

Scarlet Pimpernel

Episode 22 - Rescue English Children from the Bell Tower

PERCY (narrating): I was awakened, partially, by the sound of carriage wheels coming to a stop almost beneath my bedroom window. When I became fully awake, there was a violent pounding shaking the downstairs door. I slipped into a dressing gown, swiftly, and went down to admit my nocturnal caller.

[Knocking sounds]

CALLER: Sir Percy Blakeney?

PERCY: (fop) At your service, sir. Will you come in?

CALLER: Thank you, I--- [violent fit of coughing]

PERCY: Good heavens, man! Why -- here, here, let me help!

CALLER: [coughing] Sorry I – [cough]

PERCY: No, don't try to talk for a moment; come on, come on, let me get you to a chair. [walking sounds]. Here we are. [CALLER can't catch breath, Percy pours a drink]. You'd better drink some of this, hadn't you? Here.

CALLER: Thank you.

PERCY: Excuse me a moment, will you, while I close the door . . . [walking] This night air isn't exactly helping you. [walking back] Better?

CALLER: [puffing] Yes, much . . . much better. Thank you. I'm afraid I haven't very long to live.

PERCY: Oh come now, come now, a bad cough don't mean—

CALLER: Oh, this one does, sir. Or else I wouldn't be here. It was because of this cough that Citizen Chauvelin chose me as his messenger.

PERCY: (curiosity piqued) Citizen Chauvelin?

CALLER: Yes

PERCY: You're not a Frenchman.

CALLER: Need one be French to carry a message?

PERCY: No, but to carry a message from Chauvelin means you've been in France, and you know – there IS a war going on.

CALLER: Chauvelin released me from the Concierge Prison in Paris five days ago and sent me here.

PERCY: Why?

CALLER: Because I'm dying. Its no loss to him that I'm not his prisoner for the last week or the last month of my life. Perhaps I am more fortunate than the other English prisoners that he holds. At least I can die here in my own land, in my own home.

PERCY: How did you come to be a French prisoner?

CALLER: I was traveling through France when war came. So were other Englishmen – and there were others – there, conducting business of various kinds. All of us were seized. May I have --

PERCY: Oh, by all means. [pours more drink] Here you are. Now, what about this message.

CALLER: Yes, I was told to give you this letter, and this key. [sound of key on table]

PERCY: Key? Key to . . .what?

CALLER: I'm afraid I didn't have Citizen Chauvelin's confidence. Perhaps the letter explains.

PERCY: Yes, yes perhaps it does. Well, if you'll excuse me...

CALLER: Of course.

["suspenseful" music]

PERCY: [narrating in Pimpernel voice] The letter from Chauvelin was addressed on the outside to Sir Percy Blakeney, but on the inside it was addressed to the Scarlet Pimpernel. Even as I read, I felt a strange chill. I could almost see Chauvelin's fanatical face as he wrote the words:

CHAUVELIN'S VOICE: To the Scarlet Pimpernel – the bearer of this letter will also deliver to you a key. It is a key to the bell tower of the Abbey at Riems. Ten days from this writing – my dear Pimpernel – the Abby and everything in it will be destroyed by fire! Unless you come before that time, and with your key save the precious contents of the bell tower. In that case, I will guarantee the safety of the contents, but naturally I make no such guarantee for your own safety. I am certain that any questions that you may have can be answered by the bearer.

["dramatic" music]

PERCY: It was signed by Chauvelin. In reading it, I had unconsciously read it aloud to the messenger. When I had finished, I turned to him for an explanation. His face had gone from the ashen gray of illness to the deathly whiteness of fear and revulsion.

CALLER: Good Heavens, Sir Percy!

PERCY: What is it man? What is in that bell tower?

CALLER: I told you about the others, the other English prisoners?

PERCY: Yes.

CALLER: Some of the merchants who had been living in France had their families with them, wives and children.

PERCY: Go on.

CALLER: On the same day that Chauvelin released me to bring you this message, he also issued an order for all English children to be transferred to the Bell tower of the Abby at Reims.

