CHAPTER XI—THE GREAT NORTH ROAD

It chanced that as I went down the hill these last words of my friend the drover echoed not unfruitfully in my head. I had never told these men the least particulars as to my race or fortune, as it was a part, and the best part, of their civility to ask no questions: yet they had dubbed me without hesitation English. Some strangeness in the accent they had doubtless thus explained. And it occurred to me, that if I could pass in Scotland for an Englishman, I might be able to reverse the process and pass in England for a Scot. I thought, if I was pushed to it, I could make a struggle to imitate the brogue; after my experience with Candlish and Sim, I had a rich provision of outlandish words at my command; and I felt I could tell the tale of Tweedie's dog so as to deceive a native.
At the same time, I was afraid my name of St. Ives was scarcely suitable; till I remembered there was a town so called in the province of Cornwall, thought I might yet be glad to claim it for my place of origin, and decided for a Cornish family and a Scots education. For a trade, as I was equally ignorant of all, and as the most innocent might at any moment be the means of my exposure, it was best to pretend to none. And I dubbed myself a young gentleman of a sufficient fortune and an idle, curious habit of mind, rambling the country at my own charges, in quest of health, information, and merry adventures.

At Newcastle, which was the first town I reached, I completed my preparations for the part, before going to the inn, by the purchase of a

knapsack and a pair of leathern gaiters. My plaid I continued to wear from sentiment. It was warm, useful to sleep in if I were again benighted, and I had discovered it to be not unbecoming for a man of gallant carriage. Thus equipped, I supported my character of the light-hearted pedestrian not amiss. Surprise was indeed expressed that I should have selected such a season of the year; but I pleaded some delays of business, and smilingly claimed to be an eccentric. The devil was in it, I would say, if any season of the year was not good enough for me; I was not made of sugar, I was no mollycoddle to be afraid of an ill-aired bed or a sprinkle of snow; and I would knock upon the table with my fist and call for t'other bottle, like the noisy and free-hearted young gentleman I was. It was my policy (if I may so express myself) to talk much and say little. At the inn tables, the country, the state of the roads, the business interest of those who sat down with me, and the course of public events, afforded me a considerable field in which I might discourse at large and still communicate no information about myself. There was no one with less air of reticence; I plunged into my company up to the neck; and I had a long cock-and-bull story of an aunt of mine which must have convinced the most suspicious of my innocence. 'What!' they would have said, 'that young ass to be concealing anything! Why, he has deafened me with an aunt of his until my head aches. He only wants you should give him a line, and he would tell you his whole descent from Adam downward, and his whole private fortune to the last shilling.' A responsible solid fellow was even so much moved by pity for my inexperience as to give me a word or two of good advice: that I was but a young man after all—I had at this time a deceptive air of youth that made

me easily pass for one-and-twenty, and was, in the circumstances, worth a fortune—that the company at inns was very mingled, that I should do well to be more careful, and the like; to all which I made answer that I meant no harm myself and expected none from others, or the devil was in it. 'You are one of those d---d prudent fellows that I could never abide with,' said I. 'You are the kind of man that has a long head. That's all the world, my dear sir: the long-heads and the short-horns! Now, I am a short-horn.' 'I doubt,' says he, 'that you will not go very far without getting sheared.' I offered to bet with him on that, and he made off, shaking his head.

But my particular delight was to enlarge on politics and the war. None damned the French like me; none was more bitter against the Americans. And when the north-bound mail arrived, crowned with holly, and the coachman and guard hoarse with shouting victory, I went even so far as to entertain the company to a bowl of punch, which I compounded myself with no illiberal hand, and doled out to such sentiments as the following:—

'Our glorious victory on the Nivelle'! 'Lord Wellington, God bless him! and may victory ever attend upon his arms!' and, 'Soult, poor devil! and may he catch it again to the same tune!'

Never was oratory more applauded to the echo—never any one was more of the popular man than I. I promise you, we made a night of it. Some of the company supported each other, with the assistance of boots, to their respective bedchambers, while the rest slept on the field of glory where

we had left them; and at the breakfast table the next morning there was an extraordinary assemblage of red eyes and shaking fists. I observed patriotism to burn much lower by daylight. Let no one blame me for insensibility to the reverses of France! God knows how my heart raged. How I longed to fall on that herd of swine and knock their heads together in the moment of their revelry! But you are to consider my own situation and its necessities; also a certain lightheartedness, eminently Gallic, which forms a leading trait in my character, and leads me to throw myself into new circumstances with the spirit of a schoolboy. It is possible that I sometimes allowed this impish humour to carry me further than good taste approves: and I was certainly punished for it once.

