

Just as in movies, there are those scenes that wind up in the cutting room floor, my “Discarded Chapters” folder often rivals the completed book for length. Sometimes, the scenes are discarded because they’re unworkable, other times, because they lead into alternative plot-lines that would take a seven volume set (a la the more verbose Victorian writers) to explore, and sometimes simply because the blasted manuscript is just plain too long, and something has to go.

The scene below falls into that last category, and, let me tell you, it hurt to cut it, partly because cutting anything always hurts, but mostly because it’s the only scene in *The Secret History of the Pink Carnation* where Sir Percy Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel himself, puts in a cameo appearance.

To set the scene for you, Richard has just discovered that Amy is—or so he believes—in love with his alter ego, the Purple Gentian. He is kicking himself (no comfortable thing, when one is wearing Hessian boots!) for being idiot enough to be his own rival. Who better to consult than the one man in all France who encountered the exact same problem?

“Percy! I need to talk to you!” Richard barreled into the Blakeney’s bedroom. “Oh, sorry.”

Richard skidded to a stop as Marguerite’s curly head descended under the sheets with a squeal.

“Uh, never mind, sorry, uh,” Richard backed out, feeling about twelve. Sounds of sheets whispering and feet scurrying emerged from the other room. Should he wait, wondered Richard with uncharacteristic indecision, or should he go away and come back in the morning? He hovered uncertainly. He hated feeling uncertain. He was a man of action, a man of decision, a... well, that was the general idea. But this whole love business was decidedly unsettling. Richard scowled at the gilded inlay of the door.

Until the door was abruptly tugged open and he found himself scowling at Percy instead.

“You do have the worst timing, lad,” Sir Percy informed him as he belted his dressing gown. “I’ll take it this is of the utmost importance?”

“Um....” Suddenly sheepish, Richard followed Percy into the room and seated himself gingerly on a chaise longue.

“Hullo, Richard!” One white hand waved at him from the direction of the adjoining dressing room and then disappeared.

Percy regarded Richard intently from his shrewd, heavy lidded eyes. “What’s wrong, lad? Is it the League?”

“When you were courting Marguerite, and she didn’t know you were the Scarlet Pimpernel, how did you manage it?” Richard blurted out, not altogether coherently.

“Ah, so this is about a girl, I take it?” Percy’s posture relaxed in a moment from that of the Scarlet Pimpernel, alert, active, to that of the urbane man about town. He settled back against the embroidered chair back. “Who is she? A Frenchwoman? They make demmed fine wives,” he added, raising his voice for the benefit of the denizen of the dressing room. A tinkle of silvery laughter floated out into the bedroom.

“No.” Richard reconsidered. “Well, half French. But that’s not the important thing. She’s.... Devil take it, where do I start?”

Lady Blakeney drifted in as Richard was about half way through his recital, and stood listening behind her husband’s chair, head cocked sideways.

Percy listened as intently as though Richard were describing his plans to overthrow the French government. When Richard finished, he shook his head. “I won’t lie to you, Richard. It was hard. Demmed hard.”

“Whoever she is, tell her the truth,” Lady Blakeney advised emphatically. “Unlike another great foolish oaf I know.”

Sir Percy twirled an imaginary quizzing glass. “Sink me if I don’t know who that might be!”

“But what about the danger to the mission?”

“How can you love someone and not trust them?” asked Lady Blakeney indignantly, ruby earrings swinging against the red-gold mass of her hair. Her words sounded unsettlingly like Amy’s in the garden earlier that evening.

Richard shot out of his seat as though he had been sitting on tacks, not petit point.

“It’s not about trust. It’s about the mission.”

Lady Blakeney narrowed her eyes at him and muttered something in French. “Oh, Richard.” She stood on tiptoe to press a quick kiss on each cheek. “If you need us, we’re always here for you.”

“You make it sound like you think I’m wrong,” Richard muttered.

Percy looked deeply apprehensive. Lady Blakeney just patted his hand and repeated, “We’re here when you need us.”

I love epilogues, especially the older Judith McNaught ones. There’s something inexpressibly satisfying about that precious moment when all the various problems that have plagued the characters for the past five hundred pages have been cleared up, and you get a little peak into their future wedded bliss. Naturally, when I wrote the first draft of *The Secret History of the Pink Carnation*, Amy and Richard got an epilogue. But then Eloise came along, and a gooey Richard and Amy epilogue would have sounded pretty silly coming after the last Eloise chapter.

Farewell, Epilogue. But here, restored to its original form, is the original ending of *The Secret History of the Pink Carnation*....

Epilogue

"You just scared away poor Giles Alsworthy," Amy scolded Richard as she accepted the glass of ratafia he handed her.

"He deserved it," Richard replied unrepentantly. "The bas—er, man, was leering down your bodice."

"So are you," Amy pointed out, accurately gauging the angle of Richard's gaze.

"Ah, but as your husband I claim exclusive leering rights."

"Drat, I'd forgotten about the part of the wedding ceremony where you promised to love, honor, and leer."

Richard lowered his voice intimately. "Haven't I made good on the with my body I thee worship bit? Or shall I try harder?"

Amy gulped down her entire glass of ratafia.

"Don't," she protested. Richard's eyes gleamed wickedly. "Not now. Your mother will never forgive us if we leave this early."

Acknowledging the truth of the statement, Richard forced himself to postpone his favorite pastime of seducing Amy. Judging his second favorite pastime—ogling Amy—a little too dangerous, he took a step back and surveyed the crowded ballroom.

"She has done us proud, hasn't she?"

