

At the exact moment that it began to catch fire, she opened her eyes, raised her hand and, with two dainty fingers, had taken the burning scrap of paper from the young man's hand. Then she blew out the flame, and held the paper to her nostril with perfect unconcern.

'How thoughtful of you, Sir Andrew,' she said gaily, 'surely 'twas your grandmother who taught you that the smell of burnt paper was a sovereign remedy against giddiness.'

She sighed with satisfaction, holding the paper tightly between her jewelled fingers; that talisman which perhaps would save her brother Armand's life. Sir Andrew was staring at her, too dazed for the moment to realise what had actually happened; he had been taken so completely by surprise, that he seemed quite unable to grasp the fact that the slip of paper, which she held in her dainty hand, was one perhaps on which the life of his comrade might depend.

Marguerite burst into a long, merry peal of laughter.

'Why do you stare at me like that?' she said playfully, 'I assure you I feel much better; your remedy has proved most effectual. This room is most delightfully cool,' she added, with the same perfect composure, 'and the sound of the gavotte from the ball-room is fascinating and soothing.'

She was prattling on in the most unconcerned and pleasant way, whilst Sir Andrew, in an agony of mind, was racking his brains as to the quickest method he could employ to get that bit of paper out of that beautiful woman's hand. Instinctively, vague and tumultuous thoughts rushed through his mind: he suddenly remembered her nationality, and worst of all, recollected that horrible tale anent the Marquis de St Cyr, which in England no one had credited, for the sake of Sir Percy, as well as for her own.

'What? Still dreaming and staring?' she said, with a merry laugh, 'you are most ungallant, Sir Andrew; and now I come to think of it, you seemed more startled than pleased when you saw me just now. I do believe, after all, that it was not concern for my health, nor yet a remedy taught you by your grandmother that caused you to burn this tiny scrap of paper... I vow it must have been your lady love's last cruel epistle you were trying to destroy. Now confess!' she added, playfully holding up the scrap of paper, 'does this contain her final *congé*, or a last appeal to kiss and make friends?'

'Whichever it is, Lady Blakeney,' said Sir Andrew, who was gradually recovering his self-possession, 'this little note is undoubtedly mine, and...'

Not caring whether his action was one that would be styled ill-bred towards a lady, the young man had made a bold dash for the note; but Marguerite's thoughts flew quicker than his own; her actions, under pressure of this intense excitement, were swifter and more sure. She was tall and strong; she took a quick step backwards and knocked over the small Sheraton table which was already top-heavy, and which fell down with a crash, together with the massive candelabra upon it.

She gave a quick cry of alarm:

'The candles, Sir Andrew—quick!'

There was not much damage done; one or two of the candles had blown out as the candelabra fell; others had merely sent some grease upon the valuable carpet; one had ignited the paper shade over it. Sir Andrew quickly and dexterously put out the flames and replaced the candelabra upon the table; but this had taken him a few seconds to do, and those seconds had been all that Marguerite needed to cast a quick glance at the paper, and to note its contents—a dozen words in the same distorted handwriting she had seen before, and bearing the same device—a star-shaped flower drawn in red ink.

When Sir Andrew once more looked at her, he only saw on her face alarm at the untoward accident and relief at its happy issue; whilst the tiny and momentous note had apparently fluttered to the ground. Eagerly the young man picked it up, and his face looked much relieved, as his fingers closed tightly over it.

'For shame, Sir Andrew,' she said, shaking her head with a playful sigh, 'making havoc in the heart of some impressionable duchess, whilst conquering the affections of my sweet little Suzanne. Well, well! I do believe it was Cupid himself who stood by you, and threatened the entire Foreign Office with destruction by fire, just on purpose to make me drop love's message, before it had been polluted by my indiscreet eyes. To think that, a moment longer, and I might have known the secrets of an ering duchess.'

'You will forgive me, Lady Blakeney,' said Sir Andrew, now as calm as she was herself, 'if I resume the interesting occupation which you had interrupted?'

'By all means, Sir Andrew! How should I venture to thwart the love-god again? Perhaps he would mete out some terrible chastisement against my presumption. Burn your love-token, by all means!'

Sir Andrew had already twisted the paper into a long spill, and was once again holding it to the flame of the candle, which had remained alight. He did not notice the strange smile on the face of his fair *vis-à-vis*, so intent was he on the work of destruction; perhaps, had he done so, the look of relief would have faded from his face. He watched the fateful note, as it curled under the flame. Soon the last fragment fell on the floor, and he placed his heel upon the ashes.