PERCY: The madman!

CALLER: Mad, but cunning!

PERCY: Yes, if I don't make use of the key-

CALLER: The children will die! But if you do – you will--

PERCY: Then – I shall die!

CALLER: What are you going to do?

PERCY: I, eh, want to live, sir, like any man.

CALLER: I see.

PERCY: But I promise you, there will be no children in that bell tower when Chauvelin puts it to the torch.

[music]

PERCY: (narrating in "pimpernel" voice) It took almost a full day to gather together available members of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel and get them ready for the journey, and then another day to get safely into France. By the time we reached the outskirts of Reims, we had little more than 48 hours.

[sound of horses trotting]

TONY: We can't ride straight into town, Blakeney--

PERCY: No Tony, we'll have to stake the horses out in this wood somewhere, in case we need them later. Oh, quite a concentration of troops in this area. Ho there, friends. Whoa.

[voices of Leaguers talking and reacting]

PERCY: We'll leave the horses here. Harding can slip back here at night and

tend them.

HARDING: Aye, Sir Percy.

PERCY: Meanwhile let's go over the plan once more, shall we? What plan we have. [chuckles from the League] Well, we'll have to be ready for anything. Ffoulkes, you and your group address the soldiers. Mingle with the French troops in the town and keep your ears open. Don't ask too many questions though, or you may arouse suspicions.

FFOULKES: We'll be careful, Blakeney.

PERCY: You know what your assignment is, Burns?

BURNS: Yes, you want my men and I to get some farm carts and clothing.

PERCY: Women's clothing. On the way back some of us may have to look quite – eh – motherly.

[Laughter]

LEAGUE MEMBER: You mean to dress us as women? And take one or two children each?

PERCY: It's a possibility! But its certain we won't be able to parade to the coast with all nineteen of them in a group.

LEAGUE MEMBER: But, in case there is trouble, don't you think the rest of us should know what you and Tony are doing? I know the work you've assigned to us will be child's play when compared to your own activities.

PERCY: Well, my work depends on an assumption. Since Chauvelin planned this trap I'm assuming he'll be here to supervise it. If he is, Tony and I will attempt to capture him.

LEAGUER: You mean, hold him as hostage against the safety of the children?

PERCY: No that wouldn't work; but if we can take him, I can assume his identity myself and order the removal of the children from the Bell tower.

TONY: It won't be the first time that Blakeney here has imitated Chauvelin...

PERCY: No, Tony, but it may be the last. Don't be overconfident. Chauvelin hasn't forgotten the past either. Well, gentlemen, good fortune with your assignments. [League wishes Percy well from background] Let's go Tony! Or rather—[French accent] Citizen Comrade of the glorious French Republic!

[underscoring]

PERCY: [narrating] We dressed as field laborers and went into Reims. The guard was worse than we had expected. Three times we were challenged, and three

times our chests tightened as our forged credentials were scrutinized. But we were permitted to pass. At the local inn and everywhere else, tales and rumors crept from tongue to tongue. There was no secret about this new battle of wits between Chauvelin and the Scarlet Pimpernel.

[Inn sounds]

INN WOMAN: There will be no errors this time, Citizen Comrades, mark my words! Citizen C will put an end to this Pimpernel!

PERCY: [French accent] I hope you are right, Madame.

TONY: [French accent] That Chauvelin, he is a wise one!

PERCY: Yes, his schemes are perfect, but those who execute them are not as clever as the Citizen. If he could but get away from his duties in Paris long enough to see this through. . . ! Oh, it might be different.

INN WOMAN: [laughs] Might be different? Be assured, comrades, this time it WILL be different!

PERCY: [gasping] You mean, Chauvelin himself is in Reims?

WOMAN: [worried] I did not say that, Citizen.

TONY: Oh, pay no attention to her insinuating tongue, citizen. You know how women gossip. How would she know where Chauvelin might be?

