CHAPTER XXVI—THE COTTAGE AT NIGHT

At the door I was nearly blown back by the unbridled violence of the squall, and Rowley and I must shout our parting words. All the way along Princes Street (whither my way led) the wind hunted me behind and screamed in my ears. The city was flushed with bucketfuls of rain that tasted salt from the neighbouring ocean. It seemed to darken and lighten again in the vicissitudes of the gusts. Now you would say the lamps had been blown out from end to end of the long thoroughfare; now, in a lull, they would revive, re-multiply, shine again on the wet pavements, and make darkness sparingly visible.

By the time I had got to the corner of the Lothian Road there was a distinct improvement. For one thing, I had now my shoulder to the wind; for a second, I came in the lee of my old prison-house, the Castle; and, at any rate, the excessive fury of the blast was itself moderating. The thought of what errand I was on re-awoke within me, and I seemed to breast the rough weather with increasing ease. With such a destination, what mattered a little buffeting of wind or a sprinkle of cold water? I recalled Flora's image, I took her in fancy to my arms, and my heart throbbed. And the next moment I had recognised the inanity of that fool's paradise. If I could spy her taper as she went to bed, I might count myself lucky.

I had about two leagues before me of a road mostly uphill, and now deep

in mire. So soon as I was clear of the last street lamp, darkness received me—a darkness only pointed by the lights of occasional rustic farms, where the dogs howled with uplifted heads as I went by. The wind continued to decline: it had been but a squall, not a tempest. The rain, on the other hand, settled into a steady deluge, which had soon drenched me thoroughly. I continued to tramp forward in the night, contending with gloomy thoughts and accompanied by the dismal ululation of the dogs. What ailed them that they should have been thus wakeful, and perceived the small sound of my steps amid the general reverberation of the rain, was more than I could fancy. I remembered tales with which I had been entertained in childhood. I told myself some murderer was going by, and the brutes perceived upon him the faint smell of blood; and the next moment, with a physical shock, I had applied the words to my own case!

Here was a dismal disposition for a lover. 'Was ever lady in this humour wooed?' I asked myself, and came near turning back. It is never wise to risk a critical interview when your spirits are depressed, your clothes muddy, and your hands wet! But the boisterous night was in itself favourable to my enterprise: now, or perhaps never, I might find some way to have an interview with Flora; and if I had one interview (wet clothes, low spirits and all), I told myself there would certainly be another.

Arrived in the cottage-garden I found the circumstances mighty inclement. From the round holes in the shutters of the parlour, shafts of candle-light streamed forth; elsewhere the darkness was complete. The trees, the thickets, were saturated; the lower parts of the garden turned

into a morass. At intervals, when the wind broke forth again, there passed overhead a wild coil of clashing branches; and between whiles the whole enclosure continuously and stridently resounded with the rain. I advanced close to the window and contrived to read the face of my watch. It was half-past seven; they would not retire before ten, they might not before midnight, and the prospect was unpleasant. In a lull of the wind I could hear from the inside the voice of Flora reading aloud; the words of course inaudible—only a flow of undecipherable speech, quiet, cordial, colourless, more intimate and winning, more eloquent of her personality, but not less beautiful than song. And the next moment the clamour of a fresh squall broke out about the cottage; the voice was drowned in its bellowing, and I was glad to retreat from my dangerous post.

For three egregious hours I must now suffer the elements to do their worst upon me, and continue to hold my ground in patience. I recalled the least fortunate of my services in the field: being out-sentry of the pickets in weather no less vile, sometimes unsuppered and with nothing to look forward to by way of breakfast but musket-balls; and they seemed light in comparison. So strangely are we built: so much more strong is the love of woman than the mere love of life.

At last my patience was rewarded. The light disappeared from the parlour and reappeared a moment after in the room above. I was pretty well informed for the enterprise that lay before me. I knew the lair of the dragon—that which was just illuminated. I knew the bower of my Rosamond,

and how excellently it was placed on the ground-level, round the flank of the cottage and out of earshot of her formidable aunt. Nothing was left but to apply my knowledge. I was then at the bottom of the garden, whether I had gone (Heaven save the mark!) for warmth, that I might walk to and fro unheard and keep myself from perishing. The night had fallen still, the wind ceased; the noise of the rain had much lightened, if it had not stopped, and was succeeded by the dripping of the garden trees. In the midst of this lull, and as I was already drawing near to the cottage, I was startled by the sound of a window-sash screaming in its channels; and a step or two beyond I became aware of a gush of light upon the darkness. It fell from Flora's window, which she had flung open on the night, and where she now sat, roseate and pensive, in the shine of two candles falling from behind, her tresses deeply embowering and shading her; the suspended comb still in one hand, the other idly clinging to the iron stanchions with which the window was barred.

