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The Scarlet Pimpernel Looks at the World

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Published by Good Press, 2022

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EAN 4066338093936

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Chapter 1
Sir Percy Blakeney Puts Up His Quizzing-Glass

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Odd’s fish! but I am already beginning to wonder whether my visit to your modern world is going to be depressing or exhilarating. Lud love you, m’dears, think on it! To be compelled to be serious — really serious, mind you — through the whole length of a book; to say what I think of your modern culture; to make you see the romance of an era which you yourselves deem unbearably prosaic — la! the task would be impossible were it not for the fact that after taking a preliminary look round I have found that these modern times of yours are quite as romantic as were those in which I lived: they are just as full of adventure, of love and of laughter as when I and Sir Andrew and Lord Tony wore rapiers and ruffles, and Lady Blakeney danced the minuet and sang ‘Eldorado’ to the accompaniment of the spinet.

It would in very truth be an impossible task were it not for the delight in store for me of scoring off all those demmed dull Chauvelins, or Chambertins, of your twentieth century and of proving to them that with all their Committees of Pussyfoots and Boards of Public Morals they cannot manacle a certain little blind god we all wot of, nor can they destroy that lure of adventure and of danger which beckons to you modern young people with just as much insistence as it did to us.

Therefore am I here now in your midst — an eighteenth-century dandy, seemingly out of place amid your plus-fours and swallow-tailed coats, but nevertheless prepared to prove my argument up to the hilt. It is demmed embarassing, believe me, to speak to you in the pages of a book and to remain invisible and inaudible the while, even though in the days of my friends Robespierre, Fouquier-Tinville and their like my capacities in that direction were mightily embarassing to them. But even after the first page or two I already have scored off your arrant pessimists: one hundred and fifty years ago the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel was made up of nineteen gallant English gentlemen, but now, by contrast, I can enroll under my banner hundreds of thousands — nay, millions — of men and women of every nation; all those, in fact, who worship beauty, who dream romantic dreams, who love every kind of adventure, so be it that adventure is spiced with danger. Every soldier of fortune — and your modern world counts these by the million — is really a member of this new League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

You don’t believe me? You smile? You scoff? You shrug your shoulders? By gad! if I do not succeed in proving my case within the space allotted to me in this book then I will take a ticket — not a return ticket, mind you — for old Charon’s boat and never utter a word of complaint.

Now let me confess at once that yours is a strange world, even though it be not strange to me. I see changes — a power of changes, from our wigs and ruffles and rapiers, our coaches and gigs, our leisurely ways, our inconsequent aristocracy and, for the most part, contented, easy-going

working-classes. You live in a rush in this twentieth century; grim earnestness pervades your whole existence; you make and accept great and marvellous wonders — miracles, I would call them — as a matter of course, simply because in your impatience and your restlessness you are always eager to get on — to get on, on, on, inventing and making things greater and more marvellous still.

But this is where the strangeness comes in: you — or, rather, the pessimistic Chauvelins amongst you — vow that romance is dead in this modern world; they speak regretfully of the good old days when Sir Percy and Lady Blakeney were the stars of London society, when a romantic love-affair or quixotic adventure met you at every turn. You find your century a dull one, and I marvelled at first whether I, too, would find it so, or would deem it necessary to tint my quizzing-glass with a roseate hue.

As a matter of fact, what do I find?

I find an age so racked with boredom, so surfeited with pleasure and novelty, that it cannot recognize the incomparable adventure of living in the midst of the most marvellous inventions devised by the ingenious brain of man; of living at a time when a man can speak to wife or friend across the width of the world; when he can put a girdle round the earth by flying through space, or listen to voices that speak hundreds of miles away.

It was the fashion in my day to cultivate an air of boredom that one did not feel, but, bless me! your detachment and boredom to-day in the midst of all your modern marvels are neither a fad nor a pose. I see that they are very real indeed.

Strange, did I say? La! it is astounding.

I reckon to have enjoyed a pretty turn now and again in France with those demmed dirty fellows of the Committee of Public Safety. But what a record of heroic deeds *you* established in France less than a score of years ago when you transformed a matter of blood and mud and hate and horror into an epic of nobility and self-sacrifice and splendid comradeship to which mere words cannot attempt to do justice! My League and I were ready to take our lives in our hands when it came to spiriting an *aristo* from under the guillotine, but there is not a man among us who would hesitate to take off his hat in sincere respect and boundless admiration for the greater courage of that band of miners who recently, in a pit disaster in Yorkshire, went down unhesitatingly into the bowels of the earth to risk flame and poison-gas, death by explosion or drowning, in order to try and save their comrades, even though these were, perhaps, already beyond the hope of human aid.

You declare that romance to-day is dead? What, then, but romance is the story of the young nurse who a few weeks ago saved the life of her lover by drawing with her own breath and through her mouth the diphtheria poison from his throat when nothing but this difficult and dangerous method could save him from death? What, indeed, is the whole life of the great Italian inventor, Signor Marconi, but a living romance?

Nay, ’tis not romance you lack in this twentieth century. Had but one quarter as much of it come our way in the days when I frequented Richmond and Vauxhall, my faith! we should have been staggered by it. We had to seek Romance;

for you it flaunts its magic before your eyes every day and in a hundred different ways. By gad! when the last word of this book is written and the last tale told, I shall feel happy in the thought that I had a sight of all that is roseate and silver in the midst of the drab existence you complain of.

