

CHAPTER XII—I FOLLOW A COVERED CART NEARLY TO MY DESTINATION

At last I began to draw near, by reasonable stages, to the neighbourhood of Wakefield; and the name of Mr. Burchell Fenn came to the top in my memory. This was the gentleman (the reader may remember) who made a trade of forwarding the escape of French prisoners. How he did so: whether he had a sign-board, Escapes forwarded, apply within; what he charged for his services, or whether they were gratuitous and charitable, were all matters of which I was at once ignorant and extremely curious. Thanks to my proficiency in English, and Mr. Romaine's bank-notes, I was getting on swimmingly without him; but the trouble was that I could not be easy till I had come to the bottom of these mysteries, and it was my difficulty that I knew nothing of him beyond the name. I knew not his trade beyond that of Forwarder of Escapes—whether he lived in town or country, whether he were rich or poor, nor by what kind of address I was to gain his confidence. It would have a very bad appearance to go along the highwyside asking after a man of whom I could give so scanty an account; and I should look like a fool, indeed, if I were to present myself at his door and find the police in occupation! The interest of the conundrum, however, tempted me, and I turned aside from my direct road to pass by Wakefield; kept my ears pricked, as I went, for any mention of his name, and relied for the rest on my good fortune. If Luck (who must certainly be feminine) favoured me as far as to throw me in the man's way, I should owe the lady a candle; if not, I could very readily

console myself. In this experimental humour, and with so little to help me, it was a miracle that I should have brought my enterprise to a good end; and there are several saints in the calendar who might be happy to exchange with St. Ives!

I had slept that night in a good inn at Wakefield, made my breakfast by candle-light with the passengers of an up-coach, and set off in a very ill temper with myself and my surroundings. It was still early; the air raw and cold; the sun low, and soon to disappear under a vast canopy of rain-clouds that had begun to assemble in the north-west, and from that quarter invaded the whole width of the heaven. Already the rain fell in crystal rods; already the whole face of the country sounded with the discharge of drains and ditches; and I looked forward to a day of downpour and the hell of wet clothes, in which particular I am as dainty as a cat. At a corner of the road, and by the last glint of the drowning sun, I spied a covered cart, of a kind that I thought I had never seen before, preceding me at the foot's pace of jaded horses. Anything is interesting to a pedestrian that can help him to forget the miseries of a day of rain; and I bettered my pace and gradually overtook the vehicle.

The nearer I came, the more it puzzled me. It was much such a cart as I am told the calico printers use, mounted on two wheels, and furnished with a seat in front for the driver. The interior closed with a door, and was of a bigness to contain a good load of calico, or (at a pinch and if it were necessary) four or five persons. But, indeed, if human beings were meant to travel there, they had my pity! They must travel in the

dark, for there was no sign of a window; and they would be shaken all the way like a phial of doctor's stuff, for the cart was not only ungainly to look at—it was besides very imperfectly balanced on the one pair of wheels, and pitched unconscionably. Altogether, if I had any glancing idea that the cart was really a carriage, I had soon dismissed it; but I was still inquisitive as to what it should contain, and where it had come from. Wheels and horses were splashed with many different colours of mud, as though they had come far and across a considerable diversity of country. The driver continually and vainly plied his whip. It seemed to follow they had made a long, perhaps an all-night, stage; and that the driver, at that early hour of a little after eight in the morning, already felt himself belated. I looked for the name of the proprietor on the shaft, and started outright. Fortune had favoured the careless: it was Burchell Fenn!

'A wet morning, my man,' said I.

The driver, a loutish fellow, shock-headed and turnip-faced, returned not a word to my salutation, but savagely flogged his horses. The tired animals, who could scarce put the one foot before the other, paid no attention to his cruelty; and I continued without effort to maintain my position alongside, smiling to myself at the futility of his attempts, and at the same time pricked with curiosity as to why he made them. I made no such formidable a figure as that a man should flee when I accosted him; and my conscience not being entirely clear, I was more accustomed to be uneasy myself than to see others timid. Presently he

desisted, and put back his whip in the holster with the air of a man vanquished.

‘So you would run away from me?’ said I. ‘Come, come, that’s not English.’

‘Beg pardon, master: no offence meant,’ he said, touching his hat.

‘And none taken!’ cried I. ‘All I desire is a little gaiety by the way.’

I understood him to say he didn’t ‘take with gaiety.’

‘Then I will try you with something else,’ said I. ‘Oh, I can be all things to all men, like the apostle! I dare to say I have travelled with heavier fellows than you in my time, and done famously well with them. Are you going home?’

‘Yes, I’m a goin’ home, I am,’ he said.

