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Lord Tony's Wife: A Scarlet Pimpernel Adventure

Emmuska Baroness Orczy de Orczi, Emma Orczy, Jack Farr

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Sir Percy Blakeney and his lady had just arrived. It was close on midnight, and the ball had positively languished. What was a ball without the presence of Sir Percy? His Royal Highness too had been expected earlier than this. But it was not thought that he would come at all, despite his promise, if the spoilt pet of Bath society remained unaccountably absent; and the Assembly Rooms had worn an air of woe even in the face of the gaily dressed throng which filled every vast room in its remotest angle. But now Sir Percy Blakeney had arrived, just before the clocks had struck midnight, and exactly one minute before His Royal Highness drove up himself from the Royal Apartments. Lady Blakeney was looking more radiant and beautiful than ever before, so everyone remarked, when a few moments later she appeared in the crowded ball-room on the arm of His Royal Highness and closely followed by my lord Anthony Dewhurst and by Sir Percy himself, who had the young Duchess of Flintshire on his arm. "What do you mean, you incorrigible rogue," her Grace was saying with playful severity to her cavalier, "by coming so late to the ball? Another two minutes and you would have arrived after His Royal Highness himself: and how would you have justified such solecism, I would like to know." "By swearing that thoughts of your Grace had completely addled my poor brain," he retorted gaily, "and that in the mental contemplation of such charms I forgot time, place, social duties, everything." "Even the homage due to truth," she laughed. "Cannot you for once in your life be serious, Sir Percy?" "Impossible, dear lady, whilst your dainty hand rests upon mine arm." *** It was not often that His Royal Highness graced Bath with his presence, and the occasion was made the excuse for quite exceptional gaiety and brilliancy. The new fashions of this memorable year of 1793 had defied the declaration of war and filtrated through from Paris: London milliners had not been backward in taking the hint, and though most of the more starchy dowagers obstinately adhered to the pre-war fashions—the huge hooped skirts, stiff stomachers, pointed waists, voluminous panniers and monumental head erections—the young and smart matrons were everywhere to be seen in the new gracefully flowing skirts innocent of steel constructions, the high waist line, the pouter pigeon-like draperies over their pretty bosoms. Her Grace of Flintshire looked ravishing with her curly fair hair entirely free from powder, and Lady Betty Draitune's waist seemed to be nestling under her arm-pits. Of course Lady Blakeney wore the very latest thing in striped silks and gossamer-like muslin and lace, and it was hard to enumerate all the pretty débutantes and young brides who fluttered about the Assembly Rooms this night. And gliding through that motley throng, bright-plumaged like a swarm of butterflies, there were a few figures dressed in sober blacks and greys—the émigrés over from France—men, women, young girls and gilded youth from out that seething cauldron of revolutionary France—who had shaken the dust of that rampant demagogism from off their buckled shoes, taking away with them little else but their lives. Mostly chary of speech, grave in their demeanour, bearing upon their wan faces traces of that horror which had seized them when they saw all the traditions of their past tottering around them, the proletariat whom they had despised turning against them with all the fury of caged beasts let loose, their kindred and friends massacred, their King and Queen murdered. The shelter and security which hospitable England had extended to them, had not altogether removed from their hearts the awful sense of terror and of gloom.

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