

It wasn't easy to follow the cart, but fortunately the road was bad and the cart had to travel slowly. Lady Marguerite walked quickly and sometimes she ran. Her feet began to hurt, but she didn't pay any attention. She was concentrating on the sound of the cart.

"I must stay close behind Chauvelin," she thought. "But where is Percy? Is he travelling to the hut, too? Will the soldiers find him?" She was very nervous.

In the cart, Chauvelin felt good. "My enemy won't escape this time!" he thought. "Catching the Scarlet Pimpernel will be my moment of glory."

"Are you sure that this is the right road?" he asked the gypsy some time later.

"Yes, your Excellency," the gypsy replied. "The other cart is in front of us. I can see the marks of the wheels on the road."

Suddenly, Chauvelin called to the gypsy. "Listen! What's that noise? Is it the horses?"

Lady Marguerite also heard the sound of horses. She knew that it wasn't the additional soldiers with Degas. They were still some distance behind and this sound was in front of them.

"Have the soldiers caught Sir Percy?" she thought in panic. "Are these men bringing bad news?"

Two horsemen came out of the darkness and stopped next to Chauvelin. The cart stopped too, and Lady Marguerite moved nearer to hear what the men were saying.

"Have you got good news for me?" Chauvelin asked. "Have you seen the tall Englishman?"

"No, but we've found the hut," answered one of the horsemen. "It was empty at first. But then we saw four men walking towards it, a young man and an older man in front, and two other men behind them."

Lady Marguerite's heart was in her mouth. The older man was probably the Comte de Tournay, and the young man was probably Armand.

"Are you sure that you didn't see the tall Englishman?" Chauvelin asked again.

"No, we didn't," replied the horseman. "There were six of us near the hut, and we were all watching carefully. We also met some other soldiers when we were coming here and they haven't seen the tall Englishman either."

"I'm sure that he's in front of us," Chauvelin shouted. "We must leave immediately! How far is the hut from here?"

"A few kilometres along the road, and then along a path to the cliff," the horseman replied. "The hut is 100 metres down the cliff. I know the road well."

"Come on, then, we must move fast," Chauvelin ordered the horsemen. "But stop near the path. We'll continue from there on foot."

More horsemen came along the road. It was Degas with the additional soldiers from the inn. Lady Marguerite returned quickly to the shadows at the side of the road.

"How can I help Percy?" she thought. "And what about Armand in the hut? Can I save him?"

Then Chauvelin shouted an order. The cart started to move, the soldiers followed the cart and Lady Marguerite followed the soldiers as quickly as she could.

CHAPTER 15

The Footpath

Lady Marguerite was becoming very tired. Her head hurt and her legs were trembling, but she continued to walk. "I can't stop now," she thought. "Sir Percy and Armand need me. I must get to the hut."

After some time, the soldiers stopped near a small path. There were woods all around. Lady Marguerite moved quietly behind some trees near the men and listened.

"Now where is the hut?" Chauvelin asked the officer with the soldiers.

"We must go through these woods to the edge of the cliff," the officer replied. "The hut is near there."

"Good. You go first and the gypsy and I will follow," Chauvelin said. "But stop when you get to the edge of the cliff. Do you understand?"

"I understand," replied the officer.

"Now listen to me carefully, and be sure to follow my orders," said Chauvelin to the soldiers. "If you don't, I'll punish you later. When we get to the edge of the cliff, you'll go down first to the hut. When you get there, look inside. If the tall Englishman is already there, call quietly to the others. Then go into the hut together. You must seize the men before they can find their pistols. If they fight, shoot at their arms or legs, but don't kill the tall Englishman. Is that clear?"

"Yes," replied the soldiers.

"However, if the tall Englishman isn't there yet, you must wait quietly in the trees until he arrives," continued Chauvelin. "Don't attack the hut until he's inside. And one last order: tie the gypsy with ropes and put something over his mouth. We must take him with us, but I don't want him to make a noise."

