

prudent. Unconsciously, he might fall into a cunning trap, but—once warned—he might yet succeed.

And if he failed—if indeed Fate, and Chauvelin, with all the resources at his command, proved too strong for the daring plotter after all—then at least she would be there by his side, to comfort, love and cherish, to cheat death perhaps at the last by making it seem sweet, if they died both together, locked in each other's arms, with the supreme happiness of knowing that passion had responded to passion, and that all misunderstandings were at an end.

Her whole body stiffened as with a great and firm resolution. This she meant to do, if God gave her wits and strength. Her eyes lost their fixed look; they glowed with inward fire at the thought of meeting him again so soon, in the very midst of most deadly perils; they sparkled with the joy of sharing these dangers with him—of helping him perhaps—of being with him at the last—if she failed.

The childlike sweet face had become hard and set, the curved mouth was closed tightly over her clenched teeth. She meant to do or die, with him and for his sake. A frown, which spoke of an iron will and unbending resolution, appeared between the two straight brows; already her plans were formed. She would go and find Sir Andrew Ffoulkes first; he was Percy's best friend, and Marguerite remembered with a thrill, with what blind enthusiasm the young man always spoke of his mysterious leader.

He would help her where she needed help; her coach was ready. A change of raiment, and a farewell to little Suzanne, and she could be on her way.

Without haste, but without hesitation, she walked quietly into the house.

Chapter 20

The Friend



LESS than half an hour later, Marguerite, buried in thoughts, sat inside her coach, which was bearing her swiftly to London. She had taken an affectionate farewell of little Suzanne, and seen the child safely started with her maid, and in her own coach, back to town. She had sent one courier with a respectful letter of excuse to His Royal Highness, begging for a postponement of the august visit on account of pressing and urgent business, and another on ahead to bespeak a fresh relay of horses at Faversham.

Then she had changed her muslin frock for a dark travelling costume and mantle, had provided herself with money—which her husband's lavishness always placed fully at her disposal—and had started on her way.

She did not attempt to delude herself with any vain and futile hopes; the safety of her brother Armand was to have been conditional on the imminent capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel. As Chauvelin had sent her back Armand's compromising letter, there was no doubt that he was quite satisfied in his own mind that Percy Blakeney was the man whose death he had sworn to bring about.

No! there was no room for any fond delusions! Percy, the husband whom she loved with all the ardour which her admiration for his bravery had kindled, was in immediate, deadly peril, through her hand. She had betrayed him to his enemy—unwittingly 'tis true—but she *had* betrayed him, and if Chauvelin succeeded in trapping him, who so far was unaware of his danger, then his

death would be at her door. His death! when with her very heart's blood, she would have defended him and given willingly her life for his.

She had ordered her coach to drive her to the 'Crown' inn; once there, she told her coachman to give the horses food and rest. Then she ordered a chair, and had herself carried to the house in Pall Mall where Sir Andrew Ffoulkes lived.

Among all Percy's friends who were enrolled under his daring banner, she felt that she would prefer to confide in Sir Andrew Ffoulkes. He had always been her friend, and now his love for little Suzanne had brought him closer to her still. Had he been away from home, gone on the mad errand with Percy, perhaps, then she would have called on Lord Hastings or Lord Tony—for she wanted the help of one of these young men, or she would be indeed powerless to save her husband.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, however, was at home, and his servant introduced her ladyship immediately. She went upstairs to the young man's comfortable bachelor's chambers, and was shown into a small, though luxuriously furnished, dining-room. A moment or two later Sir Andrew himself appeared.

He had evidently been much startled when he heard who his lady visitor was, for he looked anxiously—even suspiciously—at Marguerite, whilst performing the elaborate bows before her, which the rigid etiquette of the time demanded.

