

**PIMPERNEL AND  
ROSEMARY**

**BY**

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# **Table of Contents**

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XIII

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XV

CHAPTER XVI

CHAPTER XVII

CHAPTER XVIII

CHAPTER XIX

CHAPTER XX

CHAPTER XXI  
CHAPTER XXII  
CHAPTER XXIII  
CHAPTER XXIV  
CHAPTER XXV  
CHAPTER XXVI  
CHAPTER XXVII  
CHAPTER XXVIII  
CHAPTER XXIX  
CHAPTER XXX  
CHAPTER XXXI  
CHAPTER XXXII  
CHAPTER XXXIII  
CHAPTER XXXIV  
CHAPTER XXXV  
CHAPTER XXXVI  
CHAPTER XXXVII  
CHAPTER XXXVIII  
CHAPTER XXXIX  
CHAPTER XL  
CHAPTER XLI  
CHAPTER XLII  
CHAPTER XLIII  
CHAPTER XLIV

CHAPTER XLV

CHAPTER XLVI

CHAPTER XLVII

CHAPTER XLVIII

## PROLOGUE

### §I

This was in July 1916.

The woman sat alone in the room downstairs, stitching, stitching, by the flickering light of a small oil-lamp that stood on a rickety deal table close beside her. By the side of the lamp there were some half-dozen khaki tunics, and the woman took up these tunics one by one, looked them over and patted them and turned them about and about: then she took up the scissors and undid a portion of the lining. After which she stitched that portion of the lining up again, but not before she had inserted something—something that was small and white and crisp and that she took out from a fold in the bosom of her dress—between the lining and the cloth.

And this she did to each of the half dozen tunics in turn.

The room was small and bare, the paper hung down from the walls in strips, but it happened to have a ceiling that had only partially fallen in during the last bombardment, and so it might be termed a luxurious room, seeing that there were very few ceilings left in Guillaumet now. There was no roof to the house, and not a pane of glass anywhere, but as it was very hot this July, this was really an advantage. Quite a pleasant draught stirred the tattered curtain that masked the broken window and fanned the woman's dark, unruly hair about her damp forehead.

She sat in ragged bodice and petticoat, her sleeves tucked up above her elbows, her bodice open, showing throat and breasts that were not unshapely.

"You are kind to those English fellows, Alice," a dry, sarcastic voice said suddenly, close behind her.

The woman gave a start, and the hand that patted and folded the last of the tunics shook ever so slightly. Her pale, wan face looked almost ashen in hue in the dim light of the lamp. She turned and looked at the newcomer, a tall, lean fellow with tousled dark hair and unshaven chin, who lolled under the lintel of the door, chewing the stump of a cigar and gazing at her with a kind of indulgently sarcastic expression in his deep-set eyes. At sight of him she seemed reassured. It was only Lucien—Lucien the vagrant, the picker-up of unconsidered trifles, attached as porter to one of the American hospitals somewhere close by. So everybody round about here understood. But no one ever inquired further than that; everyone was too busy to trouble about other people's affairs; and Lucien was useful and willing. Though he had a game leg he would do anything he was asked—run errands, repair a derelict car, clean boots, anything. Lucien l'Américain they called him. "The Yank" the English flying boys from the aerodrome at Guillaumet had nicknamed him.

And they rather liked the Yank. Though he was as ugly as sin, swarthy, most days unshaved and dirty, he was very amusing, had a fund of good stories to relate, and was always ready for a gamble or a bit of fun. He seemed plentifully supplied with money, too—tips, probably, which he collected from the French or English officers over at the hospital—and was very free with it in the way of drinks and cigarettes for the boys. Latterly his open courtship of

Alice Gerbier had caused considerable amusement in Guillaumet. Alice was a good sort, of course, but so jolly ugly, and not so young as she once was. It was difficult to imagine any man wanting to make love to Alice Gerbier. But Lucien l'Américain must have done it after a fashion of his own, before Alice became his abject slave, fetching and carrying for him, working her fingers to the bone, and sitting up half the night sewing shirts and knitting socks for him. He took it all as a matter of course, and treated her as if she were so much dirt.

"The only way to treat women," he would remark cynically, whenever his harshness toward poor Alice roused the indignation of one of the men.

It was a curious courtship, and the boys who were quartered in old mother Gerbier's house often wondered how it would end. Poor Alice! It was her one chance. If she lost this undemonstrative admirer of hers she would never get another. No doubt she felt that, poor thing, for at times her eyes would look pathetically wistful, when she caught sight of Lucien making himself agreeable to other women.

