

THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL

by Emmuska Orczy



THE AUTHOR

Baroness Emma Magdalena Rosalia Maria Josefa Barbara Orczy (1865-1947) was a Hungarian aristocrat, the only child of an amateur composer who in her childhood had frequently known the company of such notables as Liszt and Wagner. The family lived at various times in Brussels, Paris, and London, where she studied art and finally settled. There her painting was considered good enough to grace the walls of the Royal Academy. The last fifty years of her life were devoted to writing. Though she is best known for *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and its many sequels and prequels, she also wrote magazine articles and short stories, including numerous books of mysteries such as *The Old Man in the Corner* (1909) in which she introduces the character of the armchair detective, and an autobiography, *Links in the Chain of Life* (1947). She and her husband were trapped in the German occupation of Monte Carlo during World War II, and their villa was bombed by the Allies. Thus she, in a small way, later experienced the persecution and hardship of which she wrote in her famous novels of the French Revolution.

The Scarlet Pimpernel was written in 1902 in a period of five weeks, but Baroness Orczy was unable to find a publisher for it. She consequently turned it into a stage play a year later, and it became a rousing success, paving the way for the publication of the novel in 1905. The popularity of the character led to a whole series of stories about him and his friends published in the decades that followed, many of which contained accurate details about people and events of the revolutionary era. The story itself is an unvarnished tale of swashbuckling adventure with no subplots to clutter the mind of the reader or slow down the action. The idea of a hero who conceals his identity behind the front provided by a meek nonentity or outwardly foolish and unthreatening buffoon ultimately led to the entire superhero genre that became so popular later in the twentieth century (think of Clark Kent/Superman, Don Diego/Zorro and Bruce Wayne/Batman among other notable examples).

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins in September 1792, during the Reign of Terror (actually, the Terror occurred in 1794). As was the case in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the novel portrays a Paris in which unruly mobs of peasants are conducting kangaroo courts and condemning any aristocrat they find to the guillotine. In the midst of this butchery, an unaccountable number of nobles and their families seem to be escaping, aided by a daring group of Englishmen who are led by the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, a master of disguise. Shortly before the story begins, the Pimpernel and a band of aristocrats approached a barricade disguised as French soldiers, shouting that a cart that had just passed contained hidden members of the nobility, then promptly giving chase. This time, the Pimpernel disguises himself as an old crone who spent the day watching the executions and is leaving Paris in a cart with her grandson, who is suspected of having the plague. The guards give them a wide berth, and only later find out the true identities of the denizens of the cart.

The scene then shifts to *The Fisherman's Rest*, an inn on the Dover coast from which the Scarlet Pimpernel and his men commonly embark. The proprietor, one Jellyband by name, holds forth concerning his contempt of foreigners in general and Frenchmen in particular, and cannot imagine why anyone would go to the trouble to keep the Frenchies from murdering one another. After he shares his opinions with two strangers (they turn out to be French spies, one of whom is Chauvelin), Antony Dewhurst and Andrew Ffoulkes arrive with the Comtesse de Tournay and her family, the aristocrats who had escaped in the supposedly plague-stricken cart. The two Englishmen assure the Comtesse that her husband will be rescued soon, and describe to her the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, whose leader's identity is a closely-kept secret. In the course of the conversation, the Comtesse reveals that Marguerite St. Just, the most famous actress in Paris and a former schoolmate of Suzanne de Tournay, had denounced the Marquis de St. Cyr and his entire family and sent them to the guillotine. The young men are shocked, since Marguerite had recently married Sir Percy Blakeney, the richest man in England (and, in reality, the Scarlet Pimpernel himself). No sooner are these words spoken than a coach arrives carrying Sir Percy and his lovely wife. When Marguerite enters, the Comtesse treats her rudely and refuses to speak to her, dragging a reluctant Suzanne from the room in the process. When Sir Percy, a supposedly dim-witted and foppish man of fashion, arrives, Marguerite tells him of the insult she has received, and the young Vicomte de Tournay challenges him to a duel, which he blithely refuses. Soon Marguerite leaves the room to bid her brother Armand, who is preparing to return to France, farewell. During their conversation we discover that her denunciation of the St. Cyr family involved an innocent conversation in which she shared with some friends that the Marquis had ordered her brother beaten up because he had dared to court his daughter. On the basis of this casual conversation, St. Cyr and his entire family had been guillotined. Marguerite had admitted the truth of the incident to Percy, but had not told him the reasons behind it, and as a result he had become cold and distant, though she simply ascribed his behavior to his dullness, assuming that he had tired of her. She thus feels lonely and isolated, longing for her husband's affection no matter how dull he may be. Before she returns to the inn, she is accosted by Chauvelin, an agent of the French government who is in reality a spy seeking the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel. He solicits her help in ferreting out the desired information. Marguerite, though she is a republican, deplores the tactics of the revolutionaries and refuses to help Chauvelin. Later that night, Lord Antony and Sir Andrew are attacked in *The Fisherman's Rest* by Chauvelin's

