The Scarlet Pimpernel
by
Baroness Emmuska Orczy
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The Scarlet Pimpernel

Written by Baroness Emmuska Orczy
Introduction by Anne Perry

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does Percy treat Marguerite unfairly?

2. How do the theater and theatricality function in the novel?

3. Are there other heroes in the story besides Percy, and if so, who are they and why are they heroes?

4. What is the significance of the flower that gives Percy his secret name?

5. Discuss the use of animal imagery in the novel.

6. Compare and contrast the Fisherman’s Rest with the Chat Gris.

7. What do you make of Marguerite’s assumption throughout the last part of the story that Percy is unaware of the fact that Chauvelin is on his trail?

8. Discuss point of view in the novel—it is told mostly from Marguerite’s point of view, but occasionally it slips into the minds of other characters, such as Percy and Chauvelin. What is the effect of these slips?

9. Is Marguerite ultimately a likable character?
The French Revolution

“A surging, seething, murmuring crowd of beings that are human only in name, for to the eye and ear they seem naught but savage creatures, animated by vile passions and by the lust of vengeance and hate...During the greater part of the day, the guillotine had been kept busy at its ghastly work: all that France had boasted of in the past centuries, of ancient names, and blue blood, had paid toll to her desire for liberty and for fraternity... “

–From The Scarlet Pimpernel, by the Baroness Emmuska Orczy

*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*
– the motto of the French Revolution

The Scarlet Pimpernel is really set during the final stage of the French Revolution – a series of tumultuous events sparked, at least in the beginning, by passionate ideals that eventually changed the face of Europe and the world. The Scarlet Pimpernel brings the urgency and danger of that time to life.

To understand the seeds of the French Revolution, you have to understand the American Revolution. Between 1774 and 1783, the thirteen American colonies had overthrown the British Empire and had become their own country, with a constitution that declared the equality of every man.

In France, no one was equal. The country was made up of three classes, or “estates.” The First Estate was the members of the Church, the Second Estate was the nobility and the Third Estate was everyone else: the poor and middle class.

Although it was the majority of France’s population, the Third Estate had no vote, no say in the government, and carried the highest taxes. From birth to death, the poor were burdened with taxes on every aspect of their lives. France was still a medieval state - peasants had to pay taxes to a feudal landlord as well as King Louis XVI. In good times, it could be tolerable. In bad times, like the bad winter of 1789, tensions ran high. France was heading for bankruptcy, and the Third Estate was expected to shoulder the load.

By studying the step-by-step process of the Revolution, you can get a deeper understanding of the events and ideas expressed in The Scarlet Pimpernel. By understanding the ideals that went terribly wrong in the French Revolution, you can recognize similar events in your world today. History isn’t a set of dates on a blackboard
– it’s a series of exhilarating, passionate, sometimes terrible moments in time. And you are part of it.
Baroness Orczy (1865-1947) - Emma Magdalena Rosalia Maria Josefa Barbara Orczy

Hungarian-British novelist, best remembered as the author of THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL (1905). Baroness Orczy’s sequels to the novel were less successful. She was also an artist, and her works were exhibited at the Royal Academy, London. Her first venture into fiction was with crime stories. Among her most popular characters was The Old Man in the Corner, who was featured in a series of twelve British movies from 1924, starring Rolf Leslie.

“They seek him here, they seek him there. Those Frenchmen seek him everywhere. Is he in Heaven? - Is he in hell? That damned annoying Pimpernel.”
(from The Scarlet Pimpernel)

Baroness Emmuska Orczy was born in Tarna-Ors, Hungary, as the only daughter of Baron Felix Orczy, a noted composer and conductor, and his wife Emma. Her father was a friend of such composers as Wagner, Liszt, and Gounod. Orczy moved with her parents from Budapest to Brussels and then to London, learning to speak English at the age of fifteen. She was educated in convent schools in Brussels and Paris. In London she studied at the West London School of Art. Orczy married in 1894 Montague Barstow, whom she had met while studying at the Heatherby School of Art. Together they started to produce book and magazine illustrations and published an edition of Hungarian folktales.