WOMAN: It is the truth Citizen! Do you think that Citizen Chauvelin is preparing his own meals and making his own bed at the --- bah! why should I talk to such a fools!

PERCY: Indeed why, Citizeness? You are obviously a woman who knows whereof she speaks, so let us talk no more of Chauvelin, but let us share and enjoy your charming company.

TONY: I apologize for my sharp tongue, Citizeness. Let me mellow it. And yours, with some wine.

PERCY: You see! My comrade is a good fellow! You will drink with us, no?

TONY: More wine!

The wine dulled her suspicions and antagonism. It was late when finally we left her, but that is what we wanted. In the dark and uncrowded streets we followed her eagerly. She left the town and made her way to a secluded chateau. As she neared the house, we heard her answer the challenge of a soldier.

SOLDIER: Who is it?

WOMAN: Maide de chambre!

PERCY: [softly] Wait Tony. . .

SOLDIER: Stay where you are, Madame. – Ah!

PERCY: The chateau is guarded. No, this must be Chauvelin's headquarters. Come on, through the trees. Let's circle closer as we go.

TONY: There's no telling how heavy the guard will be.

PERCY: Not very. Just a precaution. The Abby bell tower is being watched most carefully.

TONY: But even if we reach the house and get inside – how do we know which room is Chauvelin's?

PERCY: I think that may be very simple, Tony.

TONY: Oh?

PERCY: The master suite. When a man uses somebody else's property, he always takes the best.

[music]

PERCY: [narrating] We reached the house in safety and forced our way in through a small door at the side. We climbed in the darkness; light trickled under the doorsill of one of the bedrooms.

TONY: He must be in there, Blakeney

PERCY: Yes.

TONY: He might have soldiers with him?

PERCY: No sign of conversation. Probably alone going over some plans. – Well, I think we just better walk in!

TONY: Are you going to keep up the disguise?

PERCY: For what purpose, old boy? He knows who I am. [chuckle] He will certainly be able to guess why I am here. You ready?

TONY: Yeah.

PERCY: Make sure to prevent any outcry.

TONY: [sound of acknowledgement]

PERCY: And here's hoping the door isn't locked!

[steps, door opens]

CHAUVELIN: What the--!

TONY: Don't move, Citizen Chauvelin!

PERCY: Don't tell me you're surprised to see us, Chauvelin.

CHAUVELIN: Not at all, Blakeney. But you have come to the wrong place. You have a key you need?

PERCY: Yes. [foppishly] Yes, but I'm hardly fool enough to think your soldiers would let me use it without getting rather [inane chuckle] – uncomfortable – about it, huh? But on the other hand, if YOU were to use it . . . Citizen?

CHAUVELIN: [curt] I have no intention of using it.

PERCY: [casual] Oh? then I shall do so in your name, and your identity, if you don't mind. Take off your clothing, Shove-along, I have need of it.

CHAUVELIN: And if I don't?

TONY: If you don't do as he says, Citizen, I would not hesitate for one second to shoot a man who will use the safety of children as a decoy.

PERCY: He is not joking, Shove-along. Nor am I. Take 'em off.

CHAUVELIN: [laughing softly] Very well, Monsieur Blakeney. But this time, you die, Monsieur. This time, whether you wear your own true face, or mine. This time, you die.

[Music. Interlude]

PERCY: [narrating] We bound Chauvelin tightly and placed him in a closet, where it was certain he would not be found before morning. Then we made our way out of the chateau and back to Reims. My face was made up to look like Chauvelin's – enough to pass the sharpest inspection. And yet, I was uneasy. Something about his manner; a certainty I had never seen in him before . . .

[walking]

PERCY: Here's the square.

TONY: Yes. Look: heavily guarded, even at night. Well, see. Soldiers we just passed only gave you one look.

PERCY: [uneasy laugh] Oh. I-I don't know why I'm nervous.

TONY: They'll think it's strange if just the two of us try to march the children out, though.

PERCY: No we won't do that. I just want to tell the guard that I'm sending a squad with an order signed by me. Then Ffoulkes and the others can march in in about an hour and take them.

