

## CHAPTER XVIII—MR. ROMAINE CALLS ME NAMES

Feeling very much of a fool to be thus taken by surprise, I scrambled to my feet and hastened to make my visitor welcome. He did not refuse me his hand; but he gave it with a coldness and distance for which I was quite unprepared, and his countenance, as he looked on me, was marked in a strong degree with concern and severity.

‘So, sir, I find you here?’ said he, in tones of little encouragement.

‘Is that you, George? You can run away; I have business with your master.’

He showed Rowley out, and locked the door behind him. Then he sat down in an armchair on one side of the fire, and looked at me with uncompromising sternness.

‘I am hesitating how to begin,’ said he. ‘In this singular labyrinth of blunders and difficulties that you have prepared for us, I am positively hesitating where to begin. It will perhaps be best that you should read, first of all, this paragraph.’ And he handed over to me a newspaper.

The paragraph in question was brief. It announced the recapture of one of the prisoners recently escaped from Edinburgh Castle; gave his name, Clausel, and added that he had entered into the particulars of the recent revolting murder in the Castle, and denounced the murderer:—

'It is a common soldier called Champdivers, who had himself escaped, and is in all probability involved in the common fate of his comrades. In spite of the activity along all the Forth and the East Coast, nothing has yet been seen of the sloop which these desperadoes seized at Grangemouth, and it is now almost certain that they have found a watery grave.'

At the reading of this paragraph, my heart turned over. In a moment I saw my castle in the air ruined; myself changed from a mere military fugitive into a hunted murderer, fleeing from the gallows; my love, which had a moment since appeared so near to me, blotted from the field of possibility. Despair, which was my first sentiment, did not, however, endure for more than a moment. I saw that my companions had indeed succeeded in their unlikely design; and that I was supposed to have accompanied and perished along with them by shipwreck—a most probable ending to their enterprise. If they thought me at the bottom of the North Sea, I need not fear much vigilance on the streets of Edinburgh. Champdivers was wanted: what was to connect him with St. Ives? Major Chevenix would recognise me if he met me; that was beyond bargaining: he had seen me so often, his interest had been kindled to so high a point, that I could hope to deceive him by no stratagem of disguise. Well, even so; he would have a competition of testimony before him: he knew Clausel, he knew me, and I was sure he would decide for honour. At the same time the image of Flora shot up in my mind's eye with such a radiancy as fairly overwhelmed all other considerations; the blood sprang to every

corner of my body, and I vowed I would see and win her, if it cost my neck.

'Very annoying, no doubt,' said I, as I returned the paper to Mr. Romaine.

'Is annoying your word for it?' said he.

'Exasperating, if you like,' I admitted.

'And true?' he inquired.

'Well, true in a sense,' said I. 'But perhaps I had better answer that question by putting you in possession of the facts?'

'I think so, indeed,' said he.

I narrated to him as much as seemed necessary of the quarrel, the duel, the death of Goguelat, and the character of Clausel. He heard me through in a forbidding silence, nor did he at all betray the nature of his sentiments, except that, at the episode of the scissors, I could observe his mulberry face to turn three shades paler.

'I suppose I may believe you?' said he, when I had done.

'Or else conclude this interview,' said I.

‘Can you not understand that we are here discussing matters of the gravest import? Can you not understand that I feel myself weighed with a load of responsibility on your account—that you should take this occasion to air your fire-eating manners against your own attorney? There are serious hours in life, Mr. Anne,’ he said severely. ‘A capital charge, and that of a very brutal character and with singularly unpleasant details; the presence of the man Clausel, who (according to your account of it) is actuated by sentiments of real malignity, and prepared to swear black white; all the other witnesses scattered and perhaps drowned at sea; the natural prejudice against a Frenchman and a runaway prisoner: this makes a serious total for your lawyer to consider, and is by no means lessened by the incurable folly and levity of your own disposition.’

‘I beg your pardon!’ said I.

‘Oh, my expressions have been selected with scrupulous accuracy,’ he replied. ‘How did I find you, sir, when I came to announce this catastrophe? You were sitting on the hearthrug playing, like a silly baby, with a servant, were you not, and the floor all scattered with gold and bank paper? There was a tableau for you! It was I who came, and you were lucky in that. It might have been any one—your cousin as well as another.’

‘You have me there, sir,’ I admitted. ‘I had neglected all precautions,

and you do right to be angry. Apropos, Mr. Romaine, how did you come yourself, and how long have you been in the house?' I added, surprised, on the retrospect, not to have heard him arrive.

'I drove up in a chaise and pair,' he returned. 'Any one might have heard me. But you were not listening, I suppose? being so extremely at your ease in the very house of your enemy, and under a capital charge! And I have been long enough here to do your business for you. Ah, yes, I did it, God forgive me!—did it before I so much as asked you the explanation of the paragraph. For some time back the will has been prepared; now it is signed; and your uncle has heard nothing of your recent piece of activity. Why? Well, I had no fancy to bother him on his death-bed: you might be innocent; and at bottom I preferred the murderer to the spy.'