Keeping to the turf, and favoured by the darkness of the night and the patter of the rain which was now returning, though without wind, I approached until I could almost have touched her. It seemed a grossness of which I was incapable to break up her reverie by speech. I stood and drank her in with my eyes; how the light made a glory in her hair, and (what I have always thought the most ravishing thing in nature) how the planes ran into each other, and were distinguished, and how the hues blended and varied, and were shaded off, between the cheek and neck. At first I was abashed: she wore her beauty like an immediate halo of refinement; she discouraged me like an angel, or what I suspect to be the

next most discouraging, a modern lady. But as I continued to gaze, hope and life returned to me; I forgot my timidity, I forgot the sickening pack of wet clothes with which I stood burdened, I tingled with new blood.

Still unconscious of my presence, still gazing before her upon the illuminated image of the window, the straight shadows of the bars, the glinting of pebbles on the path, and the impenetrable night on the garden and the hills beyond it, she heaved a deep breath that struck upon my heart like an appeal.

'Why does Miss Gilchrist sigh?' I whispered. 'Does she recall absent friends?'

She turned her head swiftly in my direction; it was the only sign of surprise she deigned to make. At the same time I stepped into the light and bowed profoundly.

'You!' she said. 'Here?'

'Yes, I am here,' I replied. 'I have come very far, it may be a hundred and fifty leagues, to see you. I have waited all this night in your garden. Will Miss Gilchrist not offer her hand—to a friend in trouble?'

She extended it between the bars, and I dropped upon one knee on the wet path and kissed it twice. At the second it was withdrawn suddenly,

methought with more of a start than she had hitherto displayed. I regained my former attitude, and we were both silent awhile. My timidity returned on me tenfold. I looked in her face for any signals of anger, and seeing her eyes to waver and fall aside from mine, augured that all was well.

'You must have been mad to come here!' she broke out. 'Of all places under heaven this is no place for you to come. And I was just thinking you were safe in France!'

'You were thinking of me!' I cried.

'Mr. St. Ives, you cannot understand your danger,' she replied. 'I am sure of it, and yet I cannot find it in my heart to tell you. O, be persuaded, and go!'

'I believe I know the worst. But I was never one to set an undue value on life, the life that we share with beasts. My university has been in the wars, not a famous place of education, but one where a man learns to carry his life in his hand as lightly as a glove, and for his lady or his honour to lay it as lightly down. You appeal to my fears, and you do wrong. I have come to Scotland with my eyes quite open to see you and to speak with you—it may be for the last time. With my eyes quite open, I say; and if I did not hesitate at the beginning do you think that I would draw back now?'

'You do not know!' she cried, with rising agitation. 'This country, even this garden, is death to you. They all believe it; I am the only one that does not. If they hear you now, if they heard a whisper—I dread to think of it. O, go, go this instant. It is my prayer.'

'Dear lady, do not refuse me what I have come so far to seek; and remember that out of all the millions in England there is no other but yourself in whom I can dare confide. I have all the world against me; you are my only ally; and as I have to speak, you have to listen. All is true that they say of me, and all of it false at the same time. I did kill this man Goguelat—it was that you meant?'

She mutely signed to me that it was; she had become deadly pale.

'But I killed him in fair fight. Till then, I had never taken a life unless in battle, which is my trade. But I was grateful, I was on fire with gratitude, to one who had been good to me, who had been better to me than I could have dreamed of an angel, who had come into the darkness of my prison like sunrise. The man Goguelat insulted her. O, he had insulted me often, it was his favourite pastime, and he might insult me as he pleased—for who was I? But with that lady it was different. I could never forgive myself if I had let it pass. And we fought, and he fell, and I have no remorse.'

I waited anxiously for some reply. The worst was now out, and I knew that she had heard of it before; but it was impossible for me to go on

with my narrative without some shadow of encouragement.

'You blame me?'

'No, not at all. It is a point I cannot speak on—I am only a girl. I am sure you were in the right: I have always said so—to Ronald. Not, of course, to my aunt. I am afraid I let her speak as she will. You must not think me a disloyal friend; and even with the Major—I did not tell you he had become quite a friend of ours—Major Chevenix, I mean—he has taken such a fancy to Ronald! It was he that brought the news to us of that hateful Clausel being captured, and all that he was saying. I was indignant with him. I said—I dare say I said too much—and I must say he was very good-natured. He said, "You and I, who are his friends, know that Champdivers is innocent. But what is the use of saying it?" All this was in the corner of the room in what they call an aside. And then he said, "Give me a chance to speak to you in private, I have much to tell you." And he did. And told me just what you did—that it was an affair of honour, and no blame attached to you. O, I must say I like that Major Chevenix!'

At this I was seized with a great pang of jealousy. I remembered the first time that he had seen her, the interest that he seemed immediately to conceive; and I could not but admire the dog for the use he had been ingenious enough to make of our acquaintance in order to supplant me. All is fair in love and war. For all that, I was now no less anxious to do the speaking myself than I had been before to hear Flora. At least, I

could keep clear of the hateful image of Major Chevenix. Accordingly I burst at once on the narrative of my adventures. It was the same as you have read, but briefer, and told with a very different purpose. Now every incident had a particular bearing, every by-way branched off to Rome—and that was Flora.