Orczy’s first detective stories appeared in magazines. As a writer she became famous in 1903 with the stage version of the Scarlet Pimpernel. It was written with her husband - he co-authored two other plays, THE SIN OF WILLIAM JACKSON (1906), produced in London, and BEAU BROCADE (prod. in 1908), which was based on Orczy’s novel. The dramatized version of Pimpernel, starring Fred Terry and Julia Neilson, was produced in Nottingham and finally given a London run in 1905.

“Have you ever heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Citoyenne St. Just?” asked Chauvelin, abruptly.
“Heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel?” she retorted with a long and merry laugh, “Faith man! we talk of nothing else. . . . We have hats ‘à la Scarlet Pimpernel’; our horses are called Scarlet Pimpernel”; at the Prince of Wales’ supper party the other night we had a soufflé a la Scarlet Pimpernel.”. . .Lud!” she added gaily, “the other day I ordered at my milliner’s a blue dress trimmed with green, and bless me, if she did not call that à la Scarlet Pimpernel.”

The book adaptation of The Scarlet Pimpernel was rejected by more than a dozen publishers. Orczy’s bestselling novel had as its background the French Revolution. Sir Percy Blakeney is a mysterious hero, who saves the lives the French aristocrats and helps them to escape the guillotine. He falls in love with a beautiful actress, Marguerite St Just.
To conceal from Marguerite and others that he is the Scarlet Pimpernel, Sir Percy assumes the double role of a clumsy English aristocrat, and swashbuckling hero, the master of disguise. As a spy Percy can be seen as a forefather of James Bond and other espionage agents. The persecutor of the Scarlet Pimpernel is Citizen Chauvelin, an agent of Robespierre. Orczy’s sympathies were shown clearly: she was suspicious of the “lower orders” and Pimpernel rescued the French nobility - sometimes others - only because he admired the nobility of all countries. Once Percy disguises himself as a Jew, thinking that the French despise Jews and do not ask questions. He also formed a band of helpers, Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, Lord Anthony Dewhurst, Lord Hastings, etc.

The book has inspired several film versions, the best of which was directed in 1934 by Harold Young, starring Leslie Howard (Sir Percy) and Merle Oberon (Marguerite), his wife. Marguerite is fooled by Percy’s act to save her imprisoned brother. She agrees to help the villainous Frenchman Chauvelin (Raymond Massey) to trap Pimpernel. The original director Roland V. Brown was fired on his first day at work, for one of many times in his odd career. Howard and Oberon became lovers while filming, causing her to break off her engagement to Joseph Schenk, the head of United Artists. She was later to marry the producer, Alexander Korda.

In 1905 there appeared Orczy’s first collection of mystery stories under the title THE CASE OF MISS ELLIOT. Among Orczy’s detective characters is the Old Man in the Corner, who solved mysteries in thirty-eight stories, without leaving his chair, like professor Van Dusen or later Nero Wolfe. The first collection of the Old Man stories, THE CASE OF MISS ELLIOTT, was published in 1905. This nondescript armchair detective spends much of his life in the corner of a London teashop. A young reporter brings him details of crimes which baffle the police. Although The Old Man does not hide his upper class attitudes, he sometimes feels sympathy for the criminals. In the 1970s the character appeared in the Thames TV series The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes, when the case of ‘The Mysterious Death on the Underground Railway’ was dramatized.

