

CHAPTER VII—SWANSTON COTTAGE

I had two views. The first was, naturally, to get clear of Edinburgh Castle and the town, to say nothing of my fellow-prisoners; the second to work to the southward so long as it was night, and be near Swanston Cottage by morning. What I should do there and then, I had no guess, and did not greatly care, being a devotee of a couple of divinities called Chance and Circumstance. Prepare, if possible; where it is impossible, work straight forward, and keep your eyes open and your tongue oiled. Wit and a good exterior—there is all life in a nutshell.

I had at first a rather chequered journey: got involved in gardens, butted into houses, and had even once the misfortune to awake a sleeping family, the father of which, as I suppose, menaced me from the window with a blunderbuss. Altogether, though I had been some time gone from my companions, I was still at no great distance, when a miserable accident put a period to the escape. Of a sudden the night was divided by a scream. This was followed by the sound of something falling, and that again by the report of a musket from the Castle battlements. It was strange to hear the alarm spread through the city. In the fortress drums were beat and a bell rung backward. On all hands the watchmen sprang their rattles. Even in that limbo or no-man's-land where I was wandering, lights were made in the houses; sashes were flung up; I could hear neighbouring families converse from window to window, and at length I was challenged myself.

'Wha's that?' cried a big voice.

I could see it proceeded from a big man in a big nightcap, leaning from a one-pair window; and as I was not yet abreast of his house, I judged it was more wise to answer. This was not the first time I had had to stake my fortunes on the goodness of my accent in a foreign tongue; and I have always found the moment inspiriting, as a gambler should. Pulling around me a sort of great-coat I had made of my blanket, to cover my sulphur-coloured livery,—'A friend!' said I.

'What like's all this collieshangie?' said he.

I had never heard of a collieshangie in my days, but with the racket all about us in the city, I could have no doubt as to the man's meaning.

'I do not know, sir, really,' said I; 'but I suppose some of the prisoners will have escaped.'

'Bedamned!' says he.

'Oh, sir, they will be soon taken,' I replied: 'it has been found in time. Good morning, sir!'

'Ye walk late, sir?' he added.

‘Oh, surely not,’ said I, with a laugh. ‘Earlyish, if you like!’ which brought me finally beyond him, highly pleased with my success.

I was now come forth on a good thoroughfare, which led (as well as I could judge) in my direction. It brought me almost immediately through a piece of street, whence I could hear close by the springing of a watchman’s rattle, and where I suppose a sixth part of the windows would be open, and the people, in all sorts of night gear, talking with a kind of tragic gusto from one to another. Here, again, I must run the gauntlet of a half-dozen questions, the rattle all the while sounding nearer; but as I was not walking inordinately quick, as I spoke like a gentleman, and the lamps were too dim to show my dress, I carried it off once more. One person, indeed, inquired where I was off to at that hour.

I replied vaguely and cheerfully, and as I escaped at one end of this dangerous pass I could see the watchman’s lantern entering by the other. I was now safe on a dark country highway, out of sight of lights and out of the fear of watchmen. And yet I had not gone above a hundred yards before a fellow made an ugly rush at me from the roadside. I avoided him with a leap, and stood on guard, cursing my empty hands, wondering whether I had to do with an officer or a mere footpad, and scarce knowing which to wish. My assailant stood a little; in the thick darkness I could see him bob and sidle as though he were feinting at me for an advantageous onfall. Then he spoke.

‘My goo’ frien’,’ says he, and at the first word I pricked my ears, ‘my

goo' frien', will you oblishe me with lil neshary infamation? Whish roa'
t' Cramond?'

I laughed out clear and loud, stepped up to the convivialist, took him by the shoulders and faced him about. 'My good friend,' said I, 'I believe I know what is best for you much better than yourself, and may God forgive you the fright you have given me! There, get you gone to Edinburgh!' And I gave a shove, which he obeyed with the passive agility of a ball, and disappeared incontinently in the darkness down the road by which I had myself come.