No doubt of it but the man played a friendly part; no doubt also that, in his ill-temper and anxiety, he expressed himself unpalatably.

'You will perhaps find me over delicate,' said I. 'There is a word you employed—'

'I employ the words of my brief, sir,' he cried, striking with his hand on the newspaper. 'It is there in six letters. And do not be so certain—you have not stood your trial yet. It is an ugly affair, a fishy business. It is highly disagreeable. I would give my hand off—I mean I would give a hundred pound down, to have nothing to do with it. And,

situated as we are, we must at once take action. There is here no choice. You must at once quit this country, and get to France, or Holland, or, indeed, to Madagascar.'

'There may be two words to that,' said I.

'Not so much as one syllable!' he retorted. 'Here is no room for argument. The case is nakedly plain. In the disgusting position in which you have found means to place yourself, all that is to be hoped for is delay. A time may come when we shall be able to do better. It cannot be now: now it would be the gibbet.'

'You labour under a false impression, Mr. Romaine,' said I. 'I have no impatience to figure in the dock. I am even as anxious as yourself to postpone my first appearance there. On the other hand, I have not the slightest intention of leaving this country, where I please myself extremely. I have a good address, a ready tongue, an English accent that passes, and, thanks to the generosity of my uncle, as much money as I want. It would be hard indeed if, with all these advantages, Mr. St. Ives should not be able to live quietly in a private lodging, while the authorities amuse themselves by looking for Champdivers. You forget, there is no connection between these two personages.'

'And you forget your cousin,' retorted Romaine. 'There is the link. There is the tongue of the buckle. He knows you are Champdivers.' He put up his hand as if to listen. 'And, for a wager, here he is himself'

he exclaimed.

As when a tailor takes a piece of goods upon his counter, and rends it across, there came to our ears from the avenue the long tearing sound of a chaise and four approaching at the top speed of the horses. And, looking out between the curtains, we beheld the lamps skimming on the smooth ascent.

‘Ay,’ said Romaine, wiping the window-pane that he might see more clearly. ‘Ay, that is he by the driving! So he squanders money along the king’s highway, the triple idiot! gorging every man he meets with gold for the pleasure of arriving—where? Ah, yes, where but a debtor’s jail, if not a criminal prison!’

‘Is he that kind of a man?’ I said, staring on these lamps as though I could decipher in them the secret of my cousin’s character.

‘You will find him a dangerous kind,’ answered the lawyer. ‘For you, these are the lights on a lee shore! I find I fall in a muse when I consider of him; what a formidable being he once was, and what a personable! and how near he draws to the moment that must break him utterly! we none of us like him here; we hate him, rather; and yet I have a sense—I don’t think at my time of life it can be pity—but a reluctance rather, to break anything so big and figurative, as though he were a big porcelain pot or a big picture of high price. Ay, there is what I was waiting for!’ he cried, as the lights of a second chaise swam in sight.

'It is he beyond a doubt. The first was the signature and the next the flourish. Two chaises, the second following with the baggage, which is always copious and ponderous, and one of his valets: he cannot go a step without a valet.'

'I hear you repeat the word big,' said I. 'But it cannot be that he is anything out of the way in stature.'

'No,' said the attorney. 'About your height, as I guessed for the tailors, and I see nothing wrong with the result. But, somehow, he commands an atmosphere; he has a spacious manner; and he has kept up, all through life, such a volume of racket about his personality, with his chaises and his racers and his dicings, and I know not what—that somehow he imposes! It seems, when the farce is done, and he locked in Fleet prison—and nobody left but Buonaparte and Lord Wellington and the Hetman Platoff to make a work about—the world will be in a comparison quite tranquil. But this is beside the mark,' he added, with an effort, turning again from the window. 'We are now under fire, Mr. Anne, as you soldiers would say, and it is high time we should prepare to go into action. He must not see you; that would be fatal. All that he knows at present is that you resemble him, and that is much more than enough. If it were possible, it would be well he should not know you were in the house.'

'Quite impossible, depend upon it,' said I. 'Some of the servants are



directly in his interests, perhaps in his pay: Dawson, for an example.'

'My own idea!' cried Romaine. 'And at least,' he added, as the first of the chaises drew up with a dash in front of the portico, 'it is now too late. Here he is.'

We stood listening, with a strange anxiety, to the various noises that awoke in the silent house: the sound of doors opening and closing, the sound of feet near at hand and farther off. It was plain the arrival of my cousin was a matter of moment, almost of parade, to the household. And suddenly, out of this confused and distant bustle, a rapid and light tread became distinguishable. We heard it come upstairs, draw near along the corridor, pause at the door, and a stealthy and hasty rapping succeeded.

'Mr. Anne—Mr. Anne, sir! Let me in!' said the voice of Rowley.

We admitted the lad, and locked the door again behind him.

