

## CHAPTER IX—THREE IS COMPANY, AND FOUR NONE

The rest of the day I slept in the corner of the hen-house upon Flora's shawl. Nor did I awake until a light shone suddenly in my eyes, and starting up with a gasp (for, indeed, at the moment I dreamed I was still swinging from the Castle battlements) I found Ronald bending over me with a lantern. It appeared it was past midnight, that I had slept about sixteen hours, and that Flora had returned her poultry to the shed and I had heard her not. I could not but wonder if she had stooped to look at me as I slept. The puritan hens now slept irremediably; and being cheered with the promise of supper I wished them an ironical good-night, and was lighted across the garden and noiselessly admitted to a bedroom on the ground floor of the cottage. There I found soap, water, razors—offered me diffidently by my beardless host—and an outfit of new clothes. To be shaved again without depending on the barber of the gaol was a source of a delicious, if a childish joy. My hair was sadly too long, but I was none so unwise as to make an attempt on it myself. And, indeed, I thought it did not wholly misbecome me as it was, being by nature curly. The clothes were about as good as I expected. The waistcoat was of toilenet, a pretty piece, the trousers of fine kerseymere, and the coat sat extraordinarily well. Altogether, when I beheld this changeling in the glass, I kissed my hand to him.

'My dear fellow,' said I, 'have you no scent?'

‘Good God, no!’ cried Ronald. ‘What do you want with scent?’

‘Capital thing on a campaign,’ said I. ‘But I can do without.’

I was now led, with the same precautions against noise, into the little bow-windowed dining-room of the cottage. The shutters were up, the lamp guiltily turned low; the beautiful Flora greeted me in a whisper; and when I was set down to table, the pair proceeded to help me with precautions that might have seemed excessive in the Ear of Dionysius.

‘She sleeps up there,’ observed the boy, pointing to the ceiling; and the knowledge that I was so imminently near to the resting-place of that gold eyeglass touched even myself with some uneasiness.

Our excellent youth had imported from the city a meat pie, and I was glad to find it flanked with a decanter of really admirable wine of Oporto.

While I ate, Ronald entertained me with the news of the city, which had naturally rung all day with our escape: troops and mounted messengers had followed each other forth at all hours and in all directions; but according to the last intelligence no recapture had been made. Opinion in town was very favourable to us: our courage was applauded, and many professed regret that our ultimate chance of escape should be so small.

The man who had fallen was one Sombref, a peasant; he was one who slept in a different part of the Castle; and I was thus assured that the whole of my former companions had attained their liberty, and Shed A was untenanted.

From this we wandered insensibly into other topics. It is impossible to exaggerate the pleasure I took to be thus sitting at the same table with Flora, in the clothes of a gentleman, at liberty and in the full possession of my spirits and resources; of all of which I had need, because it was necessary that I should support at the same time two opposite characters, and at once play the cavalier and lively soldier for the eyes of Ronald, and to the ears of Flora maintain the same profound and sentimental note that I had already sounded. Certainly there are days when all goes well with a man; when his wit, his digestion, his mistress are in a conspiracy to spoil him, and even the weather smiles upon his wishes. I will only say of myself upon that evening that I surpassed my expectations, and was privileged to delight my hosts. Little by little they forgot their terrors and I my caution; until at last we were brought back to earth by a catastrophe that might very easily have been foreseen, but was not the less astonishing to us when it occurred.

I had filled all the glasses. 'I have a toast to propose,' I whispered, 'or rather three, but all so inextricably interwoven that they will not bear dividing. I wish first to drink to the health of a brave and therefore a generous enemy. He found me disarmed, a fugitive and helpless. Like the lion, he disdained so poor a triumph; and when he might have vindicated an easy valour, he preferred to make a friend. I wish that we should next drink to a fairer and a more tender foe. She found me in prison; she cheered me with a priceless sympathy; what she

has done since, I know she has done in mercy, and I only pray—I dare scarce hope—her mercy may prove to have been merciful. And I wish to conjoin with these, for the first, and perhaps the last time, the health—and I fear I may already say the memory—of one who has fought, not always without success, against the soldiers of your nation; but who came here, vanquished already, only to be vanquished again by the loyal hand of the one, by the unforgettable eyes of the other.’