Marguerite had laid aside every vestige of nervousness; she was perfectly calm, and having returned the young man's elaborate salute, she began very calmly,—

'Sir Andrew, I have no desire to waste valuable time in much talk. You must take certain things I am going to tell you for granted. These will be of no importance. What is important is that your leader and comrade, the Scarlet Pimpernel...my husband...Percy Blakeney...is in deadly peril.'

But there was no time now to go over the past. By her own blindness she had sinned; now she must repay, not by empty remorse, but by prompt and useful action.

Percy had started for Calais, utterly unconscious of the fact that his most relentless enemy was on his heels. He had set sail early that morning from London Bridge. Provided he had a favourable wind, he would no doubt be in France within twenty-four hours; no doubt he had reckoned on the wind and chosen this route.

Chauvelin, on the other hand, would post to Dover, charter a vessel there, and undoubtedly reach Calais much about the same time. Once in Calais, Percy would meet all those who were eagerly waiting for the noble and brave Scarlet Pimpernel, who had come to rescue them from horrible and unmerited death. With Chauvelin's eyes now fixed upon his every movement, Percy would thus not only be endangering his own life, but that of Suzanne's father, the old Comte de Tournay, and of those other fugitives who were waiting for him and trusting in him. There was also Armand, who had gone to meet de Tournay, secure in the knowledge that the Scarlet Pimpernel was watching over his safety.

All these lives, and that of her husband, lay in Marguerite's hands; these she must save, if human pluck and ingenuity were equal to the task.

Unfortunately, she could not do all this quite alone. Once in Calais she would not know where to find her husband, whilst Chauvelin, in stealing the papers at Dover, had obtained the whole itinerary. Above everything, she wished to warn Percy.

She knew enough about him by now to understand that he would never abandon those who trusted in him, that he would not turn back from danger, and leave the Comte de Tournay to fall into the bloodthirsty hands that knew of no mercy. But if he were warned, he might form new plans, be more wary, more

‘He was waiting for the coach, your ladyship, which he had ordered.’

‘The coach?’

‘Yes, my lady. A special coach he had ordered. I understood from his man that he was posting straight to Dover.’

‘That’s enough. You may go.’ Then she turned to the groom: ‘My coach and the four swiftest horses in the stables, to be ready at once.’

The groom and runner both went quickly off to obey. Marguerite remained standing for a moment on the lawn quite alone. Her graceful figure was as rigid as a statue, her eyes were fixed, her hands were tightly clasped across her breast; her lips moved as they murmured with pathetic heart-breaking persistence,—

‘What’s to be done? What’s to be done? Where to find him?—Oh, God! grant me light.’

But this was not the moment for remorse and despair. She had done—unwittingly—an awful and terrible thing—the very worst crime, in her eyes, that woman ever committed—she saw it in all its horror. Her very blindness in not having guessed her husband’s secret seemed now to her another deadly sin. She ought to have known! she ought to have known!

How could she imagine that a man who could love with so much intensity as Percy Blakeney had loved her from the first—how could such a man be the brainless idiot he chose to appear? She, at least, ought to have known that he was wearing a mask, and having found that out, she should have torn it from his face, whenever they were alone together.

Her love for him had been paltry and weak, easily crushed by her own pride; and she, too, had worn a mask in assuming a contempt for him, whilst, as a matter of fact, she completely misunderstood him.

Had she had the remotest doubt of the correctness of her deductions, she would have had them confirmed now, for Sir Andrew, completely taken by surprise, had grown very pale, and was quite incapable of making the slightest attempt at clever parrying.

‘No matter how I know this, Sir Andrew,’ she continued quietly, ‘thank God that I do, and that perhaps it is not too late to save him. Unfortunately, I cannot do this quite alone, and therefore have come to you for help.’

‘Lady Blakeney,’ said the young man, trying to recover himself, ‘I...’

