

CHAPTER XXVIII—EVENTS OF MONDAY: THE LAWYER'S PARTY

By half-past eight o'clock on the next morning, I was ringing the bell of the lawyer's office in Castle Street, where I found him ensconced at a business table, in a room surrounded by several tiers of green tin cases. He greeted me like an old friend.

'Come away, sir, come away!' said he. 'Here is the dentist ready for you, and I think I can promise you that the operation will be practically painless.'

'I am not so sure of that, Mr. Robbie,' I replied, as I shook hands with him. 'But at least there shall be no time lost with me.'

I had to confess to having gone a-roving with a pair of drovers and their cattle, to having used a false name, to having murdered or half-murdered a fellow-creature in a scuffle on the moors, and to having suffered a couple of quite innocent men to lie some time in prison on a charge from which I could have immediately freed them. All this I gave him first of all, to be done with the worst of it; and all this he took with gravity, but without the least appearance of surprise.

'Now, sir,' I continued, 'I expect to have to pay for my unhappy frolic, but I would like very well if it could be managed without my personal appearance or even the mention of my real name. I had so much wisdom as

to sail under false colours in this foolish jaunt of mine; my family would be extremely concerned if they had wind of it; but at the same time, if the case of this Faa has terminated fatally, and there are proceedings against Todd and Candlish, I am not going to stand by and see them vexed, far less punished; and I authorise you to give me up for trial if you think that best—or, if you think it unnecessary, in the meanwhile to make preparations for their defence. I hope, sir, that I am as little anxious to be Quixotic, as I am determined to be just.’

‘Very fairly spoken,’ said Mr. Robbie. ‘It is not much in my line, as doubtless your friend, Mr. Romaine, will have told you. I rarely mix myself up with anything on the criminal side, or approaching it. However, for a young gentleman like you, I may stretch a point, and I dare say I may be able to accomplish more than perhaps another. I will go at once to the Procurator Fiscal’s office and inquire.’

‘Wait a moment, Mr. Robbie,’ said I. ‘You forget the chapter of expenses. I had thought, for a beginning, of placing a thousand pounds in your hands.’

‘My dear sir, you will kindly wait until I render you my bill,’ said Mr. Robbie severely.’

‘It seemed to me,’ I protested, ‘that coming to you almost as a stranger, and placing in your hands a piece of business so contrary to your habits, some substantial guarantee of my good faith—’

‘Not the way that we do business in Scotland, sir,’ he interrupted, with an air of closing the dispute.

‘And yet, Mr. Robbie,’ I continued, ‘I must ask you to allow me to proceed. I do not merely refer to the expenses of the case. I have my eye besides on Todd and Candlish. They are thoroughly deserving fellows; they have been subjected through me to a considerable term of imprisonment; and I suggest, sir, that you should not spare money for their indemnification. This will explain,’ I added smiling, ‘my offer of the thousand pounds. It was in the nature of a measure by which you should judge the scale on which I can afford to have this business carried through.’

‘I take you perfectly, Mr. Ducie,’ said he. ‘But the sooner I am off, the better this affair is like to be guided. My clerk will show you into the waiting-room and give you the day’s Caledonian Mercury and the last Register to amuse yourself with in the interval.’

I believe Mr. Robbie was at least three hours gone. I saw him descend from a cab at the door, and almost immediately after I was shown again into his study, where the solemnity of his manner led me to augur the worst. For some time he had the inhumanity to read me a lecture as to the incredible silliness, ‘not to say immorality,’ of my behaviour. ‘I have the satisfaction in telling you my opinion, because it appears that you are going to get off scot free,’ he continued, where, indeed, I

thought he might have begun.

‘The man, Faa, has been discharged cured; and the two men, Todd and Candlish, would have been liberated long ago if it had not been for their extraordinary loyalty to yourself, Mr. Ducie—or Mr. St. Ivey, as I believe I should now call you. Never a word would either of the two old fools volunteer that in any manner pointed at the existence of such a person; and when they were confronted with Faa’s version of the affair, they gave accounts so entirely discrepant with their own former declarations, as well as with each other, that the Fiscal was quite nonplussed, and imagined there was something behind it. You may believe I soon laughed him out of that! And I had the satisfaction of seeing your two friends set free, and very glad to be on the causeway again.’

‘Oh, sir,’ I cried, ‘you should have brought them here.’