TONY: Sounds perfect.

PERCY: Well, I hope so. – Here's the entrance.

SOLDIER: Halt!

PERCY: [as Chauvelin] It is alright, Comrade. It is I, Citizen Chauvelin.

SOLDIER: Bonsoir, Citizen Chauvelin.

PERCY: Open this door. I wish to enter and speak to your captain. [pause] Did you not hear what I said?

SOLDIER: Yes. I heard what you said, citizen. Now I am waiting to hear something else. The password, please.

PERCY: [menacing] Do you dare to challenge me?

SOLDIER: Yes I do, Citizen. By your own order, you said nobody, not even yourself, was to be unchallenged. The password, if you please!

[music]

PERCY: [narrating] Our voices had grown louder, attracting the attention of the soldiers in the square and now the guard's rifle had tilted, and the point of his barrel was only inches from my stomach. His eyes were hard and dangerous in the dim light.

SOLDIER: You said make certain of the identity of everyone, monsieur, especially yourself. If you do not give me the password in five seconds – I

TONY: [quickly interrupting] You see Citizen Chauvelin! They are alert! This guard has certainly passed your test.

SOLDIER: Test?

TONY: Of course, fool! To make sure you were following the orders to the letter, eh Citizen Chauvelin?

PERCY: Of course, why else? You have done well, my soldier. With you on guard, I see that my fear was unfounded. Come citizen, we will return to the chateau. Bonsoir, soldier!

TONY: [exhaling] That was close.

PERCY: [in own voice] He's still suspicious. Walk towards that alleyway where --

SOLDIER: [calling loudly] Citizen Chauvelin!!

PERCY: [as Chauvelin] What is it?

SOLDIER: I would still like the password, Citizen.

[music]

PERCY: [narrating] His suspicion had flared up again, dangerous and demanding, and I had no answer to his question. There was only one thing to do; Tony knew it too, as though my thoughts were his own. At the same instant we started our run to the alleyway.

[they run]

SOLDIER: Halt! Halt! Halt or I'll fire! [rifle is shot] Stop them! Stop them! It's the Pimpernel!

[loud angry voices of the soldiers]

OTHER SOLDIERS: The Pimpernel! The Pimpernel! [shots]

TONY: Blakeney! Back there!

PERCY: What?

TONY: The guard! He just fired? We didn't fire! Good heavens, they're fighting among themselves.

PERCY: Stop!

TONY: What is it?

PERCY: Those soldiers returning fire – they're our own men! Ffoulkes and his group in French uniform. Ffoulkes!

FFOULKES: Be with you as soon as we can, Blakeney! Knew you weren't Chauvelin the moment you crossed the square and brought Tony with you! Alright men, come on! Across the street! They won't follow you into this ally for a moment or two!

PERCY: Good man, Ffoulkes! Come on men, this way!

[music]

PERCY: [narrating] The joy of our escape was dampened the moment we reached our hiding place in safety. Harding and Burns and the others were there too, their missions accomplished, but we still didn't have the children.

TONY: You can't blame yourself, Blakeney. Chauvelin's web is tightly woven this time.

BURNS: You've done all you can, old boy.

PERCY: No. Not quite all.

TONY: Oh, what do you mean?

PERCY: What I mean is very simple, Tony. Chauvelin doesn't really care about the children. What he wants is me. If I walk up and open that door, they'll allow me to do it.

BURNS: And then they'll kill you!

TONY: He's right, Blakeney. Impossible.

PERCY: No. But just leaving the children there – THAT's what's impossible. [heavy pause] And it's almost daybreak. At daybreak tomorrow, the abbey will be set on fire. We've a bare twenty-four hours. If we can't do anything by this time tomorrow, I use that key. [pause] You said you succeeded in getting the clothing and the farm carts, Burns?

BURNS: Yes. We were almost caught once, though.

PERCY: By a farmer?

BURNS: No. Troops. We found one farmhouse deserted. There was an old cart there and we were fixing a wheel to take it when the troops came along.