‘Will you hear me first?’ she interrupted. ‘This is how the matter stands. When the agent of the French Government stole your papers that night in Dover, he found amongst them certain plans, which you or your leader meant to carry out for the rescue of the Comte de Tournay and others. The Scarlet Pimpernel—Percy, my husband—has gone on this errand himself to-day. Chauvelin knows that the Scarlet Pimpernel and Percy Blakeney are one and the same person. He will follow him to Calais, and there will lay hands on him. You know as well as I do the fate that awaits him at the hands of the Revolutionary Government of France. No interference from England—from King George himself—would save him. Robespierre and his gang would see to it that the interference came too late. But not only that, the much-trusted leader will also have been unconsciously the means of revealing the hiding-place of the Comte de Tournay and of all those who, even now, are placing their hopes in him.’

She had spoken quietly, dispassionately, and with firm, unbending resolution. Her purpose was to make that young man trust and help her, for she could do nothing without him.

‘I do not understand,’ he repeated, trying to gain time, to think what was best to be done.

‘Ay! but I think you do, Sir Andrew. You must know that I am speaking the truth. Look these facts straight in the face. Percy has

sailed for Calais, I presume for some lonely part of the coast, and Chauvelin is on his track. *He* has posted for Dover, and will cross the Channel probably to-night. What do you think will happen?’

The young man was silent.

‘Percy will arrive at his destination: unconscious of being followed he will seek out de Tournay and the others—among these is Armand St Just, my brother—he will seek them out, one after another, probably, not knowing that the sharpest eyes in the world are watching his every movement. When he has thus unconsciously betrayed those who blindly trust in him, when nothing can be gained from him, and he is ready to come back to England, with those whom he has gone so bravely to save, the doors of the trap will close upon him, and he will be sent to end his noble life upon the guillotine.’

Still Sir Andrew was silent.

‘You do not trust me,’ she said passionately. ‘Oh, God! cannot you see that I am in deadly earnest? Man, man,’ she added, while, with her tiny hands she seized the young man suddenly by the shoulders, forcing him to look straight at her, ‘tell me, do I look like that vilest thing on earth—a woman who would betray her own husband?’

‘God forbid, Lady Blakeney,’ said the young man at last, ‘that I should attribute such evil motives to you, but...’

‘But what?... tell me... Quick, man!... the very seconds are precious!’

‘Will you tell me,’ he asked resolutely, and looking searchingly into her blue eyes, ‘whose hand helped to guide M. Chauvelin to the knowledge which you say he possesses?’

‘Mine,’ she said quietly, ‘I own it—I will not lie to you, for I wish you to trust me absolutely. But I had no idea—how *could* I have?—of the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel... and my brother’s safety was to be my prize if I succeeded.’

‘In helping Chauvelin to track the Scarlet Pimpernel?’

‘The runner said, my lady,’ replied the groom, ‘that his orders were to deliver this, and that your ladyship would understand from whom it came.’

Marguerite tore open the envelope. Already her instinct had told her what it contained, and her eyes only glanced at it mechanically.

It was a letter written by Armand St Just to Sir Andrew Foulkes—the letter which Chauvelin’s spies had stolen at ‘The Fisherman’s Rest,’ and which Chauvelin had held as a rod over her to enforce her obedience.

Now he had kept his word—he had sent her back St Just’s compromising letter... for he was on the track of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Marguerite’s senses reeled, her very soul seemed to be leaving her body; she tottered, and would have fallen but for Suzanne’s arm round her waist. With superhuman effort she regained control over herself—there was yet much to be done.

‘Bring that runner here to me,’ she said to the servant, with much calm. ‘He has not gone?’

‘No, my lady.’

The groom went, and Marguerite turned to Suzanne.

‘And you, child, run within. Tell Lucile to get ready. I fear I must send you home, child. And—stay, tell one of the maids to prepare a travelling dress and cloak for me.’

Suzanne made no reply. She kissed Marguerite tenderly, and obeyed without a word; the child was overawed by the terrible, nameless misery in her friend’s face.