‘A very fortunate circumstance for me!’ said I. ‘At this rate we shall see a good deal of each other, going the same way; and, now I come to think of it, why should you not give me a cast? There is room beside you on the bench.’

With a sudden snatch, he carried the cart two yards into the roadway. The horses plunged and came to a stop. ‘No, you don’t!’ he said,

menacing me with the whip. 'None o' that with me.'

'None of what?' said I. 'I asked you for a lift, but I have no idea of taking one by force.'

'Well, I've got to take care of the cart and 'orses, I have,' says he.

'I don't take up with no runagate vagabones, you see, else.'

'I ought to thank you for your touching confidence,' said I, approaching carelessly nearer as I spoke. 'But I admit the road is solitary hereabouts, and no doubt an accident soon happens. Little fear of anything of the kind with you! I like you for it, like your prudence, like that pastoral shyness of disposition. But why not put it out of my power to hurt? Why not open the door and bestow me here in the box, or whatever you please to call it?' And I laid my hand demonstratively on the body of the cart.

He had been timorous before; but at this, he seemed to lose the power of speech a moment, and stared at me in a perfect enthusiasm of fear.

'Why not?' I continued. 'The idea is good. I should be safe in there if I were the monster Williams himself. The great thing is to have me under lock and key. For it does lock; it is locked now,' said I, trying the door. 'A propos, what have you for a cargo? It must be precious.'

He found not a word to answer.

Rat-tat-tat, I went upon the door like a well-drilled footman.

‘Any one at home?’ I said, and stooped to listen.

There came out of the interior a stifled sneeze, the first of an uncontrollable paroxysm; another followed immediately on the heels of it; and then the driver turned with an oath, laid the lash upon the horses with so much energy that they found their heels again, and the whole equipage fled down the road at a gallop.

At the first sound of the sneeze, I had started back like a man shot. The next moment, a great light broke on my mind, and I understood. Here was the secret of Fenn’s trade: this was how he forwarded the escape of prisoners, hawking them by night about the country in his covered cart. There had been Frenchmen close to me; he who had just sneezed was my countryman, my comrade, perhaps already my friend! I took to my heels in pursuit. ‘Hold hard!’ I shouted. ‘Stop! It’s all right! Stop!’ But the driver only turned a white face on me for a moment, and redoubled his efforts, bending forward, plying his whip and crying to his horses; these lay themselves down to the gallop and beat the highway with flying hoofs; and the cart bounded after them among the ruts and fled in a halo of rain and spattering mud. But a minute since, and it had been trundling along like a lame cow; and now it was off as though drawn by Apollo’s coursers. There is no telling what a man can do, until you frighten him!

It was as much as I could do myself, though I ran valiantly, to maintain my distance; and that (since I knew my countrymen so near) was become a chief point with me. A hundred yards farther on the cart whipped out of the high-road into a lane embowered with leafless trees, and became lost to view. When I saw it next, the driver had increased his advantage considerably, but all danger was at an end, and the horses had again declined into a hobbling walk. Persuaded that they could not escape me, I took my time, and recovered my breath as I followed them.

Presently the lane twisted at right angles, and showed me a gate and the beginning of a gravel sweep; and a little after, as I continued to advance, a red brick house about seventy years old, in a fine style of architecture, and presenting a front of many windows to a lawn and garden. Behind, I could see outhouses and the peaked roofs of stacks; and I judged that a manor-house had in some way declined to be the residence of a tenant-farmer, careless alike of appearances and substantial comfort. The marks of neglect were visible on every side, in flower-bushes straggling beyond the borders, in the ill-kept turf, and in the broken windows that were incongruously patched with paper or stuffed with rags. A thicket of trees, mostly evergreen, fenced the place round and secluded it from the eyes of prying neighbours. As I came in view of it, on that melancholy winter's morning, in the deluge of the falling rain, and with the wind that now rose in occasional gusts and hooted over the old chimneys, the cart had already drawn up at the front-door steps, and the driver was already in earnest discourse with Mr. Burchell Fenn. He was standing with his hands behind his back—a man of a gross,

misbegotten face and body, dewlapped like a bull and red as a harvest moon; and in his jockey cap, blue coat and top boots, he had much the air of a good, solid tenant-farmer.

The pair continued to speak as I came up the approach, but received me at last in a sort of goggling silence. I had my hat in my hand.

'I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Burchell Fenn?' said I.

'The same, sir,' replied Mr. Fenn, taking off his jockey cap in answer to my civility, but with the distant look and the tardy movements of one who continues to think of something else. 'And who may you be?' he asked.