Lucien l'Américain lolled into the room and came to a halt close beside Alice's chair; with the air of a condescending pasha he patted her thin shoulders.

"You are kinder to these fellows," he said, "than you are to me. Why the dickens you should work so hard for them I don't know. You look dog-tired, and it's swelteringly hot to-night. We shall have a storm, I think."

"The boys were saying they thought a storm was coming on," Alice said in a tired, toneless voice, "and they were hoping it would soon be over."

"Off as usual in the morning, I suppose," Lucien remarked curtly.

The woman nodded.

"And like a good soul you are putting a few stitches to their clothes, eh?" the man went on, and jerked a grimy thumb in the direction of the pile of tunics.

"There's no one else to do it for them," the woman rejoined in the same toneless, listless voice.

"Rather a futile task," he rejoined drily. "What is a hole more or less in a tunic? How many of these fellows will come back from their raid to-morrow do you suppose? Most of these carefully mended tunics will supplement the meagre wardrobes of our friend Fritz over the way, I'm thinking."

"Perhaps," the woman assented with a weary sigh.

"How many of them are going to-morrow?" he asked.

"I don't know. All the men in this house are going."

"And how many will come back do you think?"

The woman shuddered and pressed her thin, colourless lips more tightly together. The Yank gave a harsh laugh and shrugged his lean shoulders.

"These English flying men are very daring," he said lightly; "even Fritz will admit that much. They'll take the maddest risks! I don't think that you will see many of these tunics back here at close of day to-morrow."

The woman, however, remained obstinately silent. Whilst Lucien threw himself into a broken-down armchair that groaned under his weight, she rose and gathered up the pile of tunics.

"What are you doing with the things?" he asked querulously. "Can't you sit still for once and talk to me?"

He stretched out a long, muscular arm, succeeded in grabbing her dress, and drew her with sudden violence towards him. She tried to resist and to clutch the tunics tightly against her breast, but they fell out of her arms in a heap on the floor. She would have stooped to pick them up, but in a moment Lucien had her by the shoulders, forcing her to turn and to look at him.

"You are kinder to those fellows," he reiterated with his harsh laugh, "than you are to me. Leave those things alone, I say, and get me something to drink. What have you got in the house?"

But Alice for once was obstinate. As a rule even an unspoken wish from Lucien was a law unto her, but this time she wrenched herself free from his grasp, and getting down on one knee she started picking up the tunics from the floor. Lucien watched her for a moment or two through half-closed lids, with an undefinable expression on his lean, swarthy face, and a strange line, almost of cruelty, around his firm lips. Apparently he was not accustomed to seeing his whims thwarted, and no doubt he was impelled by the very human desire to probe his power upon this fond and foolish woman, for suddenly he jumped up, gave the tunics that were still

on the floor a vigorous kick which sent them flying to the farthest corner of the room, and roughly grabbed the others which Alice was hugging to her breast.

"I told you," he said with a savage oath, "to leave those things alone and to get me a drink."

For the space of a few seconds, Alice still hesitated; she looked up at him with a pathetic expression of wistfulness and subjection, while she wiped the palms of her moist hands against her tattered apron. Lucien's eyes, meeting hers, lost their savage gleam; he looked almost ashamed of his brutality.

"That's all right, my girl," he said with an indulgent smile. "I didn't mean to be unkind. Get me a drink, there's a good soul. Where did you want to put these things?" he added, as he condescended to stoop and collect the scattered tunics.

Alice's wan face at once beamed with a joy as pathetic as her anxiety had been just now. She even contrived to smile.

"Never mind about them, Lucien," she said, and with rather jerky movements she wiped the top of the table with her apron. Then she turned towards the door: "I'll put the things away presently. I can get you a bottle of that wine you brought in the other day. Would you like that?"

"Yes, I should," the Yank rejoined. "And then you can come and sit still for a bit. That eternal stitch-stitching of yours gets on my nerves. Now," he went on, and, having collected all the tunics, he placed them back upon the table, "why you wanted to fiddle with these tunics I can't imagine. They can't have needed mending. Why, they are practically new."

