Sir Percy Hits Back

Baroness Orczy

More daring adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel

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About the Author

Emmuska Orczy was born in Tarnaörs, Heves, in Hungary, the daughter of a composer, Baron Felix Orczy, and Countess Emma Wass.

Her parents left Hungary in 1868, fearful of the threat of a peasant revolution. They lived in Budapest before moving to Brussels and then on to Paris. There, she studied music with limited success before the family moved on again; this time to London, at which point her interest turned to art. She studied at the West London School of Art, followed by Heatherley's School of Fine Art, where she met a young illustrator, Henry Montague MacLean Barstow, the son of an English clergyman who was to become her friend, lover, and husband in a happy marriage that lasted nearly fifty years. They were to have one son.

> *"My marriage was for close on half a century one of perfect happiness and understanding, of perfect friendship and communion of*

thought. The great link in my chain of life which brought me everything that makes life worth the living."

To start with there was little money and the pair worked as translator (Orczy) and illustrator, before she embarked upon a writing career in 1899 which, to start with, was not a success. By 1901, however, she had produced a second novel and a string of detective stories for a magazine which were received a little more kindly. In 1903, in co-operation with her husband, she wrote a play about an English aristocrat, Sir Percy Blakeney, whose mission in life was to rescue French aristocrats from the extreme events affecting their class during the French Revolution.

The play got off to a shaky start, but soon developed a following and eventually ran for four years in the West End of London. It was translated and revised and performed in many other countries. In tandem with the play, Orczy novelized the story and this became a huge success. There followed over ten sequels which featured the central character, Blakeney, along with his family and other members of what was referred to as the *League of the Scarlet Pimpernel*. The first of these, *I Will Repay,* was published in 1906 and the last, *Mam'zelle Guillotine,* in 1940.

She also wrote many other novels, mainly romances, but also within another genre she mastered; detective fiction. *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* was one of the first novels to feature a female detective. *The Old Man in the Corner* stories are of particular significance, as they represented a new departure in fiction, with an 'armchair' detective literally attempting to reveal solutions based on logic alone.

Success brought financial reward and eventually she bought an estate, Villa Bijou in Monte Carlo, Monaco,

which was to become her home and where her beloved husband died in 1943. England, however, remained important to her and in addition to working tirelessly during the First World War in aid of the recruitment of male volunteers for the services, it was in Henley-on-Thames, near London, that she died in 1947.

Many film and TV adaptations of Orczy’s work have been made, and her novels remain sought after and avidly digested by successive new generations of readers.

One

On the spot where the Hotel Moderne now rears its more ambitious head, there stood at that time a cottage with sloping red-tiled roof and whitewashed walls. It was owned by one Baptiste Portal, an old peasant of the Dauphiné, who dispensed refreshments to travellers and passers-by, as his father and grandfather had done before him, in the shape of somewhat thin *vin du pays* and an occasional glass of *eau-de-vie*, while he spent his slack time chiefly in grumbling at the fact that the new posting-inn on the high road had taken all his trade away. He did not see the necessity of the posting-inn, did not old Baptiste, nor for a matter of that of the high road or the post-chaise. Before all these new notions had come into the heads of the government people up in Paris, travellers had been content to come squelching through the mud on the back of a good horse, or come ploughing through inches of dust in the old *cocith*. So why not now? And was not the old wine of Les Amandiers as good and better than the vinegar dispensed at the more pretentious posting-inn? The place was called Les Amandiers because at the back of the house there were two anaemic almond trees with gaunt, twisted arms which covered themselves in the spring with sickly blooms, and in the summer with dust. In front of the house, up against the whitewashed wall, there was a wooden bench on which Baptiste's privileged customers were wont to sit on fine evenings, to drink their *vin du pays* and join the old man in his wholesale condemnation of the government "up in Paris" and its new-fangled ways. From this vantage-point a glorious

view was obtained over the valley of the Buëche, and beyond Laragne as far as the peaks of Pelvoux: whilst to the right towered in the distance the grand old citadel of Sisteron with its turrets and fortifications dating from the fourteenth century, and the stately church of Notre Dame. But views and winding rivers, snowy peaks and mediaeval fortresses did not interest Baptiste Portal's customers nearly as much as the price of almonds or the alarming increase in the cost of living.