Chauvelin and the soldiers walked quickly along the path. Lady Marguerite followed them quietly, trying to stay in the shadow of the trees. Suddenly, the moon appeared from behind the clouds and Lady Marguerite stopped. She could see the edge of the cliff not far in front of her. Beyond it she saw the sea. A ship was waiting. It was Sir Percy's ship.

"Will the men in the hut ever get to the ship?" Lady Marguerite thought. "I must get to the hut before the soldiers and speak to the men inside. I must tell them of the danger."

Lady Marguerite started to run in a different direction. She wanted to go around the soldiers and get in front of them. There was still a little light from the moon and this helped her. A few minutes later, she arrived at the edge of the cliff and looked down.

A little distance from her, on the left, she saw the hut with a small light inside.

"Good, it's not too difficult to get to it," she thought. "There are even large rocks to help me climb down the cliff."

She looked around the woods; there was nobody near. She forgot everything: the soldiers, the danger, her fatigue. She went down the cliff as fast as she could, going from rock to rock. It was difficult, and sometimes she nearly fell. But she couldn't stop now!

She was already near the hut when she heard a noise behind her. Then someone caught her skirt and she fell to the ground. She wanted to shout but there was a hand over her mouth. Another hand held her arms behind her back. Then she heard someone laugh quietly.

"This is a surprise, my dear lady!" said Chauvelin. "I didn't expect to see you here. I'm sorry if you're uncomfortable, but I can't let you go." He gave a quick order to his men. Then someone tied a cloth over Lady Marguerite's mouth and lifted her from the ground. Lady Marguerite fainted.

CHAPTER 16

At the Hut

When Lady Marguerite opened her eyes again, she was sitting on the ground with her back against a tree. She heard the sea somewhere below her. Next to her, Chauvelin and the officer were speaking in quiet voices.

"There are four men in the hut," the officer said. "They're sitting round the fire."

"What's the time?" Chauvelin asked.

"It's nearly two o'clock," answered the officer.

"And the ship?" asked Chauvelin.

"It's still there," the officer told him. "We're sure that a small boat is hiding near here, waiting for the men in the hut. This boat will take them to the ship, but they've hidden the boat and we can't find it."

"That's not so important," Chauvelin said. "We'll make sure that nobody gets to it. Are all the soldiers ready?"

"Yes, they are. They won't move until the tall Englishman arrives," the officer answered.

"Where's the gypsy?" Chauvelin asked.

"We've tied his arms and legs, and we've put a cloth over his mouth," the officer informed him. "He can't move or shout."

"Good, then return to your positions near the hut," ordered Chauvelin. "I'll take care of the lady."

Chauvelin turned to Lady Marguerite. "Well, my dear," he said with a smile. "You're very brave, but you won't win. Your brother's inside that hut with three other men. They're all waiting for my prize, the Scarlet Pimpernel. If you do what I say, you can still save your brother. If you don't move or make a sound, he'll go free with you tonight. That's a promise. Only you must be completely quiet. If you move or try to shout, we'll kill Armand and the other men in the hut. And you will watch."

Lady Marguerite was very frightened. Again she had to decide between Sir Percy and Armand. "If I try to warn Sir Percy, my brother will die," she thought. "But if I save my brother, Chauvelin will catch my brave Percy!"

Chauvelin watched her and smiled. He was sure of her reaction. A few seconds later, he took the cloth from her mouth. He was right: she didn't make a sound. "Think, think of a plan!" she thought in panic.

Suddenly, in the woods, she heard a voice singing. It was the same English song as before, at

the Chat Gris Inn. Was she dreaming? Was it perhaps Sir Percy? And where exactly was he? The voice came nearer. Desgas took his pistol in his hand.

"No! No! This can't happen!" thought Lady Marguerite. Without another thought, she stood up quickly and shouted, "Armand, you must shoot. Defend yourselves! The Scarlet Pimpernel is near, and the soldiers are all around. Armand! Armand! Why don't you shoot?" Then she ran towards the little hut, still shouting.

In a second, Chauvelin was next to her and put his hands over her mouth. The soldiers stood up quickly. The singer became silent.