A minute later the groom returned, followed by the runner who had brought the letter.

‘Who gave you this packet?’ asked Marguerite.

‘A gentleman, my lady,’ replied the man, ‘at “The Rose and Thistle” inn opposite Charing Cross. He said you would understand.’

‘At “The Rose and Thistle”? What was he doing?’

'Nothing, nothing, child,' she murmured, as in a dream. 'Wait a moment...let me think...think!...You said...the Scarlet Pimpernel had gone to-day...?'

'Marguerite, *chérie*, what is it? You frighten me...'

'It is nothing, child, I tell you...nothing...I must be alone a minute—and—dear one...I may have to curtail our time together to-day...I may have to go away—you'll understand?'

'I understand that something has happened, *chérie*, and that you want to be alone. I won't be a hindrance to you. Don't think of me. My maid, Lucile, has not yet gone...we will go back together...don't think of me.'

She threw her arms impulsively round Marguerite. Child as she was, she felt the poignancy of her friend's grief, and with the infinite tact of her girlish tenderness, she did not try to pry into it, but was ready to efface herself.

She kissed Marguerite again and again, then walked sadly back across the lawn. Marguerite did not move, she remained there, thinking...wondering what was to be done.

Just as little Suzanne was about to mount the terrace steps, a groom came running round the house towards his mistress. He carried a sealed letter in his hand. Suzanne instinctively turned back; her heart told her that here perhaps was further ill news for her friend, and she felt that her poor Margot was not in a fit state to bear any more.

The groom stood respectfully beside his mistress, then he handed her the sealed letter.

'What is that?' asked Marguerite.

'Just come by runner, my lady.'

Marguerite took the letter mechanically, and turned it over in her trembling fingers.

'Who sent it?' she said.

She nodded.

'It is no use telling you how he forced my hand. Armand is more than a brother to me, and...and...how *could* I guess?...But we waste time, Sir Andrew...every second is precious...in the name of God!...my husband is in peril...your friend!—your comrade!—Help me to save him.'

Sir Andrew felt his position to be a very awkward one. The oath he had taken before his leader and comrade was one of obedience and secrecy; and yet the beautiful woman, who was asking him to trust her, was undoubtedly in earnest; his friend and leader was equally undoubtedly in imminent danger and... 'Lady Blakeney,' he said at last, 'God knows you have perplexed me, so that I do not know which way my duty lies. Tell me what you wish me to do. There are nineteen of us ready to lay down our lives for the Scarlet Pimpernel if he is in danger.'

'There is no need for lives just now, my friend,' she said dily; 'my wits and four swift horses will serve the necessary purpose. But I must know where to find him. See,' she added, while her eyes filled with tears, 'I have humbled myself before you, I have owned my fault to you; shall I also confess my weakness?—My husband and I have been estranged, because he did not trust me, and because I was too blind to understand. You must confess that the bandage which he put over my eyes was a very thick one. Is it small wonder that I did not see through it? But last night, after I led him unwittingly into such deadly peril, it suddenly fell from my eyes. If you will not help me, Sir Andrew, I would still strive to save my husband. I would still exert every faculty I possess for his sake; but I might be powerless, for I might arrive too late, and nothing would be left for you but lifelong remorse, and...and...for me, a broken heart.'

'But, Lady Blakeney,' said the young man, touched by the gentle earnestness of this exquisitely beautiful woman, 'do you know that what you propose doing is man's work?—you can-

not possibly journey to Calais alone. You would be running the greatest possible risks to yourself, and your chances of finding your husband now—were I to direct you ever so carefully—are infinitely remote.’

‘Oh, I hope there are risks!’ she murmured softly. ‘I hope there are dangers, too!—I have so much to atone for. But I fear you are mistaken. Chauvelin’s eyes are fixed upon you all, he will scarce notice me. Quick, Sir Andrew!—the coach is ready, and there is not a moment to be lost...I *must* get to him! I *must*!’ she repeated with almost savage energy, ‘to warn him that that man is on his track...Can’t you see—can’t you see, that I *must* get to him...even...even if it be too late to save him...at least...to be by his side...at the last.’