Now on this particular afternoon in May the mistral was blowing mercilessly across the valley from over the snows of Pelvoux, and the cold and the dust had driven all the good Portal's customers indoors. The low-raftered room, decorated with strings of onions which hung from the ceiling together with a bunch or two of garlic, of basil and other pot-herbs, and perfumed also with the aroma of the *pot-au-feu* simmering in the kitchen, had acquired just that right atmosphere, cosy, warm and odorous, beloved of every true man born in Dauphiné. It was a memorable afternoon, remembered long afterwards and retold by the gossips of Sisteron and Laragne in all its dramatic details. But at this hour, nothing more dramatic had occurred than the arrival of a detachment of soldiers, under the command of an under-officer, who had come up from Orange, so they said, in order to fetch away the young men who were wanted for the army. They had demanded supper and shelter for the night.

Of course soldiers, as soldiers, were very much disapproved of by those worthies of Sisteron who frequented Les Amandiers, more especially now when what they did was to fetch away the young men for cannon-fodder, to fight the English and prolong this awful war which caused food to be so dear and hands for harvesting so scarce. But on the other hand, soldiers

as company were welcome. They brought news of the outside world, most of it bad, it is true – nothing good did happen anywhere these days – but news nevertheless. And though at the recital of what went on in Paris, in Lyons or even as near as Orange, the guillotine, the tumbrils, the wholesale slaughter of tyrants and aristos, one shuddered with horror and apprehension, there were always the lively tales of barrack-life to follow, the laughter, the ribald song, and something of life seemed to filtrate into this sleepy half-dead corner of old Dauphiné.

The soldiers – there were a score of them – occupied the best place in the room, as was only fitting; they sat, squeezed tightly against one another like dried figs in a box, on the two benches on either side of the centre trestle-table. Old Baptiste Portal sat with them beside the officer. Some kind of lieutenant this man appeared to be, or other subaltern; but oh dear me! these days one could hardly tell an officer from the rag-tag and bobtail of the army, save for the fact that he wore epaulettes. Now this man – but there! what was the use of comparing these ruffians with the splendid officers of the King's armies in the past?

This one certainly was not proud. He sat with his men, joked, drank with them, and presently he convened friend Portal to a glass of wine: "À la santé," he added, "de la République, and of Citizen Robespierre, the great and incorruptible master of France!"

Baptiste, wagging his old head, had not liked to refuse, because soldiers were soldiers and these had been at great pains to explain to him that the reason why the guillotine was kept so busy was because Frenchmen had not yet learned to be good Republicans.

"We've cut off the head of Louis Capet and of the widow Capet too," the officer had added with grim

significance, “but there are still Frenchmen who are bad patriots and hanker after the return of the tyrants.”

Now Baptiste, like all his like in the Dauphiné, had learned in childhood to worship God and honour the King. The crime of regicide appeared to him unforgivable, like that mysterious sin against the Holy Ghost, which M. le Curé used vaguely to hint at, and which no one understood. In addition to that Baptiste greatly resented His late Majesty King Louis XVI and his august Queen being irreverently referred to as Louis Capet and the widow Capet. But he kept his own counsel and silently drank his wine. What his thoughts were at the moment was nobody’s business.

After that, talk drifted to the neighbourhood: the aristos who still clung to the land which by right belonged to the people. Neither Baptiste nor his customers – old peasants from the district – were a match for the lieutenant and his corporals in such discussions. They did not dare argue, only shook their heads and sighed at the coarse jests which the soldiers uttered against people and families whom everyone in the Dauphiné knew and esteemed.

The Frontenacs for instance.

The talk and the jests had turned on the Frontenacs: people who had owned the land for as long as the oldest inhabitant could remember and God only knows how long before that. Well! it appeared that in the eyes of these soldiers of the Republic the Frontenacs were bad patriots, tyrants and traitors. Didn’t Citizen Portal know that?

No! Portal did not – he had never been called “citizen” before, and didn’t like it: he was just Baptiste to those who knew him, quoi? – Nor would he admit that the Frontenacs were traitors. There was Monsieur, who knew more about cattle and almonds than any man for leagues around. How could he be a bad patriot?

And Madame, who was very good and pious, and Mademoiselle who was so ill and delicate. But on this there followed an altercation – stern rebuke of Baptiste from the officer for talking of “Monsieur”, of “Madame” and “Mademoiselle”. Bah! there were no aristos left these days. “Aren’t we all citizens of France?” the lieutenant concluded grandiloquently.

