

# Emma Orczy

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**Baroness Emma ("Emmuska") Orczy** (September 23, 1865 – November 12, 1947) was a British novelist, playwright and artist of Hungarian origin. She was most notable for her series of novels featuring the Scarlet Pimpernel. Some of her paintings were exhibited at the Royal Academy in London.

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## Early life

Born **Emma Magdalena Rosalia Maria Josefa Barbara Orczy** in Tarnaörs, Hungary, she was the daughter of composer Baron Felix Orczy and Countess Emma Wass. Family friends at their Hungarian estates included Charles Gounod, Franz Liszt, and Richard Wagner.

Her parents left Hungary in 1868, fearful of the threat of a peasant revolution. They lived in Budapest, Brussels, and Paris, where Emma studied music without success. Finally, in 1880, the family moved to London where they lodged with their countryman Francis Pichler at 162 Great Portland Street. Orczy attended West London School of Art and then Heatherley's School of Fine Art, where she met her future husband, Montague Maclean Barstow, whom she married in 1894.

## Writing career

They had very little money, and Orczy started to work with her husband as a translator and an illustrator to supplement his low earnings. John Montague Orczy-Barstow, their only child, was born February 25, 1899. She started writing soon after his birth but her first novel, *The Emperor's Candlesticks* (1899), was a failure. She did, however, find a small following with a series of detective stories in the *Royal Magazine*. Her next novel, *In Mary's Reign* (1901) did better.

In 1903, she and her husband wrote a play based on one of her short stories about an English aristocrat, Sir Percy Blakeney, Bart., who rescued French aristocrats from the French revolution: *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. She submitted her novelization of the story under the same title to 12 publishers. While waiting the decision of

these publishers, Fred Terry and Julia Neilson accepted the play for production in the West End. Initially, it drew small audiences, but the play ran four years in London, broke many stage records, was translated and produced in other countries, and underwent several revivals. This theatrical success generated huge sales for the novel.

She went on to write over a dozen sequels featuring Sir Percy Blakeney, his family, and the other members of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel, of which the first, *I Will Repay* (1906), was the most popular. The last Pimpernel book, *Mam'zelle Guillotine*, was published in 1940. None of her three subsequent plays matched the success of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. She also wrote popular mystery fiction and many adventure romances. Her *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* was an early example of a female detective as the main character.

Orczy's novels were racy, mannered melodramas and she favored historical fiction. In *The Nest of the Sparrowhawk* (1909), for example, a malicious guardian in Puritan Kent tricks his beautiful wealthy young ward into marrying him by disguising himself as an exiled French prince. He persuades his widowed sister-in-law to abet him in this plot, in which she unwittingly disgraces one of her long lost sons and finds the other murdered by the villain. Even though this novel had no link to *The Scarlet Pimpernel* other than its shared authorship, the publisher advertised it as part of 'The Scarlet Pimpernel Series'.

Her work was so successful that she was able to buy an estate in Monte Carlo.

She died in Henley-on-Thames on November 12, 1947.

## **Influence**

Orczy can lay claim to creating at least two archetypes of popular fiction: the armchair detective as exemplified by The Old Man In the Corner, and the adventurer with the dual identity. Sir Percy Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel, is a rich fop by day and defender of the innocent by night, exactly like his literary descendants Don Diego de la Vega/Zorro, Bruce Wayne/Batman, and Oliver Queen/Green Arrow.

Orczy was also among the first writers to create a "band of brothers" who supported a dashing hero figure, and it is possible find traces of the Scarlet Pimpernel and his League in later figures such as Bulldog Drummond and the Black Gang and Doc Savage and his Fabulous Five.

The Scarlet Pimpernel also inspired one of the great heroes of the twentieth century, Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat credited with saving tens of thousands of

Hungarian Jews during World War II. Wallenberg began his work after seeing a modernization of the Scarlet Pimpernel, Pimpernel Smith, and was himself of the same aristocratic background as the original Pimpernel.

## **Descendants**

Her son, John Montague Orczy-Barstow, was a writer under the name John Blakeney, the surname taken from that of his mother's most famous fictional character.

Her grandson, Michael Felix Orczy-Barstow, was a British aviator and an early computer systems analyst. He died in Corpus Christi, Texas.

One of her great-great grandchildren, Christopher Orczy[1] (born in 1972), is a composer living in New Zealand. His works are largely instrumental, and the art harmonium is his main instrument.