‘Faith, Madame, you must command me. Gladly would I or any of my comrades lay down our lives for your husband. If you *will* go yourself...’

‘Nay, friend, do you not see that I would go mad if I let you go without me?’ She stretched out her hand to him. ‘You *will* trust me?’

‘I await your orders,’ he said simply.

‘Listen, then. My coach is ready to take me to Dover. Do you follow me, as swiftly as horses will take you. We meet at nightfall at “The Fisherman’s Rest”. Chauvelin would avoid it, as he is known there, and I think it would be the safest. I will gladly accept your escort to Calais...as you say, I might miss Sir Percy were you to direct me ever so carefully. We’ll charter a schooner at Dover and cross over during the night. Disguised, if you will agree to it, as my lacquey, you will, I think, escape detection.’

‘I am entirely at your service, Madame,’ rejoined the young man earnestly. ‘I trust to God that you will sight the *Day Dream* before we reach Calais. With Chauvelin at his heels, every step the Scarlet Pimpernel takes on French soil is fraught with danger.’

And all for sheer sport and devilry of course!—saving men, women and children from death, as other men destroy and kill animals for the excitement, the love of the thing. The idle, rich man wanted some aim in life—he, and the few young bucks he enrolled under his banner, had amused themselves for months in risking their lives for the sake of an innocent few.

Perhaps he had meant to tell her when they were first married; and then the story of the Marquis de St Cyr had come to his ears, and he had suddenly turned from her, thinking, no doubt, that she might some day betray him and his comrades, who had sworn to follow him; and so he had tricked her, as he tricked all others, whilst hundreds now owed their lives to him, and many families owed him both life and happiness.

The mask of the inane fop had been a good one, and the part consummately well played. No wonder that Chauvelin’s spies had failed to detect, in the apparently brainless nincompoo, the man whose reckless daring and resourceful ingenuity had baffled the keenest French spies, both in France and in England. Even last night when Chauvelin went to Lord Grenville’s dining-room to seek that daring Scarlet Pimpernel, he only saw that inane Sir Percy Blakeney fast asleep in a corner of the sofa.

Had his astute mind guessed the secret, then? Here lay the whole awful, horrible, amazing puzzle. In betraying a nameless stranger to his fate in order to save her brother, had Marguerite Blakeney sent her husband to his death?

No! no! no! a thousand times no! Surely Fate could not deal a blow like that: Nature itself would rise in revolt: her hand, when it held that tiny scrap of paper last night, would surely have been struck numb ere it committed a deed so appalling and so terrible.

‘But what is it, *chère*?’ said little Suzanne, now genuinely alarmed, for Marguerite’s colour had become dull and ashen. ‘Are you ill, Marguerite? What is it?’

catching the daring plotter, red-handed, in France, and sending him to the guillotine without compunction or delay?

Marguerite turned sick with horror, and her hand convulsively clutched the ring in her dress.

'You are not listening, *chérie*,' said Suzanne, reproachfully, as she paused in her long, highly interesting narrative.

'Yes, yes, darling—indeed I am,' said Marguerite with an effort, forcing herself to smile. 'I love to hear you talking...and your happiness makes me so very glad...Have no fear, we will manage to propitiate *manan*. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes is a noble English gentleman; he has money and position, the Comtesse will not refuse her consent...But...now, little one...tell me...what is the latest news about your father?'

'Oh!' said Suzanne, with mad glee, 'the best we could possibly hear. My Lord Hastings came to see *manan* early this morning. He said that all is now well with dear papa, and we may safely expect him here in England in less than four days.'

