

CHAPTER III—MAJOR CHEVENIX COMES INTO THE STORY, AND GOGUELAT GOES OUT

There was never any talk of a recovery, and no time was lost in getting the man's deposition. He gave but the one account of it: that he had committed suicide because he was sick of seeing so many Englishmen. The doctor vowed it was impossible, the nature and direction of the wound forbidding it. Goguelat replied that he was more ingenious than the other thought for, and had propped up the weapon in the ground and fallen on the point—'just like Nebuchadnezzar,' he added, winking to the assistants. The doctor, who was a little, spruce, ruddy man of an impatient temper, pished and pshawed and swore over his patient. 'Nothing to be made of him!' he cried. 'A perfect heathen. If we could only find the weapon!' But the weapon had ceased to exist. A little resined twine was perhaps blowing about in the castle gutters; some bits of broken stick may have trailed in corners; and behold, in the pleasant air of the morning, a dandy prisoner trimming his nails with a pair of scissors!

Finding the wounded man so firm, you may be sure the authorities did not leave the rest of us in peace. No stone was left unturned. We were had in again and again to be examined, now singly, now in twos and threes. We were threatened with all sorts of impossible severities and tempted with all manner of improbable rewards. I suppose I was five times interrogated, and came off from each with flying colours. I am like old

Souvaroff, I cannot understand a soldier being taken aback by any question; he should answer, as he marches on the fire, with an instant briskness and gaiety. I may have been short of bread, gold or grace; I was never yet found wanting in an answer. My comrades, if they were not all so ready, were none of them less staunch; and I may say here at once that the inquiry came to nothing at the time, and the death of Goguelat remained a mystery of the prison. Such were the veterans of France! And yet I should be disingenuous if I did not own this was a case apart; in ordinary circumstances, some one might have stumbled or been intimidated into an admission; and what bound us together with a closeness beyond that of mere comrades was a secret to which we were all committed and a design in which all were equally engaged. No need to inquire as to its nature: there is only one desire, and only one kind of design, that blooms in prisons. And the fact that our tunnel was near done supported and inspired us.

I came off in public, as I have said, with flying colours; the sittings of the court of inquiry died away like a tune that no one listens to; and yet I was unmasked—I, whom my very adversary defended, as good as confessed, as good as told the nature of the quarrel, and by so doing prepared for myself in the future a most anxious, disagreeable adventure. It was the third morning after the duel, and Goguelat was still in life, when the time came round for me to give Major Chevenix a lesson. I was fond of this occupation; not that he paid me much—no more, indeed, than eighteenpence a month, the customary figure, being a miser in the grain; but because I liked his breakfasts and (to some extent) himself. At

least, he was a man of education; and of the others with whom I had any opportunity of speech, those that would not have held a book upsidedown would have torn the pages out for pipe-lights. For I must repeat again that our body of prisoners was exceptional: there was in Edinburgh Castle none of that educational busyness that distinguished some of the other prisons, so that men entered them unable to read, and left them fit for high employments. Chevenix was handsome, and surprisingly young to be a major: six feet in his stockings, well set up, with regular features and very clear grey eyes. It was impossible to pick a fault in him, and yet the sum-total was displeasing. Perhaps he was too clean; he seemed to bear about with him the smell of soap. Cleanliness is good, but I cannot bear a man's nails to seem japanned. And certainly he was too self-possessed and cold. There was none of the fire of youth, none of the swiftness of the soldier, in this young officer. His kindness was cold, and cruel cold; his deliberation exasperating. And perhaps it was from this character, which is very much the opposite of my own, that even in these days, when he was of service to me, I approached him with suspicion and reserve.

I looked over his exercise in the usual form, and marked six faults.

'H'm. Six,' says he, looking at the paper. 'Very annoying! I can never get it right.'

'Oh, but you make excellent progress!' I said. I would not discourage him, you understand, but he was congenitally unable to learn French.

Some fire, I think, is needful, and he had quenched his fire in soapsuds.

He put the exercise down, leaned his chin upon his hand, and looked at me with clear, severe eyes.

