CHAPTER XIII—I MEET TWO OF MY COUNTRYMEN

As soon as I judged it safe, and that was not before Burchell Fenn had talked himself back into his breath and a complete good humour, I proposed he should introduce me to the French officers, henceforth to become my fellow-passengers. There were two of them, it appeared, and my heart beat as I approached the door. The specimen of Perfidious Albion whom I had just been studying gave me the stronger zest for my fellow-countrymen. I could have embraced them; I could have wept on their necks. And all the time I was going to a disappointment.

It was in a spacious and low room, with an outlook on the court, that I found them bestowed. In the good days of that house the apartment had probably served as a library, for there were traces of shelves along the wainscot. Four or five mattresses lay on the floor in a corner, with a frowsy heap of bedding; near by was a basin and a cube of soap; a rude kitchen-table and some deal chairs stood together at the far end; and the room was illuminated by no less than four windows, and warmed by a little, crazy, sidelong grate, propped up with bricks in the vent of a hospitable chimney, in which a pile of coals smoked prodigiously and gave out a few starveling flames. An old, frail, white-haired officer sat in one of the chairs, which he had drawn close to this apology for a fire. He was wrapped in a camlet cloak, of which the collar was turned up, his knees touched the bars, his hands were spread in the very smoke, and yet he shivered for cold. The second—a big, florid, fine animal of a man,

whose every gesture labelled him the cock of the walk and the admiration of the ladies—had apparently despaired of the fire, and now strode up and down, sneezing hard, bitterly blowing his nose, and proffering a continual stream of bluster, complaint, and barrack-room oaths.

Fenn showed me in with the brief form of introduction: 'Gentlemen all, this here's another fare!' and was gone again at once. The old man gave me but the one glance out of lack-lustre eyes; and even as he looked a shiver took him as sharp as a hiccough. But the other, who represented to admiration the picture of a Beau in a Catarrh, stared at me arrogantly.

'And who are you, sir?' he asked.

I made the military salute to my superiors.

'Champdivers, private, Eighth of the Line,' said I.

'Pretty business!' said he. 'And you are going on with us? Three in a cart, and a great trolloping private at that! And who is to pay for you, my fine fellow?' he inquired.

'If monsieur comes to that,' I answered civilly, 'who paid for him?'

'Oh, if you choose to play the wit!' said he,—and began to rail at large upon his destiny, the weather, the cold, the danger and the expense of

the escape, and, above all, the cooking of the accursed English. It seemed to annoy him particularly that I should have joined their party. 'If you knew what you were doing, thirty thousand millions of pigs! you would keep yourself to yourself! The horses can't drag the cart; the roads are all ruts and swamps. No longer ago than last night the Colonel and I had to march half the way—thunder of God!—half the way to the knees
in mud—and I with this infernal cold—and the danger of detection! Happily we met no one: a desert—a real desert—like the whole abominable country! Nothing to eat—no, sir, there is nothing to eat but raw cow and greens boiled in water—nor to drink but Worcestershire sauce! Now I, with my catarrh, I have no appetite; is it not so? Well, if I were in France, I should have a good soup with a crust in it, an omelette, a fowl in rice, a partridge in cabbages—things to tempt me, thunder of God! But here—day of God!—what a country! And cold, too! They talk about Russia—this is all the cold I want! And the people—look at them! What a race! Never any handsome men; never any fine officers!'—and he looked down complacently for a moment at his waist—'And the women—what faggots!
No, that is one point clear, I cannot stomach the English!'

There was something in this man so antipathetic to me, as sent the mustard into my nose. I can never bear your bucks and dandies, even when they are decent-looking and well dressed; and the Major—for that was his rank—was the image of a flunkey in good luck. Even to be in agreement with him, or to seem to be so, was more than I could make out to endure.

'You could scarce be expected to stomach them,' said I civilly, 'after having just digested your parole.'

He whipped round on his heel and turned on me a countenance which I dare say he imagined to be awful; but another fit of sneezing cut him off ere he could come the length of speech.