It is to be feared I may have lent at times a certain resonancy to my voice; it is to be feared that Ronald, who was none the better for his own hospitality, may have set down his glass with something of a clang. Whatever may have been the cause, at least, I had scarce finished my compliment before we were aware of a thump upon the ceiling overhead. It was to be thought some very solid body had descended to the floor from the level (possibly) of a bed. I have never seen consternation painted in more lively colours than on the faces of my hosts. It was proposed to smuggle me forth into the garden, or to conceal my form under a horsehair sofa which stood against the wall. For the first expedient, as was now plain by the approaching footsteps, there was no longer time; from the second I recoiled with indignation.

‘My dear creatures,’ said I, ‘let us die, but do not let us be ridiculous.’

The words were still upon my lips when the door opened and my friend of

the gold eyeglass appeared, a memorable figure, on the threshold. In one hand she bore a bedroom candlestick; in the other, with the steadiness of a dragoon, a horse-pistol. She was wound about in shawls which did not wholly conceal the candid fabric of her nightdress, and surmounted by a nightcap of portentous architecture. Thus accoutred, she made her entrance; laid down the candle and pistol, as no longer called for; looked about the room with a silence more eloquent than oaths; and then, in a thrilling voice—‘To whom have I the pleasure?’ she said, addressing me with a ghost of a bow.

‘Madam, I am charmed, I am sure,’ said I. ‘The story is a little long; and our meeting, however welcome, was for the moment entirely unexpected by myself. I am sure—’ but here I found I was quite sure of nothing, and tried again. ‘I have the honour,’ I began, and found I had the honour to be only exceedingly confused. With that, I threw myself outright upon her mercy. ‘Madam, I must be more frank with you,’ I resumed. ‘You have already proved your charity and compassion for the French prisoners, I am one of these; and if my appearance be not too much changed, you may even yet recognise in me that Oddity who had the good fortune more than once to make you smile.’

Still gazing upon me through her glass, she uttered an uncompromising grunt; and then, turning to her niece—‘Flora,’ said she, ‘how comes he here?’

The culprits poured out for a while an antiphony of explanations, which

died out at last in a miserable silence.

‘I think at least you might have told your aunt,’ she snorted.

‘Madam,’ I interposed, ‘they were about to do so. It is my fault if it be not done already. But I made it my prayer that your slumbers might be respected, and this necessary formula of my presentation should be delayed until to-morrow in the morning.’

The old lady regarded me with undissembled incredulity, to which I was able to find no better repartee than a profound and I trust graceful reverence.

‘French prisoners are very well in their place,’ she said, ‘but I cannot see that their place is in my private dining-room.’

‘Madam,’ said I, ‘I hope it may be said without offence, but (except the Castle of Edinburgh) I cannot think upon the spot from which I would so readily be absent.’

At this, to my relief, I thought I could perceive a vestige of a smile to steal upon that iron countenance and to be bitten immediately in.

‘And if it is a fair question, what do they call ye?’ she asked.

‘At your service, the Vicomte Anne de St.-Yves,’ said I.

‘Moshia the Viscount,’ said she, ‘I am afraid you do us plain people a great deal too much honour.’

‘My dear lady,’ said I, ‘let us be serious for a moment. What was I to do? Where was I to go? And how can you be angry with these benevolent children who took pity on one so unfortunate as myself? Your humble servant is no such terrific adventurer that you should come out against him with horse-pistol and’—smiling—‘bedroom candlesticks. It is but a young gentleman in extreme distress, hunted upon every side, and asking no more than to escape from his pursuers. I know your character, I read it in your face’—the heart trembled in my body as I said these daring words. ‘There are unhappy English prisoners in France at this day, perhaps at this hour. Perhaps at this hour they kneel as I do; they take the hand of her who might conceal and assist them; they press it to their lips as I do—’

‘Here, here!’ cried the old lady, breaking from my solicitations.