Chauvelin tried to control himself. "Into the hut, men, and don't let anyone escape!" he ordered.

The soldiers ran into the hut and looked around it. "There's nobody here," one of them said. Chauvelin couldn't believe his ears! "What did I tell you - don't let anyone escape," he shouted angrily. "Quick, after them! You'll pay for this! And you too, Desgas."

"But those were your orders," the soldier replied stupidly. "'Don't do anything until the tall Englishman arrives.' That's what you said. The four men left the hut quietly, one by one, about half an hour ago. I saw them go."

"What! You let them go?" shouted Chauvelin. His face was red with anger. He pushed Lady Marguerite violently and she fell to the ground, hitting her head on a stone. She lay there and didn't move.

CHAPTER 17

The Escape

While Chauvelin and the soldiers were talking, they heard the sound of pistols further along the shore.

"Where is the noise coming from?" Chauvelin asked. "Run and look."

At first the soldiers didn't see anything. Then, after a few seconds, they saw a few soldiers on the shore and a small boat in the sea. The boat was going towards the ship.

"They've escaped!" Chauvelin said angrily. "You idiots! Look what you've done!"

Chauvelin was perplexed. "How did the Scarlet Pimpernel get to the hut to tell his friends of the danger?" he thought. "The soldiers didn't see him, and neither did I. How did he do it? And where is he now?"

He thought for a moment, then he felt a little hope. "I heard the voice singing after the four men left the hut. St Just and the Frenchmen have escaped, but the Scarlet Pimpernel is probably still somewhere in the woods. I can still catch him!"

He turned to the soldiers. "Let's return to the hut, men, and see what we can find," he said.

They went into the hut and looked everywhere. Finally, in a dark corner, on the ground, the soldiers found a letter.

"Ah! The men forgot this when they left," Chauvelin said. He took the letter to the light. He knew the handwriting well.

The letter said: "I can't come to you myself. When you receive this letter, leave the hut quietly, one by one. Go down the cliff and walk left along the shore for one kilometre. A boat is waiting to take you to my ship. When you are safely on the ship, send the boat to wait for me. I'll come to the dark place on the shore near the Chat Gris Inn. The men on my ship know this place. Obey my orders without question." The letter was signed with a little scarlet flower.

"Which one of you knows the shore well?" Chauvelin asked the soldiers.

"I do," said one of the men. "I know the shore from here to Calais."

"Do you know the dark place near the Chat Gris Inn?" Chauvelin asked him.

"Oh, yes, I know it very well," replied the soldier.

"Good. The tall Englishman is going there," Chauvelin explained. "But he doesn't know the shore as well as you, and he'll be careful to hide on the way, so it will take him longer. If we're fortunate, we can still catch him! If you get to the dark place before him, you'll get 1,000 francs!"

"I know a very good way to go," the soldier shouted excitedly. "Come with me, men!"

The soldiers left quickly for Calais and Chauvelin felt new hope. If they all moved quickly, he could still win! He looked at Lady Marguerite. She was so weak and tired that she still couldn't move. Her face was pale and her eyes were shut.

Then Chauvelin remembered a little problem. "Where's that stupid gypsy?" he asked Desgas.

"He's near here, on the other side of the hut," Desgas replied. "He can't escape."

Chauvelin went to the gypsy, and suddenly his anger exploded. "You lied to me, you idiot!" he shouted. "You said that the other cart was just in front of us, but you lied. What did I pay you for, eh?"

He turned to Desgas. "Beat him with your belt, Desgas," he said. "Teach the lying gypsy a lesson!"

The gypsy was frightened and started to cry. Then he cried again when Desgas beat him.

"Good," said Chauvelin with cruel satisfaction. "Now we'll return to Calais in his cart. He and Lady Marguerite can stay here together. I'll send someone to find them in the morning. Let's go."

CHAPTER 18

The Scarlet Pimpernel Wins

After everyone left, Lady Marguerite opened her eyes slowly. She was alone in the dark. Her head hurt and she was worried. Where was Sir Percy? Was Armand alive or dead? She couldn't remember anything after she heard the voice singing.