This was in the episcopal city of Durham. We sat down, a considerable company, to dinner, most of us fine old vatted English tories of that class which is often so enthusiastic as to be inarticulate. I took and held the lead from the beginning; and, the talk having turned on the French in the Peninsula, I gave them authentic details (on the authority of a cousin of mine, an ensign) of certain cannibal orgies in Galicia, in which no less a person than General Caffarelli had taken a part. I always disliked that commander, who once ordered me under arrest for insubordination; and it is possible that a spice of vengeance added to the rigour of my picture. I have forgotten the details; no doubt they were high-coloured. No doubt I rejoiced to fool these jolter-heads; and no doubt the sense of security that I drank from their dull, gasping faces encouraged me to proceed extremely far. And for my sins, there was one silent little man at table who took my story at the true value. It

was from no sense of humour, to which he was quite dead. It was from no particular intelligence, for he had not any. The bond of sympathy, of all things in the world, had rendered him clairvoyant.

Dinner was no sooner done than I strolled forth into the streets with some design of viewing the cathedral; and the little man was silently at my heels. A few doors from the inn, in a dark place of the street, I was aware of a touch on my arm, turned suddenly, and found him looking up at me with eyes pathetically bright.

'I beg your pardon, sir; but that story of yours was particularly rich. He—he! Particularly racy,' said he. 'I tell you, sir, I took you wholly! I smoked you! I believe you and I, sir, if we had a chance to talk, would find we had a good many opinions in common. Here is the "Blue Bell," a very comfortable place. They draw good ale, sir. Would you be so condescending as to share a pot with me?'

There was something so ambiguous and secret in the little man's perpetual signalling, that I confess my curiosity was much aroused. Blaming myself, even as I did so, for the indiscretion, I embraced his proposal, and we were soon face to face over a tankard of mulled ale. He lowered his voice to the least attenuation of a whisper.

'Here, sir,' said he, 'is to the Great Man. I think you take me? No?' He leaned forward till our noses touched. 'Here is to the Emperor!' said he.

I was extremely embarrassed, and, in spite of the creature's innocent appearance, more than half alarmed. I thought him too ingenious, and, indeed, too daring for a spy. Yet if he were honest he must be a man of extraordinary indiscretion, and therefore very unfit to be encouraged by an escaped prisoner. I took a half course, accordingly—accepted his toast in silence, and drank it without enthusiasm.

He proceeded to abound in the praises of Napoleon, such as I had never heard in France, or at least only on the lips of officials paid to offer them.

'And this Caffarelli, now,' he pursued: 'he is a splendid fellow, too, is he not? I have not heard vastly much of him myself. No details, sir—no details! We labour under huge difficulties here as to unbiassed information.'

'I believe I have heard the same complaint in other countries,' I could not help remarking. 'But as to Caffarelli, he is neither lame nor blind, he has two legs and a nose in the middle of his face. And I care as much about him as you care for the dead body of Mr. Perceval!'

He studied me with glowing eyes.

'You cannot deceive me!' he cried. 'You have served under him. You are a Frenchman! I hold by the hand, at last, one of that noble race, the

pioneers of the glorious principles of liberty and brotherhood. Hush! No, it is all right. I thought there had been somebody at the door. In this wretched, enslaved country we dare not even call our souls our own. The spy and the hangman, sir—the spy and the hangman! And yet there is a candle burning, too. The good leaven is working, sir—working underneath. Even in this town there are a few brave spirits, who meet every Wednesday. You must stay over a day or so, and join us. We do not use this house. Another, and a quieter. They draw fine ale, however—fair, mild ale. You will find yourself among friends, among brothers. You will hear some very daring sentiments expressed!' he cried, expanding his small chest. 'Monarchy, Christianity—all the trappings of a bloated past—the Free Confraternity of Durham and Tyneside deride.'

Here was a devil of a prospect for a gentleman whose whole design was to avoid observation! The Free Confraternity had no charms for me; daring sentiments were no part of my baggage; and I tried, instead, a little cold water.

'You seem to forget, sir, that my Emperor has re-established Christianity,' I observed.