henchmen, kidnaped and robbed of incriminating papers - including a letter from Armand St. Just identifying him as a sympathizer with the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Later at the opera, Chauvelin approaches Marguerite and tells her of the incriminating letter, warning her that the only way to save her brother from the guillotine is to help him uncover the identity of the Pimpernel. The stolen papers imply that he would be present later that evening at Lord Grenville's ball, and Chauvelin demands Marguerite's assistance there. At the ball, we observe tension-filled conversations between Marguerite and the Comtesse de Tournay on the one hand and Chauvelin on the other. Meanwhile, Sir Percy is behaving like a buffoon as usual. Circulating through the crowd, Marguerite notices Lord Hastings (another member of the League) passing a note to Sir Andrew Ffoulkes. She follows Sir Andrew and manages to read the note without his knowledge; it said that the Scarlet Pimpernel would be in the supper room at exactly one o'clock, and would leave for Paris the next day. As she dances the minuet with Sir Andrew, she agonizes over the decision she must make - should she betray a brave man she admired, though unknown to her, or should she leave her brother to the tender mercies of Chauvelin? Finally she decides to do whatever is necessary to save her brother and hope that the Scarlet Pimpernel can extricate himself from one more tight spot. When Chauvelin corners her, she tells him the content of the note and he then goes to the supper room to await the unsuspecting Pimpernel. One o'clock comes and goes, however, and Chauvelin sees no one in the room except the snoring form of Sir Percy Blakeney, dead to the world as he sleeps off his dinner and drinks. Fearful that the failure of the trap would lead to the death of her brother, Marguerite confronts Chauvelin as she and Percy leave the party, but he just reiterates the fact that Armand will be safe only if the Scarlet Pimpernel is caught.

After the Blakeney's return to their estate in Richmond, Marguerite tells Percy about Armand's predicament and begs his help. Each feels the other's love, but each is too proud to break down the walls between them, even after Marguerite explains the events behind the betrayal of the St. Cyr family. Percy vows that Armand will be safe, then sends his wife off to her bed. Marguerite is unable to sleep, and stands at the window thinking of her love for Percy and how she might regain his favor. Hearing a soft noise, she goes to the door and finds a letter informing her that Percy had suddenly been called on a trip to the North. She rushes out and catches him before he leaves, and forces him to admit that his real purpose is to use his influence to help Armand. She somehow feels comforted by this, but still has no clue as to her husband's actual identity. Marguerite goes back to bed, and when she awakes finds the door to her husband's study open - a room she has never entered. When she goes in, she finds it orderly, almost Spartan - quite unlike the character of the man she knows. As she leaves the room, she discovers on the floor a signet ring bearing the seal of a small red flower she had seen repeatedly in previous days - the scarlet pimpernel - and the truth finally begins to dawn on her. Shortly thereafter, Suzanne de Tournay comes to visit her, and reveals that the Scarlet Pimpernel himself was leaving for France to rescue her father, the Comte de Tournay, and other aristocrats. During her visit, Marguerite receives a sealed letter by courier - it is Armand's incriminating missive, returned by Chauvelin because he is now ready to capture the elusive Pimpernel. Suddenly the full weight of what she has done comes crashing down on Lady Blakeney - she has not only betrayed the bravest man in England, but she has betrayed her own husband, perhaps to his death on the guillotine!

After dismissing Suzanne, Marguerite seeks out Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and confesses all to him, begging his help to save her husband. He readily agrees, and the two embark for the coast, planning to set sail for France at the nearest opportunity. When they arrive at *The Fisherman's*

Rest, however, they encounter a fierce storm that prevents them (and Chauvelin) from leaving England for a full twenty-four hours. The next night they set sail for Calais and arrive without incident. Sir Andrew leads her to the *Chat Gris*, a disreputable hole in the wall owned by a rude and dirty man named Brogard. When they ask the proprietor if he has seen a tall Englishman, he tells them that such a man had been there earlier and was intending to return for supper. Marguerite is thrilled that she should be able to warn Percy before Chauvelin arrives, but Sir Andrew reminds her that the Scarlet Pimpernel would never forsake those he had promised to rescue in order to save himself. While Sir Andrew goes to search for Percy, Marguerite hides herself in an attic room to wait for his arrival at the inn. Soon someone arrives, but the new arrival is not Percy. Instead, it is Chauvelin, disguised as a priest. He speaks to his assistant about the trap that has been built to catch the Scarlet Pimpernel - all roads and the beach are heavily guarded, and spies are everywhere looking for a tall Englishman or anyone who could be such a person in disguise. The rendezvous is supposed to occur at Pere Blanchard's hut, but no one seems to know where such a place is located.