‘Behave yourself before folk! Saw ever anyone the match of that? And on earth, my dears, what are we to do with him?’

‘Pack him off, my dear lady,’ said I: ‘pack off the impudent fellow double-quick! And if it may be, and if your good heart allows it, help him a little on the way he has to go.’

‘What’s this pie?’ she cried stridently. ‘Where is this pie from,

Flora?’

No answer was vouchsafed by my unfortunate and (I may say) extinct accomplices.

‘Is that my port?’ she pursued. ‘Hough! Will somebody give me a glass of my port wine?’

I made haste to serve her.

She looked at me over the rim with an extraordinary expression. ‘I hope ye liked it?’ said she.

‘It is even a magnificent wine,’ said I.

‘Aweel, it was my father laid it down,’ said she. ‘There were few knew more about port wine than my father, God rest him!’ She settled herself in a chair with an alarming air of resolution. ‘And so there is some particular direction that you wish to go in?’ said she.

‘O,’ said I, following her example, ‘I am by no means such a vagrant as you suppose. I have good friends, if I could get to them, for which all I want is to be once clear of Scotland; and I have money for the road.’ And I produced my bundle.

‘English bank-notes?’ she said. ‘That’s not very handy for Scotland.



It's been some fool of an Englishman that's given you these, I'm thinking. How much is it?'

'I declare to heaven I never thought to count!' I exclaimed. 'But that is soon remedied.'

And I counted out ten notes of ten pound each, all in the name of Abraham Newlands, and five bills of country bankers for as many guineas.

'One hundred and twenty six pound five,' cried the old lady. 'And you carry such a sum about you, and have not so much as counted it! If you are not a thief, you must allow you are very thief-like.'

'And yet, madam, the money is legitimately mine,' said I.

She took one of the bills and held it up. 'Is there any probability, now, that this could be traced?' she asked.

'None, I should suppose; and if it were, it would be no matter,' said I.

'With your usual penetration, you guessed right. An Englishman brought it me. It reached me, through the hands of his English solicitor, from my great-uncle, the Comte de Kéroual de Saint-Yves, I believe the richest émigré in London.'

'I can do no more than take your word for it,' said she.

‘And I trust, madam, not less,’ said I.

‘Well,’ said she, ‘at this rate the matter may be feasible. I will cash one of these five-guinea bills, less the exchange, and give you silver and Scots notes to bear you as far as the border. Beyond that, Masha the Viscount, you will have to depend upon yourself.’

I could not but express a civil hesitation as to whether the amount would suffice, in my case, for so long a journey.

‘Ay,’ said she, ‘but you havenae heard me out. For if you are not too fine a gentleman to travel with a pair of drovers, I believe I have found the very thing, and the Lord forgive me for a treasonable old wife! There are a couple stopping up by with the shepherd-man at the farm; to-morrow they will take the road for England, probably by skriegh of day—and in my opinion you had best be travelling with the stots,’ said she.

‘For Heaven’s sake do not suppose me to be so effeminate a character!’ I cried. ‘An old soldier of Napoleon is certainly beyond suspicion. But, dear lady, to what end? and how is the society of these excellent gentlemen supposed to help me?’

‘My dear sir,’ said she, ‘you do not at all understand your own predicament, and must just leave your matters in the hands of those who do. I dare say you have never even heard tell of the drove-roads or the

drovers; and I am certainly not going to sit up all night to explain it to you. Suffice it, that it is me who is arranging this affair—the more shame to me!—and that is the way ye have to go. Ronald,’ she continued, ‘away up-by to the shepherds; rowst them out of their beds, and make it perfectly distinct that Sim is not to leave till he has seen me.’

Ronald was nothing loath to escape from his aunt’s neighbourhood, and left the room and the cottage with a silent expedition that was more like flight than mere obedience. Meanwhile the old lady turned to her niece.

‘And I would like to know what we are to do with him the night!’ she cried.