'I think we must have a little talk,' said he.

'I am entirely at your disposition,' I replied; but I quaked, for I knew what subject to expect.

'You have been some time giving me these lessons,' he went on, 'and I am tempted to think rather well of you. I believe you are a gentleman.'

'I have that honour, sir,' said I.

'You have seen me for the same period. I do not know how I strike you; but perhaps you will be prepared to believe that I also am a man of honour,' said he.

'I require no assurances; the thing is manifest,' and I bowed.

'Very well, then,' said he. 'What about this Goguelat?'

'You heard me yesterday before the court,' I began. 'I was awakened only—'

‘Oh yes; I “heard you yesterday before the court,” no doubt,’ he interrupted, ‘and I remember perfectly that you were “awakened only.” I could repeat the most of it by rote, indeed. But do you suppose that I believed you for a moment?’

‘Neither would you believe me if I were to repeat it here,’ said I.

‘I may be wrong—we shall soon see,’ says he; ‘but my impression is that you will not “repeat it here.” My impression is that you have come into this room, and that you will tell me something before you go out.’

I shrugged my shoulders.

‘Let me explain,’ he continued. ‘Your evidence, of course, is nonsense. I put it by, and the court put it by.’

‘My compliments and thanks!’ said I.

‘You must know—that’s the short and the long,’ he proceeded. ‘All of you in shed B are bound to know. And I want to ask you where is the common-sense of keeping up this farce, and maintaining this cock-and-bull story between friends. Come, come, my good fellow, own yourself beaten, and laugh at it yourself.’

‘Well, I hear you, go ahead,’ said I. ‘You put your heart in it.’

He crossed his legs slowly. 'I can very well understand,' he began, 'that precautions have had to be taken. I dare say an oath was administered. I can comprehend that perfectly.' (He was watching me all the time with his cold, bright eyes.) 'And I can comprehend that, about an affair of honour, you would be very particular to keep it.'

'About an affair of honour?' I repeated, like a man quite puzzled.

'It was not an affair of honour, then?' he asked.

'What was not? I do not follow,' said I.

He gave no sign of impatience; simply sat awhile silent, and began again in the same placid and good-natured voice: 'The court and I were at one in setting aside your evidence. It could not deceive a child. But there was a difference between myself and the other officers, because I knew my man and they did not. They saw in you a common soldier, and I knew you for a gentleman. To them your evidence was a leash of lies, which they yawned to hear you telling. Now, I was asking myself, how far will a gentleman go? Not surely so far as to help hush a murder up? So that—when I heard you tell how you knew nothing of the matter, and were only awakened by the corporal, and all the rest of it—I translated your statements into something else. Now, Champdivers,' he cried, springing up lively and coming towards me with animation, 'I am going to tell you what that was, and you are going to help me to see justice done: how, I don't know, for of course you are under oath—but somehow. Mark what I'm

going to say.'

At that moment he laid a heavy, hard grip upon my shoulder; and whether he said anything more or came to a full stop at once, I am sure I could not tell you to this day. For, as the devil would have it, the shoulder he laid hold of was the one Goguelat had pinked. The wound was but a scratch; it was healing with the first intention; but in the clutch of Major Chevenix it gave me agony. My head swam; the sweat poured off my face; I must have grown deadly pale.

He removed his hand as suddenly as he had laid it there. 'What is wrong with you?' said he.

'It is nothing,' said I. 'A qualm. It has gone by.'

'Are you sure?' said he. 'You are as white as a sheet.'

'Oh no, I assure you! Nothing whatever. I am my own man again,' I said, though I could scarce command my tongue.

'Well, shall I go on again?' says he. 'Can you follow me?'

'Oh, by all means!' said I, and mopped my streaming face upon my sleeve, for you may be sure in those days I had no handkerchief.

'If you are sure you can follow me. That was a very sudden and sharp

seizure,' he said doubtfully. 'But if you are sure, all right, and here goes. An affair of honour among you fellows would, naturally, be a little difficult to carry out, perhaps it would be impossible to have it wholly regular. And yet a duel might be very irregular in form, and, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, loyal enough in effect. Do you take me? Now, as a gentleman and a soldier.'