Silence and submission on the part of all the groundlings which followed on the lieutenant’s rebuke, somewhat mollified the latter’s aggressive patriotism. He condescended to relate how he had been deputed to make a perquisition in the house of the Frontenacs, and if anything was found the least com-promising, then the devil help the whole brood: their lives would not be worth an hour’s purchase. In fact, in the lieutenant’s opinion – and who better qualified to hold one? – the Frontenacs were already judged, condemned, and as good as guillotined. He held with the “law of the suspect,” lately enacted by the National Assembly, did Lieutenant Godet.

Again much wagging of heads! “The Committees in all Sections,” Godet now goes on airily, and proceeds to pick his teeth after that excellently stewed scrag-end of mutton, “the Committees in all Sections are ordered in future to arrest all persons who are suspect.”

No one knows what is a Committee, nor yet a Section: but they are evidently fearsome things. But no matter about them: the thing is who are the “suspect” who are thus arrestable?

“The Frontenacs are suspect,” the lieutenant explains whilst sucking his tooth-pick, “and so are all persons who by their actions – or – their writings have become – er – suspect.”

Not very illuminating perhaps, but distinctly productive of awe. The worthies of Sisteron, those who are privileged to sit close to the centre table and

actually to put in a word with the soldiers, sip their wine in silence. Just below the tiny window at the end of the room two charcoal-burners, or wood-cutters – I know not what they are – are lending an attentive ear. They dare not join in the conversation because they are comparative strangers, vagabonds really, come to pick up a few sous by doing menial work too lowering for a local peasant to do. One of them is small and slender, but looks vigorous; the other, much older, with stooping shoulders, and grey, lank hair that falls over a wrinkled forehead. He is harassed by a constant, tearing cough which he strives in vain to suppress out of respect for the company.

"But," the worthy Portal puts in tentatively, "how does one know Monsieur le – I mean citizen officer, that a person is in verity suspect?"

The lieutenant explains with a sweeping gesture of the tooth-pick: "If you are a good patriot, Citizen Portal, you are able to recognize a Suspect in the street, you can seize him by the collar then and there, and you may drag him off before the Committee, who will promptly clap him in prison. And remember," he added significantly, "that there are forty-four thousand Committees in France today."

"Forty-four thousand?" somebody exclaims.

"And twenty-three," Godet replies, gloating over his knowledge of this trifling detail. "Forty-four thousand and twenty-three," he reiterates and claps the table with the palm of his hand.

"One in Sisteron?" someone murmurs.

"Three!" the lieutenant replies.

"And the Frontenacs are suspect, you say?"

"I shall know that tomorrow," rejoins the other, "and so will you."

The way he said those three last words caused everyone to shudder. Over at the far end of the room,

the charcoal-burner, or whatever he was, had a tearing fit of coughing.

"'Tis little Fleurette who will weep her eyes out," good old Baptiste said with a doleful shake of the head, "if anything happens to Mad – to the citizens up at the château."

"Fleurette?" the lieutenant asked.

"She is Armand's daughter – Citizen Armand you know – why?"

He might well stare, for the officer, for some unaccountable reason, had burst into a loud guffaw.

"Citizen Armand's daughter did you say?" he queried at last, his eyes still streaming with the effort of laughing.

"Yes, of course. As pretty a wench as you can see in Dauphiné. Why shouldn't Armand have a daughter, I'd like to know."

"Do tigers have daughters?" the lieutenant retorted significantly.

Somehow the conversation languished after that.

The fate which so obviously awaited the Frontenacs, who were known and loved, cast a gloom over the most buoyant spirits. Not even the salacious stories of barrack-life, on which the men now embarked with much gusto, found responsive laughter.

It was getting late too. Past eight o'clock, and tallow was dear these days. There was a cart-shed at the back of the house, with plenty of clean straw: some of the soldiers declared themselves ready for a stretch there: even the voluble officer was yawning. The regular customers of Les Amandiers took the hint. They emptied their mugs, paid over their sous, and trooped out one by one.

The wind had gone down. There was not a cloud in the sky, which was a deep and intense sapphire blue, studded with stars. The waning moon was not yet up,

and the atmosphere was redolent of the perfume of almond-blossom. Altogether a lovely night. Nature in her kindest, most gentle mood. Spring in the air and life stirring in the entrails of the earth in travail. Some of the soldiers made their way to the shed, whilst others stretched out on the floor, or the benches of the room, there to dream perhaps of the perquisition to be made tomorrow and of the tragedy which would enter like a sudden devastating gust of wind into the peaceful home of the Frontenacs.