'Ah, sir, but that was policy!' he exclaimed. 'You do not understand Napoleon. I have followed his whole career. I can explain his policy from first to last. Now for instance in the Peninsula, on which you were so very amusing, if you will come to a friend's house who has a map of

Spain, I can make the whole course of the war quite clear to you, I venture to say, in half an hour.'

This was intolerable. Of the two extremes, I found I preferred the British tory; and, making an appointment for the morrow, I pleaded sudden headache, escaped to the inn, packed my knapsack, and fled, about nine at night, from this accursed neighbourhood. It was cold, starry, and clear, and the road dry, with a touch of frost. For all that, I had not the smallest intention to make a long stage of it; and about ten o'clock, spying on the right-hand side of the way the lighted windows of an alehouse, I determined to bait there for the night.

It was against my principle, which was to frequent only the dearest inns; and the misadventure that befell me was sufficient to make me more particular in the future. A large company was assembled in the parlour, which was heavy with clouds of tobacco smoke, and brightly lighted up by a roaring fire of coal. Hard by the chimney stood a vacant chair in what I thought an enviable situation, whether for warmth or the pleasure of society; and I was about to take it, when the nearest of the company stopped me with his hand.

'Beg thy pardon, sir,' said he; 'but that there chair belongs to a British soldier.'

A chorus of voices enforced and explained. It was one of Lord Wellington's heroes. He had been wounded under Rowland Hill. He was

Colbourne's right-hand man. In short, this favoured individual appeared to have served with every separate corps, and under every individual general in the Peninsula. Of course I apologised. I had not known. The devil was in it if a soldier had not a right to the best in England. And with that sentiment, which was loudly applauded, I found a corner of a bench, and awaited, with some hopes of entertainment, the return of the hero. He proved, of course, to be a private soldier. I say of course, because no officer could possibly enjoy such heights of popularity. He had been wounded before San Sebastian, and still wore his arm in a sling. What was a great deal worse for him, every member of the company had been
plying him with drink. His honest yokel's countenance blazed as if with fever, his eyes were glazed and looked the two ways, and his feet stumbled as, amidst a murmur of applause, he returned to the midst of his admirers.

Two minutes afterwards I was again posting in the dark along the highway; to explain which sudden movement of retreat I must trouble the reader with a reminiscence of my services.

I lay one night with the out-pickets in Castile. We were in close touch with the enemy; the usual orders had been issued against smoking, fires, and talk, and both armies lay as quiet as mice, when I saw the English sentinel opposite making a signal by holding up his musket. I repeated it, and we both crept together in the dry bed of a stream, which made the demarcation of the armies. It was wine he wanted, of which we had a good

provision, and the English had quite run out. He gave me the money, and I, as was the custom, left him my firelock in pledge, and set off for the canteen. When I returned with a skin of wine, behold, it had pleased some uneasy devil of an English officer to withdraw the outposts! Here was a situation with a vengeance, and I looked for nothing but ridicule in the present and punishment in the future. Doubtless our officers winked pretty hard at this interchange of courtesies, but doubtless it would be impossible to wink at so gross a fault, or rather so pitiable a misadventure as mine; and you are to conceive me wandering in the plains of Castile, benighted, charged with a wine-skin for which I had no use, and with no knowledge whatever of the whereabouts of my musket, beyond that it was somewhere in my Lord Wellington's army. But my Englishman was either a very honest fellow, or else extremely thirsty, and at last contrived to advertise me of his new position. Now, the English sentry in Castile, and the wounded hero in the Durham public-house, were one and
the same person; and if he had been a little less drunk, or myself less lively in getting away, the travels of M. St. Ives might have come to an untimely end.

I suppose this woke me up; it stirred in me besides a spirit of opposition, and in spite of cold, darkness, the highwaymen and the footpads, I determined to walk right on till breakfast-time: a happy resolution, which enabled me to observe one of those traits of manners which at once depict a country and condemn it. It was near midnight when I saw, a great way ahead of me, the light of many torches; presently