'I shall tell you afterwards,' said I. 'Suffice it, in the meantime, that I come on business.'

He seemed to digest my answer laboriously, his mouth gaping, his little eyes never straying from my face.

'Suffer me to point out to you, sir,' I resumed, 'that this is a devil of a wet morning; and that the chimney corner, and possibly a glass of something hot, are clearly indicated.'

Indeed, the rain was now grown to be a deluge; the gutters of the house roared; the air was filled with the continuous, strident crash. The stolidity of his face, on which the rain streamed, was far from

reassuring me. On the contrary, I was aware of a distinct qualm of apprehension, which was not at all lessened by a view of the driver, craning from his perch to observe us with the expression of a fascinated bird. So we stood silent, when the prisoner again began to sneeze from the body of the cart; and at the sound, prompt as a transformation, the driver had whipped up his horses and was shambling off round the corner of the house, and Mr. Fenn, recovering his wits with a gulp, had turned to the door behind him.

‘Come in, come in, sir,’ he said. ‘I beg your pardon, sir; the lock goes a trifle hard.’

Indeed, it took him a surprising time to open the door, which was not only locked on the outside, but the lock seemed rebellious from disuse; and when at last he stood back and motioned me to enter before him, I was greeted on the threshold by that peculiar and convincing sound of the rain echoing over empty chambers. The entrance-hall, in which I now found myself, was of a good size and good proportions; potted plants occupied the corners; the paved floor was soiled with muddy footprints and encumbered with straw; on a mahogany hall-table, which was the only furniture, a candle had been stuck and suffered to burn down—plainly a long while ago, for the gutterings were green with mould. My mind, under these new impressions, worked with unusual vivacity. I was here shut off with Fenn and his hireling in a deserted house, a neglected garden, and a wood of evergreens: the most eligible theatre for a deed of darkness. There came to me a vision of two flagstones raised in the hall-floor, and

the driver putting in the rainy afternoon over my grave, and the prospect displeased me extremely. I felt I had carried my pleasantries as far as was safe; I must lose no time in declaring my true character, and I was even choosing the words in which I was to begin, when the hall-door was slammed-to behind me with a bang, and I turned, dropping my stick as I did so, in time—and not any more than time—to save my life.

The surprise of the onslaught and the huge weight of my assailant gave him the advantage. He had a pistol in his right hand of a portentous size, which it took me all my strength to keep deflected. With his left arm he strained me to his bosom, so that I thought I must be crushed or stifled. His mouth was open, his face crimson, and he panted aloud with hard animal sounds. The affair was as brief as it was hot and sudden. The potations which had swelled and bloated his carcass had already weakened the springs of energy. One more huge effort, that came near to overpower me, and in which the pistol happily exploded, and I felt his grasp slacken and weakness come on his joints; his legs succumbed under his weight, and he grovelled on his knees on the stone floor. ‘Spare me!’ he gasped.

I had not only been abominably frightened; I was shocked besides: my delicacy was in arms, like a lady to whom violence should have been offered by a similar monster. I plucked myself from his horrid contact, I snatched the pistol—even discharged, it was a formidable weapon—and menaced him with the butt. ‘Spare you!’ I cried, ‘you beast!’

His voice died in his fat inwards, but his lips still vehemently framed the same words of supplication. My anger began to pass off, but not all my repugnance; the picture he made revolted me, and I was impatient to be spared the further view of it.

‘Here,’ said I, ‘stop this performance: it sickens me. I am not going to kill you, do you hear? I have need of you.’

A look of relief, that I could almost have called beautiful, dawned on his countenance. ‘Anything—anything you wish,’ said he.

Anything is a big word, and his use of it brought me for a moment to a stand. ‘Why, what do you mean?’ I asked. ‘Do you mean that you will blow the gaff on the whole business?’

He answered me Yes with eager asseverations.

‘I know Monsieur de Saint-Yves is in it; it was through his papers we traced you,’ I said. ‘Do you consent to make a clean breast of the others?’

‘I do—I will!’ he cried. ‘The ’ole crew of ’em; there’s good names among ’em. I’ll be king’s evidence.’

‘So that all shall hang except yourself? You damned villain!’ I broke out. ‘Understand at once that I am no spy or thief-taker. I am a

kinsman of Monsieur de St. Yves—here in his interest. Upon my word, you have put your foot in it prettily, Mr. Burchell Fenn! Come, stand up; don't grovel there. Stand up, you lump of iniquity!

