

CHAPTER XXI—I BECOME THE OWNER OF A CLARET-COLOURED CHAISE

What with packing, signing papers, and partaking of an excellent cold supper in the lawyer's room, it was past two in the morning before we were ready for the road. Romaine himself let us out of a window in a part of the house known to Rowley: it appears it served as a kind of postern to the servants' hall, by which (when they were in the mind for a clandestine evening) they would come regularly in and out; and I remember very well the vinegar aspect of the lawyer on the receipt of this piece of information—how he pursed his lips, juttred his eyebrows, and kept repeating, 'This must be seen to, indeed! this shall be barred to-morrow in the morning!' In this preoccupation, I believe he took leave of me without observing it; our things were handed out; we heard the window shut behind us; and became instantly lost in a horrid intricacy of blackness and the shadow of woods.

A little wet snow kept sleepily falling, pausing, and falling again; it seemed perpetually beginning to snow and perpetually leaving off; and the darkness was intense. Time and again we walked into trees; time and again found ourselves adrift among garden borders or stuck like a ram in the thicket. Rowley had possessed himself of the matches, and he was neither to be terrified nor softened. 'No, I will not, Mr. Anne, sir,' he would reply. 'You know he tell me to wait till we were over the 'ill. It's only a little way now. Why, and I thought you was a soldier, too!'

I was at least a very glad soldier when my valet consented at last to kindle a thieves' match. From this, we easily lit the lantern; and thenceforward, through a labyrinth of woodland paths, were conducted by its uneasy glimmer. Both booted and great-coated, with tall hats much of a shape, and laden with booty in the form of a despatch-box, a case of pistols, and two plump valises, I thought we had very much the look of a pair of brothers returning from the sack of Amersham Place.

We issued at last upon a country by-road where we might walk abreast and without precaution. It was nine miles to Aylesbury, our immediate destination; by a watch, which formed part of my new outfit, it should be about half-past three in the morning; and as we did not choose to arrive before daylight, time could not be said to press. I gave the order to march at ease.

'Now, Rowley,' said I, 'so far so good. You have come, in the most obliging manner in the world, to carry these valises. The question is, what next? What are we to do at Aylesbury? or, more particularly, what are you? Thence, I go on a journey. Are you to accompany me?'

He gave a little chuckle. 'That's all settled already, Mr. Anne, sir,' he replied. 'Why, I've got my things here in the valise—a half a dozen shirts and what not; I'm all ready, sir: just you lead on: you'll see.'

'The devil you have!' said I. 'You made pretty sure of your welcome.'

'If you please, sir,' said Rowley.

He looked up at me, in the light of the lantern, with a boyish shyness and triumph that awoke my conscience. I could never let this innocent involve himself in the perils and difficulties that beset my course, without some hint of warning, which it was a matter of extreme delicacy to make plain enough and not too plain.

'No, no,' said I; 'you may think you have made a choice, but it was blindfold, and you must make it over again. The Count's service is a good one; what are you leaving it for? Are you not throwing away the substance for the shadow? No, do not answer me yet. You imagine that I am a prosperous nobleman, just declared my uncle's heir, on the threshold of the best of good fortune, and, from the point of view of a judicious servant, a jewel of a master to serve and stick to? Well, my boy, I am nothing of the kind, nothing of the kind.'

As I said the words, I came to a full stop and held up the lantern to his face. He stood before me, brilliantly illuminated on the background of impenetrable night and falling snow, stricken to stone between his double burden like an ass between two panniers, and gaping at me like a blunderbuss. I had never seen a face so predestined to be astonished, or so susceptible of rendering the emotion of surprise; and it tempted me as an open piano tempts the musician.

'Nothing of the sort, Rowley,' I continued, in a churchyard voice.

'These are appearances, petty appearances. I am in peril, homeless, hunted. I count scarce any one in England who is not my enemy. From this hour I drop my name, my title; I become nameless; my name is proscribed. My liberty, my life, hang by a hair. The destiny which you will accept, if you go forth with me, is to be tracked by spies, to hide yourself under a false name, to follow the desperate pretences and perhaps share the fate of a murderer with a price upon his head.'

His face had been hitherto beyond expectation, passing from one depth to another of tragic astonishment, and really worth paying to see; but at this it suddenly cleared. 'Oh, I ain't afraid!' he said; and then, choking into laughter, 'why, I see it from the first!'

I could have beaten him. But I had so grossly overshot the mark that I suppose it took me two good miles of road and half an hour of elocution to persuade him I had been in earnest. In the course of which I became so interested in demonstrating my present danger that I forgot all about my future safety, and not only told him the story of Goguelat, but threw in the business of the drovers as well, and ended by blurting out that I was a soldier of Napoleon's and a prisoner of war.