The ballroom of Uppington House glittered with hundreds of candles and bejeweled people, the latter all packed together in what would later be referred to admiringly as a sad crush. Although Amy had been sure a good half of the ton at least had to have been present at the wedding breakfast, Lady Uppington had dismissed that as, "A small family affair, darling!" and insisted on throwing a ball the following week to demonstrate her delight in her new daughter-in-law. Two hours into the event, it was clear it was already a smashing success.

In the center of the room, the Prince of Wales huffed and puffed his way through a quadrille with Lady Jersey. Henrietta and her two best friends, Penelope and Charlotte, huddled in a corner, communicating in a combination of whispers, giggles, and agitated hand gestures. Amy smiled as she spotted Uncle Bertrand, wearing the lopsided periwig that had been part of his formal attire since her arrival at Wooliston Manor as a child, holding forth on sheep breeding to a red-

faced man in knee breeches nearly as antiquated as her uncle's. Aunt Penelope wandered the perimeter of the room, inspecting the needlepoint seats of any unoccupied chairs.

Even Jane and Miss Gwen had returned briefly from France for Amy and Richard's wedding—the official wedding, that was. Halfway down the ballroom, Jane, in a dress embroidered with hundreds of tiny pink carnations, partnered Geoff in a quadrille. Ever since the illustrated newspapers had reported the daring theft of Bonaparte's gold by a dashing new secret agent, the Pink Carnation had become society's favorite flower. At least a third of the women present wore dresses embroidered with carnations (some, it must be admitted, in shades closer to orange or red, pink thread having run short among the seamstresses who served the ton), and as many more had tucked bunches of the humble flower into their hair. Among the fashionable set, all the young men sported pink flowers on their waistcoats, and one trendsetter had gone so far as to have them embroidered upon his socks. It all amused Amy hugely.

*A brief buzz of excitement had run through the ton when Richard was unveiled as the Purple Gentian (in a four page long exclusive in *The Shropshire Intelligencer*, Amy's favorite periodical). After a week of notoriety, the fickle attention of society had shifted to the Pink Carnation, a state of affairs that suited Amy and Richard perfectly. It left them in peace to pursue Amy's latest scheme: a school for secret agents, based at Richard's estate in Sussex. Six trainee spies were already in residence, practicing French colloquialisms and learning how to blacken their teeth with soot and gum.*

Amy poked Richard in the arm to draw his attention to Miss Gwen marching an unfortunate young lady and her beau off the balcony and back into the ballroom.

"That poor girl!" laughed Amy, turning to Richard.

"Come into the garden with me," he urged. "Just for a moment."

"And be hauled out by Miss Gwen? No, thank you!"

"Didn't I once promise you that I'd brave dragons for you? Come with me," Richard wheedled. "I have a surprise for you."

"Oooh, what sort of surprise?"

"Come into the garden," Richard repeated.

Amy placed her gloved hand on his arm, and let him guide her towards the French doors. "I hope this is a real surprise and not just a ploy to get me alone," she admonished.

"Would you be disappointed?" he asked with a mischievous grin.

Amy refrained from answering, eliciting a knowing chuckle from Richard.

Amy lifted her face to the evening breeze as they stepped out onto the balcony. The cool air felt heavenly on her skin after the heat of the overcrowded ballroom. She tugged at the fingers of her pale blue kid evening gloves, dyed to match the gauze overlay of her gown, and gave a sigh of relief as she peeled them off.

“Feel free to continue undressing,” commented her husband good-naturedly.

Amy leaned her blessedly bare elbows on the railing, and tilted her head to look up at Richard. “Just what was that surprise?” she asked pointedly.

“Oh well,” Richard sighed, “if you insist,” but the way he was shifting from foot to foot belied his world-weary tone. Whatever the surprise was—and Amy rapidly ran through a list of possibilities—Richard was bursting in his eagerness to present it.

“First,” he said, rubbing his hands together in unconcealed glee, “you have to look up and tell me what you see.”

“The roof of Middlethorpe House.”

Richard poked her.

“Ow! All right! Um... stars. I see lots and lots of stars.”

Richard smiled with satisfaction. “Exactly. Now close your eyes and make a wish.”

Amy closed her eyes, and was casting about for a suitable wish—it was the usual dilemma, world peace or something she really wanted—when something cold and heavy plopped onto her neck. Her eyelashes flew open.

The problem with a present that had been placed around one’s neck, was that it was rather difficult to inspect. Lifting it, Amy caught a glimpse of the brilliant glitter of diamonds.

“Didn’t I owe you a necklace of stars?” Richard asked softly.

“A—oh.” Amy looked down at the necklace again, the sparkle of the central pendant refracting in an opalescent rainbow of tears. “Oh, Richard.”

“If you don’t like it—”

Amy launched herself at Richard’s neck, smashing him into the creeping tendrils of a rosebush, and nearly topping both of them over the railing of the balcony into the garden below. The smell of crushed roses drifted around them. “It’s the sweetest, most thoughtful, kindest, most wonderful present anyone has ever given me!”

Richard didn’t even notice the thorns poking into his jacket. His chest swelled with pride. “I’m glad you like it,” he said casually.

“I—oh,” choked Amy. She rubbed her face against his shoulder. “I love you, I love you, I love you so much!”

“And I love you.” Kissing the top of her head, Richard resolved to run out and obtain the matching bracelet and earrings at the earliest opportunity.

Amy flung back her head to look at him and cupped his cheeks in both hands. “But you didn’t need to buy me diamonds. It’s you. You make me see necklaces of stars. Every time you kiss me.”

The next day, the scandalous gossip made the rounds of the ton that not only were Lord Richard Selwick and his new bride unfashionably in love, they had spent a good half hour kissing—each other!—on the balcony of Uppington House during their nuptial ball. It was, the gossips agreed, shockingly bad ton. But what could one expect from a man whose parents had the poor taste to remain in love, and a girl who was half French?