

## CHAPTER XX—AFTER THE STORM

No sooner was the house clear of my cousin than I began to reckon up, ruefully enough, the probable results of what had passed. Here were a number of pots broken, and it looked to me as if I should have to pay for all! Here had been this proud, mad beast goaded and baited both publicly and privately, till he could neither hear nor see nor reason; whereupon the gate had been set open, and he had been left free to go and contrive whatever vengeance he might find possible. I could not help thinking it was a pity that, whenever I myself was inclined to be upon my good behaviour, some friends of mine should always determine to play a piece of heroics and cast me for the hero—or the victim—which is very much the same. The first duty of heroics is to be of your own choosing. When they are not that, they are nothing. And I assure you, as I walked back to my own room, I was in no very complaisant humour: thought my uncle and

Mr. Romaine to have played knuckle-bones with my life and prospects; cursed them for it roundly; had no wish more urgent than to avoid the pair of them; and was quite knocked out of time, as they say in the ring, to find myself confronted with the lawyer.

He stood on my hearthrug, leaning on the chimney-piece, with a gloomy, thoughtful brow, as I was pleased to see, and not in the least as though he were vain of the late proceedings.

'Well?' said I. 'You have done it now!'

'Is he gone?' he asked.

'He is gone,' said I. 'We shall have the devil to pay with him when he comes back.'

'You are right,' said the lawyer, 'and very little to pay him with but flams and fabrications, like to-night's.'

'To-night's?' I repeated.

'Ay, to-night's!' said he.

'To-night's what?' I cried.

'To-night's flams and fabrications.'

'God be good to me, sir,' said I, 'have I something more to admire in your conduct than ever I had suspected? You cannot think how you interest me! That it was severe, I knew; I had already chuckled over that. But that it should be false also! In what sense, dear sir?'

I believe I was extremely offensive as I put the question, but the lawyer paid no heed.

'False in all senses of the word,' he replied seriously. 'False in the sense that they were not true, and false in the sense that they were not real; false in the sense that I boasted, and in the sense that I lied. How can I arrest him? Your uncle burned the papers! I told you so—but doubtless you have forgotten—the day I first saw you in Edinburgh Castle. It was an act of generosity; I have seen many of these acts, and always regretted—always regretted! "That shall be his inheritance," he said, as the papers burned; he did not mean that it should have proved so rich a one. How rich, time will tell.'

'I beg your pardon a hundred thousand times, my dear sir, but it strikes me you have the impudence—in the circumstances, I may call it the indecency—to appear cast down?'

'It is true,' said he: 'I am. I am cast down. I am literally cast down. I feel myself quite helpless against your cousin.'

'Now, really!' I asked. 'Is this serious? And is it perhaps the reason why you have gorged the poor devil with every species of insult? and why you took such surprising pains to supply me with what I had so little need of—another enemy? That you were helpless against them? "Here is my last missile," say you; "my ammunition is quite exhausted: just wait till I get the last in—it will irritate, it cannot hurt him. There—you see!—he is furious now, and I am quite helpless. One more prod, another kick: now he is a mere lunatic! Stand behind me; I am quite helpless!"

Mr. Romaine, I am asking myself as to the background or motive of this singular jest, and whether the name of it should not be called treachery?’

‘I can scarce wonder,’ said he. ‘In truth it has been a singular business, and we are very fortunate to be out of it so well. Yet it was not treachery: no, no, Mr. Anne, it was not treachery; and if you will do me the favour to listen to me for the inside of a minute, I shall demonstrate the same to you beyond cavil.’ He seemed to wake up to his ordinary briskness. ‘You see the point?’ he began. ‘He had not yet read the newspaper, but who could tell when he might? He might have had that damned journal in his pocket, and how should we know? We were—I may say, we are—at the mercy of the merest twopenny accident.’

‘Why, true,’ said I: ‘I had not thought of that.’