'And now, Sir Andrew,' said Marguerite Blakeney, with the pretty nonchalance peculiar to herself, and with the most winning of smiles, 'will you venture to excite the jealousy of your fair lady by asking me to dance the minuet?'

her purpose, Marguerite slipped close behind him... At that moment he looked round and saw her; she uttered a groan, passed her hand across her forehead, and murmured faintly,—

'The heat in the room was terrible... I felt so faint... Ah!...'

She tottered almost as if she would fall, and Sir Andrew, quickly re-covering himself, and crumpling in his hand the tiny note he had been reading, was only, apparently, just in time to support her.

'You are ill, Lady Blakeney?' he asked with much concern. 'Let me...'

'No, no, nothing—' she interrupted quickly. 'A chair—quick.'

She sank into a chair close to the table, and throwing back her head, closed her eyes.

'There!' she murmured, still faintly; 'the giddiness is passing off... Do not heed me, Sir Andrew; I assure you I already feel better.'

At moments like these there is no doubt—and psychologists actually assert it—that there is in us a sense which has absolutely nothing to do with the other five: it is not that we see, it is not that we hear or touch, yet we seem to do all three at once. Marguerite sat there with her eyes apparently closed. Sir Andrew was immediately behind her, and on her right was the table with the five-armed candelabra upon it. Before her mental vision there was absolutely nothing but Armand's face. Armand, whose life was in the most imminent danger, and who seemed to be looking at her from a background upon which were dimly painted the seething crowd of Paris, the bare walls of the Tribunal of Public Safety, with Fouquier-Tinville, the Public Prosecutor, demanding Armand's life in the name of the people of France, and the lurid guillotine with its stained knife waiting for another victim... Armand!... For one moment there was dead silence in the little boudoir. Beyond, from the brilliant ball-room, the sweet notes of the gavotte, the frou-frou of rich dresses, the talk and laughter of a large and merry crowd, came as a strange, weird accompaniment to the drama which was being enacted here.

Sir Andrew had not uttered another word. Then it was that that extra sense became potent in Marguerite Blakeney. She could not see, for her eyes were closed; she could not hear, for the noise from the ball-room drowned the soft rustle of that momentous scrap of paper; nevertheless she knew—as if she had both seen and heard—that Sir Andrew was even now holding the paper to the flame of one of the candles.

Marguerite contrived for the moment to evade her present attentive cavalier, and she skirted the fashionable crowd, drawing nearer to the doorway, against which Sir Andrew was leaning. Why she wished to get closer to him, she could not have said: perhaps she was impelled by an all-powerful fatality, which so often seems to rule the destinies of men.

Suddenly she stopped: her very heart seemed to stand still, her eyes, large and excited, flashed for a moment towards that doorway, then as quickly were turned away again. Sir Andrew Ffoulkes was still in the same listless position by the door, but Marguerite had distinctly seen that Lord Hastings—a young buck, a friend of her husband's and one of the Prince's set—had, as he quickly brushed past him, slipped something into his hand.

For one moment longer—oh! it was the merest flash—Marguerite paused: the next she had, with admirably played unconcern, resumed her walk across the room—but this time more quickly towards that doorway whence Sir Andrew had now disappeared.

All this, from the moment that Marguerite had caught sight of Sir Andrew leaning against the doorway, until she followed him into the little boudoir beyond, had occurred in less than a minute. Fate is usually swift when she deals a blow.

Now Lady Blakeney had suddenly ceased to exist. It was Marguerite St Just who was there only: Marguerite St Just who had passed her childhood, her early youth, in the protecting arms of her brother Armand. She had forgotten everything else—her rank, her dignity, her secret enthusiasms—everything save that Armand stood in peril of his life, and that there, not twenty feet away from her, in the small boudoir which was quite deserted, in the very hands of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, might be the talisman which would save her brother's life.

Barely another thirty seconds had elapsed between the moment when Lord Hastings slipped the mysterious 'something' into Sir Andrew's hand, and the one when she, in her turn, reached the deserted boudoir. Sir Andrew was standing with his back to her and close to a table upon which stood a massive silver candelabra. A slip of paper was in his hand, and he was in the very act of perusing its contents.

Unperceived, her soft clinging robe making not the slightest sound upon the heavy carpet, not daring to breathe until she had accomplished

Chapter 13

Either—Or?