‘No instructions, Mr. Ducie!’ said he. ‘How did I know you wished to renew an acquaintance which you had just terminated so fortunately? And, indeed, to be frank with you, I should have set my face against it, if you had! Let them go! They are paid and contented, and have the highest possible opinion of Mr. St. Ivey! When I gave them fifty pounds apiece—which was rather more than enough, Mr. Ducie, whatever you may think—the man Todd, who has the only tongue of the party, struck his staff on the ground. “Weel,” says he, “I aye said he was a gentleman!” “Man, Todd,” said I, “that was just what Mr St. Ivey said of yourself!”’

‘So it was a case of “Compliments fly when gentlefolk meet.”’

‘No, no, Mr. Ducie, man Todd and man Candlish are gone out of your life, and a good riddance! They are fine fellows in their way, but no proper associates for the like of yourself; and do you finally agree to be done with all eccentricity—take up with no more drovers, or tinkers, but enjoy the naitural pleasures for which your age, your wealth, your intelligence, and (if I may be allowed to say it) your appearance so completely fit you. And the first of these,’ quoth he, looking at his watch, ‘will be to step through to my dining-room and share a bachelor’s luncheon.’

Over the meal, which was good, Mr. Robbie continued to develop the same theme. ‘You’re, no doubt, what they call a dancing-man?’ said he.

‘Well, on Thursday night there is the Assembly Ball. You must certainly go there, and you must permit me besides to do the honours of the ceety and send you a ticket. I am a thorough believer in a young man being a young man—but no more drovers or rovers, if you love me! Talking of which puts me in mind that you may be short of partners at the

Assembly—oh, I have been young myself!—and if ye care to come to anything

so portentiously tedious as a tea-party at the house of a bachelor lawyer, consisting mainly of his nieces and nephews, and his grand-nieces and grand-nephews, and his wards, and generally the whole clan of the descendants of his clients, you might drop in to-night towards seven o’clock. I think I can show you one or two that are worth looking at,

and you can dance with them later on at the Assembly.’

He proceeded to give me a sketch of one or two eligible young ladies’ whom I might expect to meet. ‘And then there’s my parteecular friend, Miss Flora,’ said he. ‘But I’ll make no attempt of a description. You shall see her for yourself.’

It will be readily supposed that I accepted his invitation; and returned home to make a toilette worthy of her I was to meet and the good news of which I was the bearer. The toilette, I have reason to believe, was a success. Mr. Rowley dismissed me with a farewell: ‘Crikey! Mr. Anne, but you do look prime!’ Even the stony Bethiah was—how shall I say?—dazzled, but scandalised, by my appearance; and while, of course, she deplored the vanity that led to it, she could not wholly prevent herself from admiring the result.

‘Ay, Mr. Ducie, this is a poor employment for a wayfaring Christian man!’ she said. ‘Wi’ Christ despised and rejectit in all pairts of the world and the flag of the Covenant flung doon, you will be muckle better on your knees! However, I’ll have to confess that it sets you weel. And if it’s the lassie ye’re gaun to see the nicht, I suppose I’ll just have to excuse ye! Bairns maun be bairns!’ she said, with a sigh. ‘I mind when Mr. McRankine came courtin’, and that’s lang by-gane—I mind I had a green gown, passementit, that was thocht to become me to admiration. I was nae just exactly what ye would ca’ bonny; but I was pale, penetratin’, and interestin’.’ And she leaned over the stair-rail with a candle to watch

my descent as long as it should be possible.

It was but a little party at Mr. Robbie's—by which, I do not so much mean that there were few people, for the rooms were crowded, as that there was very little attempted to entertain them. In one apartment there were tables set out, where the elders were solemnly engaged upon whist; in the other and larger one, a great number of youth of both sexes entertained themselves languidly, the ladies sitting upon chairs to be courted, the gentlemen standing about in various attitudes of insinuation or indifference. Conversation appeared the sole resource, except in so far as it was modified by a number of keepsakes and annuals which lay dispersed upon the tables, and of which the young beaux displayed the illustrations to the ladies. Mr. Robbie himself was customarily in the card-room; only now and again, when he cut out, he made an incursion among the young folks, and rolled about jovially from one to another, the very picture of the general uncle.

It chanced that Flora had met Mr. Robbie in the course of the afternoon. 'Now, Miss Flora,' he had said, 'come early, for I have a Phoenix to show you—one Mr. Ducie, a new client of mine that, I vow, I have fallen in love with'; and he was so good as to add a word or two on my appearance, from which Flora conceived a suspicion of the truth. She had come to the party, in consequence, on the knife-edge of anticipation and alarm; had chosen a place by the door, where I found her, on my arrival, surrounded by a posse of vapid youths; and, when I drew near, sprang up to meet me in the most natural manner in the world, and, obviously, with a prepared

form of words.