'I have not tried the dish myself,' I took the opportunity to add. 'It is said to be unpalatable. Did monsieur find it so?'

With surprising vivacity the Colonel woke from his lethargy. He was between us ere another word could pass.

'Shame, gentlemen!' he said. 'Is this a time for Frenchmen and fellow-soldiers to fall out? We are in the midst of our enemies; a quarrel, a loud word, may suffice to plunge us back into irretrievable distress. Monsieur le Commandant, you have been gravely offended. I make it my request, I make it my prayer—if need be, I give you my orders—that the matter shall stand by until we come safe to France. Then, if you please, I will serve you in any capacity. And for you, young man, you have shown all the cruelty and carelessness of youth. This gentleman is your superior; he is no longer young'—at which word you are to conceive the Major's face. 'It is admitted he has broken his parole. I know not his reason, and no more do you. It might be patriotism in this hour of our country's adversity, it might be humanity,

necessity; you know not what in the least, and you permit yourself to reflect on his honour. To break parole may be a subject for pity and not derision. I have broken mine—I, a colonel of the Empire. And why? I have been years negotiating my exchange, and it cannot be managed; those who have influence at the Ministry of War continually rush in before me, and I have to wait, and my daughter at home is in a decline. I am going to see my daughter at last, and it is my only concern lest I should have delayed too long. She is ill, and very ill,—at death's door. Nothing is left me but my daughter, my Emperor, and my honour; and I give my honour,

blame me for it who dare!'

At this my heart smote me.

'For God's sake,' I cried, 'think no more of what I have said! A parole? what is a parole against life and death and love? I ask your pardon; this gentleman's also. As long as I shall be with you, you shall not have cause to complain of me again. I pray God you will find your daughter alive and restored.'

'That is past praying for,' said the Colonel; and immediately the brief fire died out of him, and, returning to the hearth, he relapsed into his former abstraction.

But I was not so easy to compose. The knowledge of the poor gentleman's trouble, and the sight of his face, had filled me with the bitterness of

remorse; and I insisted upon shaking hands with the Major (which he did with a very ill grace), and abounded in palinodes and apologies.

'After all,' said I, 'who am I to talk? I am in the luck to be a private soldier; I have no parole to give or to keep; once I am over the rampart, I am as free as air. I beg you to believe that I regret from my soul the use of these ungenerous expressions. Allow me . . . Is there no way in this damned house to attract attention? Where is this fellow, Fenn?'

I ran to one of the windows and threw it open. Fenn, who was at the moment passing below in the court, cast up his arms like one in despair, called to me to keep back, plunged into the house, and appeared next moment in the doorway of the chamber.

'Oh, sir!' says he, 'keep away from those there windows. A body might see you from the back lane.'

'It is registered,' said I. 'Henceforward I will be a mouse for precaution and a ghost for invisibility. But in the meantime, for God's sake, fetch us a bottle of brandy! Your room is as damp as the bottom of a well, and these gentlemen are perishing of cold.'

So soon as I had paid him (for everything, I found, must be paid in advance), I turned my attention to the fire, and whether because I threw greater energy into the business, or because the coals were now warmed and the time ripe, I soon started a blaze that made the chimney roar

again. The shine of it, in that dark, rainy day, seemed to reanimate the Colonel like a blink of sun. With the outburst of the flames, besides, a draught was established, which immediately delivered us from the plague of smoke; and by the time Fenn returned, carrying a bottle under his arm and a single tumbler in his hand, there was already an air of gaiety in the room that did the heart good.

I poured out some of the brandy.

'Colonel,' said I, 'I am a young man and a private soldier. I have not been long in this room, and already I have shown the petulance that belongs to the one character and the ill manners that you may look for in the other. Have the humanity to pass these slips over, and honour me so far as to accept this glass.'

'My lad,' says he, waking up and blinking at me with an air of suspicion, 'are you sure you can afford it?'