THE few words which Marguerite Blakeney had managed to read on the half-scorched piece of paper, seemed literally to be the words of Fate. 'Start myself to-morrow...?' This she had read quite distinctly; then came a blur caused by the smoke of the candle, which obliterated the next few words; but, right at the bottom, there was another sentence, which was now standing clearly and distinctly, like letters of fire, before her mental vision. 'If you wish to speak to me again, I shall be in the supper-room at one o'clock precisely.' The whole was signed with the hastily-scrawled little device—a tiny star-shaped flower, which had become so familiar to her.

One o'clock precisely! It was now close upon eleven, the last minut was being danced, with Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and beautiful Lady Blakeney leading the couples, through its delicate and intricate figures.

Close upon eleven! the hands of the handsome Louis XV clock upon its ornolu bracket seemed to move along with maddening rapidity. Two hours more, and her fate and that of Armand would be sealed. In two hours she must make up her mind whether she will keep the knowledge so cunningly gained to herself, and leave her brother to his fate, or whether she will wilfully betray a brave man, whose life was devoted to his fellow-men, who was noble, generous, and above all, unsuspecting. It seemed a horrible thing to do. But then, there was Armand! Armand, too, was noble and brave, Armand, too, was unsuspecting. And Armand loved her, would have willingly trusted his life in her hands, and now, when she could save him from death, she hesitated. Oh! it was monstrous; her

brother's kind, gentle face, so full of love for her, seemed to be looking reproachfully at her. 'You might have saved me, Margot!' he seemed to say to her, 'and you chose the life of a stranger, a man you do not know, whom you have never seen, and preferred that he should be safe, whilst you sent me to the guillotine!'

All these conflicting thoughts raged through Marguerite's brain, while, with a smile upon her lips, she glided through the graceful mazes of the minuet. She noted—with that acute sense of hers—that she had succeeded in completely allaying Sir Andrew's fears. Her self-control had been absolutely perfect—she was a finer actress at this moment, and throughout the whole of this minuet, than she had ever been upon the boards of the Comédie Française; but then, a beloved brother's life had not depended upon her histrionic powers.

She was too clever to overdo her part, and made no further allusions to the supposed *billet doux*, which had caused Sir Andrew Ffoulkes such an agonising five minutes. She watched his anxiety melting away under her sunny smile, and soon perceived that, whatever doubt may have crossed his mind at the moment, she had, by the time the last bars of the minuet had been played, succeeded in completely dispelling it; he never realised in what a fever of excitement she was, what effort it cost her to keep up a constant ripple of *banal* conversation.

When the minuet was over, she asked Sir Andrew to take her into the next room.

'I have promised to go down to supper with His Royal Highness,' she said, 'but before we part, tell me... am I forgiven?'

'Forgiven?'

'Yes! Confess, I gave you a fright just now... But, remember, I am not an Englishwoman, and I do not look upon the exchanging of *billet doux* as a crime, and I vow I'll not tell my little Suzanne. But now, tell me, shall I welcome you at my water-party on Wednesday?'

'I am not sure, Lady Blakeney,' he replied evasively. 'I may have to leave London to-morrow.'

'I would not do that, if I were you,' she said earnestly; then seeing the anxious look once more reappearing in his eyes, she added gaily; 'No one can throw a ball better than you can, Sir Andrew, we should so miss you on the bowling-green.'

Both the young men looked a little haggard and anxious, but otherwise they were irreproachably dressed, and there was not the slightest sign, about their courtly demeanour, of the terrible catastrophe, which they must have felt hovering round them and round their chief.

That the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel had no intention of abandoning its cause, she had gathered through little Suzanne herself, who spoke openly of the assurance she and her mother had had that the Comte de Tournay would be rescued from France by the league, within the next few days. Vaguely she began to wonder, as she looked at the brilliant and fashionable crowd in the gaily-lighted ball-room, which of these worldly men round her was the mysterious 'Scarlet Pimpernel,' who held the threads of such daring plots, and the fate of valuable lives in his hands.

A burning curiosity seized her to know him: although for months she had heard of him and had accepted his anonymity, as everyone else in society had done; but now she longed to know—quite impersonally, quite apart from Armand, and oh! quite apart from Chauvelin—only for her own sake, for the sake of the enthusiastic admiration she had always bestowed on his bravery and cunning.

He was at the ball, of course, somewhere, since Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Antony Dewhurst were here, evidently expecting to meet their chief—and perhaps to get a fresh *mot d'ordre* from him.

Marguerite looked round at everyone, at the aristocratic high-typed Norman faces, the squarely-built, fair-haired Saxon, the more gentle, humorous caste of the Celt, wondering which of these betrayed the power, the energy, the cunning which had imposed its will and its leadership upon a number of high-born English gentlemen, among whom rumour asserted was His Royal Highness himself.