His hand rose again at the words and hovered over me. I could bear no more, and winced away from him. 'No,' I cried, 'not that. Do not put your hand upon my shoulder. I cannot bear it. It is rheumatism,' I made haste to add. 'My shoulder is inflamed and very painful.'

He returned to his chair and deliberately lighted a cigar.

'I am sorry about your shoulder,' he said at last. 'Let me send for the doctor.'

'Not in the least,' said I. 'It is a trifle. I am quite used to it. It does not trouble me in the smallest. At any rate, I don't believe in doctors.'

'All right,' said he, and sat and smoked a good while in a silence which I would have given anything to break. 'Well,' he began presently, 'I believe there is nothing left for me to learn. I presume I may say that I know all.'

‘About what?’ said I boldly.

‘About Goguelat,’ said he.

‘I beg your pardon. I cannot conceive,’ said I.

‘Oh,’ says the major, ‘the man fell in a duel, and by your hand! I am not an infant.’

‘By no means,’ said I. ‘But you seem to me to be a good deal of a theorist.’

‘Shall we test it?’ he asked. ‘The doctor is close by. If there is not an open wound on your shoulder, I am wrong. If there is—’ He waved his hand. ‘But I advise you to think twice. There is a deuce of a nasty drawback to the experiment—that what might have remained private between us two becomes public property.’

‘Oh, well!’ said I, with a laugh, ‘anything rather than a doctor! I cannot bear the breed.’

His last words had a good deal relieved me, but I was still far from comfortable.

Major Chevenix smoked awhile, looking now at his cigar ash, now at me.

'I'm a soldier myself,' he says presently, 'and I've been out in my time and hit my man. I don't want to run any one into a corner for an affair that was at all necessary or correct. At the same time, I want to know that much, and I'll take your word of honour for it. Otherwise, I shall be very sorry, but the doctor must be called in.'

'I neither admit anything nor deny anything,' I returned. 'But if this form of words will suffice you, here is what I say: I give you my parole, as a gentleman and a soldier, there has nothing taken place amongst us prisoners that was not honourable as the day.'

'All right,' says he. 'That was all I wanted. You can go now, Champdivers.'

And as I was going out he added, with a laugh: 'By the bye, I ought to apologise: I had no idea I was applying the torture!'

The same afternoon the doctor came into the courtyard with a piece of paper in his hand. He seemed hot and angry, and had certainly no mind to be polite.

'Here!' he cried. 'Which of you fellows knows any English? Oh!'—spying me—'there you are, what's your name! You'll do. Tell these fellows that the other fellow's dying. He's booked; no use talking; I expect he'll go by evening. And tell them I don't envy the feelings of the fellow who spiked him. Tell them that first.'

I did so.

‘Then you can tell ’em,’ he resumed, ‘that the fellow, Goggle—what’s his name?—wants to see some of them before he gets his marching orders. If I got it right, he wants to kiss or embrace you, or some sickening stuff. Got that? Then here’s a list he’s had written, and you’d better read it out to them—I can’t make head or tail of your beastly names—and they can answer present, and fall in against that wall.’

It was with a singular movement of incongruous feelings that I read the first name on the list. I had no wish to look again on my own handiwork; my flesh recoiled from the idea; and how could I be sure what reception he designed to give me? The cure was in my own hand; I could pass that first name over—the doctor would not know—and I might stay away. But to the subsequent great gladness of my heart, I did not dwell for an instant on the thought, walked over to the designated wall, faced about, read out the name ‘Champdivers,’ and answered myself with the word ‘Present.’

There were some half dozen on the list, all told; and as soon as we were mustered, the doctor led the way to the hospital, and we followed after, like a fatigue party, in single file. At the door he paused, told us ‘the fellow’ would see each of us alone, and, as soon as I had explained that, sent me by myself into the ward. It was a small room, whitewashed; a south window stood open on a vast depth of air and a spacious and distant prospect; and from deep below, in the Grassmarket the voices of

hawkers came up clear and far away. Hard by, on a little bed, lay Goguelat. The sunburn had not yet faded from his face, and the stamp of death was already there. There was something wild and unmannish in his smile, that took me by the throat; only death and love know or have ever seen it. And when he spoke, it seemed to shame his coarse talk.