To the amazement of Chauvelin as well as Marguerite, Sir Percy himself soon walks through the door of the inn, loudly singing *God Save the King*, with no attempt at concealment or stealth. He continues to play his foppish character, calmly eating dinner with Chauvelin and carrying on an inane conversation. Meanwhile, Marguerite can hear soldiers approaching the inn. Just before they arrive, Percy offers Chauvelin a pinch of snuff - his favorite indulgence. He had thoughtfully filled the snuffbox with pepper, however, and Chauvelin is quickly incapacitated, while Percy calmly walks out the door. When the soldiers arrive, they report seeing nothing of a tall Englishman. A quick search of the vicinity reveals the nearby establishment of a Jewish merchant from whom Percy had earlier arranged to rent a horse and cart. The Jew is nowhere to be found, but a friend of his (Percy in disguise) tells Chauvelin that he knows where to find Pere Blanchard's hut and can provide more reliable transportation for a small fee. Chauvelin agrees, but threatens to have the old man beaten to death if he is lying. The French agent is now convinced that he has the Scarlet Pimpernel in his clutches, and orders his captain to bring his most brutal soldiers to make the Pimpernel's last hours especially unpleasant ones.

After everyone leaves, Marguerite decides to follow the cart on foot. She walks along the edge of the road, keeping her distance to avoid being seen or heard. Soon horsemen approach and the cart comes to a halt. Marguerite creeps close and hears the horsemen tell Chauvelin that they had found the hut in question, and that inside it were two men, one young and one old; she recognizes Armand and the Comte de Tournay by their descriptions. They had seen no sign of a tall Englishman, however. With the hut less than two leagues distant, the hunt seems to be nearing its end. Chauvelin orders the soldiers to surround the hut but by no means to show themselves until the tall Englishman appears. He and his lieutenant begin to move down the cliff toward the hut with the Jew in tow, wearing a gag because they fear he might inadvertently make some sound of warning. Marguerite follows, then when she sees the hut, runs toward it to warn those hiding there, who are as yet unaware of their peril. She is soon seized from behind by Chauvelin, however, who gags her and forces her toward the hut in which he hopes to trap her unsuspecting husband. Chauvelin removes the gag from her mouth and warns her not to make a sound or else her brother would be shot before her eyes. Suddenly she hears a familiar voice singing *God Save the King* and screams despite herself. Chauvelin sends his men into the hut, but they find it empty, then notice that Percy's schooner, several miles out at sea, is being approached by a boat filled with men. Chauvelin realizes he has lost the refugees, but knows the Scarlet

Pimperl must still be in the area. Then his men discover a note in the hut, indicating that the Pimperl would be waiting for the returning boat in a stream near the *Chat Gris*. Chauvelin and the soldiers immediately race for the old inn, leaving the Jew and Marguerite bound on the ground. After they leave, Marguerite hears her husband's voice, but it takes a while before she realizes that it is coming from the mouth of the old Jew. She crawls over and unties him, and he tells her that he gave two messages to Armand in the hut, one with the real instructions and one with the false directions that was found by Chauvelin's men. He also assures her that he now knows her whole story and loves her more than ever. They make their way to the waiting boat, and the story ends back in England with the wedding of Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Suzanne de Tournay, and with the comment that Chauvelin never appeared in England again.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Sir Percy Blakeney (The Scarlet Pimpernel) - The hero of the story is an English nobleman who risks his life repeatedly to go into France in disguise to rescue French aristocrats from the guillotine, while in England he pretends to be dull and foppish.
- Marguerite St. Just (Lady Blakeney) - A brilliant French actress, "the cleverest woman in Europe," who is rumored to have denounced the St. Cyr family and sent them to the guillotine; she marries Sir Percy without knowing that he is the elusive Pimpernel, then is blackmailed by Chauvelin to help in capturing the rogue Englishman.
- Armand St. Just - Marguerite's brother, reputed to be a republican who harbors a grudge against the St. Cyr family, but who has recently joined the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel. It is to guarantee his safety that Marguerite agrees to help Chauvelin capture the Scarlet Pimpernel.
- Chauvelin - Accredited representative of the French revolutionary government to England, he is in reality a spy seeking the identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel who blackmails Marguerite into helping him.
- Lord Antony Dewhurst - A member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel.
- Sir Andrew Ffoulkes - A member of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, in love with Suzanne de Tournay.
- Desgas - Chauvelin's secretary and second in command.
- Jellyband - Proprietor of *The Fisherman's Rest*.
- Sally Jellyband - The proprietor's daughter, a sweet and attractive girl.
- Comtesse de Tournay - An aristocrat rescued by the Scarlet Pimpernel at the beginning of the novel.

