

CHAPTER XVII—THE DESPATCH-BOX

The doctor had scarce finished his meal before he hastened with an apology to attend upon his patient; and almost immediately after I was myself summoned and ushered up the great staircase and along interminable corridors to the bedside of my great-uncle the Count. You are to think that up to the present moment I had not set eyes on this formidable personage, only on the evidences of his wealth and kindness. You are to think besides that I had heard him miscalled and abused from my earliest childhood up. The first of the émigrés could never expect a good word in the society in which my father moved. Even yet the reports I received were of a doubtful nature; even Romaine had drawn of him no very amiable portrait; and as I was ushered into the room, it was a critical eye that I cast on my great-uncle. He lay propped on pillows in a little cot no greater than a camp-bed, not visibly breathing. He was about eighty years of age, and looked it; not that his face was much lined, but all the blood and colour seemed to have faded from his body, and even his eyes, which last he kept usually closed as though the light distressed him. There was an unspeakable degree of slyness in his expression, which kept me ill at ease; he seemed to lie there with his arms folded, like a spider waiting for prey. His speech was very deliberate and courteous, but scarce louder than a sigh.

‘I bid you welcome, Monsieur le Vicomte Anne,’ said he, looking at me

hard with his pale eyes, but not moving on his pillows. 'I have sent for you, and I thank you for the obliging expedition you have shown. It is my misfortune that I cannot rise to receive you. I trust you have been reasonably well entertained?'

'Monsieur mon oncle,' I said, bowing very low, 'I am come at the summons of the head of my family.'

'It is well,' he said. 'Be seated. I should be glad to hear some news—if that can be called news that is already twenty years old—of how I have the pleasure to see you here.'

By the coldness of his address, not more than by the nature of the times that he bade me recall, I was plunged in melancholy. I felt myself surrounded as with deserts of friendlessness, and the delight of my welcome was turned to ashes in my mouth.

'That is soon told, monseigneur,' said I. 'I understand that I need tell you nothing of the end of my unhappy parents? It is only the story of the lost dog.'

'You are right. I am sufficiently informed of that deplorable affair; it is painful to me. My nephew, your father, was a man who would not be advised,' said he. 'Tell me, if you please, simply of yourself.'

'I am afraid I must run the risk of harrowing your sensibility in the

beginning,' said I, with a bitter smile, 'because my story begins at the foot of the guillotine. When the list came out that night, and her name was there, I was already old enough, not in years but in sad experience, to understand the extent of my misfortune. She—' I paused. 'Enough that she arranged with a friend, Madame de Chasserades, that she should take charge of me, and by the favour of our jailers I was suffered to remain in the shelter of the Abbaye. That was my only refuge; there was no corner of France that I could rest the sole of my foot upon except the prison. Monsieur le Comte, you are as well aware as I can be what kind of a life that was, and how swiftly death smote in that society. I did not wait long before the name of Madame de Chasserades succeeded to that of my mother on the list. She passed me on to Madame de Noytot; she, in her turn, to Mademoiselle de Bray; and there were others. I was the one thing permanent; they were all transient as clouds; a day or two of their care, and then came the last farewell and—somewhere far off in that roaring Paris that surrounded us—the bloody scene. I was the cherished one, the last comfort, of these dying women. I have been in pitched fights, my lord, and I never knew such courage. It was all done smiling, in the tone of good society; belle maman was the name I was taught to give to each; and for a day or two the new "pretty mamma" would make much of me, show me off, teach me the minuet, and to say my prayers; and then, with a tender embrace, would go the way of her predecessors, smiling. There were some that wept too. There was a childhood! All the time Monsieur de Culemberg kept his eye on me, and would have had me out of the Abbaye and in his own protection, but my "pretty mammas" one

after another resisted the idea. Where could I be safer? they argued; and what was to become of them without the darling of the prison? Well, it was soon shown how safe I was! The dreadful day of the massacre came; the prison was overrun; none paid attention to me, not even the last of my “pretty mammas,” for she had met another fate. I was wandering distracted, when I was found by some one in the interests of Monsieur de Culemberg. I understand he was sent on purpose; I believe, in order to reach the interior of the prison, he had set his hand to nameless barbarities: such was the price paid for my worthless, whimpering little life! He gave me his hand; it was wet, and mine was reddened; he led me unresisting. I remember but the one circumstance of my flight—it was my last view of my last pretty mamma. Shall I describe it to you?’ I asked the Count, with a sudden fierceness.

‘Avoid unpleasant details,’ observed my great-uncle gently.

At these words a sudden peace fell upon me. I had been angry with the man before; I had not sought to spare him; and now, in a moment, I saw that there was nothing to spare. Whether from natural heartlessness or extreme old age, the soul was not at home; and my benefactor, who had kept the fire lit in my room for a month past—my only relative except Alain, whom I knew already to be a hired spy—had trodden out the last sparks of hope and interest.