‘Ronald and I meant to put him in the hen-house,’ said the encrimsoned Flora.

‘And I can tell you he is to go to no such a place,’ replied the aunt.

‘Hen-house, indeed! If a guest he is to be, he shall sleep in no mortal hen-house. Your room is the most fit, I think, if he will consent to occupy it on so great a suddenty. And as for you, Flora, you shall sleep with me.’

I could not help admiring the prudence and tact of this old dowager, and of course it was not for me to make objections. Ere I well knew how, I was alone with a flat candlestick, which is not the most sympathetic of companions, and stood studying the snuff in a frame of mind between

triumph and chagrin. All had gone well with my flight: the masterful lady who had arrogated to herself the arrangement of the details gave me every confidence; and I saw myself already arriving at my uncle's door. But, alas! it was another story with my love affair. I had seen and spoken with her alone; I had ventured boldly; I had been not ill received; I had seen her change colour, had enjoyed the undissembled kindness of her eyes; and now, in a moment, down comes upon the scene that apocalyptic figure with the nightcap and the horse-pistol, and with the very wind of her coming behold me separated from my love! Gratitude and admiration contended in my breast with the extreme of natural rancour. My appearance in her house at past midnight had an air (I could not disguise it from myself) that was insolent and underhand, and could not but minister to the worst suspicions. And the old lady had taken it well. Her generosity was no more to be called in question than her courage, and I was afraid that her intelligence would be found to match. Certainly, Miss Flora had to support some shrewd looks, and certainly she had been troubled. I could see but the one way before me: to profit by an excellent bed, to try to sleep soon, to be stirring early, and to hope for some renewed occasion in the morning. To have said so much and yet to say no more, to go out into the world upon so half-hearted a parting, was more than I could accept.

It is my belief that the benevolent fiend sat up all night to baulk me. She was at my bedside with a candle long ere day, roused me, laid out for me a damnable misfit of clothes, and bade me pack my own (which were wholly unsuited to the journey) in a bundle. Sore grudging, I arrayed

myself in a suit of some country fabric, as delicate as sackcloth and about as becoming as a shroud; and, on coming forth, found the dragon had prepared for me a hearty breakfast. She took the head of the table, poured out the tea, and entertained me as I ate with a great deal of good sense and a conspicuous lack of charm. How often did I not regret the change!—how often compare her, and condemn her in the comparison, with her charming niece! But if my entertainer was not beautiful, she had certainly been busy in my interest. Already she was in communication with my destined fellow-travellers; and the device on which she had struck appeared entirely suitable. I was a young Englishman who had outrun the constable; warrants were out against me in Scotland, and it had become needful I should pass the border without loss of time, and privately.

‘I have given a very good account of you,’ said she, ‘which I hope you may justify. I told them there was nothing against you beyond the fact that you were put to the haw (if that is the right word) for debt.’

‘I pray God you have the expression incorrectly, ma’am,’ said I. ‘I do not give myself out for a person easily alarmed; but you must admit there is something barbarous and mediaeval in the sound well qualified to startle a poor foreigner.’

‘It is the name of a process in Scots Law, and need alarm no honest man,’ said she. ‘But you are a very idle-minded young gentleman; you must still have your joke, I see: I only hope you will have no cause to regret

it.'

'I pray you not to suppose, because I speak lightly, that I do not feel deeply,' said I. 'Your kindness has quite conquered me; I lay myself at your disposition, I beg you to believe, with real tenderness; I pray you to consider me from henceforth as the most devoted of your friends.'

'Well, well,' she said, 'here comes your devoted friend the drover. I'm thinking he will be eager for the road; and I will not be easy myself till I see you well off the premises, and the dishes washed, before my servant-woman wakes. Praise God, we have gotten one that is a treasure at the sleeping!'

The morning was already beginning to be blue in the trees of the garden, and to put to shame the candle by which I had breakfasted. The lady rose from table, and I had no choice but to follow her example. All the time I was beating my brains for any means by which I should be able to get a word apart with Flora, or find the time to write her a billet. The windows had been open while I breakfasted, I suppose to ventilate the room from any traces of my passage there; and, Master Ronald appearing on the front lawn, my ogre leaned forth to address him.