Nature was kind and gentle: and men were cruel and evil and vengeful. The Law of the Suspect! No more cruel, more tyrannical law was ever enacted within the memory of civilization. Forty-four thousand and twenty-three Committees to mow down the flower of the children of France. A harvest of innocents! And lest the harvesters prove slack, the National Convention has just decreed that a perambulating army shall march up and down the country, to ferret out the Suspect and to feed the guillotine. Lest the harvesters prove slack, men like Lieutenant Godet with a score of out-at-elbows, down-at-heels brigands, are ordered to scour the country, to seize and strike. To feed the guillotine in fact, and to purge the Soil of Liberty.

Is this not the most glorious revolution the world has ever known? Is it not the era of Liberty and of the Brotherhood of Man?

Two

The perambulating army had now gone to rest: some in the cart-shed, some along the benches and tables or floor of the inn. The lieutenant in a bed. Is he not the officer commanding this score of ardent patriots? Therefore must he lie in a bed – old Portal's bed – whilst old Portal himself and his wife, older and more decrepit than he, can lie on the floor, or in the dog's kennel for aught Lieutenant Godet cares.

The two wood-cutters – or shall we call them charcoal-burners? – were among the last to leave. They had petitioned for work among the worthies here present: but money was very scarce these days and each man did what work he could for himself, and did not pay another to do it for him. But Papa Tronchet, who was a carpenter by trade and owned a little bit of woodland just by the bridge, close to Armand's cottage, he promised one of the men – not both – a couple of hours' work tomorrow: wood-cutting at the rate of two sous an hour, and then he thought it dear.

And so the company had dispersed: each man to his home. The two vagabonds – wood-cutters or charcoal-burners, they were anyhow vagabonds – found their way into the town. Wearily they trudged, for one of them was very old and the other lame, till they reached a narrow lane at right angles to the riverbank. The lane was made up of stone houses that had overhanging eaves, between which the sun could never penetrate. It was invariably either as damp as the bottom of a well, or as dry and wind-swept as an iron stove-pipe. Tonight it was dry and hot: broken-down shutters, innocent of paint, creaked upon rusty hinges. A smell of boiled

cabbage, of stale water and garlic hung beneath the eaves; it came in great gusts down pitch-dark stairways, under narrow doors, oozing with sticky moisture.

The two vagabonds turned into one of these doors and by instinct seemingly, for it was pitch dark, they mounted the stone stairs that squelched with grease and dirt underneath their feet. They did not speak a word until they came to the top of the house, when one of them with a kick of his boot threw open a door; it groaned and creaked under the blow. It gave on an attic-room with sloping ceiling, black with the dirt of ages, and with dormer window masked by a tattered rag that had once been a curtain. There was a wooden table in the centre of the room, and three chairs, with broken backs and ragged rush-seats, dotted about. On the table a couple of tallow candles guttered in pewter sconces.

One of the chairs was drawn close up to the table and on it sat a young man dressed in a well-worn travelling coat with heavy boots on his feet, and a shabby tricorne hat on the top of his head. His arms were stretched out over the table and his face was buried in them. He had obviously been asleep when the door was so unceremoniously thrown open. At the sound he raised his head and blinked drowsily in the dim light at the newcomers.

Then he stretched out his arms, yawned and gave himself a shake like a sleepy dog, and finally exclaimed in English: “Ah! at last!”

One of the vagabonds – the one namely who at Les Amandiers had appeared with bent shoulders and a hacking cough, now straightened out what proved to be a magnificent athletic figure, and gave a pleasant laugh.

“Tony, you lazy dog!” he said, “I’ve a mind to throw you downstairs. What say you, Ffoulkes? While you and I have been breaking our backs and poisoning our lungs with the scent of garlic, I verily believe that this villain Tony has been fast asleep.”

“By all means let’s throw him downstairs,” assented the second vagabond, now no longer lame, whom his friend had addressed as Ffoulkes.

“What would you have me do but sleep?” Tony broke in with a laugh. “I was told to wait, and so I waited. I’d far rather have been with you.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Ffoulkes demurred, “for then you would have been dirtier than I, and almost as filthy as Blakeney. Look at him; did you ever see such a disgusting object?”

“By Gad!” rejoined Blakeney surveying his own slender hands coated with coal-dust, grease and grime, “I don’t know when I have been quite so dirty. Soap and water!” he commanded with a lofty gesture, “or I perish.”

But Tony gave a rueful shrug.