“‘Exactly,’ he said, while he leant forward excitedly, for all the world like a Jack-in-the-box let loose. ‘Precisely; and you are a journalist - call yourself one, at least - and it should be part of your business to notice and describe people. I don’t mean only the wonderful personage with the clear Saxon features, the fine blue eyes, the noble brow and classic face, but the ordinary person - the person who represents ninety out of every hundred of his own kind - the average Englishman, say, of the middle classes, who is neither very tall nor very short, who wears a moustache which is neither fair nor dark, but which masks his mouth, and a top hat which hides the shape of his head and brow, a man, in fact, who dresses like hundreds of his fellow-creatures, moves like them, speaks like them, has no peculiarity.’” (from ‘The Mysterious Death on the Underground Railway’)
The Irish lawyer Patrick Mulligan was the hero of 12 stories in SKIN O’ MY TOOTH (1928). M. Hector Ratichon, a highly unscrupulous “volunteer police agent” in the Paris of 1813, was the hero of CASTLES IN THE AIR (1921) in seven cases. In the short story ‘The Great Pearl Mystery’ Major Gilroy Straker is arrested for the murder of Madame Hypnos. Moreover, the Countess Zakrevski’s stolen pearls are found in his room at the Dominions Club. Straker’s explanation is not very good, and her sister Mary hires Patrick
Mulligan to defend him. “He did not do it, Mr Mulligan. God knows he did not do it, but human justice does err at times, and - well! it’s no use saying anything more - is it?” Mulligan finds out that a gang of malefactors are behind the crimes. Pincetti, the proprietor of a Continental restaurant, is the head of the organization. Again Orczy’s characters use disguises, and a socially respected person is wrongly suspected of a crime. The culprits are found among people who are distant relatives. Bacco, one of the criminals, is a waitress. “‘An innocent man’s only hope of safety hanging on a glove button, with a scrap of yellow washing kid still attached to it!’ Skin o’ My Tooth remarked to me when we were back at the office. ‘Give me the evening paper, Muggins, and let’s think of something else.’” (from ‘The Great Pearl Mystery’)

Orczy’s attempt to create a female aristocratic hero, Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk, from the ‘Female Department of Scotland Yard’, was not so successful. She solved 12 cases in LADY MOLLY OF SCOTLAND YARD (1910). Lady Molly’s methods of solving crimes include disguises. She also helped the release of her spouse from unjust imprisonment. Between the years 1905 and 1928 Orczy published 13 collections of short stories about the Old Man in the Corner, Lady Molly, Bill Owen and other characters.

In the late 1910s Baroness Orczy and her husband moved to Monte Carlo, where they stayed during the Nazi occupation. Her husband died in 1942 and after World War II she spent her remaining years in England. Orczy was a prolific writer and worked actively until her eighties. Her autobiography, LINKS IN THE CHAIN OF LIFE, was published in 1947. Baroness Orczy died in London, on November 12, 1947.

For further reading: World Authors 1900-1950, vol. 3, ed. by Martin Seymour-Smith and Andrew C. Kimmens (1996); Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, ed. by J.M. Reilly (1985); Twentieth Century Romance and Historical Writers, ed. by Aruna Vasudevan (1994)

Selected works:

ed. and trans.: OLD HUNGARIAN FAIRY TALES, 1895 (with Montagu Barstow)
ed. and trans.: THE ENCHANTED CAT, 1895
ed. and trans.: FAIRYLAND’S BEAUTY, 1895
ed. and trans.: ULETKA AND THE WHITE LIZARD, 1895

