

The historical novel entitled *The Scarlet Pimpernel* is a classic and truly deserves this prestigious title. The author of this enthralling 267 page book is Baroness Emma Orczy and it was published by Dodd, Mead & Company in the year 1964. The scene is set in the terrorized Paris of revolutionary France in the 1800's. During this time period nobody was safe from the horrifying grasp of "Madame la Guillotine" which claimed hundreds of lives every day. But a few brave men headed by a courageous person known only as the anonymous *Scarlet Pimpernel*, helped the innocent escape from their deaths. By use of trickery and deceit, these 20 men helped many endangered aristocrats escape from France back to the safety of England. There, the lives of the royalty and honored citizens were protected. Among the most widely acknowledged person of high society at the time was Lady Marguerite Blakeney who was also known as being the "cleverest woman in Europe." She had married a man by the name of Sir Percy Blakeney who had flattered her with his deep love. But they soon grew apart after Lady Blakeney confessed to her husband how she had accidentally been involved in sending a noble family to the guillotine. Feeling shocked and disappointed towards his wife, Sir Percy's adoration of her was not shown anymore. However he continued on with his life of which a part was left untold to his wife whom he could not trust. He never let her know of the secretive life he led as the celebrated *Scarlet Pimpernel*.

Later on, Lady Blakeney was blackmailed into making a deal with a French spy named Chauvelin. He had promised the return of her beloved brother, Armand, from death in France if she promised to help in leading him to the elusive man known as the *Scarlet Pimpernel*. It was a difficult moral decision, but out of the love for her dear brother and not knowing that her husband was actually the man she was sacrificing for him, Marguerite Blakeney helped Chauvelin. After discovering the true identity of the *Scarlet Pimpernel*, Marguerite raced to France in hopes of undoing her grave mistake and saving her husband who she knew was being hunted by Chauvelin. The suspense mounted as Marguerite felt the time ticking away in which her dear husband and brother had to live. She secretly followed Chauvelin through the dark streets of France as he tracked down her husband. Chauvelin's soldiers were guided by a Jewish man to a hut where the *Scarlet Pimpernel* was thought to be hiding with Armand. However, Marguerite Blakeney was soon discovered by the soldiers. She was tied and gagged along with the Jewish man and the hut was searched for Armand and the other men, but they had escaped. However, Chauvelin had found a small note in the corner of the hut which seemed to have been forgotten by them. It was written by the *Scarlet Pimpernel* and had directions to the place where he was next headed. Leaving the weak Marguerite Blakeney and the Jewish man alone, Chauvelin and his soldiers marched off to the place described in the note. Little did they know that the *Scarlet Pimpernel*

had been with them the entire time, as the disguised Jewish man. Reunited at last, Lady Blakeney and her daring husband rekindled their love as they saw how their lives had almost been sacrificed for each other. They traveled back to the safety of England where they met Armand and the innocent ones who had escaped with him. As for Chauvelin, his fate was not made very clear in the novel but it can be guessed that an appointment was arranged for him to meet "Madame la Guillotine."

This novel seemed to be well written being filled with suspense, mystery, wit, romance, and a "twist" at the end. The use of a few illustrations throughout the novel assisted in visually portraying the story. They gave flare to the vivid descriptions of Lady Marguerite Blakeney, the "cleverest woman in Europe," and depicted her husband's valor. The sentence stating, "her beauty was at its most dazzling stage. . .the sweet childlike mouth, the straight chiselled nose, round chin, and delicate throat, all seemed set off by picturesque costume of the period," is brought to life by these illustrations. The language in which this was written is also interesting. The book was obviously written in the 18th century which is demonstrated by the sort of English used. The characters seem to be very conservative, all the customs and polite airs are strictly obeyed. A chapter did not seem to pass without someone's health being questioned, or Lady Blakeney being politely greeted with a kiss upon her hand.

The suspense in this novel also enhanced it's quality, enthralling the reader and holding their attention. A quote from one of the concluding chapters serves as an example to the amount of suspense present. It states, "Marguerite's breath stopped short; she seemed to feel her very life standing still momentarily whilst she listened to that voice and to that song." Marguerite's fear, frustration, and confusion is grasped by the reader and serves to keep them interested. The plot of the book is complex and yet so simple. It is a basic story which is soon complicated by events and other characters which dramatize it and add the wonderful suspense. The conclusion is also set off with much anticipation with the reader asking what will finally become of the courageous Scarlet Pimpernel and his unknowing wife. The true identity of the Jewish man is shocking and adds depth to the characters along with the story. What we perceive to be, and take for granted, is suddenly proven false with a sudden "twist" at the end.

Wit enhances a novel by entertaining the reader with not only the plot line but also a side anecdote. It is rare to find a story which does this, but it seems as though the author of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* achieved the task. Emma Orczy adds humor to some of the situations which the characters encounter, and lessens the amount of tension

present by it. For instance, as Lady Blakeney enters the inn at Calais, France she makes a statement which is somewhat humorous considering the amount of suspense present at the time. The quote reads, "The paper, such as it was, was hanging from the walls in strips; there did not seem to be a single piece of furniture in the room that could, by the wildest stretch of imagination, be called 'whole.'" The character's opinion is relayed to the reader which not only brings a grin to their face, but also helps them to understand the character more.

Suspense coupled with romance, even further captivates the reader. It's unfortunate that the misunderstanding between Sir Percy and his wife effects their love towards one another. If she had only been aware of the secretive part of his life, different events might have occurred for the better. These emotions strike the reader and add depth to the novel. A particular scene, where the tension between the two main characters is at it's height, takes place on the porch of the Blakeney's estate during the early hours of the morning. Sir Percy and Marguerite misunderstand one another and she leaves feeling that he doesn't love her anymore, when he actually adores her just as much as the day they got married. But the two never reveal their true emotions until the conclusion of the story where certain events lead to it's exposure.

The Scarlet Pimpernel is also noteworthy for it's historical content and enlightenment of the time period during the French revolution. Those years saw the violent overthrow of a thousand years of monarchy, and shook the capitals of the world. The struggles faced by those who were innocent and who's lives were unfortunately ended at the hands of "Madame la guillotine" is clearly expressed by this novel. The reader even gains a respect and appreciation for it. This story not only entertains the reader, but also educates them and arises interest in history.

Overall, this proved to be a very interesting novel, one which should be recommended to any reader in search of entertainment and historical enlightenment. The Scarlet Pimpernel truly captured the essence of the time period through the lavish language and detailed descriptions, proving it to be a notable history book.

