

CHAPTER XXII—CHARACTER AND ACQUIREMENTS OF MR. ROWLEY

I am not certain that I had ever really appreciated before that hour the extreme peril of the adventure on which I was embarked. The sight of my cousin, the look of his face—so handsome, so jovial at the first sight, and branded with so much malignity as you saw it on the second—with his hyperbolic curls in order, with his neckcloth tied as if for the conquests of love, setting forth (as I had no doubt in the world he was doing) to clap the Bow Street runners on my trail, and cover England with handbills, each dangerous as a loaded musket, convinced me for the first time that the affair was no less serious than death. I believe it came to a near touch whether I should not turn the horses' heads at the next stage and make directly for the coast. But I was now in the position of a man who should have thrown his gage into the den of lions; or, better still, like one who should have quarrelled overnight under the influence of wine, and now, at daylight, in a cold winter's morning, and humbly sober, must make good his words. It is not that I thought any the less, or any the less warmly, of Flora. But, as I smoked a grim segar that morning in a corner of the chaise, no doubt I considered, in the first place, that the letter-post had been invented, and admitted privately to myself, in the second, that it would have been highly possible to write her on a piece of paper, seal it, and send it skimming by the mail, instead of going personally into these egregious dangers, and through a country that I beheld crowded with gibbets and Bow Street officers. As for Sim and Candlish, I doubt if they crossed my mind.

At the Green Dragon Rowley was waiting on the doorsteps with the luggage, and really was bursting with unpalatable conversation.

'Who do you think we've 'ad 'ere, sir?' he began breathlessly, as the chaise drove off. 'Red Breasts'; and he nodded his head portentously.

'Red Breasts?' I repeated, for I stupidly did not understand at the moment an expression I had often heard.

'Ah!' said he. 'Red weskits. Runners. Bow Street runners. Two on' em, and one was Lavender himself! I hear the other say quite plain, "Now, Mr. Lavender, if you're ready." They was breakfasting as nigh me as I am to that postboy. They're all right; they ain't after us. It's a forger; and I didn't send them off on a false scent—O no! I thought there was no use in having them over our way; so I give them "very valuable information," Mr. Lavender said, and tipped me a tizzy for myself; and they're off to Luton. They showed me the 'andcuffs, too—the other one did—and he clicked the dratted things on my wrist; and I tell you, I believe I nearly went off in a swoond! There's something so beastly in the feel of them! Begging your pardon, Mr. Anne,' he added, with one of his delicious changes from the character of the confidential schoolboy into that of the trained, respectful servant.

Well, I must not be proud! I cannot say I found the subject of handcuffs to my fancy; and it was with more asperity than was needful that I

reproved him for the slip about the name.

‘Yes, Mr. Ramornie,’ says he, touching his hat. ‘Begging your pardon, Mr. Ramornie. But I’ve been very piticular, sir, up to now; and you may trust me to be very piticular in the future. It were only a slip, sir.’

‘My good boy,’ said I, with the most imposing severity, ‘there must be no slips. Be so good as to remember that my life is at stake.’

I did not embrace the occasion of telling him how many I had made myself. It is my principle that an officer must never be wrong. I have seen two divisions beating their brains out for a fortnight against a worthless and quite impregnable castle in a pass: I knew we were only doing it for discipline, because the General had said so at first, and had not yet found any way out of his own words; and I highly admired his force of character, and throughout these operations thought my life exposed in a very good cause. With fools and children, which included Rowley, the necessity was even greater. I proposed to myself to be infallible; and even when he expressed some wonder at the purchase of the claret-coloured chaise, I put him promptly in his place. In our situation, I told him, everything had to be sacrificed to appearances; doubtless, in a hired chaise, we should have had more freedom, but look at the dignity! I was so positive, that I had sometimes almost convinced myself. Not for long, you may be certain! This detestable conveyance always appeared to me to be laden with Bow Street officers, and to have a placard upon the back of it publishing my name and crimes. If I had paid seventy pounds to get

the thing, I should not have stuck at seven hundred to be safely rid of it.

And if the chaise was a danger, what an anxiety was the despatch-box and its golden cargo! I had never had a care but to draw my pay and spend it; I had lived happily in the regiment, as in my father's house, fed by the great Emperor's commissariat as by ubiquitous doves of Elijah—or, my faith! if anything went wrong with the commissariat, helping myself with the best grace in the world from the next peasant! And now I began to feel at the same time the burthen of riches and the fear of destitution. There were ten thousand pounds in the despatch-box, but I reckoned in French money, and had two hundred and fifty thousand agonies; I kept it under my hand all day, I dreamed of it at night. In the inns, I was afraid to go to dinner and afraid to go to sleep. When I walked up a hill I durst not leave the doors of the claret-coloured chaise.

Sometimes I would change the disposition of the funds: there were days when I carried as much as five or six thousand pounds on my own person, and only the residue continued to voyage in the treasure-chest—days when I bulked all over like my cousin, crackled to a touch with bank paper, and had my pockets weighed to bursting-point with sovereigns. And there were other days when I wearied of the thing—or grew ashamed of it—and put

all the money back where it had come from: there let it take its chance, like better people! In short, I set Rowley a poor example of consistency, and in philosophy, none at all.