THE CASE OF MISS ELLIOTT, 1905
A SON OF THE PEOPLE, 1906
THE SIN OF WILLIAM JACKSON, 1906 (play, with Montagu Barstow)
I WILL REPAY, 1906
IN MARY’S REIGN, 1907
THE TANGLED SKEIN, 1907
BEAU BROCADE, 1908 (play, with Montagu Barstow)
OLD MAN IN THE CORNER, 1909
THE NEST OF THE SPARROWHAWK, 1909
LADY MOLLY OF SCOTLAND YARD, 1910 - Scotland Yardin lady Molly
PETTICOAT GOVERNMENT, 1910
A TRUE WOMAN, 1911
THE DUKE’S WAGER, 1911 (play)
THE TRAITOR, 1912
THE GOOD PATRIOTS, 1912
MEADOWSWEET, 1912
FIRE IN THE STUBBLE, 1912
ELDORADO, 1913
UNTO CAESAR, 1914
THE LAUGHING CAVALIER, 1914
THE BRONZE EAGLE, 1915
A BRIDE OF THE PLAINS, 1915
LEATHERFACE: A TALE OF OLD FLANDERS, 1916
OLD SCARECROW, 1916
A SHEAF OF BLUEBELLS, 1917
LORD TONY’S WIFE, 1917
THE LEGION OF HONOUR, 1918 (play, adaptation of Orczy’s novel A Sheaf of Bluebells)
THE MAN IN GREY, 1918 - Harmaapukuinen mies
THE LEAGUE OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL, 1919
HIS MAJESTY’S WELL-BELOVED, 1919
CASTLES IN THE AIR, 1921
NICOLETTE, 1922
LEATHERFACE, 1922 (play, with Caryl Fiennes, adaptation of Orczy’s novel)
THE TRIUMPH OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL, 1922
THE HONOURABLE JIM, 1924
LES BEAUX ET LES DANDYS DE GRANDS SIÈCLES EN ANGLETERRE, 1924
UNRAVELLED KNOTS, 1925
PIMPERNEL AND ROSEMARY, 1925
THE MISER OF MAIDA VALE, 1925
A QUESTION OF TEMPTATION, 1925
THE CELESTIAL CITY, 1926
UNRAVELED KNOTS, 1926
SIR PERCY HITS BACK, 1927
SKIN O’ MY TOOTH, 1928
BLUE EYES AND GREY, 1929
ADVENTURES OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL, 1929
MARIVOSA, 1931
IN TE RUE MONGE, 1931
A CHILD OF THE REVOLUTION, 1932
A JOYOUS ADVENTURE, 1932
THE WAY OF THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL, 1933
THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL LOOKS AT THE WORLD, 1933
A SPY OF NAPOLEON, 1934
THE UNCROWNED KING, 1935
SIR PERCY LEADS THE BAND, 1936
THE TURBULENT DUCHESS: H.R.H. MADAME LE DUCHESSÉ DE BERRI, 1936
DIVINE FOLLY, 1937
NO GREATER LOVE, 1938
MAM’ZELLE GUILLOTINE, 1940
PRICE OF RACE, 1942
WILL-O’THE-WISP, 1947
LINKS IN THE CHAIN OF LIFE, 1947 (autobiography)
Emma Magdalena Rosalia Maria Josefa Orczy

1865-1947

Entry Updated : 08/22/2003

Place of Birth: Tarna-Ors, Hungary

Personal Information: Family: Born Emma Magdalena Rosalia Maria Josefa Barbara Orczy, September 23, 1865, in Tarna-Ors, Hungary; died November 12, 1947, in London, England; daughter of Baron Felix Orczy and Countesse Wass; married Montagu Barstow, 1895; children: John Montagu Orczy Barstow. Education: Attended various schools in Brussels, Belgium, and Paris, France, until c. 1880; attended West London School of Art and Heatherly’s School of Art, c. late 1880s.