'How do you do, Mr. Ducie?' she said. 'It is quite an age since I have seen you!'

'I have much to tell you, Miss Gilchrist,' I replied. 'May I sit down?'

For the artful girl, by sitting near the door, and the judicious use of her shawl, had contrived to keep a chair empty by her side.

She made room for me, as a matter of course, and the youths had the discretion to melt before us. As soon as I was once seated her fan flew out, and she whispered behind it:

'Are you mad?'

'Madly in love,' I replied; 'but in no other sense.'

'I have no patience! You cannot understand what I am suffering!' she said. 'What are you to say to Ronald, to Major Chevenix, to my aunt?'

Your aunt?' I cried, with a start. 'Peccavi! is she here?'

'She is in the card-room at whist,' said Flora.

'Where she will probably stay all the evening?' I suggested.

'She may,' she admitted; 'she generally does!'

'Well, then, I must avoid the card-room,' said I, 'which is very much what I had counted upon doing. I did not come here to play cards, but to contemplate a certain young lady to my heart's content—if it can ever be contented!—and to tell her some good news.'

'But there are still Ronald and the Major!' she persisted. 'They are not card-room fixtures! Ronald will be coming and going. And as for Mr. Chevenix, he—'

'Always sits with Miss Flora?' I interrupted. 'And they talk of poor St. Ives? I had gathered as much, my dear; and Mr. Ducie has come to prevent it! But pray dismiss these fears! I mind no one but your aunt.'

'Why my aunt?'

'Because your aunt is a lady, my dear, and a very clever lady, and, like all clever ladies, a very rash lady,' said I. 'You can never count upon them, unless you are sure of getting them in a corner, as I have got you, and talking them over rationally, as I am just engaged on with yourself! It would be quite the same to your aunt to make the worst kind of a scandal, with an equal indifference to my danger and to the feelings of our good host!'

'Well,' she said, 'and what of Ronald, then? Do you think he is above making a scandal? You must know him very little!'

'On the other hand, it is my pretension that I know him very well!' I replied. 'I must speak to Ronald first—not Ronald to me—that is all!'

'Then, please, go and speak to him at once!' she pleaded. 'He is there—do you see?—at the upper end of the room, talking to that girl in pink.'

'And so lose this seat before I have told you my good news?' I exclaimed. 'Catch me! And, besides, my dear one, think a little of me and my good news! I thought the bearer of good news was always welcome! I hoped he might be a little welcome for himself! Consider! I have but one friend; and let me stay by her! And there is only one thing I care to hear; and let me hear it!'

'Oh, Anne,' she sighed, 'if I did not love you, why should I be so uneasy? I am turned into a coward, dear! Think, if it were the other way round—if you were quite safe and I was in, oh, such danger!'

She had no sooner said it than I was convicted of being a dullard. 'God forgive me, dear!' I made haste to reply. 'I never saw before that there were two sides to this!' And I told her my tale as briefly as I could, and rose to seek Ronald. 'You see, my dear, you are obeyed,' I said.

She gave me a look that was a reward in itself; and as I turned away from her, with a strong sense of turning away from the sun, I carried that look in my bosom like a caress. The girl in pink was an arch, ogling person, with a good deal of eyes and teeth, and a great play of shoulders and rattle of conversation. There could be no doubt, from Mr. Ronald's attitude, that he worshipped the very chair she sat on. But I was quite ruthless. I laid my hand on his shoulder, as he was stooping over her like a hen over a chicken.

'Excuse me for one moment, Mr. Gilchrist!' said I.

He started and span about in answer to my touch, and exhibited a face of inarticulate wonder.

'Yes!' I continued, 'it is even myself! Pardon me for interrupting so agreeable a tête-à-tête, but you know, my good fellow, we owe a first duty to Mr. Robbie. It would never do to risk making a scene in the man's drawing-room; so the first thing I had to attend to was to have you warned. The name I go by is Ducie, too, in case of accidents.'

'I—I say, you know!' cried Ronald. 'Deuce take it, what are you doing here?'

'Hush, hush!' said I. 'Not the place, my dear fellow—not the place. Come to my rooms, if you like, to-night after the party, or to-morrow in the morning, and we can talk it out over a segar. But here, you know, it

really won't do at all.'

