CHAPTER VIII—THE HEN-HOUSE

I was half an hour at least in the society of these distressing bipeds, and alone with my own reflections and necessities. I was in great pain of my flayed hands, and had nothing to treat them with; I was hungry and thirsty, and had nothing to eat or to drink; I was thoroughly tired, and there was no place for me to sit. To be sure there was the floor, but nothing could be imagined less inviting.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, my good-humour was restored. The key rattled in the lock, and Master Ronald entered, closed the door behind him, and leaned his back to it.

'I say, you know!' he said, and shook a sullen young head.

'I know it's a liberty,' said I.

'It's infernally awkward: my position is infernally embarrassing,' said he.

'Well,' said I, 'and what do you think of mine?'

This seemed to pose him entirely, and he remained gazing upon me with a convincing air of youth and innocence. I could have laughed, but I was not so inhumane.

'I am in your hands,' said I, with a little gesture. 'You must do with me what you think right.'

'Ah, yes!' he cried: 'if I knew!'

'You see,' said I, 'it would be different if you had received your commission. Properly speaking, you are not yet a combatant; I have ceased to be one; and I think it arguable that we are just in the position of one ordinary gentleman to another, where friendship usually comes before the law. Observe, I only say arguable. For God's sake, don't think I wish to dictate an opinion. These are the sort of nasty little businesses, inseparable from war, which every gentleman must decide for himself. If I were in your place—'

'Ay, what would you do, then?' says he.

'Upon my word, I do not know,' said I. 'Hesitate, as you are doing, I believe.'

'I will tell you,' he said. 'I have a kinsman, and it is what he would think, that I am thinking. It is General Graham of Lynedoch—Sir Thomas Graham. I scarcely know him, but I believe I admire him more than I do God.'

'I admire him a good deal myself,' said I, 'and have good reason to. I

have fought with him, been beaten, and run away. Veni, victus sum, evasi.'

'What!' he cried. 'You were at Barossa?'

'There and back, which many could not say,' said I. 'It was a pretty affair and a hot one, and the Spaniards behaved abominably, as they usually did in a pitched field; the Marshal Duke of Belluno made a fool of himself, and not for the first time; and your friend Sir Thomas had the best of it, so far as there was any best. He is a brave and ready officer.'

'Now, then, you will understand!' said the boy. 'I wish to please Sir Thomas: what would he do?'

'Well, I can tell you a story,' said I, 'a true one too, and about this very combat of Chiclana, or Barossa as you call it. I was in the Eighth of the Line; we lost the eagle of the First Battalion, more betoken, but it cost you dear. Well, we had repulsed more charges than I care to count, when your 87th Regiment came on at a foot's pace, very slow but very steady; in front of them a mounted officer, his hat in his hand, white-haired, and talking very quietly to the battalions. Our Major, Vigo-Roussillon, set spurs to his horse and galloped out to sabre him, but seeing him an old man, very handsome, and as composed as if he were in a coffee-house, lost heart and galloped back again. Only, you see, they had been very close together for the moment, and looked each other

in the eyes. Soon after the Major was wounded, taken prisoner, and carried into Cadiz. One fine day they announced to him the visit of the General, Sir Thomas Graham. "Well, sir," said the General, taking him by the hand, "I think we were face to face upon the field." It was the white-haired officer!'

'Ah!' cried the boy,—his eyes were burning.

'Well, and here is the point,' I continued. 'Sir Thomas fed the Major from his own table from that day, and served him with six covers.'

'Yes, it is a beautiful—a beautiful story,' said Ronald. 'And yet somehow it is not the same—is it?'

'I admit it freely,' said I.

The boy stood awhile brooding. 'Well, I take my risk of it,' he cried. 'I believe it's treason to my sovereign—I believe there is an infamous punishment for such a crime—and yet I'm hanged if I can give you up.'

I was as much moved as he. 'I could almost beg you to do otherwise,' I said. 'I was a brute to come to you, a brute and a coward. You are a noble enemy; you will make a noble soldier.' And with rather a happy idea of a compliment for this warlike youth, I stood up straight and gave him the salute.

He was for a moment confused; his face flushed. 'Well, well, I must be getting you something to eat, but it will not be for six,' he added, with a smile: 'only what we can get smuggled out. There is my aunt in the road, you see,' and he locked me in again with the indignant hens.

I always smile when I recall that young fellow; and yet, if the reader were to smile also, I should feel ashamed. If my son shall be only like him when he comes to that age, it will be a brave day for me and not a bad one for his country.

At the same time I cannot pretend that I was sorry when his sister succeeded in his place. She brought me a few crusts of bread and a jug of milk, which she had handsomely laced with whisky after the Scottish manner.

'I am so sorry,' she said: 'I dared not bring on anything more. We are so small a family, and my aunt keeps such an eye upon the servants. I have put some whisky in the milk—it is more wholesome so—and with eggs you will be able to make something of a meal. How many eggs will you be wanting to that milk? for I must be taking the others to my aunt—that is my excuse for being here. I should think three or four. Do you know how to beat them? or shall I do it?'

