

The Story of Sir Percy and the Baroness

Written by Alex Walker

A look at Baroness Orczy's influential character, the Scarlet Pimpernel.

'They seek him here, they seek him there, those Frenchies seek him everywhere. Is he in heaven or is he in hell, that demn'd elusive Pimpernel'

Baroness Orczy's most popular character, the Scarlet Pimpernel, first appeared in a stage production in London in 1903. Nearly a hundred years later the character is again a success on the stage (this time on Broadway). Between, these two stage productions there have been numerous novels, films and television shows and the Scarlet Pimpernel's influence can be seen in many diverse fictional characters including Bulldog Drummond, Zorro and the later comic book superheroes.

Baroness Emmuska Orczy was born in Tarna-Ors, Hungary. She was the only daughter of Baron Felix Orczy, a noted composer and conductor. 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 West London School of Art and it was while she was studying that she met Montaque Bristow, whom she married in 1894. Together they earned a living at book and magazine illustration and jointly published an edition of Hungarian folktales.

Orczy also started to write short stories and found some success with the detective series, 'The Old Man in the Corner.' These stories are of 'an eccentric



Above: Baroness Orczy (1865–1947), creator of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

scarecrow of a man', who sits in a London tea shop and solves the crimes simply by analysing all the clues which are brought to him by a young female reporter, Polly Burton. The Old Man (he remains nameless throughout the stories) shows himself to be sympathetic towards the criminals and there is more than a hint in his last case, *The Mysterious Death In Percy Street*, that he may have been a master criminal himself! The stories of The Old Man, knotting and unknitting a piece of string while he deduces, first appeared in *The Royal Magazine*, 1901–1902.

The Old Man was one of first

'armchair detectives,' a detective who never really gets involved with the crime but solves the mystery from a distance. It has been said that these 'armchair detectives' were inspired by Sherlock Holme's brother, Mycroft. Many mystery writers continued using this formula, notably Rex Stout in his excellent Nero Wolfe series.

While on a trip to France with her husband Orczy found inspiration for a romantic novel. She became fascinated by the events of the French Revolution and dreamt about what kind of a hero that would have been able to fight its terror. The hero that she developed could be seen as 'bringing together of all the facets of her [Orczy's] romantic personality. Her fascination with theatricality and disguise, her passion for history and especially, her love of honour and heroism.' That hero was the Scarlet Pimpernel.

However, the finished novel was rejected by most of the publishing houses in London. The fashion of the day was for modern, true-to-life novels, not the historical romance and adventure of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Orczy was discouraged, but not ready to give up yet.

An actor friend put her in contact with the husband and wife acting team of Fred Terry and Julia Neilson, who were looking for a new romantic drama. They decided that *The Scarlet Pimpernel* fitted the bill and a production was planned.

The play opened at the New Theatre in London in 1904. The standing ovation of the first night audience was 'hot and strong' but not so the reaction of the critics the next morning. The jaded London critics, trying to champion new, 'modern' plays, said that *The Scarlet Pimpernel* was 'old fashioned.'



Above: *The Old Man in the Corner*. Illustration by H. M. Brock.

Nevertheless, the play became a popular success; word of mouth made *The Scarlet Pimpernel* a smash hit. It became a favourite of the London audiences — playing more than 2000 performances. The novel was published soon after the play's opening and was also an immediate success.

The hero of the book (and play) is Sir Percy Blakeney, one of the ten richest men in England during the years of the French Revolution. To the outside world he was a 'silly, brainless fop', but he was not what he appeared to be. Blakeney, in the guise of the Scarlet Pimpernel, is a brave, dashing hero who specialises in rescuing the imperiled French aristocrats from their sentences of death-by-guillotine. This alter-ego plot device foreshadows the popular costumed superheroes to come.

The Pimpernel is a master of disguise,



Above: Illustration from *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (reprint 1950s)

a top-notch swordsman, and a cunning strategist who with the help of his League of the Pimpernel (a band of devoted English noblemen who implicitly follow the Pimpernel's orders) has foiled the plans of the French and their 'Satanic' agent Chauvelin on many occasions.