“I have a bit of soap in my pocket,” he said, and diving into the capacious pocket of his coat he produced an infinitesimal remnant of soap which he threw upon the table. “As for water, I can’t offer you any. The only tap in the house is in the back kitchen which Madame, our worthy landlady, has locked up for the night. She won’t have anything wasted, she tells me, not even water.”

“Fine, thrifty people, your Dauphinois,” commented Blakeney, wisely shaking his head. “But did you try bribery?”

“Yes! But Madame – I beg your pardon, Citizeness Marlot – immediately called me a cursed aristo, and threatened me with some committee or other. I couldn’t argue with her, she reeked of garlic.”

“And you, Tony, are an arrant coward,” Blakeney rejoined, “where garlic is concerned.”

“I am,” Tony was willing to admit. “That’s why I am so terrified of you both at this moment.”

They all laughed, and since water was not obtainable, Sir Percy Blakeney, one of the most exquisite dandies of his time, and his friend Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, sat down on rickety chairs, in clothes sticky with dirt, their faces and hands masked by a thick coating of grime. Down the four walls of the small, attic-room fillets of greasy moisture trickled and mingled with the filth that lay in cakes upon the floor.

“I can’t bear to look at Tony,” Blakeney said with a mock sigh, “he is too demned clean.”

“We’ll soon remedy that,” was Ffoulkes’ dry comment.

And behold Sir Andrew Ffoulkes at close grips with Lord Antony Dewhurst, and this in silence for fear of disturbing the rest of the house, and bringing attention on themselves. It was a sparring match in the best style, Blakeney acting as referee, its object – to transfer some of the grime that coated the clothes and hands of Sir Andrew onto the immaculate Lord Tony. They were only boys after all, these men, who even now were risking their lives in order to rescue the innocent from the clutches of a bloody tyranny. They were boys in their love of adventure, and in their hero worship, and men in the light-hearted way in which they were prepared for the supreme sacrifice, should luck turn against them.

The sparring match ended in a call for mercy on the part of Lord Tony. His face was plastered with grime, his hands as dirty as those of his friends.

“Tony,” Blakeney said finally when he called a halt, “if her ladyship were to see you now she would divorce you.”

Vent having been given to unconquerable animal spirits, there was a quick return to the serious business of the day.

“What is the latest?” Lord Tony asked.

“Just this,” Sir Percy replied: “That those hell-hounds have sent out detachments of soldiers all over the country to ferret out what they are pleased to call treason. We all know what that means. Since their iniquitous ‘Law of the Suspect’, no man, woman or child is safe from denunciation: now with this perambulating army, summary arrests occur by the thousand. It seems that at any moment any of those brigands can seize you by the coat-collar and drag you before one of their precious committees, who promptly sends you to the nearest guillotine.”

“And you came across a detachment of those brigands, I suppose.”

“We have; Ffoulkes and I spent a couple of hours in their company, in the midst of fumes of garlic that would have reduced you, Tony, to a drivelling coward. I vow the smell of it has even infested my hair.”

“Anything to be done?” Tony asked simply. He knew his chief well enough to perceive the vein of grim earnestness through all this flippancy.

“Yes!” Blakeney replied. “The squad of brigands who are scouring this part of France are principally after a family named Frontenac, which consists of father, mother and an invalid daughter. I had already found out something about them in the course of the day, whilst I carted some manure for a farmer close by. Beastly stuff manure, by the way! I tried to get into touch with Monsieur, who is a stubborn optimist, and does not believe that any man could mean harm to him or to his family. I went to him in the guise of a royalist agent, supposed to have inside information of impending arrests. He simply refused to believe me. Well! we’ve

met that type of man before. He will have a terrible awakening tomorrow.”

Sir Percy paused for a moment or two, a deep frown between his brows. His keen intellect, alive to all those swift tragedies which he had devoted his life to countermine was already at work envisaging the immediate future, the personages of the coming drama, husband, wife, invalid daughter; then the perquisition, the arrest, summary condemnation and slaughter of three helpless innocents.

“I can’t help being sorry for the man,” he said after awhile, “though he is an obstinate fool! but it is the wife and daughter whom we cannot allow those savage beasts to capture and to kill. I caught sight of them. The girl is pathetic, frail and crippled. I couldn’t bear—”

He broke off abruptly. No need to say more, of course; they understood one another these men who had braved death so often together for love of humanity and for love of sport. Blakeney silent, one firm, slender hand clutched upon the table, was working out a problem of how to rescue three helpless people from that certain death-trap which was already laid for them. The other two waited in equal silence for orders. The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel! pledged to help the innocent and to save the helpless! One to command, nineteen to obey: the two who were here in this filthy, dark attic-room, were the chief’s most trusted officers; but the others were not far away!

