CHAPTER XIX—THE DEVIL AND ALL AT AMERSHAM PLACE

Never did two human creatures get to their feet with more alacrity than the lawyer and myself. We had locked and barred the main gates of the citadel; but unhappily we had left open the bath-room sally-port; and here we found the voice of the hostile trumpets sounding from within, and all our defences taken in reverse. I took but the time to whisper Mr. Romaine in the ear: 'Here is another tableau for you!' at which he looked at me a moment with a kind of pathos, as who should say, 'Don't hit a man when he's down.' Then I transferred my eyes to my enemy.

He had his hat on, a little on one side: it was a very tall hat, raked extremely, and had a narrow curling brim. His hair was all curled out in masses like an Italian mountebank—a most unpardonable fashion. He sported a huge tippeted overcoat of frieze, such as watchmen wear, only the inside was lined with costly furs, and he kept it half open to display the exquisite linen, the many-coloured waistcoat, and the profuse jewellery of watch-chains and brooches underneath. The leg and the ankle were turned to a miracle. It is out of the question that I should deny the resemblance altogether, since it has been remarked by so many different persons whom I cannot reasonably accuse of a conspiracy. As a matter of fact, I saw little of it and confessed to nothing. Certainly he was what some might call handsome, of a pictorial, exuberant style of beauty, all attitude, profile, and impudence: a man whom I could see in fancy parade on the grand stand at a race-meeting or swagger in

Piccadilly, staring down the women, and stared at himself with admiration by the coal-porters. Of his frame of mind at that moment his face offered a lively if an unconscious picture. He was lividly pale, and his lip was caught up in a smile that could almost be called a snarl, of a sheer, arid malignity that appalled me and yet put me on my mettle for the encounter. He looked me up and down, then bowed and took off his hat to me.

'My cousin, I presume?' he said.

'I understand I have that honour,' I replied.

'The honour is mine,' said he, and his voice shook as he said it.

'I should make you welcome, I believe,' said I.

'Why?' he inquired. 'This poor house has been my home for longer than I care to claim. That you should already take upon yourself the duties of host here is to be at unnecessary pains. Believe me, that part would be more becomingly mine. And, by the way, I must not fail to offer you my little compliment. It is a gratifying surprise to meet you in the dress of a gentleman, and to see'—with a circular look upon the scattered bills—'that your necessities have already been so liberally relieved.'

I bowed with a smile that was perhaps no less hateful than his own.

‘There are so many necessities in this world,’ said I. ‘Charity has to choose. One gets relieved, and some other, no less indigent, perhaps indebted, must go wanting.’

‘Malice is an engaging trait,’ said he.

‘And envy, I think?’ was my reply.

He must have felt that he was not getting wholly the better of this passage at arms; perhaps even feared that he should lose command of his temper, which he reined in throughout the interview as with a red-hot curb, for he flung away from me at the word, and addressed the lawyer with insulting arrogance.

‘Mr. Romaine,’ he said, ‘since when have you presumed to give orders in this house?’

‘I am not prepared to admit that I have given any,’ replied Romaine; ‘certainly none that did not fall in the sphere of my responsibilities.’

‘By whose orders, then, am I denied entrance to my uncle’s room?’ said my cousin.

‘By the doctor’s, sir,’ replied Romaine; ‘and I think even you will admit his faculty to give them.’

'Have a care, sir,' cried Alain. 'Do not be puffed up with your position. It is none so secure, Master Attorney. I should not wonder in the least if you were struck off the rolls for this night's work, and the next I should see of you were when I flung you alms at a pothouse door to mend your ragged elbows. The doctor's orders? But I believe I am not mistaken! You have to-night transacted business with the Count; and this needy young gentleman has enjoyed the privilege of still another interview, in which (as I am pleased to see) his dignity has not prevented his doing very well for himself. I wonder that you should care to prevaricate with me so idly.'

'I will confess so much,' said Mr. Romaine, 'if you call it prevarication. The order in question emanated from the Count himself. He does not wish to see you.'

'For which I must take the word of Mr. Daniel Romaine?' asked Alain.

'In default of any better,' said Romaine.