Before he could collect his mind for an answer, I had given him my address in St. James Square, and had again mingled with the crowd. Alas! I was not fated to get back to Flora so easily! Mr. Robbie was in the path: he was insatiably loquacious; and as he continued to palaver I watched the insipid youths gather again about my idol, and cursed my fate and my host. He remembered suddenly that I was to attend the Assembly Ball on Thursday, and had only attended to-night by way of a preparative. This put it into his head to present me to another young lady; but I managed this interview with so much art that, while I was scrupulously polite and even cordial to the fair one, I contrived to keep Robbie beside me all the time and to leave along with him when the ordeal was over. We were just walking away arm in arm, when I spied my friend the Major approaching, stiff as a ramrod and, as usual, obtrusively clean.

'Oh! there's a man I want to know,' said I, taking the bull by the horns. 'Won't you introduce me to Major Chevenix?'

'At a word, my dear fellow,' said Robbie; and 'Major!' he cried, 'come here and let me present to you my friend Mr. Ducie, who desires the honour of your acquaintance.'

The Major flushed visibly, but otherwise preserved his composure. He bowed very low. 'I'm not very sure,' he said: 'I have an idea we have met before?'

'Informally,' I said, returning his bow; 'and I have long looked forward to the pleasure of regularising our acquaintance.'

'You are very good, Mr. Ducie,' he returned. 'Perhaps you could aid my memory a little? Where was it that I had the pleasure?'

'Oh, that would be telling tales out of school,' said I, with a laugh, 'and before my lawyer, too!'

'I'll wager,' broke in Mr. Robbie, 'that, when you knew my client, Chevenix—the past of our friend Mr. Ducie is an obscure chapter full of horrid secrets—I'll wager, now, you knew him as St. Ivey,' says he, nudging me violently.

'I think not, sir,' said the Major, with pinched lips.

'Well, I wish he may prove all right!' continued the lawyer, with certainly the worst-inspired jocularly in the world. 'I know nothing by him! He may be a swell mobsman for me with his aliases. You must put your memory on the rack, Major, and when ye've remembered when and where ye met him, be sure ye tell me.'

'I will not fail, sir,' said Chevenix.

‘Seek to him!’ cried Robbie, waving his hand as he departed.

The Major, as soon as we were alone, turned upon me his impassive countenance.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘you have courage.’

‘It is undoubted as your honour, sir,’ I returned, bowing.

‘Did you expect to meet me, may I ask?’ said he.

‘You saw, at least, that I courted the presentation,’ said I.

‘And you were not afraid?’ said Chevenix.

‘I was perfectly at ease. I knew I was dealing with a gentleman. Be that your epitaph.’

‘Well, there are some other people looking for you,’ he said, ‘who will make no bones about the point of honour. The police, my dear sir, are simply agog about you.’

‘And I think that that was coarse,’ said I.

‘You have seen Miss Gilchrist?’ he inquired, changing the subject.

'With whom, I am led to understand, we are on a footing of rivalry?' I asked. 'Yes, I have seen her.'

'And I was just seeking her,' he replied.

I was conscious of a certain thrill of temper; so, I suppose, was he. We looked each other up and down.

'The situation is original,' he resumed.

'Quite,' said I. 'But let me tell you frankly you are blowing a cold coal. I owe you so much for your kindness to the prisoner Champdivers.'

'Meaning that the lady's affections are more advantageously disposed of?' he asked, with a sneer. 'Thank you, I am sure. And, since you have given me a lead, just hear a word of good advice in your turn. Is it fair, is it delicate, is it like a gentleman, to compromise the young lady by attentions which (as you know very well) can come to nothing?'

I was utterly unable to find words in answer.

'Excuse me if I cut this interview short,' he went on. 'It seems to me doomed to come to nothing, and there is more attractive metal.'

'Yes,' I replied, 'as you say, it cannot amount to much. You are impotent, bound hand and foot in honour. You know me to be a man falsely

accused, and even if you did not know it, from your position as my rival you have only the choice to stand quite still or to be infamous.’

‘I would not say that,’ he returned, with another change of colour. ‘I may hear it once too often.’

With which he moved off straight for where Flora was sitting amidst her court of vapid youths, and I had no choice but to follow him, a bad second, and reading myself, as I went, a sharp lesson on the command of temper.

It is a strange thing how young men in their teens go down at the mere wind of the coming of men of twenty-five and upwards! The vapid ones fled without thought of resistance before the Major and me; a few dallied awhile in the neighbourhood—so to speak, with their fingers in their mouths—but presently these also followed the rout, and we remained face to face before Flora. There was a draught in that corner by the door; she had thrown her pelisse over her bare arms and neck, and the dark fur of the trimming set them off. She shone by contrast; the light played on her smooth skin to admiration, and the colour changed in her excited face. For the least fraction of a second she looked from one to the other of her pair of rival swains, and seemed to hesitate. Then she addressed Chevenix:—

‘You are coming to the Assembly, of course, Major Chevenix?’ said she.