Seventeen others! scattered about the countryside, disguised, doing menial work in order to keep in touch with the population, spying, hiding in woods or huts; all of them under orders from their chiefs, and prepared for the call from him.

“Tony,” Blakeney said at last, “you’d better find Hastings and Stowmaries at once and they must pass the word round to the others. I want three of them –

they can draw lots for that – to go to the Four Oaks and there to remain until I can send Ffoulkes to them with full instructions. When you've done that, I want you and Ffoulkes to spend the night in and about Les Amandiers, and gather what you can of the projects of those brigands by keeping your ears open. I'll keep in touch with you from time to time."

"You think," Ffoulkes put in, "that we'll have trouble with the Frontenacs?"

"Not with the ladies, of course," Blakeney replied. "We'll get them safely out of the way before the perambulating army of jackals arrives. With God's help we ought to have time enough to gather a few valuables together. The trouble will be with that obstinate, tiresome man. I feel sure he won't move until the soldiers are hammering at his door. Anyway, I shall know my way in and about the château by tomorrow morning, and will then get into touch with you both at Les Amandiers."

He rose: a tall, straight figure on whom the filthy clothes of a vagabond wood-cutter sat with strange incongruity. But even in this strange garb, which was grotesque as well as degrading, there was an extraordinary dignity in the carriage of the head, the broad shoulders, the firm, long Anglo-Saxon limbs, but above all in the flash of the eyes beneath their heavy lids and in the quiet, low-toned voice so obviously accustomed to be heard and obeyed. The two others were ready on the instant to act according to instructions; to act without argument or question. The fire of excitement was in their eyes: the spirit of adventure, of sport for sport's sake had them in its grip.

"Do I go with you now, Blakeney?" Ffoulkes asked, as his chief had remained for a moment standing, as if following a train of thought.

“Yes,” Blakeney replied. “And by the way, Ffoulkes, and you too, Tony, while you are at Les Amandiers try and find out about this girl Fleurette the old innkeeper spoke about. He said that the girl would cry her eyes out if anything happened to the Frontenacs. You remember?”

“I do. He also said that she was as pretty a wench as could be found in Dauphiné,” Ffoulkes put in with a smile.

“Her father is named Armand,” Blakeney rejoined.

“And the lieutenant called him a tiger, rather enigmatically I thought.”

“This Fleurette sounds an engaging young person,” Lord Tony commented with a smile.

“And should be a useful one in our adventure,” Blakeney concluded. “Find out what you can about her.”

He was the last to leave the room. Ffoulkes and Lord Tony had already gone down the stone staircase, feeling their way through the darkness. But Sir Percy Blakeney stood for a minute or two longer, erect, silent, motionless. Not Sir Percy Blakeney, that is, the elegant courtier, the fastidious fop, the spoilt child of London society, but the daring adventurer, ready, now as so often before, to throw his life in the balance to save three innocent people from death. Would he succeed? Nay! that he did not doubt. Not for a moment. He would save the Frontenacs as he had saved scores of helpless men, women and children before, or leave his bones to moulder in this fair land where his name had become anathema to the tigers that fed on the blood of their kindred. The true adventurer! Reckless of risks and dangers, with only the one goal in view: Success.

Sport? Of course it was sport! grand, glorious, maddening sport! Sport that made him forget every other joy in life, every comfort, every beatitude. Everything except the exquisite wife who in far-off

England waited patiently, with deadly anxiety gnawing at her heart, for news of the man she worshipped. She, perhaps, the greatest heroine of them all.

With a quick sigh, half of impatience, half of longing, Sir Percy Blakeney finally blew out the tallow lights and made his way out into the open.

Three

The house where Fleurette was born and where she spent the first eighteen years of her life, still stands about half-way down the road between Sisteron and Serres and close to Laragne, which was then only a village nestling in the valley of the Buëche. To get to it you must first go cautiously down the slope at the head of the old stone bridge, and then climb up another slope to the front door beside the turbulent little mill stream, the soft gurgle of which had lulled Fleurette to sleep ever since her tiny ears had wakened to earthly sounds.