PERCY: What did you do?

BURNS: Just pretended that it was my farm. Did the usual grumbling about how the army had taken my livestock and everything else of value.

PERCY: What are the troops? A patrol looking for us?

BURNS: No, they were robbing the farms as usual. Not livestock – they were searching for metal. Anything that can be melted down to make cannon or shot. They stripped everything—

PERCY: Just a minute!

BURNS: Oh.

TONY: What is it, Blakeney?

PERCY: I was just thinking about what Burns said about that metal. Ffoulkes.

FFOULKES: Yes, Blakeney?

PERCY: You spent quite some time near the Abbey this evening. Did you or any of your men look the place over?

FFOULKES: Well, as well as we could from the outside. Of course we heard a few things as well. The children are locked in a room at the top. Barred windows and a special guard outside the door.

PERCY: Well, that's good information. I hope the next that I want is as good. Is the bell still in the tower?

FFOULKES: Why, yes. I looked the tower over. Casually, of course, but I saw it!

PERCY: Good! Well, we may bring those children out with us yet! [excited voices of League] Burns ran into a troop looking for metal, didn't he? Well that bell is metal, a choice piece, enough for a couple of cannons!

A LEAGUE MEMBER: He's right!

PERCY: We've got to work this very carefully out, though, to get into that tower!

TONY: That's the part that won't work.

PERCY: Oh, it will, it WILL! Chauvelin has superiors too, you know. Besides he must be very uncomfortable by now in that closet where we left him. Yes, I'll need a new disguise, I think. A staff officer. And we'll all go to call on Chauvelin. We'll be responsible for getting him OUT of the closet.

TONY: Well, then what?

PERCY: Well, he'll feel more friendly towards us than his own men! I'll demand the bell before the torch is set to the abbey. Now look, we'll need an enormous flat wagon and an oversized thick wooden platform and a team of eight good farm horses. Burns, that's your task. I don't care how you get it, but get it!

TONY: I still say Chauvelin won't admit us to that tower.

PERCY: Yes he will! It will take myself and say twelve of us to move the bell. Alright. We'll let him put a guard of a hundred men outside the door of the room where the children are imprisoned. We won't even go near it. Harding.

HARDING: Yes.

PERCY: You get ropes and pulleys, the heaviest you can find. We strap the bell to the platform Burns gets then we lower it from belfry by pulley onto the wagon.

FFOULKES: Just a minute Blakeney. What about the children?

PERCY: They will be inside the bell, Ffoulkes.

FFOULKES: But you said we wouldn't even go near the door to their room!

PERCY: We won't. Just you leave it to me. Come on, let's get moving now! I want to be the one to rescue Chauvelin from that closet.

PERCY: [narrating] We rescued him, alright. He snarled, swore, but he didn't see through my disguise. Then, sharply and with great authority, I demanded the bell.

CHAUVELIN: I say NO, Colonel! No one enters the tower without my permission.

PERCY: [French accent, disguised voice] But I ask your permission!

CHAUVELIN: No. I am grateful to you for releasing me – but no!

PERCY: You would not yet be released if I had not come to consult you about the bell. It is needed for cannon!

CHAUVELIN: You may have it tomorrow. From the burned ruins.

PERCY: That will not do, citizen! Heat and fire at the wrong time can reduce the value of the metal. It is needed. My orders are from the General Staff, and I demand that bell!

CHAUVELIN: I have a purpose—

PERCY: I know your purpose! I also know mine! and my orders. You can triple the guard upon your little English brats. Citizen, I have been of help to you. Now you be of help to me. Please. If I am forced to report failure to my superiors, it will go very badly – with both of us.

CHAUVELIN: Hmm. Very well, citizen Colonel. But I will triple my guard on that room, and if you or any of your men go within ten feet of the iron door I've guarded, you will be shot!

PERCY: Very well!