‘Certainly,’ said I; ‘and, indeed, the day for them is nearly over. I was taken to Monsieur de Culemberg’s,—I presume, sir, that you know the

Abbe de Culemborg?’

He indicated assent without opening his eyes.

‘He was a very brave and a very learned man—’

‘And a very holy one,’ said my uncle civilly.

‘And a very holy one, as you observe,’ I continued. ‘He did an infinity of good, and through all the Terror kept himself from the guillotine. He brought me up, and gave me such education as I have. It was in his house in the country at Dammarie, near Melun, that I made the acquaintance of your agent, Mr. Vicary, who lay there in hiding, only to fall a victim at the last to a gang of chauffeurs.’

‘That poor Mr. Vicary!’ observed my uncle. ‘He had been many times in my interests to France, and this was his first failure. Quel charmant homme, n’est-ce pas?’

‘Infinitely so,’ said I. ‘But I would not willingly detain you any further with a story, the details of which it must naturally be more or less unpleasant for you to hear. Suffice it that, by M. de Culemborg’s own advice, I said farewell at eighteen to that kind preceptor and his books, and entered the service of France; and have since then carried arms in such a manner as not to disgrace my family.’

'You narrate well; vous avez la voix chaude,' said my uncle, turning on his pillows as if to study me. 'I have a very good account of you by Monsieur de Mauseant, whom you helped in Spain. And you had some education from the Abbe de Culemberg, a man of a good house? Yes, you will do very well. You have a good manner and a handsome person, which hurts nothing. We are all handsome in the family; even I myself, I have had my successes, the memories of which still charm me. It is my intention, my nephew, to make of you my heir. I am not very well content with my other nephew, Monsieur le Vicomte: he has not been respectful, which is the flattery due to age. And there are other matters.'

I was half tempted to throw back in his face that inheritance so coldly offered. At the same time I had to consider that he was an old man, and, after all, my relation; and that I was a poor one, in considerable straits, with a hope at heart which that inheritance might yet enable me to realise. Nor could I forget that, however icy his manners, he had behaved to me from the first with the extreme of liberality and—I was about to write, kindness, but the word, in that connection, would not come. I really owed the man some measure of gratitude, which it would be an ill manner to repay if I were to insult him on his deathbed.

'Your will, monsieur, must ever be my rule,' said I, bowing.

'You have wit, monsieur mon neveu,' said he, 'the best wit—the wit of silence. Many might have deafened me with their gratitude. Gratitude!' he repeated, with a peculiar intonation, and lay and smiled to himself.

‘But to approach what is more important. As a prisoner of war, will it be possible for you to be served heir to English estates? I have no idea: long as I have dwelt in England, I have never studied what they call their laws. On the other hand, how if Romaine should come too late? I have two pieces of business to be transacted—to die, and to make my will; and, however desirous I may be to serve you, I cannot postpone the first in favour of the second beyond a very few hours.’

‘Well, sir, I must then contrive to be doing as I did before,’ said I.

‘Not so,’ said the Count. ‘I have an alternative. I have just drawn my balance at my banker’s, a considerable sum, and I am now to place it in your hands. It will be so much for you and so much less—’ he paused, and smiled with an air of malignity that surprised me. ‘But it is necessary it should be done before witnesses. Monsieur le Vicomte is of a particular disposition, and an unwitnessed donation may very easily be twisted into a theft.’

He touched a bell, which was answered by a man having the appearance of a

confidential valet. To him he gave a key.

‘Bring me the despatch-box that came yesterday, La Ferriere,’ said he.

‘You will at the same time present my compliments to Dr. Hunter and M. l’Abbe, and request them to step for a few moments to my room.’

The despatch-box proved to be rather a bulky piece of baggage, covered with Russia leather. Before the doctor and an excellent old smiling priest it was passed over into my hands with a very clear statement of the disposer's wishes; immediately after which, though the witnesses remained behind to draw up and sign a joint note of the transaction, Monsieur de K roual dismissed me to my own room, La Ferriere following with the invaluable box.

At my chamber door I took it from him with thanks, and entered alone. Everything had been already disposed for the night, the curtains drawn and the fire trimmed; and Rowley was still busy with my bedclothes. He turned round as I entered with a look of welcome that did my heart good. Indeed, I had never a much greater need of human sympathy, however trivial, than at that moment when I held a fortune in my arms. In my uncle's room I had breathed the very atmosphere of disenchantment. He had gorged my pockets; he had starved every dignified or affectionate sentiment of a man. I had received so chilling an impression of age and experience that the mere look of youth drew me to confide in Rowley: he was only a boy, his heart must beat yet, he must still retain some innocence and natural feelings, he could blurt out follies with his mouth, he was not a machine to utter perfect speech! At the same time, I was beginning to outgrow the painful impressions of my interview; my spirits were beginning to revive; and at the jolly, empty looks of Mr. Rowley, as he ran forward to relieve me of the box, St. Ives became himself again.