The house is a tumbledown ruin now, only partly roofed in: doors and shutters are half off their hinges: the outside staircase is worm-eaten and unsafe, the whitewashed walls are cracked and denuded of plaster; the little shrine above the door has long been bereft of its quaint, rudely painted statue of St Anthony of Padua with the Divine Child in his arms. But the wild vine still clings to the old walls, and in the gnarled branches of the old walnut tree, a venturesome pair of blackbirds will sometimes build their nest.

A certain atmosphere of mystery and romance still lingers in the tiny dell, and when we fly along the road in our twentieth-century motor car, we are conscious of this romantic feeling, and we exclaim: “Oh! how picturesque!” and ask the chauffeur to halt upon the bridge, and then get our Kodaks to work.

Perhaps when the plate is developed and we look upon the print, we fail to recapture that sense of a picturesque by-gone age, and wonder why we wasted a precious film on what is nothing but a tumbledown old

cottage, and why so many tumbledown old cottages are left to crumble away and disfigure the lovely face of France. But a century and a half ago, when Fleurette was born, there was an almond tree beside the front door, which in the early spring looked as if covered with pink snow. In those days the shutters and the doors and the outside staircase were painted a beautiful green, the walls were resplendent with fresh whitewash every year. In those days too the wild vine turned to a brilliant crimson in the autumn, and in June the climbing rose was just a mass of bloom. Then in May the nightingale often sang in the old walnut tree, and later on, when Fleurette was tall enough, she always kept a bunch of forget-me-nots in a glass, in the recess above the front door, at the foot of the statue of St Antoine de Padoue, because, as is well known, he is the saint to appeal to in case one has lost anything one values. One just made the sign of the cross and said fervently: “St Antoine de Padoue priez pour nous!” and lo! the kindly saint would aid in the search and more often than not the lost treasure would be found.

All this was, of course, anterior to the horrible events which in a few days transformed the genial, kindly people of France into a herd of wild beasts thirsting for each other’s blood, and before legalized cruelty, murder and regicide had arraigned that fair land at the bar of history, and tarnished her fair fame for ever. Fleurette was just eighteen when the terrible events came to pass that threatened to wreck her young life, and through which she learned not only how cruel and evil man could be, but also to what height of self-abnegation and heroism they could at times ascend.

Fleurette’s birthday was in May, and that day was always for her the gladdest day of the year. For one thing she could reckon on Bibi being home – Bibi being the name by which she had called her father ever since

she had learned to babble. Fleurette had no mother, and she and Bibi just worshipped each other. And of course Bibi had come home for her eighteenth birthday, and had stayed three whole days, and he had brought her a lovely shawl, one that was so soft and fleecy that when you rubbed your cheek against it, it felt just like a caress from a butterfly's wing.

Old Louise – who had looked after the house and watched over Fleurette ever since Fleurette's mother had gone up to Heaven to be with the *bon Dieu* and all the Saints – old Louise had cooked a delicious dinner, which was a very difficult thing to do these days when food was scarce and dear, and eggs, butter and sugar only for the very rich who could bribe M'sieu' Colombe, the *épicier* of the Rue Haute, to let them have what they wanted. But no matter! Old Louise was a veritable genius where a dinner was concerned, and M'sieu' Colombe, the grocer, and M'sieu' Duflos the butcher, had allowed her to have all she asked for: a luscious piece of meat, three eggs, a piece of butter, and this without any extra bribe. Then there were still half a dozen bottles of that excellent red wine which Bibi had bought in the happy olden days; and he had opened one of the bottles, and Fleurette had drunk some wine and felt very elated and altogether happy – but for this there was another reason of which more anon.

Of course the latter part of the day had been tinged with sadness, again for that one reason which will appear presently: but not only because of that, but because of Bibi's departure, which, it seems, could not be postponed, although Fleurette begged and begged that he should remain at least until tomorrow so as not to spoil this most perfect day. *Le bon Dieu* alone knew when Fleurette would see Bibi again, his absences from home had of late become more frequent and more prolonged.

Mais voilà! on one's eighteenth birthday one is not going to think of troubles until the very last minute when it is actually on the doorstep. And the day had been entirely glorious. Not a cloud: the sky of such a vivid blue that the forget-me-nots that grew in such profusion beside the stream looked pale and colourless beneath it. The crimson peonies behind the house were in full bloom, and the buds of the climbing rose on the point of bursting.