However, Sir Percy's adventurous alter-ego does have a price to pay. He keeps this secret from his French wife, Marguerite. Thus she feels rejected and does not understand the sudden change in her husband from the man she fell in love with into a useless, inane fop.

Chauvelin, an old comrade of Marguerite's, eventually arrives in England with the goal of discovering the true identity of the Scarlet Pimpernel.

By threatening Marguerite's brother's life, Chauvelin forces her to help him destroy the Scarlet Pimpernel, a man she admires and respects. Too late, Marguerite discovers that the elusive hero is none other than the man she loves most dearly. As precious time ticks by, she must undo the damage and save her husband...

Interestingly, it is what is nominally the romantic relationship, that gives the novel its hardest edge. For the better part of the novel Marguerite and Sir Percy appear to loathe each other, she because he treats her coldly, he because of her inadvertent role in the guillotining of some French nobleman. This loathing culminates in a fight in which is bracing in its rawness, and injects a welcome tone of reality into the novel.

The main criticism which has been levelled at the novel is its 'dubious politics' (clearing siding with the aristocrats). However, rather than having any political message, Orzcy merely found the historical setting a perfect backdrop for her romantic adventure.

The success of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, as both a novel and a play, allowed Orzcy and her husband to live out their lives in luxury and comfort. Over the years, they lived on an estate in Kent, a bustling London home and an opulent villa in Monte Carlo. Orzcy continued to create adventures for her 'reckless daredevil' and watch his incarnations take life throughout the world. The play was performed to great acclaim in France, Italy, Germany and Spain; the novel was translated into 16 languages.

The first Pimpernel book was followed by: *I Will Repay* (1906), *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1908), *Eldorado* (1913), *Lord Tony's Wife* (1917), *The League of the*

Scarlet Pimpernel (1919), *The Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1922), *Sir Percy Hits Back* (1927), *Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1929), *The Way of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1933), *Sir Percy Leads the Band* (1936) and *Mam'zelle Guillotine* (1940).

Apart from the Scarlet Pimpernel Orzcy developed other characters. Lady Molly Robertson-Kirk, from the 'Female Department of Scotland Yard', solved 12 cases in *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* (1910). M. Hector Raticchon, a highly unscrupulous 'volunteer police agent' in the Paris of 1813, was the hero of *Castles in the Air* (1921). Lawyer Patrick Mulligan was the hero of 12 stories in *Skin O' My Tooth* (1928).

The Scarlet Pimpernel soon made the inevitable transition to film, radio and later, TV.

A film *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934) starred Leslie Howard as the definitive Sir Percy with a great performance from Raymond Massey as the evil Chauvelin. Later, less successful movies are *The Return of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1937) with Barry K. Barnes; and *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1950) with David Niven in the leading role.

A 1950s radio series, *The New Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel*, was produced in Britain with Marius Goring as the voice of the hero. Goring went on to star in the BBC television series. In 1983 a TV movie was made with Anthony Andrews in the role. Recently the BBC have produced another television series starring Richard E. Grant as the elusive hero. The Scarlet Pimpernel has also been satirised by just about everybody from Daffy Duck to the Carry On team!

In 1943, Montague Barstow died at



Above: *The Elusive Pimpernel* was the third novel to feature Sir Percy Blakeney, known as The Scarlet Pimpernel.

their home in Monte Carlo. Orzcy then lived with her only son and travelled between London and Monte Carlo. She published her autobiography, *Links in the Chain of Life* in 1947 and died a few weeks later at the age of 82.

There is no doubt that there are those who dismiss the Scarlet Pimpernel stories as being overly formulaic, as well as being a romanticised view of a bloody conflict. However, others must disagree as the books are seldom out of print and the character has had several movie and television incarnations and has even returned to the stage. Success for the Scarlet Pimpernel hasn't proved to be as 'elusive' as the man himself.