This was far from my views when I began; and it is a common complaint of me that I have a long tongue. I believe it is a fault beloved by fortune. Which of you considerate fellows would have done a thing at once so foolhardy and so wise as to make a confidant of a boy in his teens, and positively smelling of the nursery? And when had I cause to

repent it? There is none so apt as a boy to be the adviser of any man in difficulties such as mine. To the beginnings of virile common sense he adds the last lights of the child's imagination; and he can fling himself into business with that superior earnestness that properly belongs to play. And Rowley was a boy made to my hand. He had a high sense of romance, and a secret cultus for all soldiers and criminals. His travelling library consisted of a chap-book life of Wallace and some sixpenny parts of the 'Old Bailey Sessions Papers' by Gurney the shorthand writer; and the choice depicts his character to a hair. You can imagine how his new prospects brightened on a boy of this disposition. To be the servant and companion of a fugitive, a soldier, and a murderer, rolled in one—to live by stratagems, disguises, and false names, in an atmosphere of midnight and mystery so thick that you could cut it with a knife—was really, I believe, more dear to him than his meals, though he was a great trencherman, and something of a glutton besides. For myself, as the peg by which all this romantic business hung, I was simply idolised from that moment; and he would rather have sacrificed his hand than surrendered the privilege of serving me.

We arranged the terms of our campaign, trudging amicably in the snow, which now, with the approach of morning, began to fall to purpose. I chose the name of Ramornie, I imagine from its likeness to Romaine; Rowley, from an irresistible conversion of ideas, I dubbed Gammon. His distress was laughable to witness: his own choice of an unassuming nickname had been Claude Duval! We settled our procedure at the various inns where we should alight, rehearsed our little manners like a piece of

drill until it seemed impossible we should ever be taken unprepared; and in all these dispositions, you maybe sure the despatch-box was not forgotten. Who was to pick it up, who was to set it down, who was to remain beside it, who was to sleep with it—there was no contingency omitted, all was gone into with the thoroughness of a drill-sergeant on the one hand and a child with a new plaything on the other.

‘I say, wouldn’t it look queer if you and me was to come to the post-house with all this luggage?’ said Rowley.

‘I dare say,’ I replied. ‘But what else is to be done?’

‘Well, now, sir—you hear me,’ says Rowley. ‘I think it would look more natural-like if you was to come to the post-house alone, and with nothing in your ’ands—more like a gentleman, you know. And you might say that your servant and baggage was a-waiting for you up the road. I think I could manage, somehow, to make a shift with all them dratted things—leastways if you was to give me a ’and up with them at the start.’

‘And I would see you far enough before I allowed you to try, Mr. Rowley!’ I cried. ‘Why, you would be quite defenceless! A footpad that was an infant child could rob you. And I should probably come driving by to find you in a ditch with your throat cut. But there is something in your idea, for all that; and I propose we put it in execution no farther forward than the next corner of a lane.’

Accordingly, instead of continuing to aim for Aylesbury, we headed by cross-roads for some point to the northward of it, whither I might assist Rowley with the baggage, and where I might leave him to await my return in the post-chaise.

It was snowing to purpose, the country all white, and ourselves walking snowdrifts, when the first glimmer of the morning showed us an inn upon the highwyside. Some distance off, under the shelter of a corner of the road and a clump of trees, I loaded Rowley with the whole of our possessions, and watched him till he staggered in safety into the doors of the Green Dragon, which was the sign of the house. Thence I walked briskly into Aylesbury, rejoicing in my freedom and the causeless good spirits that belong to a snowy morning; though, to be sure, long before I had arrived the snow had again ceased to fall, and the eaves of Aylesbury were smoking in the level sun. There was an accumulation of gigs and chaises in the yard, and a great bustle going forward in the coffee-room and about the doors of the inn. At these evidences of so much travel on the road I was seized with a misgiving lest it should be impossible to get horses, and I should be detained in the precarious neighbourhood of my cousin. Hungry as I was, I made my way first of all to the postmaster, where he stood—a big, athletic, horsey-looking man, blowing into a key in the corner of the yard.

On my making my modest request, he awoke from his indifference into what seemed passion.

‘A po’-shay and ’osses!’ he cried. ‘Do I look as if I ’ad a po’-shay and ’osses? Damn me, if I ’ave such a thing on the premises. I don’t make ’osses and chaises—I ’ire ’em. You might be God Almighty!’ said he; and instantly, as if he had observed me for the first time, he broke off, and lowered his voice into the confidential. ‘Why, now that I see you are a gentleman,’ said he, ‘I’ll tell you what! If you like to buy, I have the article to fit you. Second-’and shay by Lycett, of London. Latest style; good as new. Superior fittin’s, net on the roof, baggage platform, pistol ’olsters—the most com-plete and the most gen-teel turn-out I ever see! The ’ole for seventy-five pound! It’s as good as givin’ her away!’

‘Do you propose I should trundle it myself, like a hawker’s barrow?’ said I. ‘Why, my good man, if I had to stop here, anyway, I should prefer to buy a house and garden!’

‘Come and look at her!’ he cried; and, with the word, links his arm in mine and carries me to the outhouse where the chaise was on view.