Sir Andrew Ffoulkes? Surely not, with his gentle blue eyes, which were looking so tenderly and longingly after little Suzanne, who was being led away from the pleasant *tête-à-tête* by her stern mother. Marguerite watched him across the room, as he finally turned away with a sigh, and seemed to stand, aimless and lonely, now that Suzanne's dainty little figure had disappeared in the crowd.

She watched him as he strolled towards the doorway, which led to a small boudoir beyond, then paused and leaned against the framework of it, looking still anxiously all round him.

'All done in the tying of a cravat,' Sir Percy had declared to his clique of admirers.

We seek him here, we seek him there,
Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.
Is he in heaven?—Is he in hell?
That damned, elusive Pimpernel!

Sir Percy's *bon mot* had gone the round of the brilliant reception-rooms. The Prince was enchanted. He vowed that life without Blakeney would be but a dreary desert. Then, taking him by the arm, had led him to the card-room, and engaged him in a long game of hazard.

Sir Percy, whose chief interest in most social gatherings seemed to centre round the card-table, usually allowed his wife to flirt, dance, to amuse or bore herself as much as she liked. And to-night, having delivered himself of his *bon mot*, he had left Marguerite surrounded by a crowd of admirers of all ages, all anxious and willing to help her to forget that somewhere in the spacious reception-rooms, there was a long, lazy being who had been fool enough to suppose that the cleverest woman in Europe would settle down to the prosaic bonds of English matrimony.

Her still overwrought nerves, her excitement and agitation, lent beautiful Marguerite Blakeney much additional charm: escorted by a veritable bevy of men of all ages and of most nationalities, she called forth many exclamations of admiration from everyone as she passed.

She would not allow herself any more time to think. Her early, somewhat Bohemian training had made her something of a fatalist. She felt that events would shape themselves, that the directing of them was not in her hands. From Chauvelin she knew that she could expect no mercy. He had set a price upon Armand's head, and left it to her to pay or not, as she chose.

Later on in the evening she caught sight of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Lord Antony Dewhurst, who seemingly had just arrived. She noticed at once that Sir Andrew immediately made for little Suzanne de Tournay, and that the two young people soon managed to isolate themselves in one of the deep embrasures of the mullioned windows, there to carry on a long conversation, which seemed very earnest and very pleasant on both sides.

He had led her across the room, to one beyond, where already His Royal Highness was waiting for the beautiful Lady Blakeney.

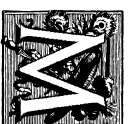
'Madame, supper awaits us,' said the Prince, offering his arm to Marguerite, 'and I am full of hope. The goddess Fortune has frowned so persistently on me at hazard, that I look with confidence for the smiles of the goddess of Beauty.'

'Your Highness has been unfortunate at the card tables?' asked Marguerite, as she took the Prince's arm.

'Ay! most unfortunate. Blakeney, not content with being the richest among my father's subjects, has also the most outrageous luck. By the way, where is that inimitable wit? I vow, Madam, that this life would be but a dreary desert without your smiles and his sallies.'

Chapter 12

The Scrap of Paper



ARGUERTE suffered intensely. Though she laughed and chattered, though she was more admired, more surrounded, more *fêted* than any woman there, she felt like one condemned to death, living her last day upon this earth.

Her nerves were in a state of painful tension, which had increased a hundredfold during that brief hour which she had spent in her husband's company, between the opera and the ball. The short ray of hope—that she might find in this good-natured, lazy individual a valuable friend and adviser—had vanished as quickly as it had come, the moment she found herself alone with him. The same feeling of good-humoured contempt which one feels for an animal or a faithful servant, made her turn away with a smile from the man who should have been her moral support in this heart-rending crisis through which she was passing: who should have been her cool-headed adviser, when feminine sympathy and sentiment tossed her hither and thither, between her love for her brother, who was far away and in mortal peril, and horror of the awful service which Chauvelin had exacted from her, in exchange for Armand's safety.

There he stood, the moral support, the cool-headed adviser, surrounded by a crowd of brainless, empty-headed young fops, who were even now repeating from mouth to mouth, and with every sign of the keenest enjoyment, a doggerel quatrain which he had just given forth.

Everywhere the absurd, silly words met her: people seemed to have little else to speak about, even the Prince had asked her, with a laugh, whether she appreciated her husband's latest poetic efforts.

'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.'