## Name pronunciation

Asked how to say her name, Orczy told *The Literary Digest* "Pronounced *or'-tsey*. It is a pure Hungarian name, the double consonant *cz* being equivalent to an English *ts*.

*Emmuska* – a diminutive meaning "very little Emma" – (accent on the first syllable—the *s* equivalent to our *sh*), thus, *em'-moosh-ka*." (Charles Earle Funk, *What's the Name, Please?*, Funk & Wagnalls, 1936.)

## Works

(incomplete)

### TRANSLATIONS

- Old Hungarian Fairy Tales (1895) translator with Montague Barstow
- The Enchanted Cat (1895) translator with Montague Barstow
- Fairyland's Beauty (1895) translator with Montague Barstow



- Uletka and the White Lizard (1895)  
translator with Montague Barstow

## **PLAYS**

- The Scarlet Pimpernel (1903)
- The Sin of William Jackson (1906)
- Beau Brocade (1908)
- The Duke's Wager (1911)
- The Legion of Honour (1918),  
adapted from A Sheaf of Bluebells

## **NOVELS**

- The Emperor's Candlesticks (1899)
- In Mary's Reign (1901) later The  
Tangled Skein (1907)
- The Scarlet Pimpernel (1905)
- The Case of Miss Elliot (collection of  
detective stories, 1905)
- By the Gods Beloved (1905) later  
released in the US as The Gates of  
Kamt (1907)
- I will Repay (1906)
- A Son of the People (1906)

- Beau Brocade (1907)
- The Elusive Pimpernel (1908)
- The Old Man In the Corner  
(collection of detective stories, 1909)
- The Nest of the Sparrowhawk (1909)
- Lady Molly of Scotland Yard  
(collection of detective stories, 1910)
- Petticoat Government (1910)
- A True Woman (1911)
- The Traitor (1912)
- The Good Patriots (1912)
- Fire in Stubble (1912)
- Meadowsweet (1912)
- Eldorado (1913)
- Unto Cæsar (1914)
- The Laughing Cavalier (1914)
- A Bride of the Plains (1915)
- The Bronze Eagle (1915)
- Leatherface (1916)
- Lord Tony's Wife (1917)
- A Sheaf of Bluebells (1917)
- Flower o' the Lily (1918)
- The Man in Grey (short stories, 1918)
- His Majesty's Well-beloved (1919)
- The League of the Scarlet Pimpernel  
(1919)

- The First Sir Percy (1921)
- *Castles in the Air* (collection, 1921)
- *The Triumph of the Scarlet Pimpernel* (1922)
- Nicolette: A Tale of Old Provence (1922)
- The Honourable Jim (1924)
- Pimpernel and Rosemary (1924)
- Les Beaux et les Dandys de Grand Siècles en Angleterre (1924)
- The Miser of Maida Vale (1925)
- A Question of Temptation (1925)
- Unravelled Knots (collection of detective stories, 1926)
- The Celestial City (1926)
- Sir Percy Hits Back (1927)
- Skin o' My Tooth (collection of detective stories, 1928)
- Adventures of the Scarlet Pimpernel (1929)
- Blue Eyes and Grey (1929)
- Marivosa (1930)
- The Scarlet Pimpernel etc (1930)  
collection of four novels
- In the Rue Monge (1931)
- A Joyous Adventure (1932)

- A Child of the Revolution (1932)
- The Scarlet Pimpernel Looks at the World (1933)
- The Way of the Scarlet Pimpernel (1933)
- A Spy of Napoleon (1934)
- The Uncrowned King (1935)
- The Turbulent Duchess (1935)
- Sir Percy Leads the Band (1936)
- The Divine Folly (1937)
- No Greater Love (1938)
- The Gallant Pimpernel (1939)  
collection of four novels
- Mam'zelle Guillotine (1940)
- Pride of Race (1942)
- The Will-O'-The-Wisp (1947)
- *Links in the Chain of Life*  
(autobiography, 1947)
- The Scarlet Pimpernel Omnibus  
(1957) collection of four novels

## External links

- Works by Baroness Orczy at Blackmask

- Works by Baroness Orczy at Blakeney Manor
- Works by Baroness Orczy at Project Gutenberg
- Literary agent

## See also

- Alexandre Dumas, père
- H. Rider Haggard
- Karl May
- Rafael Sabatini
- Emilio Salgari
- Samuel Shellabarger
- Lawrence Schoonover
- Jules Verne
- Frank Yerby

## References

- 'Obituary—Baroness ORCZY: "The Scarlet Pimpernel"', *The Times*, November 13, 1947

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