'I fear not; I fear I shall be otherwise engaged,' he replied. 'Even the pleasure of dancing with you, Miss Flora, must give way to duty.'

For awhile the talk ran harmlessly on the weather, and then branched off towards the war. It seemed to be by no one's fault; it was in the air, and had to come.

'Good news from the scene of operations,' said the Major.

'Good news while it lasts,' I said. 'But will Miss Gilchrist tell us her private thought upon the war? In her admiration for the victors, does not there mingle some pity for the vanquished?'

'Indeed, sir,' she said, with animation, 'only too much of it! War is a subject that I do not think should be talked of to a girl. I am, I have to be—what do you call it?—a non-combatant? And to remind me of what others have to do and suffer: no, it is not fair!'

'Miss Gilchrist has the tender female heart,' said Chevenix.

'Do not be too sure of that!' she cried. 'I would love to be allowed to fight myself!'

'On which side?' I asked.

'Can you ask?' she exclaimed. 'I am a Scottish girl!'

‘She is a Scottish girl!’ repeated the Major, looking at me. ‘And no one grudges you her pity!’

‘And I glory in every grain of it she has to spare,’ said I. ‘Pity is akin to love.’

‘Well, and let us put that question to Miss Gilchrist. It is for her to decide, and for us to bow to the decision. Is pity, Miss Flora, or is admiration, nearest love?’

‘Oh come,’ said I, ‘let us be more concrete. Lay before the lady a complete case: describe your man, then I’ll describe mine, and Miss Flora shall decide.’

‘I think I see your meaning,’ said he, ‘and I’ll try. You think that pity—and the kindred sentiments—have the greatest power upon the heart. I think more nobly of women. To my view, the man they love will first of all command their respect; he will be steadfast—proud, if you please; dry, possibly—but of all things steadfast. They will look at him in doubt; at last they will see that stern face which he presents to all the rest of the world soften to them alone. First, trust, I say. It is so that a woman loves who is worthy of heroes.’

‘Your man is very ambitious, sir,’ said I, ‘and very much of a hero! Mine is a humbler, and, I would fain think, a more human dog. He is one

with no particular trust in himself, with no superior steadfastness to be admired for, who sees a lady's face, who hears her voice, and, without any phrase about the matter, falls in love. What does he ask for, then, but pity?—pity for his weakness, pity for his love, which is his life.

You would make women always the inferiors, gaping up at your imaginary lover; he, like a marble statue, with his nose in the air! But God has been wiser than you; and the most steadfast of your heroes may prove human, after all. We appeal to the queen for judgment,' I added, turning and bowing before Flora.

'And how shall the queen judge?' she asked. 'I must give you an answer that is no answer at all. "The wind bloweth where it listeth": she goes where her heart goes.'

Her face flushed as she said it; mine also, for I read in it a declaration, and my heart swelled for joy. But Chevenix grew pale.

'You make of life a very dreadful kind of lottery, ma'am,' said he. 'But I will not despair. Honest and unornamental is still my choice.'

And I must say he looked extremely handsome and very amusingly like the marble statue with its nose in the air to which I had compared him.

'I cannot imagine how we got upon this subject,' said Flora.

'Madame, it was through the war,' replied Chevenix.

‘All roads lead to Rome,’ I commented. ‘What else would you expect Mr. Chevenix and myself to talk of?’

About this time I was conscious of a certain bustle and movement in the room behind me, but did not pay to it that degree of attention which perhaps would have been wise. There came a certain change in Flora’s face; she signalled repeatedly with her fan; her eyes appealed to me obsequiously; there could be no doubt that she wanted something—as well as I could make out, that I should go away and leave the field clear for my rival, which I had not the least idea of doing. At last she rose from her chair with impatience.

‘I think it time you were saying good-night, Mr Ducie!’ she said.

I could not in the least see why, and said so.

Whereupon she gave me this appalling answer, ‘My aunt is coming out of the card-room.’

In less time than it takes to tell, I had made my bow and my escape. Looking back from the doorway, I was privileged to see, for a moment, the august profile and gold eyeglasses of Miss Gilchrist issuing from the card-room; and the sight lent me wings. I stood not on the order of my going; and a moment after, I was on the pavement of Castle Street, and the lighted windows shone down on me, and were crossed by ironical

shadows of those who had remained behind.