Little he cared! All was one to him so long as he was amused, and I never knew any one amused more easily. He was thrillingly interested in life, travel, and his own melodramatic position. All day he would be looking from the chaise windows with ebullitions of gratified curiosity, that were sometimes justified and sometimes not, and that (taken altogether) it occasionally wearied me to be obliged to share. I can look at horses, and I can look at trees too, although not fond of it. But why should I look at a lame horse, or a tree that was like the letter Y? What exhilaration could I feel in viewing a cottage that was the same colour as 'the second from the miller's' in some place where I had never been, and of which I had not previously heard? I am ashamed to complain, but there were moments when my juvenile and confidential friend weighed heavy on my hands. His cackle was indeed almost continuous, but it was never unamiable. He showed an amiable curiosity when he was asking questions; an amiable guilelessness when he was conferring information. And both he did largely. I am in a position to write the biographies of Mr. Rowley, Mr. Rowley's father and mother, his Aunt Eliza, and the miller's dog; and nothing but pity for the reader, and some misgivings as to the law of copyright, prevail on me to withhold them.

A general design to mould himself upon my example became early apparent, and I had not the heart to check it. He began to mimic my carriage; he acquired, with servile accuracy, a little manner I had of shrugging the shoulders; and I may say it was by observing it in him that I first discovered it in myself. One day it came out by chance that I was of the Catholic religion. He became plunged in thought, at which I was gently

glad. Then suddenly—

‘Odd-rabbit it! I’ll be Catholic too!’ he broke out. ‘You must teach me it, Mr. Anne—I mean, Ramornie.’

I dissuaded him: alleging that he would find me very imperfectly informed as to the grounds and doctrines of the Church, and that, after all, in the matter of religions, it was a very poor idea to change. ‘Of course, my Church is the best,’ said I; ‘but that is not the reason why I belong to it: I belong to it because it was the faith of my house. I wish to take my chances with my own people, and so should you. If it is a question of going to hell, go to hell like a gentleman with your ancestors.’

‘Well, it wasn’t that,’ he admitted. ‘I don’t know that I was exactly thinking of hell. Then there’s the inquisition, too. That’s rather a cawker, you know.’

‘And I don’t believe you were thinking of anything in the world,’ said I—which put a period to his respectable conversion.

He consoled himself by playing for awhile on a cheap flageolet, which was one of his diversions, and to which I owed many intervals of peace. When he first produced it, in the joints, from his pocket, he had the duplicity to ask me if I played upon it. I answered, no; and he put the instrument away with a sigh and the remark that he had thought I might.

For some while he resisted the unspeakable temptation, his fingers visibly itching and twittering about his pocket, even his interest in the landscape and in sporadic anecdote entirely lost. Presently the pipe was in his hands again; he fitted, unfitted, refitted, and played upon it in dumb show for some time.

'I play it myself a little,' says he.

'Do you?' said I, and yawned.

And then he broke down.

'Mr. Ramornie, if you please, would it disturb you, sir, if I was to play a chune?' he pleaded. And from that hour, the tootling of the flageolet cheered our way.

He was particularly keen on the details of battles, single combats, incidents of scouting parties, and the like. These he would make haste to cap with some of the exploits of Wallace, the only hero with whom he had the least acquaintance. His enthusiasm was genuine and pretty. When he learned we were going to Scotland, 'Well, then,' he broke out, 'I'll see where Wallace lived!' And presently after, he fell to moralising. 'It's a strange thing, sir,' he began, 'that I seem somehow to have always the wrong sow by the ear. I'm English after all, and I glory in it. My eye! don't I, though! Let some of your Frenchies come over here to invade, and you'll see whether or not! Oh, yes, I'm English to the

backbone, I am. And yet look at me! I got hold of this 'ere William Wallace and took to him right off; I never heard of such a man before! And then you came along, and I took to you. And both the two of you were my born enemies! I—I beg your pardon, Mr. Ramornie, but would you mind it very much if you didn't go for to do anything against England'—he brought the word out suddenly, like something hot—'when I was along of you?'

I was more affected than I can tell.

'Rowley,' I said, 'you need have no fear. By how much I love my own honour, by so much I will take care to protect yours. We are but fraternising at the outposts, as soldiers do. When the bugle calls, my boy, we must face each other, one for England, one for France, and may God defend the right!'

