

[PDF] The Scarlet Pimpernel (Book 1 Of The Scarlet Pimpernel Series)

BARONESS ORCZY - pdf download free book



Books Details:

Title: The Scarlet Pimpernel (Book 1

Author: BARONESS ORCZY

Released: 2006-09-26

Language:

Pages: 264

ISBN: 1934169137

ISBN13: 978-1934169131

ASIN: 1934169137

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Description:

About the Author Baroness Emmuska Orczy was born in Hungary in 1865. She lived in Budapest, Brussels, Paris, Monte Carlo, and London, where she died in 1947. The author of many novels, she is best known for *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. --This text refers to an alternate edition.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. From Sarah Juliette Sasson's Introduction to *The Scarlet Pimpernel*

The volume we are presenting here is the first of a series of ten novels published between 1905 and 1940 that present the adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel. This first volume is certainly the most famous and widely read of them all and has had its own fabulous destiny. For it paves the way for the future plots, introduces the readers to the main characters, and vividly depicts and opposes the two theaters of the action: France and England, only a few hours apart by boat, but symbolizing two completely different universes. The date is September 1792, after the infamous September Massacres. The revolutionaries have decided to start history anew. In a few months, a new calendar will be established, beginning with l'An I (the Year I). Each month is rebaptized and given a new name selected for its agrarian associations, and the old Christian names are thrown out. France will become an ill-famed regicide regime with the public execution of King Louis XVI, on January 21, 1793. The bloodiest phase of the French Revolution, the so-called Reign of Terror (or simply the Terror), will soon begin. *The Scarlet Pimpernel* cycle takes place during these particularly brutal years—from September 1792 to the fall of the radical revolutionary Maximilien de Robespierre in July 1794. In certain episodes, the fictional actions combine with authentic historical events: In the novel *Eldorado*, for example, the Scarlet Pimpernel will be instrumental in the escape of the young dauphin, Louis XVII, whose fate has fueled speculation for more than two centuries.

In Baroness Orczy's imagination, France is a country in chaos; a mob runs amok, mercilessly murdering its former elite, the aristocrats. The fact that the action starts in September 1792 is significant; we, as readers, do not learn much about the French Revolution of 1789—its hopes, ideologies, and ethos. Instead, we are plunged into the violent and cruel context of the Terror. Here are the first lines of the novel:

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 of 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. The carnage had only ceased at this late hour of the day because there were other more interesting sights for the people to witness . . . and so the crowd rushed away from the Place de Grève and made for the various barricades in order to watch this interesting and amusing sight.

We are in the thick of the action, shoulder to shoulder with the crowd, surrounded by a repulsive throng, immersed in a gruesome spectacle. Soon we witness an unequal yet fascinating cat-and-mouse game between the crowd and the helpless aristocrats pathetically attempting to go past the barricade and leave the city. The aristocrats are purposely and sadistically let go, taste freedom for a few moments of intense relief, and are apprehended minutes later—unless, thanks to some miraculous intervention of the Scarlet Pimpernel, they vanish into thin air before the guards' very noses. Clearly a hero is needed, and these very first images give us the dramatic setup for the Scarlet Pimpernel's extraordinary deeds. In the first minutes of the 1934 film adaptation of the novel, the guillotine presides over the scene as a ghastly and imposing apparition. We watch aristocrats being dragged from their tumbrils and executed at the regular intervals of a factory production line. Each falling head is followed by hurrahs; each provokes a few seconds of attention from the *tricoteuses*, those spiteful witches who raise their heads from their knitting for a few seconds to absorb the spectacle before taking up their needles again.

On the other side of the Channel, however, the picture is completely different. Not only do beauty and elegance reign, but courage, heroism, and wit ultimately prevail. *The Scarlet Pimpernel* introduces a mythical English hero, one who has indeed all the qualities of a typical avenger; he is what critics of popular novels call a "Promethean hero." Although his identity must remain secret, he stirs passions in both France and England, and his name is on everyone's lips. Well-known to the British public, he inspires fashions and trends:

“Heard of the Scarlet Pimpernel? . . . 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 à la Scarlet Pimpernel.’ . . . Lud! . . . 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.’”

But most important, like all great and fearless heroes, the Pimpernel leaves a trademark sign after every act of bravery. His passing is indicated by papers printed with a humble red flower, a “scarlet pimpernel,” a gesture that not only shows his debonair demeanor but also a playful taste for risk-taking. An aristocrat himself, the Pimpernel leads a group of nineteen wellborn young men, ready to sacrifice themselves for the perilous yet exhilarating task of snatching endangered French aristocrats from the bloody grip of the revolution. *The Scarlet Pimpernel* presents such rescues as moral actions, and also as an exciting sport. The Pimpernel and his men behave like knights, but the reader will find neither reflection nor justification for their actions in the text. Their deeper motivation is not expressed; explanations are unnecessary.

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