

CHAPTER XXIII—THE ADVENTURE OF THE RUNAWAY COUPLE

The country had for some time back been changing in character. By a thousand indications I could judge that I was again drawing near to Scotland. I saw it written in the face of the hills, in the growth of the trees, and in the glint of the waterbrooks that kept the high-road company. It might have occurred to me, also, that I was, at the same time, approaching a place of some fame in Britain—Gretna Green. Over these same leagues of road—which Rowley and I now traversed in the claret-coloured chaise, to the note of the flageolet and the French lesson—how many pairs of lovers had gone bowling northwards to the music of sixteen scampering horseshoes; and how many irate persons, parents, uncles, guardians, evicted rivals, had come tearing after, clapping the frequent red face to the chaise-window, lavishly shedding their gold about the post-houses, sedulously loading and re-loading, as they went, their avenging pistols! But I doubt if I had thought of it at all, before a wayside hazard swept me into the thick of an adventure of this nature; and I found myself playing providence with other people's lives, to my own admiration at the moment—and subsequently to my own brief but passionate regret.

At rather an ugly corner of an uphill reach I came on the wreck of a chaise lying on one side in the ditch, a man and a woman in animated discourse in the middle of the road, and the two postillions, each with

his pair of horses, looking on and laughing from the saddle.

'Morning breezes! here's a smash!' cried Rowley, pocketing his flageolet in the middle of the Tight Little Island.

I was perhaps more conscious of the moral smash than the physical—more alive to broken hearts than to broken chaises; for, as plain as the sun at morning, there was a screw loose in this runaway match. It is always a bad sign when the lower classes laugh: their taste in humour is both poor and sinister; and for a man, running the posts with four horses, presumably with open pockets, and in the company of the most entrancing little creature conceivable, to have come down so far as to be laughed at by his own postillions, was only to be explained on the double hypothesis, that he was a fool and no gentleman.

I have said they were man and woman. I should have said man and child. She was certainly not more than seventeen, pretty as an angel, just plump enough to damn a saint, and dressed in various shades of blue, from her stockings to her saucy cap, in a kind of taking gamut, the top note of which she flung me in a beam from her too appreciative eye. There was no doubt about the case: I saw it all. From a boarding-school, a black-board, a piano, and Clementi's Sonatinas, the child had made a rash adventure upon life in the company of a half-bred hawbuck; and she was already not only regretting it, but expressing her regret with point and pungency.

As I alighted they both paused with that unmistakable air of being interrupted in a scene. I uncovered to the lady and placed my services at their disposal.

It was the man who answered. 'There's no use in shamming, sir,' said he. 'This lady and I have run away, and her father's after us: road to Gretna, sir. And here have these nincompoops spilt us in the ditch and smashed the chaise!'

'Very provoking,' said I.

'I don't know when I've been so provoked!' cried he, with a glance down the road, of mortal terror.

'The father is no doubt very much incensed?' I pursued civilly.

'O God!' cried the hawbuck. 'In short, you see, we must get out of this. And I'll tell you what—it may seem cool, but necessity has no law—if you would lend us your chaise to the next post-house, it would be the very thing, sir.'

'I confess it seems cool,' I replied.

'What's that you say, sir?' he snapped.

'I was agreeing with you,' said I. 'Yes, it does seem cool; and what is

more to the point, it seems unnecessary. This thing can be arranged in a more satisfactory manner otherwise, I think. You can doubtless ride?’

This opened a door on the matter of their previous dispute, and the fellow appeared life-sized in his true colours. ‘That’s what I’ve been telling her: that, damn her! she must ride!’ he broke out. ‘And if the gentleman’s of the same mind, why, damme, you shall!’

As he said so, he made a snatch at her wrist, which she evaded with horror.

I stepped between them.

‘No, sir,’ said I; ‘the lady shall not.’

He turned on me raging. ‘And who are you to interfere?’ he roared.

‘There is here no question of who I am,’ I replied. ‘I may be the devil or the Archbishop of Canterbury for what you know, or need know. The point is that I can help you—it appears that nobody else can; and I will tell you how I propose to do it. I will give the lady a seat in my chaise, if you will return the compliment by allowing my servant to ride one of your horses.’

I thought he would have sprung at my throat.

'You have always the alternative before you: to wait here for the arrival of papa,' I added.

And that settled him. He cast another haggard look down the road, and capitulated.

'I am sure, sir, the lady is very much obliged to you,' he said, with an ill grace.

I gave her my hand; she mounted like a bird into the chaise; Rowley, grinning from ear to ear, closed the door behind us; the two impudent rascals of post-boys cheered and laughed aloud as we drove off; and my own postillion urged his horses at once into a rattling trot. It was plain I was supposed by all to have done a very dashing act, and ravished the bride from the ravisher.