And now dinner was over. Louise was busy in the kitchen washing up the plates and dishes, and Fleurette was carefully putting away the beautiful silver forks and spoons which had been brought out for the occasion. She was putting them away in the fine leather case with the molleton lining, which set off the glistening silver to perfection, and little Fleurette felt happy and very contented. She worked away in silence because Bibi had leaned his darling old head against the back of his chair, and closed his eyes. Fleurette thought that he had dropped to sleep.

He looked thin and pale, the poor dear, and there were lines of anxiety and discontent around his thin lips: his hair too had of late been plentifully sprinkled with grey. Oh! how Fleurette longed to have him here at Lou Mas. Always and always. It was the only home she had ever known; dear, beautiful, fragrant Lou Mas. Here she would tend him and care for him until all those lines of care upon his face had vanished. And what more likely to bring a smile to his lips than dear old Lou Mas with its white-washed walls and red-tiled roofs, with its green shutters and little mill stream beside which, for nine months in the year, flowers grew in such profusion; violets, forget-me-nots, and lilies of the valley in the spring, and meadowsweet throughout the summer until an early frost cut them down?

As for this room, Fleurette knew that there could not be in the whole of France, anything more beautiful or more cosy. There was the beautiful walnut sideboard, polished until it shone like a mirror, there were the chairs covered in crimson rep, rather faded, it is true, but none the worse for that, and there was Bibi's special armchair adorned with that strip of tapestry which Fleurette had worked in cross-stitch, expressly for his birthday the year of her first communion. Never had there been such chairs anywhere. And that beautiful paper on the walls, the red and yellow roses that looked as if you could pick them off their lovely chocolate-coloured ground, and the chandelier with the crystal drops, and the blue vases with the gold handles that adorned the mantelpiece, not to mention the print curtains and the pink and blue check cloth upon the table. Oh, Fleurette loved all these things, they had been the playthings of her childhood and now they were her pride. If only Bibi would smile again, she felt that the whole world would be like Heaven.

And then all at once everything went wrong. Fleurette had got her beautiful new shawl out of its wrappings and draped it round her shoulders and rubbed her cheek against it. Then she had said quite innocently: "It is so lovely, Bibi, and the wool is so soft and fine. I am sure that it came from England." And it was from that moment that everything went wrong. To begin with, and quite by accident, of course, Bibi broke the stem of the glass out of which he had been drinking, and a quantity of very precious wine was spilt over the beautiful tablecloth.

Whereupon, unaccountably, because of course the tablecloth could be washed, Bibi pushed his plate aside quite roughly and suddenly looked ten years older; so wan and pale and shrivelled and old. Fleurette longed to put her arms round him – as she used to do in the

happy olden days – and ask him to tell her what was amiss. She was grown up now – eighteen years old today – quite old enough to understand. And if Bibi loved her as she thought he did, he would be comforted.

But there it was! There was something in the expression on Bibi's face that checked Fleurette's impulse. She went on quietly – very quietly, like a little mouse – with her work, and for awhile there was silence in the cosy room with the beautiful roses on the wall that looked as if you could pick them off their chocolate ground: a silence that was unaccountably full of sadness.

Four

Bibi was the first to hear the sound of footsteps coming up to the door. He gave a start, just as if he were waking from a dream.

"It's M'sieu' Colombe," Fleurette said.

At once Bibi reproved her, a thing he hardly ever did: "Citizen Colombe," he said sternly.

Fleurette shrugged her plump shoulders: "Ah well–!" she exclaimed.

"You must learn, Fleurette," Bibi insisted still with unwonted severity. "You are old enough to learn."

She said nothing more; only kissed the top of his head, the smooth brown hair, of late so plentifully tinged with grey, and promised that she would learn. She stood by the sideboard intent on putting the silver away, with her back turned to Bibi so that he should not see the soft tone of pink that had crept into her cheeks, as soon as she had perceived that two pairs of feet were treading the path outside the door.

Now there was a vigorous knock against the door, and a cheery, raucous voice called out loudly: "May one enter?"

Fleurette ran to the door and opened it.

"But certainly, certainly," she said, and then added, seemingly very astonished: "Ah! and M'sieu' Amédé too?" From which the casual observer would perhaps infer that the pink colour in her cheeks had been due to the arrival of M'sieu' Colombe, the *épicier* of the Rue Haute, rather than to that of his son Amédé. It was no doubt also the worthy *épicier* with his round florid face, dark, twinkling eyes, and general air of ferocious kindliness that caused the pink colour to spread from