There was an instantaneous convulsion in my cousin's face, and I distinctly heard him gnash his teeth at this reply; but, to my surprise, he resumed in tones of almost good humour:

'Come, Mr. Romaine, do not let us be petty!' He drew in a chair and sat down. 'Understand you have stolen a march upon me. You have introduced your soldier of Napoleon, and (how, I cannot conceive) he has been

apparently accepted with favour. I ask no better proof than the funds with which I find him literally surrounded—I presume in consequence of some extravagance of joy at the first sight of so much money. The odds are so far in your favour, but the match is not yet won. Questions will arise of undue influence, of sequestration, and the like: I have my witnesses ready. I tell it you cynically, for you cannot profit by the knowledge; and, if the worst come to the worst, I have good hopes of recovering my own and of ruining you.'

'You do what you please,' answered Romaine; 'but I give it you for a piece of good advice, you had best do nothing in the matter. You will only make yourself ridiculous; you will only squander money, of which you have none too much, and reap public mortification.'

'Ah, but there you make the common mistake, Mr. Romaine!' returned Alain. 'You despise your adversary. Consider, if you please, how very disagreeable I could make myself, if I chose. Consider the position of your protégé—an escaped prisoner! But I play a great game. I condemn such petty opportunities.'

At this Romaine and I exchanged a glance of triumph. It seemed manifest that Alain had as yet received no word of Clausel's recapture and denunciation. At the same moment the lawyer, thus relieved of the instancy of his fear, changed his tactics. With a great air of unconcern, he secured the newspaper, which still lay open before him on the table.

'I think, Monsieur Alain, that you labour under some illusion,' said he. 'Believe me, this is all beside the mark. You seem to be pointing to some compromise. Nothing is further from my views. You suspect me of an inclination to trifle with you, to conceal how things are going. I cannot, on the other hand, be too early or too explicit in giving you information which concerns you (I must say) capitally. Your great-uncle has to-night cancelled his will, and made a new one in favour of your cousin Anne. Nay, and you shall hear it from his own lips, if you choose! I will take so much upon me,' said the lawyer, rising. 'Follow me, if you please, gentlemen.'

Mr. Romaine led the way out of the room so briskly, and was so briskly followed by Alain, that I had hard ado to get the remainder of the money replaced and the despatch-box locked, and to overtake them, even by running ere they should be lost in that maze of corridors, my uncle's house. As it was, I went with a heart divided; and the thought of my treasure thus left unprotected, save by a paltry lid and lock that any one might break or pick open, put me in a perspiration whenever I had the time to remember it. The lawyer brought us to a room, begged us to be seated while he should hold a consultation with the doctor, and, slipping out of another door, left Alain and myself closeted together.

Truly he had done nothing to ingratiate himself; his every word had been steeped in unfriendliness, envy, and that contempt which (as it is born of anger) it is possible to support without humiliation. On my part, I

had been little more conciliating; and yet I began to be sorry for this man, hired spy as I knew him to be. It seemed to me less than decent that he should have been brought up in the expectation of this great inheritance, and now, at the eleventh hour, be tumbled forth out of the house door and left to himself, his poverty and his debts—those debts of which I had so ungallantly reminded him so short a time before. And we were scarce left alone ere I made haste to hang out a flag of truce.

'My cousin,' said I, 'trust me, you will not find me inclined to be your enemy.'

He paused in front of me—for he had not accepted the lawyer's invitation to be seated, but walked to and fro in the apartment—took a pinch of snuff, and looked at me while he was taking it with an air of much curiosity.

'Is it even so?' said he. 'Am I so far favoured by fortune as to have your pity? Infinitely obliged, my cousin Anne! But these sentiments are not always reciprocal, and I warn you that the day when I set my foot on your neck, the spine shall break. Are you acquainted with the properties of the spine?' he asked with an insolence beyond qualification.

It was too much. 'I am acquainted also with the properties of a pair of pistols,' said I, toising him.

'No, no, no!' says he, holding up his finger. 'I will take my revenge

how and when I please. We are enough of the same family to understand each other, perhaps; and the reason why I have not had you arrested on your arrival, why I had not a picket of soldiers in the first clump of evergreens, to await and prevent your coming—I, who knew all, before whom that pettifogger, Romaine, has been conspiring in broad daylight to supplant me—is simply this: that I had not made up my mind how I was to take my revenge.'