Willing to detain her a while longer in the hen-house, I displayed my bleeding palms; at which she cried aloud.

‘My dear Miss Flora, you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs,’ said I; ‘and it is no bagatelle to escape from Edinburgh Castle. One of us, I think, was even killed.’

‘And you are as white as a rag, too,’ she exclaimed, ‘and can hardly stand! Here is my shawl, sit down upon it here in the corner, and I will beat your eggs. See, I have brought a fork too; I should have been a good person to take care of Jacobites or Covenanters in old days! You shall have more to eat this evening; Ronald is to bring it you from town. We have money enough, although no food that we can call our own. Ah, if Ronald and I kept house, you should not be lying in this shed! He admires you so much.’

‘My dear friend,’ said I, ‘for God’s sake do not embarrass me with more alms. I loved to receive them from that hand, so long as they were needed; but they are so no more, and whatever else I may lack—and I lack everything—it is not money.’ I pulled out my sheaf of notes and detached the top one: it was written for ten pounds, and signed by that very famous individual, Abraham Newlands. ‘Oblige me, as you would like me to oblige your brother if the parts were reversed, and take this note for the expenses. I shall need not only food, but clothes.’

‘Lay it on the ground,’ said she. ‘I must not stop my beating.’

‘You are not offended?’ I exclaimed.

She answered me by a look that was a reward in itself, and seemed to imply the most heavenly offers for the future. There was in it a shadow of reproach, and such warmth of communicative cordiality as left me speechless. I watched her instead till her hens' milk was ready.

'Now,' said she, 'taste that.'

I did so, and swore it was nectar. She collected her eggs and crouched in front of me to watch me eat. There was about this tall young lady at the moment an air of motherliness delicious to behold. I am like the English general, and to this day I still wonder at my moderation.

'What sort of clothes will you be wanting?' said she.

'The clothes of a gentleman,' said I. 'Right or wrong, I think it is the part I am best qualified to play. Mr. St. Ives (for that's to be my name upon the journey) I conceive as rather a theatrical figure, and his make-up should be to match.'

'And yet there is a difficulty,' said she. 'If you got coarse clothes the fit would hardly matter. But the clothes of a fine gentleman—O, it is absolutely necessary that these should fit! And above all, with your'—she paused a moment—'to our ideas somewhat noticeable manners.'

'Alas for my poor manners!' said I. 'But my dear friend Flora, these little noticeabilities are just what mankind has to suffer under.

Yourself, you see, you're very noticeable even when you come in a crowd to visit poor prisoners in the Castle.'

I was afraid I should frighten my good angel visitant away, and without the smallest breath of pause went on to add a few directions as to stuffs and colours.

She opened big eyes upon me. 'O, Mr. St. Ives!' she cried—'if that is to be your name—I do not say they would not be becoming; but for a journey, do you think they would be wise? I am afraid'—she gave a pretty break of laughter—'I am afraid they would be daft-like!'

'Well, and am I not daft?' I asked her.

'I do begin to think you are,' said she.

'There it is, then!' said I. 'I have been long enough a figure of fun. Can you not feel with me that perhaps the bitterest thing in this captivity has been the clothes? Make me a captive—bind me with chains if you like—but let me be still myself. You do not know what it is to be a walking travesty—among foes,' I added bitterly.

'O, but you are too unjust!' she cried. 'You speak as though any one ever dreamed of laughing at you. But no one did. We were all pained to the heart. Even my aunt—though sometimes I do think she was not quite in good taste—you should have seen her and heard her at home! She took so

much interest. Every patch in your clothes made us sorry; it should have been a sister's work.'

'That is what I never had—a sister,' said I. 'But since you say that I did not make you laugh—'

'O, Mr. St. Ives! never!' she exclaimed. 'Not for one moment. It was all too sad. To see a gentleman—'

'In the clothes of a harlequin, and begging?' I suggested.

'To see a gentleman in distress, and nobly supporting it,' she said.

'And do you not understand, my fair foe,' said I, 'that even if all were as you say—even if you had thought my travesty were becoming—I should be only the more anxious, for my sake, for my country's sake, and for the sake of your kindness, that you should see him whom you have helped as God meant him to be seen? that you should have something to remember him by at least more characteristic than a misfitting sulphur-yellow suit, and half a week's beard?'

'You think a great deal too much of clothes,' she said. 'I am not that kind of girl.'

'And I am afraid I am that kind of man,' said I. 'But do not think of me

too harshly for that. I talked just now of something to remember by. I have many of them myself, of these beautiful reminders, of these keepsakes, that I cannot be parted from until I lose memory and life. Many of them are great things, many of them are high virtues—charity, mercy, faith. But some of them are trivial enough. Miss Flora, do you remember the day that I first saw you, the day of the strong east wind? Miss Flora, shall I tell you what you wore?'

We had both risen to our feet, and she had her hand already on the door to go. Perhaps this attitude emboldened me to profit by the last seconds of our interview; and it certainly rendered her escape the more easy.

'O, you are too romantic!' she said, laughing; and with that my sun was blown out, my enchantress had fled away, and I was again left alone in the twilight with the lady hens.