Suddenly, she heard something very strange. Someone was speaking English! "My God," said the voice.

Was she dreaming? She heard the voice again. "That man hit me hard!" it said.

No, it wasn't a dream. It was Sir Percy's voice!

"Sir Percy! Where are you?" she called excited.

"Very near, my dear," Sir Percy said in his bored voice. "But I can't move. Desgas has tied my arms and legs."

Lady Marguerite was perplexed. "How did Sir Percy get here?" she thought. "Why are his arms and legs tied? It was the gypsy ... "Suddenly, she began to understand. "Is it possible?" she thought "Is Sir Percy the gypsy cart-driver?"

She stood up and ran towards the voice. And there, on the ground, she saw Sir Percy. His blue eyes were looking at her and he was smiling.

"Sir Percy!" she cried. "I can't believe it."

"Good evening, Lady Blakeney. Can you help me untie these ropes? I'm really very uncomfortable," said her husband.

When Sir Percy was free, he took a small bottle of cognac from a pocket inside his coat. He gave some to Lady Marguerite and drank some himself. "Ah, that's better," he said. "You've been very brave, my dear." He smiled and kissed his wife.

"Sir Percy!" Lady Marguerite exclaimed. "I made a terrible mistake. I helped Chauvelin discover your identity. Did you know that?"

"Yes, I did, but it's all right," Sir Percy answered. "You didn't know that I was the Scarlet Pimpernel, and you wanted to save Armand."

"Where is Armand?" Lady Marguerite asked. "Is he safe?"

"Yes, he's safe," said Sir Percy. "He's on the ship."

"Lady Marguerite breathed more calmly. "How did he escape from the hut? I don't understand," she said after a minute.

"It's quite simple, my dear," Sir Percy replied. "When I saw that Chauvelin was following me and that there were soldiers everywhere, I decided to stay near Chauvelin and watch him. I gave the gypsy a few gold coins and he gave me his clothes and his cart.

I heard Chauvelin give his orders to the soldiers: they must not attack the hut until I arrive. So I took a risk. The soldiers took me from the cart and put me near the hut. I freed my hands from the ropes, then I wrote a letter to my friends with my instructions and pushed the letter under the door of the hut."

Lady Marguerite looked at her husband, full of admiration. Suddenly, she heard a noise in the woods. "What's that?" she asked.

"It's probably Sir Andrew," Sir Percy replied. "I met him near the Chat Gris Inn and gave him my orders. He's coming here by the long, safe road. Oh, here he is!"

Lady Marguerite was happy to see Sir Andrew, but she was still worried and frightened. "How will we get back to Calais?" she asked. "Chauvelin's soldiers are everywhere. And even if they don't catch us on the way, they'll wait for us on the shore near the Chat Gris Inn. We'll never get to the ship!" And she started to cry.

"Ah! You're thinking about the letter in the hut," Sir Percy said with a laugh. "Don't worry about that. You see, I pushed two letters under the door. In the first one, I told Armand what to do. One of my instructions was that he must leave the second letter on the floor of the hut. Chauvelin's soldiers found that letter. That's why they've all gone back to Calais: to wait for me on the shore near the Chat Gris Inn. But my first letter said: 'The ship must stay here and wait for me.'"

Sir Percy took Lady Marguerite's hand. "The boat isn't far from here," he continued. "I planned everything perfectly. Chauvelin and his men will wait all night on the shore near Calais. And while he's waiting, we'll be safely on the ship, leaving France."

Lady Marguerite forgot all her worries and laughed and laughed. Sir Percy kissed her happily, and soon afterwards, they were on their way to England, together with Armand and the Comte de Tournay.

A few weeks later, Sir Percy and Lady Marguerite gave a splendid party at their house. All of London society was there - all, that is, except for Chauvelin, the French Ambassador. He sent a polite letter to say that he couldn't come and no one ever saw him in England again.