In the meantime I stole a look at the little lady. She was in a state of pitiable discomposure, and her arms shook on her lap in her black lace mittens.

'Madam—' I began.

And she, in the same moment, finding her voice: 'O, what you must think of me!'

'Madam,' said I, 'what must any gentleman think when he sees youth,

beauty and innocence in distress? I wish I could tell you that I was old enough to be your father; I think we must give that up,' I continued, with a smile. 'But I will tell you something about myself which ought to do as well, and to set that little heart at rest in my society. I am a lover. May I say it of myself—for I am not quite used to all the niceties of English—that I am a true lover? There is one whom I admire, adore, obey; she is no less good than she is beautiful; if she were here, she would take you to her arms: conceive that she has sent me—that she has said to me, "Go, be her knight!"'

'O, I know she must be sweet, I know she must be worthy of you!' cried the little lady. 'She would never forget female decorum—nor make the terrible erratum I've done!'

And at this she lifted up her voice and wept.

This did not forward matters: it was in vain that I begged her to be more composed and to tell me a plain, consecutive tale of her misadventures; but she continued instead to pour forth the most extraordinary mixture of the correct school miss and the poor untutored little piece of womanhood in a false position—of engrafted pedantry and incoherent nature.

'I am certain it must have been judicial blindness,' she sobbed. 'I can't think how I didn't see it, but I didn't; and he isn't, is he? And then a curtain rose . . . O, what a moment was that! But I knew at once that you were; you had but to appear from your carriage, and I knew it,

O, she must be a fortunate young lady! And I have no fear with you, none—a perfect confidence.’

‘Madam,’ said I, ‘a gentleman.’

‘That’s what I mean—a gentleman,’ she exclaimed. ‘And he—and that—he isn’t. O, how shall I dare meet father!’ And disclosing to me her tear-stained face, and opening her arms with a tragic gesture: ‘And I am quite disgraced before all the young ladies, my school-companions!’ she added.

‘O, not so bad as that!’ I cried. ‘Come, come, you exaggerate, my dear Miss—? Excuse me if I am too familiar: I have not yet heard your name.’

‘My name is Dorothy Greensleeves, sir: why should I conceal it? I fear it will only serve to point an adage to future generations, and I had meant so differently! There was no young female in the county more emulous to be thought well of than I. And what a fall was there! O, dear me, what a wicked, piggish donkey of a girl I have made of myself, to be sure! And there is no hope! O, Mr.—’

And at that she paused and asked my name.

I am not writing my eulogium for the Academy; I will admit it was unpardonably imbecile, but I told it her. If you had been there—and seen her, ravishingly pretty and little, a baby in years and mind—and heard

her talking like a book, with so much of schoolroom propriety in her manner, with such an innocent despair in the matter—you would probably have told her yours. She repeated it after me.

‘I shall pray for you all my life,’ she said. ‘Every night, when I retire to rest, the last thing I shall do is to remember you by name.’

Presently I succeeded in winning from her her tale, which was much what I had anticipated: a tale of a schoolhouse, a walled garden, a fruit-tree that concealed a bench, an impudent raff posturing in church, an exchange of flowers and vows over the garden wall, a silly schoolmate for a confidante, a chaise and four, and the most immediate and perfect disenchantment on the part of the little lady. ‘And there is nothing to be done!’ she wailed in conclusion. ‘My error is irretrievable, I am quite forced to that conclusion. O, Monsieur de Saint-Yves! who would have thought that I could have been such a blind, wicked donkey!’

I should have said before—only that I really do not know when it came in—that we had been overtaken by the two post-boys, Rowley and Mr. Bellamy, which was the hawbuck’s name, bestriding the four post-horses; and that these formed a sort of cavalry escort, riding now before, now behind the chaise, and Bellamy occasionally posturing at the window and obliging us with some of his conversation. He was so ill-received that I declare I was tempted to pity him, remembering from what a height he had fallen, and how few hours ago it was since the lady had herself fled to his arms, all blushes and ardour. Well, these great strokes of fortune

usually befall the unworthy, and Bellamy was now the legitimate object of my commiseration and the ridicule of his own post-boys!

‘Miss Dorothy,’ said I, ‘you wish to be delivered from this man?’

‘O, if it were possible!’ she cried. ‘But not by violence.’

‘Not in the least, ma’am,’ I replied. ‘The simplest thing in life. We are in a civilised country; the man’s a malefactor—’

‘O, never!’ she cried. ‘Do not even dream it! With all his faults, I know he is not that.’