It was just the sort of chaise that I had dreamed of for my purpose: eminently rich, inconspicuous, and genteel; for, though I thought the postmaster no great authority, I was bound to agree with him so far. The body was painted a dark claret, and the wheels an invisible green. The lamp and glasses were bright as silver; and the whole equipage had an air of privacy and reserve that seemed to repel inquiry and disarm suspicion. With a servant like Rowley, and a chaise like this, I felt that I could

go from the Land's End to John o' Groat's House amid a population of bowing ostlers. And I suppose I betrayed in my manner the degree in which the bargain tempted me.

'Come,' cried the postmaster—I'll make it seventy, to oblige a friend!

'The point is: the horses,' said I.

'Well,' said he, consulting his watch, 'it's now gone the 'alf after eight. What time do you want her at the door?'

'Horses and all?' said I.

'Osses and all!' says he. 'One good turn deserves another. You give me seventy pound for the shay, and I'll 'oss it for you. I told you I didn't make 'osses; but I can make 'em, to oblige a friend.'

What would you have? It was not the wisest thing in the world to buy a chaise within a dozen miles of my uncle's house; but in this way I got my horses for the next stage. And by any other it appeared that I should have to wait. Accordingly I paid the money down—perhaps twenty pounds too much, though it was certainly a well-made and well-appointed vehicle—ordered it round in half an hour, and proceeded to refresh myself with breakfast.

The table to which I sat down occupied the recess of a bay-window, and

commanded a view of the front of the inn, where I continued to be amused by the successive departures of travellers—the fussy and the offhand, the niggardly and the lavish—all exhibiting their different characters in that diagnostic moment of the farewell: some escorted to the stirrup or the chaise door by the chamberlain, the chambermaids and the waiters almost in a body, others moving off under a cloud, without human countenance. In the course of this I became interested in one for whom this ovation began to assume the proportions of a triumph; not only the under-servants, but the barmaid, the landlady, and my friend the postmaster himself, crowding about the steps to speed his departure. I was aware, at the same time, of a good deal of merriment, as though the traveller were a man of a ready wit, and not too dignified to air it in that society. I leaned forward with a lively curiosity; and the next moment I had blotted myself behind the teapot. The popular traveller had turned to wave a farewell; and behold! he was no other than my cousin Alain. It was a change of the sharpest from the angry, pallid man I had seen at Amersham Place. Ruddy to a fault, illuminated with vintages, crowned with his curls like Bacchus, he now stood before me for an instant, the perfect master of himself, smiling with airs of conscious popularity and insufferable condescension. He reminded me at once of a royal duke, or an actor turned a little elderly, and of a blatant bagman who should have been the illegitimate son of a gentleman. A moment after he was gliding noiselessly on the road to London.

I breathed again. I recognised, with heartfelt gratitude, how lucky I had been to go in by the stable-yard instead of the hostelry door, and

what a fine occasion of meeting my cousin I had lost by the purchase of the claret-coloured chaise! The next moment I remembered that there was a waiter present. No doubt but he must have observed me when I crouched behind the breakfast equipage; no doubt but he must have commented on this unusual and undignified behaviour; and it was essential that I should do something to remove the impression.

'Waiter!' said I, 'that was the nephew of Count Carwell that just drove off, wasn't it?'

'Yes, sir: Viscount Carwell we calls him,' he replied.

'Ah, I thought as much,' said I. 'Well, well, damn all these Frenchmen, say I!'

'You may say so indeed, sir,' said the waiter. 'They ain't not to say in the same field with our 'ome-raised gentry.'

'Nasty tempers?' I suggested.

'Beas'ly temper, sir, the Viscount 'ave,' said the waiter with feeling.

'Why, no longer agone than this morning, he was sitting breakfasting and reading in his paper. I suppose, sir, he come on some pilitical information, or it might be about 'orses, but he raps his 'and upon the table sudden and calls for curacoa. It gave me quite a turn, it did; he did it that sudden and 'ard. Now, sir, that may be manners in France,

but all I can say is, that I'm not used to it.'

'Reading the paper, was he?' said I. 'What paper, eh?'

'Here it is, sir,' exclaimed the waiter. 'Seems like as if he'd dropped it.'

And picking it off the floor he presented it to me.

I may say that I was quite prepared, that I already knew what to expect; but at sight of the cold print my heart stopped beating. There it was: the fulfilment of Romaine's apprehension was before me; the paper was laid open at the capture of Clausel. I felt as if I could take a little curacoa myself, but on second thoughts called for brandy. It was badly wanted; and suddenly I observed the waiter's eye to sparkle, as it were, with some recognition; made certain he had remarked the resemblance between me and Alain; and became aware—as by a revelation—of the fool's part I had been playing. For I had now managed to put my identification beyond a doubt, if Alain should choose to make his inquiries at Aylesbury; and, as if that were not enough, I had added, at an expense of seventy pounds, a clue by which he might follow me through the length and breadth of England, in the shape of the claret-coloured chaise! That elegant equipage (which I began to regard as little better than a claret-coloured ante-room to the hangman's cart) coming presently to the door, I left my breakfast in the middle and departed; posting to the north as diligently as my cousin Alain was posting to the south, and

putting my trust (such as it was) in an opposite direction and equal speed.