‘I warrant you,’ cried Romaine, ‘you had supposed it was nothing to be the hero of an interesting notice in the journals! You had supposed, as like as not, it was a form of secrecy! But not so in the least. A part of England is already buzzing with the name of Champdivers; a day or two more and the mail will have carried it everywhere: so wonderful a machine is this of ours for disseminating intelligence! Think of it! When my father was born—but that is another story. To return: we had here the elements of such a combustion as I dread to think of—your cousin and the journal. Let him but glance an eye upon that column of print, and where

were we? It is easy to ask; not so easy to answer, my young friend. And let me tell you, this sheet is the Viscount's usual reading. It is my conviction he had it in his pocket.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said I. 'I have been unjust. I did not appreciate my danger.'

'I think you never do,' said he.

'But yet surely that public scene—' I began.

'It was madness. I quite agree with you,' Mr. Romaine interrupted. 'But it was your uncle's orders, Mr. Anne, and what could I do? Tell him you were the murderer of Goguelat? I think not.'

'No, sure!' said I. 'That would but have been to make the trouble thicker. We were certainly in a very ill posture.'

'You do not yet appreciate how grave it was,' he replied. 'It was necessary for you that your cousin should go, and go at once. You yourself had to leave to-night under cover of darkness, and how could you have done that with the Viscount in the next room? He must go, then; he must leave without delay. And that was the difficulty.'

'Pardon me, Mr. Romaine, but could not my uncle have bidden him go?' I asked.

‘Why, I see I must tell you that this is not so simple as it sounds,’ he replied. ‘You say this is your uncle’s house, and so it is. But to all effects and purposes it is your cousin’s also. He has rooms here; has had them coming on for thirty years now, and they are filled with a prodigious accumulation of trash—stays, I dare say, and powder-puffs, and such effeminate idiocy—to which none could dispute his title, even suppose any one wanted to. We had a perfect right to bid him go, and he had a perfect right to reply, “Yes, I will go, but not without my stays and cravats. I must first get together the nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine chestsfull of insufferable rubbish, that I have spent the last thirty years collecting—and may very well spend the next thirty hours a-packing of.” And what should we have said to that?’

‘By way of repartee?’ I asked. ‘Two tall footmen and a pair of crabtree cudgels, I suggest.’

‘The Lord deliver me from the wisdom of laymen!’ cried Romaine. ‘Put myself in the wrong at the beginning of a lawsuit? No, indeed! There was but one thing to do, and I did it, and burned my last cartridge in the doing of it. I stunned him. And it gave us three hours, by which we should make haste to profit; for if there is one thing sure, it is that he will be up to time again to-morrow in the morning.’

‘Well,’ said I, ‘I own myself an idiot. Well do they say, an old soldier, an old innocent! For I guessed nothing of all this.’

‘And, guessing it, have you the same objections to leave England?’ he inquired.

‘The same,’ said I.

‘It is indispensable,’ he objected.

‘And it cannot be,’ I replied. ‘Reason has nothing to say in the matter; and I must not let you squander any of yours. It will be enough to tell you this is an affair of the heart.’

‘Is it even so?’ quoth Romaine, nodding his head. ‘And I might have been sure of it. Place them in a hospital, put them in a jail in yellow overalls, do what you will, young Jessamy finds young Jenny. O, have it your own way; I am too old a hand to argue with young gentlemen who choose to fancy themselves in love; I have too much experience, thank you. Only, be sure that you appreciate what you risk: the prison, the dock, the gallows, and the halter—terribly vulgar circumstances, my young friend; grim, sordid, earnest; no poetry in that!’

‘And there I am warned,’ I returned gaily. ‘No man could be warned more finely or with a greater eloquence. And I am of the same opinion still. Until I have again seen that lady, nothing shall induce me to quit Great Britain. I have besides—’

And here I came to a full stop. It was upon my tongue to have told him the story of the drovers, but at the first word of it my voice died in my throat. There might be a limit to the lawyer's toleration, I reflected.

I had not been so long in Britain altogether; for the most part of that time I had been by the heels in limbo in Edinburgh Castle; and already I had confessed to killing one man with a pair of scissors; and now I was to go on and plead guilty to having settled another with a holly stick! A wave of discretion went over me as cold and as deep as the sea.