'Ah, Monsieur Chauvelin,' added Marguerite, looking almost with defiance across at the placid, sphinx-like face of the Frenchman, 'His Royal Highness should add that we ladies think of him as of a hero of old...we worship him...we wear his badge...we tremble for him when he is in danger, and exult with him in the hour of his victory.'

Chauvelin did no more than bow placidly both to the Prince and to Marguerite; he felt that both speeches were intended—each in their way—to convey contempt or defiance. The pleasure-loving, idle Prince he despised; the beautiful woman, who in her golden hair wore a spray of small red flowers composed of rubies and diamonds—her he held in the hollow of his hand: he could afford to remain silent and to await events.

A long, jovial, inane laugh broke the sudden silence which had fallen over everyone.

'And we poor husbands,' came in slow, affected accents from gorgeous Sir Percy, 'we have to stand by...while they worship a demmed shadow.'

Everyone laughed—the Prince more loudly than anyone. The tension of subdued excitement was relieved, and the next moment everyone was laughing and chattering merrily as the gay crowd broke up and dispersed in the adjoining rooms.

Chapter 14

One O'Clock Precisely!



UPPER had been extremely gay. All those present declared that never had Lady Blakeney been more adorable, nor that 'demmed idiot' Sir Percy more amusing. His Royal Highness had laughed until the tears streamed down his cheeks at Blakeney's foolish yet funny repartees. His doggerel verse, 'We seek him here, we seek him there,' etc., was sung to the tune of 'Ho! Merry Britons!' and to the accompaniment of glasses knocked loudly against the table. Lord Grenville, moreover, had a most perfect cook—some wags asserted that he was a scion of the old French *noblese*, who, having lost his fortune, had come to seek it in the *cuisine* of the Foreign Office.

Marguerite Blakeney was in her most brilliant mood, and surely not a soul in that crowded supper-room had even an inkling of the terrible struggle which was raging within her heart.

The clock was ticking so mercilessly on. It was long past midnight, and even the Prince of Wales was thinking of leaving the supper-table. Within the next half-hour the destinies of two brave men would be pitted against one another—the dearly-beloved brother and he, the unknown hero.

Marguerite had not even tried to see Chauvelin during this last hour; she knew that his keen, fox-like eyes would terrify her at once, and incline the balance of her decision towards Armand. Whilst she did not see him, there still lingered in her heart of hearts a vague, undefined hope that 'something' would occur, something big, enormous, epoch-making, which would shift from her young, weak shoulders this terrible burden of responsibility, of having to choose between two such cruel alternatives.

But the minutes ticked on with that dull monotony which they invariably seem to assume when our very nerves ache with their incessant ticking.

After supper, dancing was resumed. His Royal Highness had left, and there was general talk of departing among the older guests; the young ones were indefatigable and had started on a new gavotte, which would fill the next quarter of an hour.

Marguerite did not feel equal to another dance; there is a limit to the most enduring self-control. Escorted by a Cabinet Minister, she had once more found her way to the tiny boudoir, still the most deserted among all the rooms. She knew that Chauvelin must be lying in wait for her somewhere, ready to seize the first possible opportunity for a *tête-à-tête*. His eyes had met hers for a moment after the 'fore-supper minuet, and she knew that the keen diplomatist, with those searching pale eyes of his, had divined that her work was accomplished.

Fate had willed it so. Marguerite, torn by the most terrible conflict heart of woman can ever know, had resigned herself to its decrees. But Armand must be saved at any cost; he, first of all, for he was her brother, had been mother, father, friend to her ever since she, a tiny babe, had lost both her parents. To think of Armand dying a traitor's death on the guillotine was too horrible even to dwell upon—impossible, in fact. That could never be, never... As for the stranger, the hero... well! there, let Fate decide. Marguerite would redeem her brother's life at the hands of the relentless enemy, then let that cunning Scarlet Pimpernel extricate himself after that.

Perhaps—vaguely—Marguerite hoped that the daring plotter, who for so many months had baffled an army of spies, would still manage to evade Chauvelin and remain immune to the end.

She thought of all this, as she sat listening to the witty discourse of the Cabinet Minister, who, no doubt, felt that he had found in Lady Blakeney a most perfect listener. Suddenly she saw the keen, fox-like face of Chauvelin peeping through the curtained doorway.

'Lord Fancourt,' she said to the Minister, 'will you do me a service?'

'I am entirely at your ladyship's service,' he replied gallantly.

'Will you see if my husband is still in the card-room? And if he is, will you tell him that I am very tired, and would be glad to go home soon.'

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 curtsy.

'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 little 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.