'Ronald,' she said, 'wasn't that Sim that went by the wall?'

I snatched my advantage. Right at her back there was pen, ink, and paper laid out. I wrote: 'I love you'; and before I had time to write more, or

so much as to blot what I had written, I was again under the guns of the gold eyeglasses.

'It's time,' she began; and then, as she observed my occupation, 'Umph!' she broke off. 'Ye have something to write?' she demanded.

'Some notes, madam,' said I, bowing with alacrity.

'Notes,' she said; 'or a note?'

'There is doubtless some finesse of the English language that I do not comprehend,' said I.

'I'll contrive, however, to make my meaning very plain to ye, Moshale Viscount,' she continued. 'I suppose you desire to be considered a gentleman?'

'Can you doubt it, madam?' said I.

'I doubt very much, at least, whether you go to the right way about it,' she said. 'You have come here to me, I cannot very well say how; I think you will admit you owe me some thanks, if it was only for the breakfast I made ye. But what are you to me? A waif young man, not so far to seek for looks and manners, with some English notes in your pocket and a price upon your head. I am a lady; I have been your hostess, with however little will; and I desire that this random acquaintance of yours with my

family will cease and determine.’

I believe I must have coloured. ‘Madam,’ said I, ‘the notes are of no importance; and your least pleasure ought certainly to be my law. You have felt, and you have been pleased to express, a doubt of me. I tear them up.’ Which you may be sure I did thoroughly.

‘There’s a good lad!’ said the dragon, and immediately led the way to the front lawn.

The brother and sister were both waiting us here, and, as well as I could make out in the imperfect light, bore every appearance of having passed through a rather cruel experience. Ronald seemed ashamed to so much as catch my eye in the presence of his aunt, and was the picture of embarrassment. As for Flora, she had scarce the time to cast me one look before the dragon took her by the arm, and began to march across the garden in the extreme first glimmer of the dawn without exchanging speech. Ronald and I followed in equal silence.

There was a door in that same high wall on the top of which I had sat perched no longer gone than yesterday morning. This the old lady set open with a key; and on the other side we were aware of a rough-looking, thick-set man, leaning with his arms (through which was passed a formidable staff) on a dry-stone dyke. Him the old lady immediately addressed.



‘Sim,’ said she, ‘this is the young gentleman.’

Sim replied with an inarticulate grumble of sound, and a movement of one arm and his head, which did duty for a salutation.

‘Now, Mr. St. Ives,’ said the old lady, ‘it’s high time for you to be taking the road. But first of all let me give the change of your five-guinea bill. Here are four pounds of it in British Linen notes, and the balance in small silver, less sixpence. Some charge a shilling, I believe, but I have given you the benefit of the doubt. See and guide it with all the sense that you possess.’

‘And here, Mr. St. Ives,’ said Flora, speaking for the first time, ‘is a plaid which you will find quite necessary on so rough a journey. I hope you will take it from the hands of a Scotch friend,’ she added, and her voice trembled.

‘Genuine holly: I cut it myself,’ said Ronald, and gave me as good a cudgel as a man could wish for in a row.

The formality of these gifts, and the waiting figure of the driver, told me loudly that I must be gone. I dropped on one knee and bade farewell to the aunt, kissing her hand. I did the like—but with how different a passion!—to her niece; as for the boy, I took him to my arms and embraced him with a cordiality that seemed to strike him speechless. ‘Farewell!’ and ‘Farewell!’ I said. ‘I shall never forget my friends. Keep me

sometimes in memory. Farewell!' With that I turned my back and began to walk away; and had scarce done so, when I heard the door in the high wall close behind me. Of course this was the aunt's doing; and of course, if I know anything of human character, she would not let me go without some tart expressions. I declare, even if I had heard them, I should not have minded in the least, for I was quite persuaded that, whatever admirers I might be leaving behind me in Swanston Cottage, the aunt was not the least sincere.