after, the sound of wheels reached me, and the slow tread of feet, and soon I had joined myself to the rear of a sordid, silent, and lugubrious procession, such as we see in dreams. Close on a hundred persons marched by torchlight in unbroken silence; in their midst a cart, and in the cart, on an inclined platform, the dead body of a man—the centre-piece of this solemnity, the hero whose obsequies we were come forth at this unusual hour to celebrate. It was but a plain, dingy old fellow of fifty or sixty, his throat cut, his shirt turned over as though to show the wound. Blue trousers and brown socks completed his attire, if we can talk so of the dead. He had a horrid look of a waxwork. In the tossing of the lights he seemed to make faces and mouths at us, to frown, and to be at times upon the point of speech. The cart, with this shabby and tragic freight, and surrounded by its silent escort and bright torches, continued for some distance to creak along the high-road, and I to follow it in amazement, which was soon exchanged for horror. At the corner of a lane the procession stopped, and, as the torches ranged themselves along the hedgerow-side, I became aware of a grave dug in the midst of the thoroughfare, and a provision of quicklime piled in the ditch. The cart was backed to the margin, the body slung off the platform and dumped into the grave with an irreverent roughness. A sharpened stake had hitherto served it for a pillow. It was now withdrawn, held in its place by several volunteers, and a fellow with a heavy mallet (the sound of which still haunts me at night) drove it home through the bosom of the corpse. The hole was filled with quicklime, and the bystanders, as if relieved of some oppression, broke at once into a sound of whispered speech.

My shirt stuck to me, my heart had almost ceased beating, and I found my tongue with difficulty.

'I beg your pardon,' I gasped to a neighbour, 'what is this? what has he done? is it allowed?'

'Why, where do you come from?' replied the man.

'I am a traveller, sir,' said I, 'and a total stranger in this part of the country. I had lost my way when I saw your torches, and came by chance on this—this incredible scene. Who was the man?'

'A suicide,' said he. 'Ay, he was a bad one, was Johnnie Green.'

It appeared this was a wretch who had committed many barbarous murders, and being at last upon the point of discovery fell of his own hand. And the nightmare at the crossroads was the regular punishment, according to the laws of England, for an act which the Romans honoured as a virtue! Whenever an Englishman begins to prate of civilisation (as, indeed, it's a defect they are rather prone to), I hear the measured blows of a mallet, see the bystanders crowd with torches about the grave, smile a little to myself in conscious superiority—and take a thimbleful of brandy for the stomach's sake.

I believe it must have been at my next stage, for I remember going to bed extremely early, that I came to the model of a good old-fashioned English inn, and was attended on by the picture of a pretty chambermaid. We had a good many pleasant passages as she waited table or warmed my bed for me

with a devil of a brass warming pan, fully larger than herself; and as she was no less pert than she was pretty, she may be said to have given rather better than she took. I cannot tell why (unless it were for the sake of her saucy eyes), but I made her my confidante, told her I was attached to a young lady in Scotland, and received the encouragement of her sympathy, mingled and connected with a fair amount of rustic wit. While I slept the down-mail stopped for supper; it chanced that one of the passengers left behind a copy of the Edinburgh Courant, and the next morning my pretty chambermaid set the paper before me at breakfast, with the remark that there was some news from my lady-love. I took it eagerly, hoping to find some further word of our escape, in which I was disappointed; and I was about to lay it down, when my eye fell on a paragraph immediately concerning me. Faa was in hospital, grievously sick, and warrants were out for the arrest of Sim and Candlish. These two men had shown themselves very loyal to me. This trouble emerging, the least I could do was to be guided by a similar loyalty to them. Suppose my visit to my uncle crowned with some success, and my finances re-established, I determined I should immediately return to Edinburgh, put their case in the hands of a good lawyer, and await events. So my mind was very lightly made up to what proved a mighty serious matter. Candlish and Sim were all very well in their way, and I do sincerely

trust I should have been at some pains to help them, had there been nothing else. But in truth my heart and my eyes were set on quite another matter, and I received the news of their tribulation almost with joy. That is never a bad wind that blows where we want to go, and you may be sure there was nothing unwelcome in a circumstance that carried me back to Edinburgh and Flora. From that hour I began to indulge myself with the making of imaginary scenes and interviews, in which I confounded the aunt, flattered Ronald, and now in the witty, now in the sentimental manner, declared my love and received the assurance of its return. By means of this exercise my resolution daily grew stronger, until at last I had piled together such a mass of obstinacy as it would have taken a cataclysm of nature to subvert.

'Yes,' said I to the chambermaid, 'here is news of my lady-love indeed, and very good news too.'

All that day, in the teeth of a keen winter wind, I hugged myself in my plaid, and it was as though her arms were flung around me.