Once clear of this foolish fellow, I went on again up a gradual hill, descended on the other side through the houses of a country village, and came at last to the bottom of the main ascent leading to the Pentlands and my destination. I was some way up when the fog began to lighten; a little farther, and I stepped by degrees into a clear starry night, and saw in front of me, and quite distinct, the summits of the Pentlands, and behind, the valley of the Forth and the city of my late captivity buried under a lake of vapour. I had but one encounter—that of a farm-cart, which I heard, from a great way ahead of me, creaking nearer in the night, and which passed me about the point of dawn like a thing seen in a dream, with two silent figures in the inside nodding to the horse's steps. I presume they were asleep; by the shawl about her head and shoulders, one of them should be a woman. Soon, by concurrent steps, the day began to break and the fog to subside and roll away. The east grew luminous and was barred with chilly colours, and the Castle on its rock,

and the spires and chimneys of the upper town, took gradual shape, and arose, like islands, out of the receding cloud. All about me was still and sylvan; the road mounting and winding, with nowhere a sign of any passenger, the birds chirping, I suppose for warmth, the boughs of the trees knocking together, and the red leaves falling in the wind.

It was broad day, but still bitter cold and the sun not up, when I came in view of my destination. A single gable and chimney of the cottage peeped over the shoulder of the hill; not far off, and a trifle higher on the mountain, a tall old white-washed farmhouse stood among the trees, beside a falling brook; beyond were rough hills of pasture. I bethought me that shepherd folk were early risers, and if I were once seen skulking in that neighbourhood it might prove the ruin of my prospects; took advantage of a line of hedge, and worked myself up in its shadow till I was come under the garden wall of my friends' house. The cottage was a little quaint place of many rough-cast gables and grey roofs. It had something the air of a rambling infinitesimal cathedral, the body of it rising in the midst two storeys high, with a steep-pitched roof, and sending out upon all hands (as it were chapter-houses, chapels, and transepts) one-storeyed and dwarfish projections. To add to this appearance, it was grotesquely decorated with crockets and gargoyles, ravished from some medieval church. The place seemed hidden away, being not only concealed in the trees of the garden, but, on the side on which I approached it, buried as high as the eaves by the rising of the ground. About the walls of the garden there went a line of well-grown elms and beeches, the first entirely bare, the last still pretty well covered with

red leaves, and the centre was occupied with a thicket of laurel and holly, in which I could see arches cut and paths winding.

I was now within hail of my friends, and not much the better. The house appeared asleep; yet if I attempted to wake any one, I had no guarantee it might not prove either the aunt with the gold eyeglasses (whom I could only remember with trembling), or some ass of a servant-maid who should burst out screaming at sight of me. Higher up I could hear and see a shepherd shouting to his dogs and striding on the rough sides of the mountain, and it was clear I must get to cover without loss of time. No doubt the holly thickets would have proved a very suitable retreat, but there was mounted on the wall a sort of signboard not uncommon in the country of Great Britain, and very damping to the adventurous: SPRING GUNS AND MAN-TRAPS was the legend that it bore. I have learned since that these advertisements, three times out of four, were in the nature of Quaker guns on a disarmed battery, but I had not learned it then, and even so, the odds would not have been good enough. For a choice, I would a hundred times sooner be returned to Edinburgh Castle and my corner in the bastion, than to leave my foot in a steel trap or have to digest the contents of an automatic blunderbuss. There was but one chance left—that Ronald or Flora might be the first to come abroad; and in order to profit by this chance if it occurred, I got me on the cope of the wall in a place where it was screened by the thick branches of a beech, and sat there waiting.