'It's him, sir,' he panted. 'He've come.'

'You mean the Viscount?' said I. 'So we supposed. But come, Rowley—out with the rest of it! You have more to tell us, or your face belies you!'

'Mr. Anne, I do,' he said. 'Mr. Romaine, sir, you're a friend of his, ain't you?'

'Yes, George, I am a friend of his,' said Romaine, and, to my great surprise, laid his hand upon my shoulder.

'Well, it's this way,' said Rowley—'Mr. Powl have been at me! It's to play the spy! I thought he was at it from the first! From the first I see what he was after—coming round and round, and hinting things! But to-night he outs with it plump! I'm to let him hear all what you're to do beforehand, he says; and he gave me this for an earnest'—holding up half a guinea; 'and I took it, so I did! Strike me sky-blue scarlet?' says he, adducing the words of the mock oath; and he looked askance at me as he did so.

I saw that he had forgotten himself, and that he knew it. The expression of his eye changed almost in the passing of the glance from the significant to the appealing—from the look of an accomplice to that of a culprit; and from that moment he became the model of a well-drilled valet.

'Sky-blue scarlet?' repeated the lawyer. 'Is the fool delirious?'

'No,' said I; 'he is only reminding me of something.'

'Well—and I believe the fellow will be faithful,' said Romaine. 'So you are a friend of Mr. Anne's' too?' he added to Rowley.

'If you please, sir,' said Rowley.

'Tis something sudden,' observed Romaine; 'but it may be genuine enough. I believe him to be honest. He comes of honest people. Well, George Rowley, you might embrace some early opportunity to earn that half-guinea, by telling Mr. Powl that your master will not leave here till noon to-morrow, if he go even then. Tell him there are a hundred things to be done here, and a hundred more that can only be done properly at my office in Holborn. Come to think of it—we had better see to that first of all,' he went on, unlocking the door. 'Get hold of Powl, and see. And be quick back, and clear me up this mess.'

Mr. Rowley was no sooner gone than the lawyer took a pinch of snuff, and regarded me with somewhat of a more genial expression.

'Sir,' said he, 'it is very fortunate for you that your face is so strong a letter of recommendation. Here am I, a tough old practitioner, mixing myself up with your very distressing business; and here is this farmer's lad, who has the wit to take a bribe and the loyalty to come and tell you of it—all, I take it, on the strength of your appearance. I wish I could imagine how it would impress a jury!' says he.

'And how it would affect the hangman, sir?' I asked

'Absit omen!' said Mr. Romaine devoutly.

We were just so far in our talk, when I heard a sound that brought my heart into my mouth: the sound of some one slyly trying the handle of the door. It had been preceded by no audible footstep. Since the departure of Rowley our wing of the house had been entirely silent. And we had every right to suppose ourselves alone, and to conclude that the new-comer, whoever he might be, was come on a clandestine, if not a hostile, errand.

‘Who is there?’ asked Romaine.

‘It’s only me, sir,’ said the soft voice of Dawson. ‘It’s the Viscount, sir. He is very desirous to speak with you on business.’

‘Tell him I shall come shortly, Dawson,’ said the lawyer. ‘I am at present engaged.’

‘Thank you, sir!’ said Dawson.

And we heard his feet draw off slowly along the corridor.

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Romaine, speaking low, and maintaining the attitude of one intently listening, ‘there is another foot. I cannot be deceived!’

‘I think there was indeed!’ said I. ‘And what troubles me—I am not sure that the other has gone entirely away. By the time it got the length of the head of the stair the tread was plainly single.’

'Ahem—blockaded?' asked the lawyer.

'A siege en règle!' I exclaimed.

'Let us come farther from the door,' said Romaine, 'and reconsider this damnable position. Without doubt, Alain was this moment at the door. He hoped to enter and get a view of you, as if by accident. Baffled in this, has he stayed himself, or has he planted Dawson here by way of sentinel?'

'Himself, beyond a doubt,' said I. 'And yet to what end? He cannot think to pass the night there!'

'If it were only possible to pay no heed!' said Mr. Romaine. 'But this is the accursed drawback of your position. We can do nothing openly. I must smuggle you out of this room and out of this house like seizable goods; and how am I to set about it with a sentinel planted at your very door?'

'There is no good in being agitated,' said I.

'None at all,' he acquiesced. 'And, come to think of it, it is droll enough that I should have been that very moment commenting on your personal appearance, when your cousin came upon this mission. I was saying, if you remember, that your face was as good or better than a

letter of recommendation. I wonder if M. Alain would be like the rest of us—I wonder what he would think of it?’

Mr. Romaine was sitting in a chair by the fire with his back to the windows, and I was myself kneeling on the hearthrug and beginning mechanically to pick up the scattered bills, when a honeyed voice joined suddenly in our conversation.

‘He thinks well of it, Mr. Romaine. He begs to join himself to that circle of admirers which you indicate to exist already.’