'Yes,' said Marguerite, whose glowing eyes were fastened on Suzanne's lips, as she continued merrily:

'Oh, we have no fear now! You don't know, *chérie*, that that great and noble Scarlet Pimpernel himself has gone to save papa. He has gone, *chérie*...actually gone...' added Suzanne excitedly. 'He was in London this morning; he will be in Calais, perhaps, to-morrow...where he will meet papa...and then...and then...'

The blow had fallen. She had expected it all along, though she had tried for the last half-hour to delude herself and to cheat her fears. He had gone to Calais, had been in London this morning...he...the Scarlet Pimpernel...Percy Blakeney...her husband...whom she had betrayed last night to Chauvelin...

Percy...Percy...her husband...the Scarlet Pimpernel...Oh! how could she have been so blind? She understood it now—all at once...that part he played—the mask he wore...in order to throw dust in everybody's eyes.

'God grant it, Sir Andrew. But now, farewell. We meet to-night at Dover! It will be a race between Chauvelin and me across the Channel to-night—and the prize—the life of the Scarlet Pimpernel.'

He kissed her hand, and then escorted her to her chair. A quarter of an hour later she was back at the 'Crown' inn, where her coach and horses were ready and waiting for her. The next moment they thundered along the London streets, and then straight on to the Dover road at maddening speed.

She had no time for despair now. She was up and doing and had no leisure to think. With Sir Andrew Ffoulkes as her companion and ally, hope had once again revived in her heart.

God would be merciful. He would not allow so appalling a crime to be committed, as the death of a brave man, through the hand of a woman who loved him, and worshipped him, and who would gladly have died for his sake.

Marguerite's thoughts flew back to him, the mysterious hero, whom she had always unconsciously loved, when his identity was still unknown to her. Laughingly, in the olden days, she used to call him the shadowy king of her heart, and now she had suddenly found that this enigmatic personality whom she had worshipped, and the man who loved her so passionately, were one and the same: what wonder that one or two happier Visions began to force their way before her mind? She vaguely wondered what she would say to him when first they would stand face to face.

She had had so many anxieties, so much excitement during the past few hours, that she allowed herself the luxury of nursing these few more hopeful, brighter thoughts. Gradually the rumble of the coach wheels, with its incessant monotony, acted soothingly on her nerves: her eyes, aching with fatigue and many shed and unshed tears, closed involuntarily, and she fell into a troubled sleep.

naught to be ashamed of! He is a noble and true man, and one to be proud of as a lover, and... as a husband.'

'Indeed, *chérie*, I am not ashamed,' rejoined Suzanne, softly; 'and it makes me very, very proud to hear you speak so well of him. I think *maman* will consent,' she added thoughtfully, 'and I shall be—oh! so happy—but, of course, nothing is to be thought of until papa is safe...'

Marguerite started. Suzanne's father! the Comte de Tournay!—one of those whose life would be jeopardised if Chauvelin succeeded in establishing the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

She had understood all along from the Comtesse, and also from one or two of the members of the league, that their mysterious leader had pledged his honour to bring the fugitive Comte de Tournay safely out of France. Whilst little Suzanne—unconscious of all—save her own all-important little secret, went prattling on, Marguerite's thoughts went back to the events of the past night.

Armand's peril, Chauvelin's threat, his cruel 'Either—or—' which she had accepted.

And then her own work in the matter, which should have culminated at one o'clock in Lord Grenville's dining-room, when the relentless agent of the French Government would finally learn who was this mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, who so openly defied an army of spies and placed himself so boldly, and for mere sport, on the side of the enemies of France.

Since then she had heard nothing from Chauvelin. She had concluded that he had failed, and yet, she had not felt anxious about Armand, because her husband had promised her that Armand would be safe.

But now, suddenly, as Suzanne prattled merrily along, an awful horror came upon her for what she had done. Chauvelin had told her nothing, it was true; but she remembered how sarcastic and evil he looked when she took final leave of him after the ball. Had he discovered something then? Had he already laid his plans for