As the day wore on, the sun came very pleasantly out. I had been awake

all night, I had undergone the most violent agitations of mind and body, and it is not so much to be wondered at, as it was exceedingly unwise and foolhardy, that I should have dropped into a doze. From this I awakened to the characteristic sound of digging, looked down, and saw immediately below me the back view of a gardener in a stable waistcoat. Now he would appear steadily immersed in his business; anon, to my more immediate terror, he would straighten his back, stretch his arms, gaze about the otherwise deserted garden, and relish a deep pinch of snuff. It was my first thought to drop from the wall upon the other side. A glance sufficed to show me that even the way by which I had come was now cut off, and the field behind me already occupied by a couple of shepherds' assistants and a score or two of sheep. I have named the talismans on which I habitually depend, but here was a conjuncture in which both were wholly useless. The copestone of a wall arrayed with broken bottles is no favourable rostrum; and I might be as eloquent as Pitt, and as fascinating as Richelieu, and neither the gardener nor the shepherd lads would care a halfpenny. In short, there was no escape possible from my absurd position: there I must continue to sit until one or other of my neighbours should raise his eyes and give the signal for my capture.

The part of the wall on which (for my sins) I was posted could be scarce less than twelve feet high on the inside; the leaves of the beech which made a fashion of sheltering me were already partly fallen; and I was thus not only perilously exposed myself, but enabled to command some part of the garden walks and (under an evergreen arch) the front lawn and windows of the cottage. For long nothing stirred except my friend with

the spade; then I heard the opening of a sash; and presently after saw Miss Flora appear in a morning wrapper and come strolling hitherward between the borders, pausing and visiting her flowers—herself as fair. There was a friend; here, immediately beneath me, an unknown quantity—the gardener: how to communicate with the one and not attract the notice of the other? To make a noise was out of the question; I dared scarce to breathe. I held myself ready to make a gesture as soon as she should look, and she looked in every possible direction but the one. She was interested in the vilest tuft of chickweed, she gazed at the summit of the mountain, she came even immediately below me and conversed on the most fastidious topics with the gardener; but to the top of that wall she would not dedicate a glance! At last she began to retrace her steps in the direction of the cottage; whereupon, becoming quite desperate, I broke off a piece of plaster, took a happy aim, and hit her with it in the nape of the neck. She clapped her hand to the place, turned about, looked on all sides for an explanation, and spying me (as indeed I was parting the branches to make it the more easy), half uttered and half swallowed down again a cry of surprise.

The infernal gardener was erect upon the instant. ‘What’s your wull, miss?’ said he.

Her readiness amazed me. She had already turned and was gazing in the opposite direction. ‘There’s a child among the artichokes,’ she said.

‘The Plagues of Egyp’! I’ll see to them!’ cried the gardener

truculently, and with a hurried waddle disappeared among the evergreens.

That moment she turned, she came running towards me, her arms stretched out, her face incarnadined for the one moment with heavenly blushes, the next pale as death. 'Monsieur de. Saint-Yves!' she said.

'My dear young lady,' I said, 'this is the damnedest liberty—I know it! But what else was I to do?'

'You have escaped?' said she.

'If you call this escape,' I replied.

'But you cannot possibly stop there!' she cried.

'I know it,' said I. 'And where am I to go?'

She struck her hands together. 'I have it!' she exclaimed. 'Come down by the beech trunk—you must leave no footprint in the border—quickly, before Robie can get back! I am the hen-wife here: I keep the key; you must go into the hen-house—for the moment.'

I was by her side at once. Both cast a hasty glance at the blank windows of the cottage and so much as was visible of the garden alleys; it seemed there was none to observe us. She caught me by the sleeve and ran. It was no time for compliments; hurry breathed upon our necks; and I ran

along with her to the next corner of the garden, where a wired court and a board hovel standing in a grove of trees advertised my place of refuge. She thrust me in without a word; the bulk of the fowls were at the same time emitted; and I found myself the next moment locked in alone with half a dozen sitting hens. In the twilight of the place all fixed their eyes on me severely, and seemed to upbraid me with some crying impropriety. Doubtless the hen has always a puritanic appearance, although (in its own behaviour) I could never observe it to be more particular than its neighbours. But conceive a British hen!