'In short, sir, this is a matter of feeling,' I concluded, 'and nothing will prevent my going to Edinburgh.'

If I had fired a pistol in his ear he could not have been more startled.

'To Edinburgh?' he repeated. 'Edinburgh? where the very paving-stones know you!'

'Then is the murder out!' said I. 'But, Mr. Romaine, is there not sometimes safety in boldness? Is it not a common-place of strategy to get where the enemy least expects you? And where would he expect me less?'

'Faith, there is something in that, too!' cried the lawyer. 'Ay, certainly, a great deal in that. All the witnesses drowned but one, and he safe in prison; you yourself changed beyond recognition—let us hope—and walking the streets of the very town you have illustrated by



your—well, your eccentricity! It is not badly combined, indeed!’

‘You approve it, then?’ said I.

‘O, approve!’ said he; ‘there is no question of approval. There is only one course which I could approve, and that were to escape to France *instanter*.’

‘You do not wholly disapprove, at least?’ I substituted.

‘Not wholly; and it would not matter if I did,’ he replied. ‘Go your own way; you are beyond argument. And I am not sure that you will run more danger by that course than by any other. Give the servants time to get to bed and fall asleep, then take a country cross-road and walk, as the rhyme has it, like blazes all night. In the morning take a chaise or take the mail at pleasure, and continue your journey with all the decorum and reserve of which you shall be found capable.’

‘I am taking the picture in,’ I said. ‘Give me time. ’Tis the tout ensemble I must see: the whole as opposed to the details.’

‘Mountebank!’ he murmured.

‘Yes, I have it now; and I see myself with a servant, and that servant is Rowley,’ said I.

‘So as to have one more link with your uncle?’ suggested the lawyer.

‘Very judicious!’

‘And, pardon me, but that is what it is,’ I exclaimed. ‘Judicious is the word. I am not making a deception fit to last for thirty years; I do not found a palace in the living granite for the night. This is a shelter tent—a flying picture—seen, admired, and gone again in the wink of an eye. What is wanted, in short, is a trompe-l’œil that shall be good enough for twelve hours at an inn: is it not so?’

‘It is, and the objection holds. Rowley is but another danger,’ said Romaine.

‘Rowley,’ said I, ‘will pass as a servant from a distance—as a creature seen poised on the dicky of a bowling chaise. He will pass at hand as a smart, civil fellow one meets in the inn corridor, and looks back at, and asks, and is told, “Gentleman’s servant in Number 4.” He will pass, in fact, all round, except with his personal friends! My dear sir, pray what do you expect? Of course if we meet my cousin, or if we meet anybody who took part in the judicious exhibition of this evening, we are lost; and who’s denying it? To every disguise, however good and safe, there is always the weak point; you must always take (let us say—and to take a simile from your own waistcoat pocket) a snuff box-full of risk. You’ll get it just as small with Rowley as with anybody else. And the long and short of it is, the lad’s honest, he likes me, I trust him; he is my servant, or nobody.’

'He might not accept,' said Romaine.

'I bet you a thousand pounds he does!' cried I. 'But no matter; all you have to do is to send him out to-night on this cross-country business, and leave the thing to me. I tell you, he will be my servant, and I tell you, he will do well.'

I had crossed the room, and was already overhauling my wardrobe as I spoke.

'Well,' concluded the lawyer, with a shrug, 'one risk with another: à la guerre comme à la guerre, as you would say. Let the brat come and be useful, at least.' And he was about to ring the bell, when his eye was caught by my researches in the wardrobe. 'Do not fall in love with these coats, waistcoats, cravats, and other panoply and accoutrements by which you are now surrounded. You must not run the post as a dandy. It is not the fashion, even.'

'You are pleased to be facetious, sir,' said I; 'and not according to knowledge. These clothes are my life, they are my disguise; and since I can take but few of them, I were a fool indeed if I selected hastily! Will you understand, once and for all, what I am seeking? To be invisible, is the first point; the second, to be invisible in a post-chaise and with a servant. Can you not perceive the delicacy of the quest? Nothing must be too coarse, nothing too fine; rien de voyant,

rien qui détonne; so that I may leave everywhere the inconspicuous image of a handsome young man of a good fortune travelling in proper style, whom the landlord will forget in twelve hours—and the chambermaid perhaps remember, God bless her! with a sigh. This is the very fine art of dress.’