Career: Illustrator and popular writer of fiction and drama.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- The Emperor’s Candlesticks, Pearson (London), 1899, Doscher (New York, NY), 1908.
- The Case of Miss Elliott, Unwin (London), 1905.
- The Scarlet Pimpernel, Greening (London), 1905, Putnam’s (New York City), 1905.
- A Son of the People, Greening (London), 1906, Putnam’s (New York City), 1906.
- In Mary’s Reign, Cupples & Leon (New York, NY), 1907.
- The Tangled Skein, Greening (London), 1907.
- Beau Brocade, Lippincott (Philadelphia), 1907.
- The Elusive Pimpernel, Hutchinson (London), 1908, Dodd (New York City), 1908.
- The Old Man in the Corner, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1908, published as The Man in the Corner, Dodd, Mead (New York, NY), 1909.
- The Nest of the Sparrowhawk, Greening (London), 1909, Stokes (New York, NY), 1909.
- Lady Molly of Scotland Yard, Cassell (London and New York City), 1910.
- *Two Good Patriots*, Paget (New York, NY), 1912.
- *A Sheaf of Bluebells*, Hutchinson (London), 1917, Doran (New York City), 1917.
- *Silver-Leg*, Doran (New York, NY), 1918.
- *Castles in the Air*, Cassell (London and New York City), 1921.
- *Nicolette*, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1922, Doran (New York City), 1922.
- *The Old Man in the Corner Unravels the Mystery of the Khaki Tunic*, Doran (New York, NY), 1923.
- *The Old Man in the Corner Unravels the Mystery of the Pearl Necklace and the Tragedy in Bishop’s Road*, Doran (New York, NY), 1924.
- *The Old Man in the Corner Unravels the Mystery of Brundell Court and the Tytherton Case*, Doran (New York, NY), 1924.
• The Old Man in the Corner Unravels the Mystery of the Russian Prince and of Dog’s Tooth Cliff, Doran (New York, NY), 1924.
• Pimpernel and Rosemary, Cassell (London and New York City), 1924.
• The Old Man in the Corner Unravels the Mystery of the Fulton Gardens Mystery, and the Moorland Tragedy, Doran (New York, NY), 1925.
• The Old Man in the Corner Unravels the Mystery of the White Carnation and the Montmartre Hat, Doran (New York, NY), 1925.
• The Miser of Maida Vale, Doran (New York, NY), 1925.
• A Question of Temptation, Doran (New York, NY), 1925.
• Unravelled Knots, Hutchinson (London), 1925, Doran (New York City), 1926.
• The Celestial City, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1926, Doran (New York, NY), 1926.
• Blue Eyes and Grey, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1928, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1929.
• Skin o’ My Tooth, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1928, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1928.
• Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Hutchinson, 1929, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1929.
• Marivosa, Cassell (London), 1930, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1932.
• In the Rue Morgue, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1931.
• A Child of the Revolution, Cassell (London), 1932, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1932.
• A Joyous Adventure, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1932, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1932.
• The Scarlet Pimpernel Looks at the World, John Heritage (London), 1933.
• The Way of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1933, Putnam’s (New York, NY), 1934.
• A Spy of Napoleon, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1934, Putnam’s (New York, NY), 1934.
• The Uncrowned King, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1935, Putnam’s (New York, NY), 1935.
• Sir Percy Leads the Band, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1936.
• The Divine Folly, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1937.
• No Greater Love, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1938.
• Mam’zelle Guillotine: An Adventure of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1940.
• Pride of Race, Hodder & Stoughton (London), 1942.
• Links in the Chain of Life, Hutchinson (London), 1947.
• Will-o’-the-Wisp, Hutchinson (London), 1947.
• The Old Man in the Corner: Twelve Mysteries, Dover Publications (New York, NY), 1980.
PLAYS

- (With Montagu Barstow) *Beau Brocade*, produced at Devonshire Park Theatre, Sussex, 1908, then Cornet Theatre, London, 1908.
- *The Duke’s Wager*, produced at Prince’s Theatre, Manchester, 1911.
- *The Legion of Honour*, produced at Theatre Royal, Bradford, 1918, then Aldwych Theatre, London, 1921.
- (With Caryl Fiennes) *Leatherface*, produced at Theatre Royal, Portsmith, 1922.

OTHER

- (Editor and translator) *The Enchanted Cat*, Dean (London), 1895.
- (Editor and translator) *Fairyland’s Beauty (The Suitors of Princess Fire-Fly)*, Dean (London), 1895.
- (Editor and translator, with Montagu Barstow) *Old Hungarian Fairy Tales*, Dean (London), 1895.
- (Editor and translator) *Uletka and the White Lizard*, Dean (London), 1895.

“Sidelights”

The Baroness Emmuska Orczy wrote dozens of romantic novels, plays, and short stories, but the best-remembered is *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905), which was a tremendous success on stage in 1903 and was eventually adapted into a feature film. Orczy also wrote detective stories during the time that public attention was focused on that genre through Sherlock Holmes, creating “the old man in the corner,” one of the first “armchair” detectives. These mystery stories are collected in such volumes as *The Case of Miss Elliott*.