At that moment he was interrupted by the tolling of a bell. As we stood surprised and listening, it was succeeded by the sound of many feet trooping up the stairs and shuffling by the door of our room. Both, I believe, had a great curiosity to set it open, which each, owing to the presence of the other, resisted; and we waited instead in silence, and without moving, until Romaine returned and bade us to my uncle's presence.

He led the way by a little crooked passage, which brought us out in the sick-room, and behind the bed. I believe I have forgotten to remark that the Count's chamber was of considerable dimensions. We beheld it now crowded with the servants and dependants of the house, from the doctor and the priest to Mr. Dawson and the housekeeper, from Dawson down to Rowley and the last footman in white calves, the last plump chambermaid in her clean gown and cap, and the last ostler in a stable waiscoat. This large congregation of persons (and I was surprised to see how large it was) had the appearance, for the most part, of being ill at ease and heartily bewildered, standing on one foot, gaping like zanies, and those

who were in the corners nudging each other and grinning aside. My uncle, on the other hand, who was raised higher than I had yet seen him on his pillows, wore an air of really imposing gravity. No sooner had we appeared behind him, than he lifted his voice to a good loudness, and addressed the assemblage.

'I take you all to witness—can you hear me?—I take you all to witness that I recognise as my heir and representative this gentleman, whom most of you see for the first time, the Viscount Anne de St.-Yves, my nephew of the younger line. And I take you to witness at the same time that, for very good reasons known to myself, I have discarded and disinherited this other gentleman whom you all know, the Viscount de St.-Yves. I have also to explain the unusual trouble to which I have put you all—and, since your supper was not over, I fear I may even say annoyance. It has pleased M. Alain to make some threats of disputing my will, and to pretend that there are among your number certain estimable persons who may be trusted to swear as he shall direct them. It pleases me thus to put it out of his power and to stop the mouths of his false witnesses. I am infinitely obliged by your politeness, and I have the honour to wish you all a very good evening.'

As the servants, still greatly mystified, crowded out of the sickroom door, curtseying, pulling the forelock, scraping with the foot, and so on, according to their degree, I turned and stole a look at my cousin. He had borne this crushing public rebuke without change of countenance. He stood, now, very upright, with folded arms, and looking inscrutably at

the roof of the apartment. I could not refuse him at that moment the tribute of my admiration. Still more so when, the last of the domestics having filed through the doorway and left us alone with my great-uncle and the lawyer, he took one step forward towards the bed, made a dignified reverence, and addressed the man who had just condemned him to ruin.

'My lord,' said he, 'you are pleased to treat me in a manner which my gratitude, and your state, equally forbid me to call in question. It will be only necessary for me to call your attention to the length of time in which I have been taught to regard myself as your heir. In that position, I judged it only loyal to permit myself a certain scale of expenditure. If I am now to be cut off with a shilling as the reward of twenty years of service, I shall be left not only a beggar, but a bankrupt.'

Whether from the fatigue of his recent exertion, or by a well-inspired ingenuity of hate, my uncle had once more closed his eyes; nor did he open them now. 'Not with a shilling,' he contented himself with replying; and there stole, as he said it, a sort of smile over his face, that flickered there conspicuously for the least moment of time, and then faded and left behind the old impenetrable mask of years, cunning, and fatigue. There could be no mistake: my uncle enjoyed the situation as he had enjoyed few things in the last quarter of a century. The fires of life scarce survived in that frail body; but hatred, like some immortal quality, was still erect and unabated.

Nevertheless my cousin persevered.

'I speak at a disadvantage,' he resumed. 'My supplanter, with perhaps more wisdom than delicacy, remains in the room,' and he cast a glance at me that might have withered an oak tree.

I was only too willing to withdraw, and Romaine showed as much alacrity to make way for my departure. But my uncle was not to be moved. In the same breath of a voice, and still without opening his eyes, he bade me remain.

