave me to enjoy the music.'

And with her hand she began to beat time nervously against the cushion of the box. Selina Storace was singing the 'Che farò' to an audience that hung spellbound upon the prima donna's lips. Chauvelin