[music]

PERCY: [narrating] He let us into the tower, and we worked feverishly through the day. By midafternoon, the bell was ready to lower onto the platform. We removed the enormous clapper, and arranged the ropes and pulleys that would swing the giant bell over the edge of the tower [hammer sounds underscore this] to be lowered to the wagon below. But then, we had to slow down. I wanted night now – a deep, black night.

TONY: Two hours before dark.

PERCY: I know. I'll be glad when its two hours after dark.

TONY: You still haven't told me how you plan to get to the children.

PERCY: That's what those two extra ropes are for. Better start knotting one of them.

TONY: You mean you're going to use it as a ladder?

PERCY: Yes. Fortunately for us, the barred windows of the room the children are in are on the side of the tower that will be shadowed most deeply. I won't be seen from the ground.

TONY: But the bars on those windows are inches thick. You couldn't cut through them before morning.

PERCY: I don't have to, Tony. The team of eight horses and the wagon that will remove the bell and lower it should also be able to pull those bars out. Then you

lower this other rope to me, and I'll pass the children up, one by one. Just make certain to keep them quiet!

[music]

PERCY: [narrating] It went off without a hitch. It was ten o'clock at night when the last of the children crawled under the bell and we lowered it the final two feet and strapped it to the wooden platform. My heart leapt once as the bell swung out over the tower and the pulley hissed and creaked ominously, but the ropes held and the slow steady descent started. [creaking pulley noises]

TONY: Almost down, Blakeney.

PERCY: Four more feet. [French accent] Back the wagon up just a little, will you? Ah, that's it! Right there! Lower away, easy now, easy! Let it down easy! Voila! That is perfect. Tie it in place quickly, men!

[voices working]

PERCY: Keep turned this way, Tony.

TONY: What? What is it?

PERCY: The guard who was on duty here last night when I posed as Chauvelin.

TONY: What, he was shot!

PERCY: Just wounded. His arm's in a sling. He's watching us rather strangely.

BURNS: Bell's tied on well enough to get a few miles, Blakeney, but I—

PERCY: Get it moving, then, quick! That fellow's headed over to Chauvelin.

CHAUVELIN: Pimpernel! That is the Pimpernel!

LEAGUERS: Forward, let's move, come on! [sound of cart moving]

CHAUVELIN: Pimpernel! Stop that wagon!

PERCY: You're too late, Chauvelin!

CHAUVELIN: Fire! Kill them!

[gunshots]

PERCY: Get behind the bell, will you! This part of the wagon!

TONY: Good heavens, Blakeney, the children! The fire's hitting the bell!

PERCY: Ha ha! Inches of solid metal, Tony! With confidence with Harding.

TONY: They have horses to follow!

PERCY: They'll be too late, thanks to Burns there!

TONY: Well, why?

BURNS: See that shape on the edge of the wagon? Powder with a short fuse. When we reach the bridge I'll light it! No more bridge!

[laughter]

PERCY: You'll look a happy man, then, won't you Burns? Especially when we've put you into one of those dresses you stole, and you become a mama!

[laughter]

PERCY: Here is the bridge, old boy! Light the charge and let it go!

[Triumphant music. Interlude.]

TONY: Any sign of Burns and the two children he had with him, yet?

PERCY: No, everybody else is on board. All the other children are asleep. Well, we can't wait much longer... a French warship might spot us if—

TONY: Something moved over there. Burns?

BURNS: [very irritated] Come here and take one of these children, will you? Both fast asleep. Had to carry them from the cart out by the road.

PERCY: Come on, give one here, will you? You take one too, Tony.

TONY: Right.

PERCY: Oh well, there's no need to be so angry just because you had to carry a couple of children, Burns!

BURNS: No, it isn't them – great kids. But I left them for a minute once this afternoon and went into the Inn to get some food. You and your idea, Blakeney! Dressing up as a woman!

PERCY: Well, what happened?

BURNS: What happened! WHAT HAPPENED?! Some fool soldier tried to kiss me! That's what happened!

TONY: Oh, oh, bless me! [Percy and Tony laugh riotously]

[music]