He held out his arms as if to embrace me. I drew near with incredible shrinkings, and surrendered myself to his arms with overwhelming disgust. But he only drew my ear down to his lips.

‘Trust me,’ he whispered. ‘Je suis bon bougre, moi. I’ll take it to hell with me, and tell the devil.’

Why should I go on to reproduce his grossness and trivialities? All that he thought, at that hour, was even noble, though he could not clothe it otherwise than in the language of a brutal farce. Presently he bade me call the doctor; and when that officer had come in, raised a little up in his bed, pointed first to himself and then to me, who stood weeping by his side, and several times repeated the expression, ‘Frinds—frinds—dam frinds.’

To my great surprise, the doctor appeared very much affected. He nodded his little bob-wigged head at us, and said repeatedly, ‘All right, Johnny—me comprong.’

Then Goguelat shook hands with me, embraced me again, and I went out of

the room sobbing like an infant.

How often have I not seen it, that the most unpardonable fellows make the happiest exits! It is a fate we may well envy them. Goguelat was detested in life; in the last three days, by his admirable staunchness and consideration, he won every heart; and when word went about the prison the same evening that he was no more, the voice of conversation became hushed as in a house of mourning.

For myself I was like a man distracted; I cannot think what ailed me: when I awoke the following day, nothing remained of it; but that night I was filled with a gloomy fury of the nerves. I had killed him; he had done his utmost to protect me; I had seen him with that awful smile. And so illogical and useless is this sentiment of remorse, that I was ready, at a word or a look, to quarrel with somebody else. I presume the disposition of my mind was imprinted on my face; and when, a little after, I overtook, saluted and addressed the doctor, he looked on me with commiseration and surprise.

I had asked him if it was true.

'Yes,' he said, 'the fellow's gone.'

'Did he suffer much?' I asked.

'Devil a bit; passed away like a lamb,' said he. He looked on me a

little, and I saw his hand go to his fob. 'Here, take that! no sense in fretting,' he said, and, putting a silver two-penny-bit in my hand, he left me.

I should have had that twopenny framed to hang upon the wall, for it was the man's one act of charity in all my knowledge of him. Instead of that, I stood looking at it in my hand and laughed out bitterly, as I realised his mistake; then went to the ramparts, and flung it far into the air like blood money. The night was falling; through an embrasure and across the gardened valley I saw the lamplighters hastening along Princes Street with ladder and lamp, and looked on moodily. As I was so standing a hand was laid upon my shoulder, and I turned about. It was Major Chevenix, dressed for the evening, and his neckcloth really admirably folded. I never denied the man could dress.

'Ah!' said he, 'I thought it was you, Champdivers. So he's gone?'

I nodded.

'Come, come,' said he, 'you must cheer up. Of course it's very distressing, very painful and all that. But do you know, it ain't such a bad thing either for you or me? What with his death and your visit to him I am entirely reassured.'

So I was to owe my life to Goguelat at every point.

'I had rather not discuss it,' said I.

'Well,' said he, 'one word more, and I'll agree to bury the subject.

What did you fight about?'

'Oh, what do men ever fight about?' I cried.

'A lady?' said he.

I shrugged my shoulders.

'Deuce you did!' said he. 'I should scarce have thought it of him.'

And at this my ill-humour broke fairly out in words. 'He!' I cried. 'He never dared to address her—only to look at her and vomit his vile insults! She may have given him sixpence: if she did, it may take him to heaven yet!'

At this I became aware of his eyes set upon me with a considering look, and brought up sharply.

'Well, well,' said he. 'Good night to you, Champdivers. Come to me at breakfast-time to-morrow, and we'll talk of other subjects.'

I fully admit the man's conduct was not bad: in writing it down so long after the events I can even see that it was good.