Emma Magdalena Rosalia Maria Josefa Barbara Orczy was a child of the Hungarian aristocracy. Her father was Felix Orczy, a Baron of Tarna-Ors, and her mother was the former Countesse Wass, for whom she was named. Baron Orczy took an active interest in developing his land, and was a minor composer of some note who moved in musical circles, introducing his daughter personally to Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, among others. When he attempted to change the agricultural methods of his tenants, they rose against the Baron, forcing him to flee with his family to Budapest. The Orczys did not put down permanent roots there, but continued to change residences periodically, thus giving young Emma a cosmopolitan education. After spending time in Brussels and Paris, the Baron chose London for his permanent home around 1880. It was only then, when Orczy was already fifteen years old, that she began to learn English, the language in which she would write all her works.
At first, Orczy attempted to follow her father into music, but showed little aptitude. She switched, therefore, to painting, studying at the West London School of Art, and also at Heatherly’s. Some of her work was displayed at the Royal Academy as part of a student exhibition. While attending Heatherly’s she met and fell in love with an illustrator and clergyman’s son, Montagu Barstow. They married in 1894, and their only child, a son, was born five years later.

The Orczy family, like many other nineteenth-century aristocrats, had little of value apart from its name. Orczy and her husband were able to move in London high society, but they lived in straitened circumstances. Orczy became an illustrator and translator of fairy tales, and began writing swashbuckling stories and selling them to magazines. After years of privation, the dramatization of her unpublished novel, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, appeared on the London stage in 1905 to great and enduring success. Suddenly, a novel she had been unsuccessfully trying to sell for three years was in great demand, and her family’s financial worries were permanently ended.

*The Scarlet Pimpernel* had every reason to be well received by the public with its a mix of English patriotism at the expense of the French, high intrigue, and romance. The *Pimpernel* of the title is a mysterious vigilante, rescuing innocent aristocrats from the guillotines of revolutionary France. In ordinary life he is Sir Percy Blakeney, an English dandy, who avoids suspicion by affecting a false superficiality and effeminacy. While the critics dismissed the *Pimpernel* as escapist rubbish, the public devoured the novel and clamoured for more. Orczy maintained a steady stream of sequels to keep readers satisfied.

However, Orczy was never restricted to Pimpernalia alone; at the time of the initial stage success of the “Pimpernel,” she had begun writing detective stories featuring “The Old Man in the Corner,” Bill Owen. While his debut was much quieter, and his name not so widely known, his influence was just as strongly felt. With Bill Owen, Orczy is more or less credited with creating the “armchair detective” genre. Sitting in the same seat at the ABC teashop day after day, compulsively knotting and unravelling a length of string, Owen solves case after case using nothing more than the information provided by the newspapers and his journalist assistant and protege, Polly Burton. Willard Huntington Wright described Owen: “the nameless logician who sits, shabby and indifferent, at his cafe table and holds penetrating postmortems on the crimes of the day.”

The first “Old Man” collection appeared in 1908, and six more were destined to follow. The mania for Sherlock Holmes stories had not entirely disappeared from London, and many lesser detectives appeared to help fill the void left by Conan Doyle, of which Owen was one. Orczy was less successful with her female detective, one of the first in literature, Lady Molly of Scotland Yard, who was collected in only one volume, and her Irish lawyer, Patrick Mulligan. All her mysteries were fast paced, featuring elaborate, tightly worked plots and puzzles. Taken as a whole, they represent an important secondary influence on the development of twentieth-century detective fiction.
Despite these later disappointments, all of Orczy’s work sold well enough. After World War I ended, she and her husband relocated to a small estate in Monte Carlo. Typically active and lively, she participated in the relief effort during World War II, at the age of seventy-four. Eventually, however, Orczy returned to England, to live out her last years in a country home at Henley-on-Thames. She died in London in 1947.

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS


PERIODICALS


Written by: --Sketch by Michael Cisco
Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2003.

Gale Database: Contemporary Authors