Cupid, my friends, is not dead. He will never die while eyes are bright and cheeks as fair as I see them to-day. Mars is in durance vile for the moment — thank God for that! — and I hope soon to see you devoting his courage, his audacity and defiance of danger to the service of humanity instead of to its destruction. The steep slopes of Parnassus are still there for those who dare to climb; the golden apples of the Hesperides still grow in the enchanted garden for those who have the spirit to gather them

Look wide, you moderns! your feet may be plodding in clay, but your eyes can be raised to the eternal hills, and let the memory of the Scarlet Pimpernel show you the way along the silvery paths of Romance which wind their way as deftly through your crowded city streets of to-day as ever they did when I followed them to Paris; for I can hear the clarion sound of high adventure as clearly now as when it called to me in the rattle of the tumbrils.

La! I find myself almost serious, and I see myself in this small book becoming more serious still; but at least, my friends, give me the credit of throwing off my cloak of badinage for the sole purpose of making you see the world or romance in which you live. For this I am ready for the time being to sacrifice my reputation, which I may modestly assure you is that of a lover of adventure, of joy and of

laughter — the immortal spirit of the gay and gallant Scarlet Pimpernel.

Chapter 2
Romantic Britons

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I have just chanced upon a story — the story of a mongrel dog — which interested me vastly. This dog was the friend of a group of soldiers in a dug-out during the late War, and on one occasion his opportune waking and growling warned his company of a heavy German attack which was pending, and which otherwise might have broken through a vital part of the British defensive lines. In return his name was inscribed on the roll of the company, and he was entitled thereafter to draw one man's rations daily.

A year later, in the heat of a furious enemy attack, this dog's master fell seriously wounded in the bottom of a trench, and a German attacking force poured along, past the place where he lay. In their haste they would certainly have trampled the man to death, but for the fact that Mike, one ear torn by a bullet, stood growling over his master's prostrate body; so threatening was his attitude that the hurrying Germans made shift to avoid him.

So the two were found an hour later when the trench was recaptured by a British unit; and it was all the ambulance men could do to persuade the dog, faint from loss of blood as he was, to relinquish his guard. For that episode Mike was awarded the privilege of marching on parade in front of the regiment, even before its officers and colour-sergeants. And I pray you, my friends, in what country save in romantic, sentimental England would that great honour be given even to the noblest of animals?

For England to-day, no less than in my own time or during the centuries that preceded me, is incurably romantic. The legend so rife in Europe of the stolid, immovable, unfeeling, bacon-and-eggs John Bull Englishman is false.

There is more real romance hidden beneath the formal Anglo-Saxon exterior than is possessed by the effervescent Gaul or the polished Roman. The reserve, the coolness, the marked difference between casual acquaintance and friendship, the adherence to convention, the general old-fashioned quiet which the Briton adopts, is an artificial wall which he builds around his inner self.

The careless observer, seeing this artificial wall, never imagines for one moment that there may be something undreamed-of behind it. It is only the serious psychologist who realizes that right within those defences which guard the average Briton against being stared at more than he likes, he keeps his romantic ideals as carefully tended as a gardener does a rare and delicate plant. From his infancy he has been taught by parents and teachers how to build up his wall of reserve, how to fashion therein the gate of unbreakable self-control with the key so hidden that none may chance upon it.

At school — and, by my faith, I am happy to see how these magnificent public schools have spread and increased in number since my time — he is furthered impressed with the vital necessity of keeping every emotion and every ideal strictly concealed behind that artificial wall. And this attitude of mind soon becomes a cult — a kind of fetish. The average British schoolboy is taught that feeling and

emotions are things to be ashamed of, so he keeps them carefully hidden away within himself. Whereupon thoughtless people jump to the conclusion that he hasn't any, and should they, perchance, find out their mistake, they talk at once and with bitterness of the 'perfidious, hypocritical Islanders'.

Actually your ordinary man in the street prefers not to talk about romance because he takes it very seriously. I am sure you have often seen, say, a Frenchman or a German fall on another's neck and kiss him in public; but this is not a sure indication that the two will be on speaking terms the next day. Indeed they may not be friends at all, they may not even know each other: the act may be a mere spontaneous expression of joy engendered by the occasion of some patriotic demonstration or public rejoicing.

On our side of the Channel, on the other hand, a handshake and a few quiet words may be the outward manifestation of a lifelong friendship, or the last farewell to a friend whom one may never hope to see again. And there is one other fact, m'dears, which I must mention here because it goes further than any other in refuting the fallacy that our tight little island is an old, unromantic Sobersides, and that is that in no other country in the world are there so many happy marriages. Now, why is that, I ask you?

It is because when so vital a matter as matrimony is at stake your average Briton brings out the key to that walled garden of his emotions, which he has guarded so jealously from prying eyes since his boyhood, and throws open wide the gates of his secret soul; because, in short, he is

incurably romantic, and looks upon marriage as the most romantic event of his life.

I could quote you instances of British romanticism by the yard, of heroic deeds which put to shame the legendary prowess of a Bayard. Think of that lion-hearted piper, not so long ago, whose regiment was ambushed by the enemy in the Afghan hill country. The men were surrounded by a hostile tribe, their ranks were breaking under a deadly fusillade, but the gallant piper just marched up and down between the ranks and continued to play one pibroch after another encouraging the wearied fighters with the skirl of his pipes; and when after a time he fell, shot in both legs, he dragged himself up to a sitting posture and continued to rally his comrades by playing steadily on, the pibroch which they loved.

There is an outcry among some of you these days that modern England and its people have become more severely practical since my time, more sternly materialistic, and that life has become, in consequence, dull and colourless. La, my friends, you have only to look at a pair of lovers wandering arm-in-arm along a country lane, or through the meadows at eventide, to realize that side by side with all that materialism there still remains in the heart of your people the old ideal of romantic love.

And to our more emotional neighbours I would say: “See how the romanticism of our people rises when occasion demands to a sublimity which, I venture to assert, has never been surpassed by any other nation. Think, my friends, of Greater Britain, the World Empire on which the sun never sets. Does it not in itself prove to you that a handful of