'It is well,' said Alain. 'I cannot then go on to remind you of the twenty years that have passed over our heads in England, and the services I may have rendered you in that time. It would be a position too odious. Your lordship knows me too well to suppose I could stoop to such ignominy. I must leave out all my defence—your lordship wills it so! I do not know what are my faults; I know only my punishment, and it is greater than I have the courage to face. My uncle, I implore your pity: pardon me so far; do not send me for life into a debtors' jail—a pauper debtor.'

'Chat et vieux, pardonnez?' said my uncle, quoting from La Fontaine; and then, opening a pale-blue eye full on Alain, he delivered with some emphasis:

'La jeunesse se flatte et croit tout obtenir;
La vieillesse est impitoyable.'

The blood leaped darkly into Alain's face. He turned to Romaine and me, and his eyes flashed.

'It is your turn now,' he said. 'At least it shall be prison for prison with the two viscounts.'

'Not so, Mr. Alain, by your leave,' said Romaine. 'There are a few formalities to be considered first.'

But Alain was already striding towards the door.

'Stop a moment, stop a moment!' cried Romaine. 'Remember your own counsel not to despise an adversary.'

Alain turned.

'If I do not despise I hate you!' he cried, giving a loose to his passion. 'Be warned of that, both of you.'

'I understand you to threaten Monsieur le Vicomte Anne,' said the lawyer. 'Do you know, I would not do that. I am afraid, I am very much afraid, if you were to do as you propose, you might drive me into extremes.'

'You have made me a beggar and a bankrupt,' said Alain. What extreme is left?'

'I scarce like to put a name upon it in this company,' replied Romaine. 'But there are worse things than even bankruptcy, and worse places than a debtors' jail.'

The words were so significantly said that there went a visible thrill through Alain; sudden as a sword-stroke, he fell pale again.

'I do not understand you,' said he.

'O yes, you do,' returned Romaine. 'I believe you understand me very well. You must not suppose that all this time, while you were so very busy, others were entirely idle. You must not fancy, because I am an Englishman, that I have not the intelligence to pursue an inquiry. Great as is my regard for the honour of your house, M. Alain de St.-Yves, if I hear of you moving directly or indirectly in this matter, I shall do my duty, let it cost what it will: that is, I shall communicate the real name of the Buonapartist spy who signs his letters Rue Grégoire de Tours.'

I confess my heart was already almost altogether on the side of my insulted and unhappy cousin; and if it had not been before, it must have been so now, so horrid was the shock with which he heard his infamy exposed. Speech was denied him; he carried his hand to his neckcloth; he

staggered; I thought he must have fallen. I ran to help him, and at that he revived, recoiled before me, and stood there with arms stretched forth as if to preserve himself from the outrage of my touch.

'Hands off!' he somehow managed to articulate.

'You will now, I hope,' pursued the lawyer, without any change of voice, 'understand the position in which you are placed, and how delicately it behoves you to conduct yourself. Your arrest hangs, if I may so express myself, by a hair; and as you will be under the perpetual vigilance of myself and my agents, you must look to it narrowly that you walk straight. Upon the least dubiety, I will take action.' He snuffed, looking critically at the tortured man. 'And now let me remind you that your chaise is at the door. This interview is agitating to his lordship—it cannot be agreeable for you—and I suggest that it need not be further drawn out. It does not enter into the views of your uncle, the Count, that you should again sleep under this roof.'

As Alain turned and passed without a word or a sign from the apartment, I instantly followed. I suppose I must be at bottom possessed of some humanity; at least, this accumulated torture, this slow butchery of a man as by quarters of rock, had wholly changed my sympathies. At that moment I loathed both my uncle and the lawyer for their coldblooded cruelty.

Leaning over the banisters, I was but in time to hear his hasty footsteps in that hall that had been crowded with servants to honour his coming,

and was now left empty against his friendless departure. A moment later, and the echoes rang, and the air whistled in my ears, as he slammed the door on his departing footsteps. The fury of the concussion gave me (had one been still wanted) a measure of the turmoil of his passions. In a sense, I felt with him; I felt how he would have gloried to slam that door on my uncle, the lawyer, myself, and the whole crowd of those who had been witnesses to his humiliation.