He turned them over one by one: they were as he said, almost new—beautiful khaki tunics, smart and well-cut, such as the British government loved to serve out to its magnificent airmen. Then, as Alice had suddenly come to a halt by the door, he half-turned to her, and added in his usual harsh, peremptory tone:

"Are you getting me that wine or are you not?" For a few seconds after Alice had finally left the room Lucien l'Américain remained standing by the table, his grimy hand upon the pile of tunics, motionless, his eyes fixed upon the narrow doorway through which Alice had disappeared, his ear bent, listening to her retreating footsteps. As soon as these had died away down the stone steps which led to the cellar his whole attitude changed. He threw the stump of his cigar away and, picking up one of the tunics, he felt it all over scrupulously—all over, and with both hands, until in one spot his sensitive fingers felt something that had a slightly crackling, crisp sound about it when handled.

Whereupon Lucien l'Américain drew a deep breath, and in his deep-set eyes there came a quick flash of triumph. One by one, more quickly now and more surely he picked up the tunics and felt each one in turn all over until his fingers encountered the something crisp and crackling which appeared hidden between the cloth and the lining, and while he did so his face, never prepossessing, looked positively hideous; a cruel, almost animal look distorted it, the lips drew back against the gums, showing white teeth, sharp and gleaming like those of a wolf.

"That's it, is it?" he muttered once or twice. "Not bad for a woman. Did she think of it, I wonder."

Suddenly his sharp ears detected the sound of Alice's tired footstep coming up the cellar stairs. He laid the tunics back upon the table in a neat pile, then he went to the window, drew the curtain slightly aside and gave a low, prolonged whistle, which was almost immediately answered by another from somewhere out in the darkness.

Alice came in, carrying a bottle of wine and a mug. There was a scared look in her eyes as she entered, and her glance swept quickly, anxiously round the room first and then over the pile of tunics. Seeing them neatly folded, she appeared relieved, and set the bottle and mug down upon the table. She took a corkscrew from the table-drawer and proceeded to draw the cork, whilst Lucien watched her with a smile round his lips which the girl hardly dared to interpret. Now he lolled across to her. His hands were in his pockets. She had succeeded in drawing the cork, and was pouring the wine into the mug, when with a swift movement Lucien's arm shot out and closed round her throat, whilst his other hand was clapped firmly against her mouth.

She had not the time to scream. The bottle of wine fell out of her hand, crashing on the floor and the wine flowed in a stream along the cracks of the worm-eaten wood in the direction of the door. Her eyes, dilated with horror, stared into vacancy, her hands with fingers outspread were stretched out straight before her. Lucien l'Américain never uttered a word; he just held her in a grip of iron, smothering any attempt she might make to scream. Less than twenty seconds went by whilst he held the woman thus, and she passed from an excess of horror into semi-consciousness. Then from the outer passage there came the sound of stealthy footsteps, and the next moment two men dressed in rough peasant clothes came into the room. Lucien l'Américain motioned to them with a

glance, and silently, almost noiselessly, they closed in around the woman and in a moment had her secure between them and marched her out of the room, she going like a sleepwalker with eyes closed and lips tightly pressed together, her face a reflex of the horror which had invaded her soul.

Lucien l'Américain, left alone in the room, took up one of the tunics and with Alice's scissors he carefully undid a few stitches in the lining. His deft fingers then groped in the aperture, until they came in contact with something crisp and crackling, which he drew out and examined. It was a small sheet of thin paper closely covered with minute handwriting, and then folded into as small a compass as had been possible. By the flickering light of the oil-lamp the Yank tried to decipher some of the writing; his face had become expressionless as marble. It seemed as if with the unmasking of the woman, his interest in the event had ceased.

The paper contained information which would have been of enormous importance to the Germans. Having skimmed the written matter through, Lucien folded up the paper again and slipped it in a pocket-book, which he carried next to his skin. After that he took up the tunics one by one, and still with the aid of Alice's scissors he extracted the same message which was concealed in the selfsame way between the lining and the cloth of each tunic, and these also he put away in his pocket-book.

He had only just finished his task when from down the village street there rose the joyful sound of lusty throats singing "Tipperary!" and a minute or two later half a dozen boys in khaki made noisy irruption into the house.

At once there was loud shouting of "Alice! Alice, where art thou? What ho, my Alice!" And one of the boys started singing "The Roses of Picardy."

"Hallo, Yank!" came from another of them, who had just caught sight of Lucien. "What the——have you done with Alice?"

"She'll be back directly," Lucien shouted in response. "I've promised to meet her, so can't stop. S'long!"