He scrambled to his feet. He was utterly unmanned, or it might have gone hard with me yet; and I considered him hesitating, as, indeed, there was cause. The man was a double-dyed traitor: he had tried to murder me, and I had first baffled his endeavours and then exposed and insulted him. Was it wise to place myself any longer at his mercy? With his help I should doubtless travel more quickly; doubtless also far less agreeably; and there was everything to show that it would be at a greater risk. In short, I should have washed my hands of him on the spot, but for the temptation of the French officers, whom I knew to be so near, and for whose society I felt so great and natural an impatience. If I was to see anything of my countrymen, it was clear I had first of all to make my peace with Mr. Fenn; and that was no easy matter. To make friends with any one implies concessions on both sides; and what could I concede? What could I say of him, but that he had proved himself a villain and a fool, and the worse man?

'Well,' said I, 'here has been rather a poor piece of business, which I dare say you can have no pleasure in calling to mind; and, to say truth, I would as readily forget it myself. Suppose we try. Take back your pistol, which smells very ill; put it in your pocket or wherever you had it concealed. There! Now let us meet for the first time.—Give you good morning, Mr. Fenn! I hope you do very well. I come on the

recommendation of my kinsman, the Vicomte de St. Yves.'

'Do you mean it?' he cried. 'Do you mean you will pass over our little scrimmage?'

'Why, certainly!' said I. 'It shows you are a bold fellow, who may be trusted to forget the business when it comes to the point. There is nothing against you in the little scrimmage, unless that your courage is greater than your strength. You are not so young as you once were, that is all.'

'And I beg of you, sir, don't betray me to the Vis-count,' he pleaded. 'I'll not deny but what my 'eart failed me a trifle; but it was only a word, sir, what anybody might have said in the 'eat of the moment, and over with it.'

'Certainly,' said I. 'That is quite my own opinion.'

'The way I came to be anxious about the Vis-count,' he continued, 'is that I believe he might be induced to form an 'asty judgment. And the business, in a pecuniary point of view, is all that I could ask; only trying, sir—very trying. It's making an old man of me before my time. You might have observed yourself, sir, that I 'aven't got the knees I once 'ad. The knees and the breathing, there's where it takes me. But I'm very sure, sir, I address a gentleman as would be the last to make trouble between friends.'

'I am sure you do me no more than justice,' said I; 'and I shall think it quite unnecessary to dwell on any of these passing circumstances in my report to the Vicomte.'

'Which you do favour him (if you'll excuse me being so bold as to mention it) exac'ly!' said he. 'I should have known you anywheres. May I offer you a pot of 'ome-brewed ale, sir? By your leave! This way, if you please. I am 'eartily grateful—'eartily pleased to be of any service to a gentleman like you, sir, which is related to the Vis-count, and really a fambly of which you might well be proud! Take care of the step, sir. You have good news of 'is 'ealth, I trust? as well as that of Monseer the Count?'

God forgive me! the horrible fellow was still puffing and panting with the fury of his assault, and already he had fallen into an obsequious, wheedling familiarity like that of an old servant,—already he was flattering me on my family connections!

I followed him through the house into the stable-yard, where I observed the driver washing the cart in a shed. He must have heard the explosion of the pistol. He could not choose but hear it: the thing was shaped like a little blunderbuss, charged to the mouth, and made a report like a piece of field artillery. He had heard, he had paid no attention; and now, as we came forth by the back-door, he raised for a moment a pale and tell-tale face that was as direct as a confession. The rascal had

expected to see Fenn come forth alone; he was waiting to be called on for that part of sexton, which I had already allotted to him in fancy.

I need not detain the reader very long with any description of my visit to the back-kitchen; of how we mulled our ale there, and mulled it very well; nor of how we sat talking, Fenn like an old, faithful, affectionate dependant, and I—well! I myself fallen into a mere admiration of so much impudence, that transcended words, and had very soon conquered animosity.

I took a fancy to the man, he was so vast a humbug. I began to see a kind of beauty in him, his aplomb was so majestic. I never knew a rogue to cut so fat; his villainy was ample, like his belly, and I could scarce find it in my heart to hold him responsible for either. He was good enough to drop into the autobiographical; telling me how the farm, in spite of the war and the high prices, had proved a disappointment; how there was 'a sight of cold, wet land as you come along the 'igh-road'; how the winds and rains and the seasons had been misdirected, it seemed 'o' purpose'; how Mrs. Fenn had died—I lost her coming two year ago; a remarkable fine woman, my old girl, sir! if you'll excuse me,' he added, with a burst of humility. In short, he gave me an opportunity of studying John Bull, as I may say, stuffed naked—his greed, his usuriousness, his hypocrisy, his perfidy of the back-stairs, all swelled to the superlative—such as was well worth the little disarray and fluster of our passage in the hall.