‘Anyway, he’s in the wrong in this affair—on the wrong side of the law, call it what you please,’ said I; and with that, our four horsemen having for the moment headed us by a considerable interval, I hailed my post-boy and inquired who was the nearest magistrate and where he lived. Archdeacon Clitheroe, he told me, a prodigious dignitary, and one who lived but a lane or two back, and at the distance of only a mile or two out of the direct road. I showed him the king’s medallion.

‘Take the lady there, and at full gallop,’ I cried.

‘Right, sir! Mind yourself,’ says the postillion.

And before I could have thought it possible, he had turned the carriage

to the rightabout and we were galloping south.

Our outriders were quick to remark and imitate the manoeuvre, and came flying after us with a vast deal of indiscriminate shouting; so that the fine, sober picture of a carriage and escort, that we had presented but a moment back, was transformed in the twinkling of an eye into the image of a noisy fox-chase. The two postillions and my own saucy rogue were, of course, disinterested actors in the comedy; they rode for the mere sport, keeping in a body, their mouths full of laughter, waving their hats as they came on, and crying (as the fancy struck them) Tally-ho! 'Stop, thief!' 'A highwayman! A highwayman!' It was otherguess work with Bellamy. That gentleman no sooner observed our change of direction than he turned his horse with so much violence that the poor animal was almost cast upon its side, and launched her in immediate and desperate pursuit. As he approached I saw that his face was deadly white and that he carried a drawn pistol in his hand. I turned at once to the poor little bride that was to have been, and now was not to be; she, upon her side, deserting the other window, turned as if to meet me.

'O, O, don't let him kill me!' she screamed.

'Never fear,' I replied.

Her face was distorted with terror. Her hands took hold upon me with the instinctive clutch of an infant. The chaise gave a flying lurch, which took the feet from under me and tumbled us anyhow upon the seat. And

almost in the same moment the head of Bellamy appeared in the window which Missy had left free for him.

Conceive the situation! The little lady and I were falling—or had just fallen—backward on the seat, and offered to the eye a somewhat ambiguous picture. The chaise was speeding at a furious pace, and with the most violent leaps and lurches, along the highway. Into this bounding receptacle Bellamy interjected his head, his pistol arm, and his pistol; and since his own horse was travelling still faster than the chaise, he must withdraw all of them again in the inside of the fraction of a minute. He did so, but he left the charge of the pistol behind him—whether by design or accident I shall never know, and I dare say he has forgotten! Probably he had only meant to threaten, in hopes of causing us to arrest our flight. In the same moment came the explosion and a pitiful cry from Missy; and my gentleman, making certain he had struck her, went down the road pursued by the furies, turned at the first corner, took a flying leap over the thorn hedge, and disappeared across country in the least possible time.

Rowley was ready and eager to pursue; but I withheld him, thinking we were excellently quit of Mr. Bellamy, at no more cost than a scratch on the forearm and a bullet-hole in the left-hand claret-coloured panel. And accordingly, but now at a more decent pace, we proceeded on our way to Archdeacon Clitheroe's, Missy's gratitude and admiration were aroused to a high pitch by this dramatic scene, and what she was pleased to call my wound. She must dress it for me with her handkerchief, a service

which she rendered me even with tears. I could well have spared them, not loving on the whole to be made ridiculous, and the injury being in the nature of a cat's scratch. Indeed, I would have suggested for her kind care rather the cure of my coat-sleeve, which had suffered worse in the encounter; but I was too wise to risk the anti-climax. That she had been rescued by a hero, that the hero should have been wounded in the affray, and his wound bandaged with her handkerchief (which it could not even bloody), ministered incredibly to the recovery of her self-respect; and I could hear her relate the incident to 'the young ladies, my school-companions,' in the most approved manner of Mrs. Radcliffe! To have insisted on the torn coat-sleeve would have been unmannerly, if not inhuman.

Presently the residence of the archdeacon began to heave in sight. A chaise and four smoking horses stood by the steps, and made way for us on our approach; and even as we alighted there appeared from the interior of the house a tall ecclesiastic, and beside him a little, headstrong, ruddy man, in a towering passion, and brandishing over his head a roll of paper. At sight of him Miss Dorothy flung herself on her knees with the most moving adjurations, calling him father, assuring him she was wholly cured and entirely repentant of her disobedience, and entreating forgiveness; and I soon saw that she need fear no great severity from Mr. Greensleeves, who showed himself extraordinarily fond, loud, greedy of caresses and prodigal of tears.