He dashed out of the house, and in a moment the darkness had swallowed him up.

## §2

Three days later. Half an hour after the break of dawn. In a moderately well-furnished room in the town hall of Lille an elderly man was sitting over a scanty *petit-déjeuner*. He had an intellectual face, with high-bred features and sparse grey hair carefully brushed across his cranium so as to hide the beginnings of baldness. From time to time he cast eager eyes at the door opposite to where he was sitting or anxious ones at the clock upon the mantel-shelf.

Suddenly his whole face brightened up with eager expectancy. He had just perceived the sound of a harsh voice coming from the next room, and demanding peremptorily to speak with M. de Kervoisin.

A servant entered, but de Kervoisin was too impatient to allow him to speak.

"Number Ten is it?" he queried sharply, and at once added, "Show him in."

A tall, ragged, uncouth, unshaved creature sauntered into the room, with hands in pockets and a chewed cigar stump in the corner of his mouth. Strangely enough the elegant high-bred M. de Kervoisin received this extraordinary visitor with the utmost courtesy. He rose to greet him, shook him warmly by the hand, offered him a chair, coffee, liqueurs, cigarettes. The newcomer declined everything except the armchair, into which he threw himself with obvious satisfaction.

"Tired, my friend?" M. de Kervoisin queried amiably.

"Of course," the other replied curtly. "I have been up nearly two hours."

"The want of sleep," M. de Kervoisin murmured with an engaging smile. Then he added drily: "And I suppose some emotion . . ."

"Emotion?" the other broke in with a harsh laugh. "None, I assure you, save what is pleasurable."

"What? To see a woman shot?"

He who went by the strange appellation of Number Ten threw aside the chewed stump of his cigar, then he carefully selected a cigarette from M. de Kervoisin's case, and lit it leisurely before he replied:

"Yes, my friend . . . to see a woman shot. Have you never seen a human creature shot or hung?"

"No, never!" M. de Kervoisin replied with a shudder. "And I hope I never may."

"It is a thrill well worth experiencing," the other remarked and blew rings of cigarette smoke through his pursed lips. "Yes," he went on drily, "well worth experiencing."

"Ah!" M. de Kervoisin rejoined with a sigh, "you English are astonishing."

"Yes, I dare say we seem so to you," Number Ten retorted. "But we do not shoot women."

"So I understand. The danger of spies is not quite so acute with you as it is with us; and this woman was really dangerous."

"She was dangerous because she was so extraordinarily clever. In all my experience I never came across anything quite so ingenious as the way she went to work."

"She worked from the British aerodrome, I think you told me, behind Guillaumet?"

"And calculated that out of every half-dozen English machines that went up, at least three would come down behind the German lines: so she inserted all the information she could get in the linings of the airmen's tunics. A clever idea," Number Ten added thoughtfully, "and in the end I only discovered the trick by accident."

He smiled, and stared for a second straight out before him, and as he did so memory brought back vividly the picture of the tumble-down house at Guillaumet, and Alice Gerbier sitting there, stitching, stitching with the pile of tunics before her, and he himself—disguised as a loafer, commonly called Lucien l'Américain, for no particular reason, as he certainly was not American—hanging round the woman for weeks, vaguely

suspecting at first, then certain, then wondering how the trick was done, the clever trick whereby so much valuable information was conveyed to the Germans, information that could only have been obtained in the neighbourhood of the English aerodrome. And he saw himself, the spy-tracker, the secret-service agent, carefully setting the trap which had ensnared so many women ever since the world began, the trap set with a bait to lure a woman's vanity, and an old maid's passionate longing for love. And to these memory pictures another now was added, the picture of Alice Gerbier in the early dawn in the prison yard of Lille, with her back to the wall, and a handkerchief over her eyes, and a platoon of soldiers with rifles raised. And gradually as these pictures passed before his mind's eye, became strangely vivid and then passed by again, the man's expressive face became hideous in its aspect of ruthless cruelty. The eyes narrowed till they were mere slits, the lips curled up over the gums displaying a row of teeth pointed and sharp as those of a wolf.

A discreet cough from M. de Kervoisin roused him from his meditation.

"You are certainly a prince amongst secret service agents, my friend," M. de Kervoisin said suavely. "I don't know what we should do without you. But Alice Gerbier certainly represents your crowning triumph."

Number Ten gave a harsh laugh.

"It certainly was a thrill," he said coolly, "well worth experiencing."

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