So I spoke at the moment; but for all my brave airs, the boy had wounded me in a vital quarter. His words continued to ring in my hearing. There was no remission all day of my remorseful thoughts; and that night (which we lay at Lichfield, I believe) there was no sleep for me in my bed. I put out the candle and lay down with a good resolution; and in a moment all was light about me like a theatre, and I saw myself upon the stage of it playing ignoble parts. I remembered France and my Emperor, now depending on the arbitrament of war, bent down, fighting on their knees and with their teeth against so many and such various assailants. And I burned with shame to be here in England, cherishing an English fortune,

pursuing an English mistress, and not there, to handle a musket in my native fields, and to manure them with my body if I fell. I remembered that I belonged to France. All my fathers had fought for her, and some had died; the voice in my throat, the sight of my eyes, the tears that now sprang there, the whole man of me, was fashioned of French earth and born of a French mother; I had been tended and caressed by a succession of the daughters of France, the fairest, the most ill-starred; and I had fought and conquered shoulder to shoulder with her sons. A soldier, a noble, of the proudest and bravest race in Europe, it had been left to the prattle of a hobbledehoy lackey in an English chaise to recall me to the consciousness of duty.

When I saw how it was I did not lose time in indecision. The old classical conflict of love and honour being once fairly before me, it did not cost me a thought. I was a Saint-Yves de K roual; and I decided to strike off on the morrow for Wakefield and Burchell Fenn, and embark, as soon as it should be morally possible, for the succour of my downtrodden fatherland and my beleaguered Emperor. Pursuant on this resolve, I leaped from bed, made a light, and as the watchman was crying half-past two in the dark streets of Lichfield, sat down to pen a letter of farewell to Flora. And then—whether it was the sudden chill of the night, whether it came by association of ideas from the remembrance of Swanston Cottage I know not, but there appeared before me—to the barking of sheep-dogs—a couple of snuffy and shambling figures, each wrapped in a plaid, each armed with a rude staff; and I was immediately bowed down to have forgotten them so long, and of late to have thought of them so

cavalierly.

Sure enough there was my errand! As a private person I was neither French nor English; I was something else first: a loyal gentleman, an honest man. Sim and Candlish must not be left to pay the penalty of my unfortunate blow. They held my honour tacitly pledged to succour them; and it is a sort of stoical refinement entirely foreign to my nature to set the political obligation above the personal and private. If France fell in the interval for the lack of Anne de St.-Yves, fall she must! But I was both surprised and humiliated to have had so plain a duty bound upon me for so long—and for so long to have neglected and forgotten it. I think any brave man will understand me when I say that I went to bed and to sleep with a conscience very much relieved, and woke again in the morning with a light heart. The very danger of the enterprise reassured me: to save Sim and Candlish (suppose the worst to come to the worst) it would be necessary for me to declare myself in a court of justice, with consequences which I did not dare to dwell upon; it could never be said that I had chosen the cheap and the easy—only that in a very perplexing competition of duties I had risked my life for the most immediate.

We resumed the journey with more diligence: thenceforward posted day and night; did not halt beyond what was necessary for meals; and the postillions were excited by gratuities, after the habit of my cousin Alain. For twopence I could have gone farther and taken four horses; so extreme was my haste, running as I was before the terrors of an awakened conscience. But I feared to be conspicuous. Even as it was, we

attracted only too much attention, with our pair and that white elephant, the seventy-pounds-worth of claret-coloured chaise.

Meanwhile I was ashamed to look Rowley in the face. The young shaver had contrived to put me wholly in the wrong; he had cost me a night's rest and a severe and healthful humiliation; and I was grateful and embarrassed in his society. This would never do; it was contrary to all my ideas of discipline; if the officer has to blush before the private, or the master before the servant, nothing is left to hope for but discharge or death. I hit upon the idea of teaching him French; and accordingly, from Lichfield, I became the distracted master, and he the scholar—how shall I say? indefatigable, but uninspired. His interest never flagged. He would hear the same word twenty times with profound refreshment, mispronounce it in several different ways, and forget it again with magical celerity. Say it happened to be stirrup. 'No, I don't seem to remember that word, Mr. Anne,' he would say: 'it don't seem to stick to me, that word don't.' And then, when I had told it him again, 'Etrier!' he would cry. 'To be sure! I had it on the tip of my tongue. Eterier!' (going wrong already, as if by a fatal instinct). 'What will I remember it by, now? Why, interior, to be sure! I'll remember it by its being something that ain't in the interior of a horse.' And when next I had occasion to ask him the French for stirrup, it was a toss-up whether he had forgotten all about it, or gave me exterior for an answer. He was never a hair discouraged. He seemed to consider that he was covering the ground at a normal rate. He came up smiling day after day. 'Now, sir, shall we do our French?' he would say;

and I would put questions, and elicit copious commentary and explanation, but never the shadow of an answer. My hands fell to my sides; I could have wept to hear him. When I reflected that he had as yet learned nothing, and what a vast deal more there was for him to learn, the period of these lessons seemed to unroll before me vast as eternity, and I saw myself a teacher of a hundred, and Rowley a pupil of ninety, still hammering on the rudiments! The wretched boy, I should say, was quite unspoiled by the inevitable familiarities of the journey. He turned out at each stage the pink of serving-lads, deft, civil, prompt, attentive, touching his hat like an automaton, raising the status of Mr. Ramornie in the eyes of all the inn by his smiling service, and seeming capable of anything in the world but the one thing I had chosen—learning French!