About the author
Baroness Orczy was born into an aristocratic family in Hungary, in 1865. Owing to her father’s disputes with the farmers on his estate, they moved to Brussels, then to Paris and finally to London where she married Montague Barstow. By far her most well-known novel is *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905), of which she wrote twenty sequels, but she also wrote many other books nearly all of which feature upper class heroes and espionage. The couple moved to Monaco in 1910, and following her husband’s death in 1942, she returned to London. She died in 1947 at the age of 82.

Summary
Chapter 1: The year is 1792 and the place is Paris, France. The aristocrats are trying to leave the city and the revolutionaries are trying to stop them. The aristocrats have the help of a very clever English man, who is known as the Scarlet Pimpernel, on account of his habit of leaving a picture of a pimpernel flower for the revolutionaries every time he helps an aristocrat to escape. A group of important people are gathered in a small hotel in Devon, England. They are Lord Antony and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes, both Englishmen, the Comtesse de Tournay and her son, the Vicomte, and her daughter Suzanne, French aristocrats who have been rescued from Paris with the help of the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel. The Comtesse tells a story about a woman called Marguerite St Just, who she is convinced brought about the death of an aristocrat, the Marquis de St Cyr. She says she never wants to see the woman again which causes some embarrassment to the others as Marguerite has subsequently married Sir Percy Blakeney, a very rich man, and is just about to arrive at the hotel.

Chapter 2: Lady Blakeney comes in and greets the Comtesse, who immediately leaves the room. Sir Percy Blakeney, a loud, friendly but somewhat dim-witted man, follows his wife into the room. Straightaway, he gets into an argument with the Vicomte who wants to fight him. Sir Percy refuses to fight and Marguerite leaves the room in disgust at her husband’s cowardice. Outside the hotel she meets her brother, Armand, who is going to France on a dangerous mission. As she watches him sail away she thinks about the past. Armand had been in love with the Marquis de Cyr’s daughter, but because he wasn’t an aristocrat he was badly treated. Marguerite told the police about some treacherous letters and the Marquis was killed. As she is about to re-enter the hotel, Chauvelin, an agent of the French revolutionary government, addresses her by her French name. He questions her as to the identity of the Pimpernel, to which she replies that nobody knows. Chauvelin wants her to help him find the Pimpernel, but she refuses. Later that night Sir Andrew and Lord Antony discuss plans to rescue the Comte de Tournay. Suddenly, they are attacked by Chauvelin’s men, who recover a letter from Armand which outlines his intention to meet and help the Comte. He smiles as he now has a means of blackmailing Marguerite into helping him.

Chapter 3: Marguerite meets Chauvelin again at a theatre in London. He tells her he has her brother’s letter, which proves that he is a friend of the Pimpernel, and shows her a note from the Pimpernel indicating that he will be attending a party that night in Lord Grenville’s house. Chauvelin tells Marguerite he knows the name of the hotel the Pimpernel uses in Calais, *Le Chat Gris*, and that he wants her to help him identify the Pimpernel by watching who Lord Antony and Sir Andrew talk to at the party, or he will hand over her brother’s letter to the revolutionaries. At the party, she sees somebody give Sir Andrew a note and follows him into a room. When he begins to burn the note, she pretends to faint, knocking over some candles. While Sir Andrew is picking them up, she quickly reads the note, which is from the Pimpernel, saying that he will be in the dining room at one o’clock that morning. Later she is questioned by Chauvelin and reluctantly tells him about the note. He waits in the dining room, accompanied by the sleeping Lord Blakeney, but nobody else comes in. Frustrated, he warns Marguerite that her brother’s life depends on the death of the Pimpernel.
The Scarlet Pimpernel

Chapter 4: Back at their house, Marguerite tells her husband that her brother is in danger from Chauvelin. Her husband agrees to help and the next day Marguerite finds a note saying he has to travel North and will be away a week. She manages to speak to her husband before his departure and he admits he is going to London and that his journey is linked to Armand. She goes into her husband’s room and is surprised to find it full of learned papers and books, not the sort of thing she would have imagined her foolish husband to possess, and even more surprised to find a ring with an image of a pimpernel on it. She sees Suzanne, the daughter of the Comtesse, who tells her the Pimpernel is in London that day and will be going to France very soon. Suddenly, Marguerite realises that her husband is the brave and clever Pimpernel. Then, Armand’s letter is returned to her, signifying that Chauvelin now knows the identity of the Pimpernel. She hurries to London to talk to Sir Andrew about the dangerous position her husband is in and he agrees to help her. They rendezvous at the hotel in Dover, with him disguised as her servant, and wait for the morning boat to Calais.

Chapter 5: At Le Chat Gris hotel, the owner tells them that a tall man had been in the hotel but had gone out. Marguerite is convinced he is talking about her husband and asks Sir Andrew to go and look for him. As she is waiting for his return, she sees a short, thin priest enter the hotel who she recognises as Chauvelin in disguise. Chauvelin tells his assistant, Desgas, to go and look for the tall man. Then, Sir Percy comes in, recognises Chauvelin’s disguise immediately, and starts making fun of him. When Chauvelin is momentarily distracted, he puts some pepper in his snuff box and offers it to Chauvelin. While Chauvelin is recovering from the effects of the pepper in his nose, Sir Percy leaves. Desgas returns and reports that the tall man had been seen talking to a man called Reuben about a horse and cart. An old man, a friend of Reuben, is brought before Chauvelin and questioned. In return for some money he tells them the tall man is heading for Blanchard’s house. Chauvelin and Desgas follow the old man towards the house.