‘Now, Rowley, don’t be in a hurry,’ said I. ‘This is a momentous juncture. Man and boy, you have been in my service about three hours. You must already have observed that I am a gentleman of a somewhat morose disposition, and there is nothing that I more dislike than the smallest appearance of familiarity. Mr. Pole or Mr. Powl, probably in the spirit of prophecy, warned you against this danger.’

‘Yes, Mr. Anne,’ said Rowley blankly.

‘Now there has just arisen one of those rare cases, in which I am willing to depart from my principles. My uncle has given me a box—what you would call a Christmas box. I don’t know what’s in it, and no more do you: perhaps I am an April fool, or perhaps I am already enormously wealthy; there might be five hundred pounds in this apparently harmless receptacle!’

‘Lord, Mr. Anne!’ cried Rowley.

‘Now, Rowley, hold up your right hand and repeat the words of the oath after me,’ said I, laying the despatch-box on the table. ‘Strike me blue if I ever disclose to Mr. Powl, or Mr. Powl’s Viscount, or anything that is Mr. Powl’s, not to mention Mr. Dawson and the doctor, the treasures of the following despatch-box; and strike me sky-blue scarlet if I do not continually maintain, uphold, love, honour and obey, serve, and follow to the four corners of the earth and the waters that are under the earth,

the hereinafter before-mentioned (only that I find I have neglected to mention him) Viscount Anne de Kéroual de St.-Yves, commonly known as Mr.

Rowley's Viscount. So be it. Amen.'

He took the oath with the same exaggerated seriousness as I gave it to him.

'Now,' said I. 'Here is the key for you; I will hold the lid with both hands in the meanwhile.' He turned the key. 'Bring up all the candles in the room, and range them along-side. What is it to be? A live gorgon, a Jack-in-the-box, or a spring that fires a pistol? On your knees, sir, before the prodigy!'

So saying, I turned the despatch-box upside down upon the table. At sight of the heap of bank paper and gold that lay in front of us, between the candles, or rolled upon the floor alongside, I stood astonished.

'O Lord!' cried Mr. Rowley; 'oh Lordy, Lordy, Lord!' and he scrambled after the fallen guineas. 'O my, Mr. Anne! what a sight o' money! Why, it's like a blessed story-book. It's like the Forty Thieves.'

'Now Rowley, let's be cool, let's be businesslike,' said I. 'Riches are deceitful, particularly when you haven't counted them; and the first thing we have to do is to arrive at the amount of my—let me say, modest competency. If I'm not mistaken, I have enough here to keep you in gold

buttons all the rest of your life. You collect the gold, and I'll take the paper.'

Accordingly, down we sat together on the hearthrug, and for some time there was no sound but the creasing of bills and the jingling of guineas, broken occasionally by the exulting exclamations of Rowley. The arithmetical operation on which we were embarked took long, and it might have been tedious to others; not to me nor to my helper.

'Ten thousand pounds!' I announced at last.

'Ten thousand!' echoed Mr. Rowley.

And we gazed upon each other.

The greatness of this fortune took my breath away. With that sum in my hands, I need fear no enemies. People are arrested, in nine cases out of ten, not because the police are astute, but because they themselves run short of money; and I had here before me in the despatch-box a succession of devices and disguises that insured my liberty. Not only so; but, as I felt with a sudden and overpowering thrill, with ten thousand pounds in my hands I was become an eligible suitor. What advances I had made in the past, as a private soldier in a military prison, or a fugitive by the wayside, could only be qualified or, indeed, excused as acts of desperation. And now, I might come in by the front door; I might approach the dragon with a lawyer at my elbow, and rich settlements to

offer. The poor French prisoner, Champdivers, might be in a perpetual danger of arrest; but the rich travelling Englishman, St.-Ives, in his post-chaise, with his despatch-box by his side, could smile at fate and laugh at locksmiths. I repeated the proverb, exulting, Love laughs at locksmiths! In a moment, by the mere coming of this money, my love had become possible—it had come near, it was under my hand—and it may be by one of the curiosities of human nature, but it burned that instant brighter.

‘Rowley,’ said I, ‘your Viscount is a made man.’

‘Why, we both are, sir,’ said Rowley.

‘Yes, both,’ said I; ‘and you shall dance at the wedding;’ and I flung at his head a bundle of bank notes, and had just followed it up with a handful of guineas, when the door opened, and Mr. Romaine appeared upon the threshold.