To give myself a countenance, as well as to have all ready for the road

when I should find occasion, I turned to quit scores with Bellamy's two postillions. They had not the least claim on me, but one of which they were quite ignorant—that I was a fugitive. It is the worst feature of that false position that every gratuity becomes a case of conscience. You must not leave behind you any one discontented nor any one grateful. But the whole business had been such a 'hurrah-boys' from the beginning, and had gone off in the fifth act so like a melodrama, in explosions, reconciliations, and the rape of a post-horse, that it was plainly impossible to keep it covered. It was plain it would have to be talked over in all the inn-kitchens for thirty miles about, and likely for six months to come. It only remained for me, therefore, to settle on that gratuity which should be least conspicuous—so large that nobody could grumble, so small that nobody would be tempted to boast. My decision was hastily and not wisely taken. The one fellow spat on his tip (so he called it) for luck; the other developing a sudden streak of piety, prayed God bless me with fervour. It seemed a demonstration was brewing, and I determined to be off at once. Bidding my own post-boy and Rowley be in readiness for an immediate start, I reascended the terrace and presented myself, hat in hand, before Mr. Greensleeves and the archdeacon.

'You will excuse me, I trust,' said I. 'I think shame to interrupt this agreeable scene of family effusion, which I have been privileged in some small degree to bring about.'

And at these words the storm broke.

‘Small degree! small degree, sir!’ cries the father; ‘that shall not pass, Mr. St. Eaves! If I’ve got my darling back, and none the worse for that vagabone rascal, I know whom I have to thank. Shake hands with me—up to the elbows, sir! A Frenchman you may be, but you’re one of the right breed, by God! And, by God, sir, you may have anything you care to ask of me, down to Dolly’s hand, by God!’

All this he roared out in a voice surprisingly powerful from so small a person. Every word was thus audible to the servants, who had followed them out of the house and now congregated about us on the terrace, as well as to Rowley and the five postillions on the gravel sweep below.

The sentiments expressed were popular; some ass, whom the devil moved to be my enemy, proposed three cheers, and they were given with a will. To hear my own name resounding amid acclamations in the hills of Westmorland

was flattering, perhaps; but it was inconvenient at a moment when (as I was morally persuaded) police handbills were already speeding after me at the rate of a hundred miles a day.

Nor was that the end of it. The archdeacon must present his compliments, and pressed upon me some of his West India sherry, and I was carried into a vastly fine library, where I was presented to his lady wife. While we were at sherry in the library, ale was handed round upon the terrace. Speeches were made, hands were shaken, Missy (at her father’s request) kissed me farewell, and the whole party reaccompanied me to the terrace,

where they stood waving hats and handkerchiefs, and crying farewells to all the echoes of the mountains until the chaise had disappeared.

The echoes of the mountains were engaged in saying to me privately: 'You fool, you have done it now!'

'They do seem to have got 'old of your name, Mr. Anne,' said Rowley. 'It weren't my fault this time.'

'It was one of those accidents that can never be foreseen,' said I, affecting a dignity that I was far from feeling. 'Some one recognised me.'

'Which on 'em, Mr. Anne?' said the rascal.

'That is a senseless question; it can make no difference who it was,' I returned.

'No, nor that it can't!' cried Rowley. 'I say, Mr. Anne, sir, it's what you would call a jolly mess, ain't it? looks like "clean bowled-out in the middle stump," don't it?'

'I fail to understand you, Rowley.'

'Well, what I mean is, what are we to do about this one?' pointing to the postillion in front of us, as he alternately hid and revealed his patched

breeches to the trot of his horse. 'He see you get in this morning under Mr. Ramornie—I was very piticular to Mr. Ramornie you, if you remember, sir—and he see you get in again under Mr. Saint Eaves, and whatever's he going to see you get out under? that's what worries me, sir. It don't seem to me like as if the position was what you call stratetegic!'

'Parrrrbleu! will you let me be!' I cried. 'I have to think; you cannot imagine how your constant idiotic prattle annoys me.'

'Beg pardon, Mr. Anne,' said he; and the next moment, 'You wouldn't like for us to do our French now, would you, Mr. Anne?'

'Certainly not,' said I. 'Play upon your flageolet.'

The which he did with what seemed to me to be irony.

Conscience doth make cowards of us all! I was so downcast by my pitiful mismanagement of the morning's business that I shrank from the eye of my own hired infant, and read offensive meanings into his idle tootling.

I took off my coat, and set to mending it, soldier-fashion, with a needle and thread. There is nothing more conducive to thought, above all in arduous circumstances; and as I sewed, I gradually gained a clearness upon my affairs. I must be done with the claret-coloured chaise at once. It should be sold at the next stage for what it would bring. Rowley and

I must take back to the road on our four feet, and after a decent interval of trudging, get places on some coach for Edinburgh again under new names! So much trouble and toil, so much extra risk and expense and loss of time, and all for a slip of the tongue to a little lady in blue!