- Suzanne de Tournay - The Comtesse's daughter, in love with Sir Andrew Ffoulkes.
- Vicomte de Tournay - The Comtesse's son, who challenges Percy to a duel but is rebuffed.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Sport, Madame la Comtesse, sport. We are a nation of sportsmen, you know, and just now it is the fashion to pull the hare from between the teeth of the hound.” (Antony Dewhurst, ch.4, p.39)

“From Chauvelin she knew 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.” (ch.12, p.100)

“She despised her husband for his inanities and vulgar, unintellectual occupations; and he, she felt, would despise her still worse, because she had not been strong enough to do right for right's sake, and to sacrifice her brother to the dictates of conscience.” (Lady Blakeney's thoughts, ch.16, p.125)

“A free citizen does not respond too readily to the wishes of those who happen to require something of him.” (ch.22, p.177)

“The brave eagle, captured, and with noble wings clipped, was doomed to endure the gnawing of the rat.” (ch.24, p.193)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare and contrast the treatment of the French Revolution found in Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. Focus particularly on the attitudes of the two authors toward the French aristocrats and the French peasants. How would you explain the similarities and differences you see?
2. In Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, both authors picture the French Revolution as a chaotic revolt of the French working class. In reality, the Revolution was led by middle-class radicals, and the role of the peasantry was secondary to the activities of the various revolutionary governments. Why do you think both authors choose to misrepresent the Revolution in this way? Be sure to refer to the themes of the novels in answering the question.
3. Despite the numerous similarities between Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* and Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, the latter is generally considered to be a far better novel than the former. Why do you think this is so? Analyze the two novels with regard to structure, style, and characterization in the process of answering the question.

4. In Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Lady Blakeney is placed in a horrible dilemma - she must either betray the noble Scarlet Pimpernel or leave her brother to suffer death on the guillotine as a traitor to France. Evaluate her choice from the standpoint of Scripture. Which should she choose, and why? Do you agree or disagree with the decision she makes?
5. In Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, who is the real protagonist of the story, Sir Percy Blakeney or his wife Marguerite? Support your conclusion with details from the novel.
6. In Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, the author clearly sympathizes with the French aristocracy. Since Emmuska Orczy was an expatriate Hungarian noblewoman, the reason for her sympathy is not too difficult to discern. In what ways does she display her sympathies in the novel? Consider elements of plot, characterization, and dialogue in your answer.
7. Unlike other more highly-respected novels, Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* has no subplots. Discuss the possible reasons for this choice on the part of the author, and evaluate its effectiveness. Does the straight-line plot of the story contribute to or detract from its value to the reader? Use specifics from the novel to support your conclusion.
8. Lord Antony Dewhurst, a member of the League in Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, when asked why he risks his life to rescue French aristocrats, answers, "Sport, Madame la Comtesse, sport. We are a nation of sportsmen, you know, and just now it is the fashion to pull the hare from between the teeth of the hound." Do you believe him? If so, does his declared motive lessen your respect for the brave young men who risk their lives in this way? If not, what evidence do you find in the novel to support the assertion that the motives of Sir Percy and his band are nobler than they themselves are willing to admit?
9. Assess Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* from an historical standpoint. How accurate is the picture it paints, given what you know of the French Revolution? Why do you think the author chose to distort the historical facts in the way she did? Do such distortions contribute to the effectiveness of the novel or help to develop its themes? In what ways?
10. Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was written shortly after the Dreyfus Affair rocked the nation of France to its very foundation. Discuss the treatment of Jews in the novel. In what ways does that treatment reflect the deep-seated French prejudice against them revealed in the Dreyfus Affair? Be sure to use specific quotations from the novel to support your argument.

11. Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* is credited with being the first example of a story of a hero with a secret identity, and thus the forerunner of later heroes ranging from Zorro to Superman. What explains the popularity of such stories? Why do you think people are drawn to tales of average nonentities or men who are mocked and despised by their peers who secretly are heroes loved and respected by all? Answer the question using evidence from the novel that shows ways in which readers might identify with the title character.

12. Assess the moral values presented in Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Choose three prominent values espoused by the admirable characters in the book, show how they are portrayed in the novel, and compare what you find to biblical teachings on the same values.