When I had begun to speak I had kneeled upon the gravel withoutside the low window, rested my arms upon the sill, and lowered my voice to the most confidential whisper. Flora herself must kneel upon the other side, and this brought our heads upon a level with only the bars between us. So placed, so separated, it seemed that our proximity, and the continuous and low sounds of my pleading voice, worked progressively and powerfully on her heart, and perhaps not less so on my own. For these spells are double-edged. The silly birds may be charmed with the pipe of the fowler, which is but a tube of reeds. Not so with a bird of our own feather! As I went on, and my resolve strengthened, and my voice found new modulations, and our faces were drawn closer to the bars and to each other, not only she, but I, succumbed to the fascination, and were kindled by the charm. We make love, and thereby ourselves fall the deeper in it. It is with the heart only that one captures a heart.

'And now,' I continued, 'I will tell you what you can still do for me. I run a little risk just now, and you see for yourself how unavoidable it is for any man of honour. But if—but in case of the worst I do not choose to enrich either my enemies or the Prince Regent. I have here the bulk of what my uncle gave me. Eight thousand odd pounds. Will you take

care of it for me? Do not think of it merely as money; take and keep it as a relic of your friend or some precious piece of him. I may have bitter need of it ere long. Do you know the old country story of the giant who gave his heart to his wife to keep for him, thinking it safer to repose on her loyalty than his own strength? Flora, I am the giant—a very little one: will you be the keeper of my life? It is my heart I offer you in this symbol. In the sight of God, if you will have it, I give you my name, I endow you with my money. If the worst come, if I may never hope to call you wife, let me at least think that you will use my uncle's legacy as my widow.'

'No, not that,' she said. 'Never that.'

'What then?' I said. 'What else, my angel? What are words to me? There is but one name that I care to know you by. Flora, my love!'

'Anne!' she said.

What sound is so full of music as one's own name uttered for the first time in the voice of her we love!

'My darling!' said I.

The jealous bars, set at the top and bottom in stone and lime, obstructed the rapture of the moment; but I took her to myself as wholly as they allowed. She did not shun my lips. My arms were wound round her body,

which yielded itself generously to my embrace. As we so remained, entwined and yet severed, bruising our faces unconsciously on the cold bars, the irony of the universe—or as I prefer to say, envy of some of the gods—again stirred up the elements of that stormy night. The wind blew again in the tree-tops; a volley of cold sea-rain deluged the garden, and, as the deuce would have it, a gutter which had been hitherto choked up began suddenly to play upon my head and shoulders with the vivacity of a fountain. We parted with a shock; I sprang to my feet, and she to hers, as though we had been discovered. A moment after, but now both standing, we had again approached the window on either side.

'Flora,' I said, 'this is but a poor offer I can make you.'

She took my hand in hers and clasped it to her bosom.

'Rich enough for a queen!' she said, with a lift in her breathing that was more eloquent than words. 'Anne, my brave Anne! I would be glad to be your maidservant; I could envy that boy Rowley. But, no!' she broke off, 'I envy no one—I need not—I am yours.'

'Mine,' said I, 'for ever! By this and this, mine!'

'All of me,' she repeated. 'Altogether and forever!'

And if the god were envious, he must have seen with mortification how little he could do to mar the happiness of mortals. I stood in a mere

waterspout; she herself was wet, not from my embrace only, but from the splashing of the storm. The candles had guttered out; we were in darkness. I could scarce see anything but the shining of her eyes in the dark room. To her I must have appeared as a silhouette, haloed by rain and the spouting of the ancient Gothic gutter above my head.

Presently we became more calm and confidential; and when that squall, which proved to be the last of the storm, had blown by, fell into a talk of ways and means. It seemed she knew Mr. Robbie, to whom I had been so slenderly accredited by Romaine—was even invited to his house for the evening of Monday, and gave me a sketch of the old gentleman's character which implied a great deal of penetration in herself, and proved of great use to me in the immediate sequel. It seemed he was an enthusiastic antiquary, and in particular a fanatic of heraldry. I heard it with delight, for I was myself, thanks to M. de Culemberg, fairly grounded in that science, and acquainted with the blazons of most families of note in Europe. And I had made up my mind—even as she spoke, it was my fixed determination, though I was a hundred miles from saying it—to meet Flora on Monday night as a fellow-guest in Mr. Robbie's house.

I gave her my money—it was, of course, only paper I had brought. I gave it her, to be her marriage-portion, I declared.

'Not so bad a marriage-portion for a private soldier,' I told her, laughing, as I passed it through the bars.

‘O, Anne, and where am I to keep it?’ she cried. ‘If my aunt should find it! What would I say!’

‘Next your heart,’ I suggested.

‘Then you will always be near your treasure,’ she cried, ‘for you are always there!’

We were interrupted by a sudden clearness that fell upon the night. The clouds dispersed; the stars shone in every part of the heavens; and, consulting my watch, I was startled to find it already hard on five in the morning.