Chapter 6: Marguerite follows the group to a house by the sea. As she is thinking of a way to warn her husband, Chauvelin grabs her. He tells her that her brother and the Comte are in the house, and that her brother’s life will be spared if she doesn’t raise the alarm, and thereby puts her in a terrible dilemma. The soldiers find nothing in the house except a note from the Pimpernel telling Armand and the Comte to get on the waiting boat and to go to Le Chat Gris in Calais to await him there. Chauvelin sees three men getting into the boat and orders his men to go to Calais, but not before beating up the old man. They leave Marguerite and the old man alone. Marguerite is overjoyed to discover the old man is in fact Sir Percy. He explains everything to her. He had left two notes for Armand in the house. One was for Chauvelin to make him think they were going to Calais, and the other was for Armand, instructing him to take the boat a little out to sea and then to return when Chauvelin and his men had left. Sir Andrew joins the couple and they wait for the boat.

Background and themes

Historical perspective: The Scarlet Pimpernel is a fictional character but the book is set in the time of the French Revolution. It would be quite easy to imagine that there really were people of Sir Percy’s character operating in those times.

The upper and lower classes: National differences are set aside when a particular class of people are being threatened. Sir Percy and his friends are English nobility and so have an affinity with their French counterparts and help them escape.

Disguise: The novel could not work without the various disguises employed by the Pimpernel. He has to be in disguise because his war is a secret one, and therefore he cannot rely on open physical fighting.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and ask them to think about how life was different in 1792 in England and France compared with life today. Ask them to consider the following: Did people eat the same food as people today? Were there supermarkets? How did they travel? Were people fatter or thinner? Did people live longer? Did children go to school? Were people richer or poorer? Did they work harder and longer hours? What jobs did they do and what jobs didn’t they do?
The Scarlet Pimpernel

Chapter 1
While reading (p. 6, after ‘I like England,’ he said happily.)

2 Quiz: Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to answer some questions about England and that the pair with the most correct answers wins. Then read out the following options: English people usually eat dinner at six/eighteen o’clock. The second biggest city in England is Liverpool/Manchester/Birmingham. Sixty/Eighty/A hundred million people live in England. Liverpool football club play in blue/red/white shirts. The famous clock in London is called Big David/Big John/Big Ben. Baseball/Basketball/Cricket is a famous game in England. Which one of these three actors is English: Jennifer Aniston/Kate Winslet/Nicole Kidman? The taxis in London are yellow/red/black. The name of the river in London is the Thames/the Severn/the Humber. A lot of English people go on holiday to Sweden/Spain/Germany.

Chapter 2
While reading (p. 11, after ‘She went to them with open arms.’)

3 Role play: Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Marguerite and the Comtesse. Remind them that the Comtesse hates Marguerite. See Discussion activities key for an example start to the conversation.

After reading

4 Write and ask: Write What was the name of the Comtesse’s daughter? on the board and elicit the answer (Suzanne). Ask students to write another question about something in Chapter 2. Now have students stand up and walk around the classroom, asking and answering each other’s questions.

Chapter 3
While reading (p. 21, after ‘I want to listen to the music.’)

5 Discuss: Put the students in small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions about music: Do you like listening to music? What music do you like/hate? Are there any famous singers from your country? What music is your country famous for? Do you listen to music when you are studying? Do you like dancing to music?

After reading

6 Write and guess: Put students in pairs and ask one of them to study the pictures on pages 21 and 23 and the other the pictures on pages 25 and 27. Tell them to write five sentences about each picture, two of which are not true. The students read out their sentences and their partner has to identify the mistakes.

Chapter 4
After reading

7 Write and guess: Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Chapter 4. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students who have to identify the mistakes.

Chapter 5
While reading (p. 41, after ‘It’s not very nice, I know,’ Sir Andrew answered.)

8 Discuss: Put the students in groups and ask them to discuss the following questions about hotels they have stayed in on their last holiday: Where was the hotel? Did you stay in a bad hotel? What was the food like? Were the rooms dirty? Was it expensive?

After reading

9 Game: Write the word person on the board. Then write the word tall in front of it. Tell the students that there are approximately 16 words in Chapter 5 that can be written before the word ‘person’ to describe a person’s feelings, character or physical appearance. In pairs tell them they have 10 minutes to find as many of these words as possible. The pair with the most words wins.

10 Write: Put the students in pairs and ask them to write a summary of Chapter 5. Tell them the summary must be exactly fifty words, not one more or one less. The students then read out their summaries to each other.

Chapter 6
While reading (p. 52, after ‘He moved away.’)

11 Role play: Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Marguerite and Chauvelin. He wants to know why she is near the house and she becomes angry and insults him. See Discussion activities key for an example start to the conversation.

After reading

12 Write and guess: Write Marguerite heard the sound of men and women. on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (horses not women). Now students choose a sentence from Chapter 6 and rewrite it changing one word. Students walk around the classroom, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

13 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: cold, bird, ground, loudly, brave, friend. Ask the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Chapter 6.

14 Write and guess: Put the students in groups of four. Tell two of the students to read through Chapters 1–3 and the other two to read Chapters 4–6. Tell them to write down 20 questions about their chapters. Pair A then asks Pair B their questions and vice-versa. The pair with the most correct answers wins.