‘I have practised it with success for fifty years,’ said Romaine, with a chuckle. ‘A black suit and a clean shirt is my infallible recipe.’

‘You surprise me; I did not think you would be shallow!’ said I, lingering between two coats. ‘Pray, Mr. Romaine, have I your head? or did you travel post and with a smartish servant?’

‘Neither, I admit,’ said he.

‘Which change the whole problem,’ I continued. ‘I have to dress for a smartish servant and a Russia leather despatch-box.’ That brought me to a stand. I came over and looked at the box with a moment’s hesitation. ‘Yes,’ I resumed. ‘Yes, and for the despatch-box! It looks moneyed and landed; it means I have a lawyer. It is an invaluable property. But I could have wished it to hold less money. The responsibility is crushing. Should I not do more wisely to take five hundred pounds, and intrust the remainder with you, Mr. Romaine?’

‘If you are sure you will not want it,’ answered Romaine.

'I am far from sure of that,' cried I. 'In the first place, as a philosopher. This is the first time I have been at the head of a large sum, and it is conceivable—who knows himself?—that I may make it fly. In the second place, as a fugitive. Who knows what I may need? The whole of it may be inadequate. But I can always write for more.'

'You do not understand,' he replied. 'I break off all communication with you here and now. You must give me a power of attorney ere you start to-night, and then be done with me trenchantly until better days.'

I believe I offered some objection.

'Think a little for once of me!' said Romaine. 'I must not have seen you before to-night. To-night we are to have had our only interview, and you are to have given me the power; and to-night I am to have lost sight of you again—I know not whither, you were upon business, it was none of my affairs to question you! And this, you are to remark, in the interests of your own safety much more than mine.'

'I am not even to write to you?' I said, a little bewildered.

'I believe I am cutting the last strand that connects you with common sense,' he replied. 'But that is the plain English of it. You are not even to write; and if you did, I would not answer.'

'A letter, however—' I began.

‘Listen to me,’ interrupted Romaine. ‘So soon as your cousin reads the paragraph, what will he do? Put the police upon looking into my correspondence! So soon as you write to me, in short, you write to Bow Street; and if you will take my advice, you will date that letter from France.’

‘The devil!’ said I, for I began suddenly to see that this might put me out of the way of my business.

‘What is it now?’ says he.

‘There will be more to be done, then, before we can part,’ I answered.

‘I give you the whole night,’ said he. ‘So long as you are off ere daybreak, I am content.’

‘In short, Mr. Romaine,’ said I, ‘I have had so much benefit of your advice and services that I am loth to sever the connection, and would even ask a substitute. I would be obliged for a letter of introduction to one of your own cloth in Edinburgh—an old man for choice, very experienced, very respectable, and very secret. Could you favour me with such a letter?’

‘Why, no,’ said he. ‘Certainly not. I will do no such thing, indeed.’

'It would be a great favour, sir,' I pleaded.

'It would be an unpardonable blunder,' he replied. 'What? Give you a letter of introduction? and when the police come, I suppose, I must forget the circumstance? No, indeed. Talk of it no more.'

'You seem to be always in the right,' said I. 'The letter would be out of the question, I quite see that. But the lawyer's name might very well have dropped from you in the way of conversation; having heard him mentioned, I might profit by the circumstance to introduce myself; and in this way my business would be the better done, and you not in the least compromised.'

'What is this business?' said Romaine.

'I have not said that I had any,' I replied. 'It might arise. This is only a possibility that I must keep in view.'

'Well,' said he, with a gesture of the hands, 'I mention Mr. Robbie; and let that be an end of it!—Or wait!' he added, 'I have it. Here is something that will serve you for an introduction, and cannot compromise me.' And he wrote his name and the Edinburgh lawyer's address on a piece of card and tossed it to me.