I assured him I could.

'I thank you, then: I am very cold.' He took the glass out, and a little colour came in his face. 'I thank you again,' said he. 'It goes to the heart.'

The Major, when I motioned him to help himself, did so with a good deal of liberality; continued to do so for the rest of the morning, now with

some sort of apology, now with none at all; and the bottle began to look foolish before dinner was served. It was such a meal as he had himself predicted: beef, greens, potatoes, mustard in a teacup, and beer in a brown jug that was all over hounds, horses, and hunters, with a fox at the fat end and a gigantic John Bull—for all the world like Fenn—sitting in the midst in a bob-wig and smoking tobacco. The beer was a good brew, but not good enough for the Major; he laced it with brandy—for his cold, he said; and in this curative design the remainder of the bottle ebbed away. He called my attention repeatedly to the circumstance; helped me pointedly to the dregs, threw the bottle in the air and played tricks with it; and at last, having exhausted his ingenuity, and seeing me remain quite blind to every hint, he ordered and paid for another himself.

As for the Colonel, he ate nothing, sat sunk in a muse, and only awoke occasionally to a sense of where he was, and what he was supposed to be doing. On each of these occasions he showed a gratitude and kind courtesy that endeared him to me beyond expression. 'Champdivers, my lad, your health!' he would say. 'The Major and I had a very arduous march last night, and I positively thought I should have eaten nothing, but your fortunate idea of the brandy has made quite a new man of me—quite a new man.' And he would fall to with a great air of heartiness, cut himself a mouthful, and, before he had swallowed it, would have forgotten his dinner, his company, the place where he then was, and the escape he was engaged on, and become absorbed in the vision of a sick-room and a dying girl in France. The pathos of this continual

preoccupation, in a man so old, sick, and over-weary, and whom I looked upon as a mere bundle of dying bones and death-pains, put me wholly from my victuals: it seemed there was an element of sin, a kind of rude bravado of youth, in the mere relishing of food at the same table with this tragic father; and though I was well enough used to the coarse, plain diet of the English, I ate scarce more than himself. Dinner was hardly over before he succumbed to a lethargic sleep; lying on one of the mattresses with his limbs relaxed, and his breath seemingly suspended—the very image of dissolution.

This left the Major and myself alone at the table. You must not suppose our tête-à-tête was long, but it was a lively period while it lasted. He drank like a fish or an Englishman; shouted, beat the table, roared out songs, quarrelled, made it up again, and at last tried to throw the dinner-plates through the window, a feat of which he was at that time quite incapable. For a party of fugitives, condemned to the most rigorous discretion, there was never seen so noisy a carnival; and through it all the Colonel continued to sleep like a child. Seeing the Major so well advanced, and no retreat possible, I made a fair wind of a foul one, keeping his glass full, pushing him with toasts; and sooner than I could have dared to hope, he became drowsy and incoherent. With the wrong-headedness of all such sots, he would not be persuaded to lie down upon one of the mattresses until I had stretched myself upon another. But the comedy was soon over; soon he slept the sleep of the just, and snored like a military music; and I might get up again and face (as best I could) the excessive tedium of the afternoon.

I had passed the night before in a good bed; I was denied the resource of slumber; and there was nothing open for me but to pace the apartment, maintain the fire, and brood on my position. I compared yesterday and to-day—the safety, comfort, jollity, open-air exercise and pleasant roadside inns of the one, with the tedium, anxiety, and discomfort of the other. I remembered that I was in the hands of Fenn, who could not be more false—though he might be more vindictive—than I fancied him. I looked forward to nights of pitching in the covered cart, and days of monotony in I knew not what hiding-places; and my heart failed me, and I was in two minds whether to slink off ere it was too late, and return to my former solitary way of travel. But the Colonel stood in the path. I had not seen much of him; but already I judged him a man of a childlike nature—with that sort of innocence and courtesy that, I think, is only to be found in old soldiers or old priests—and broken with years and sorrow. I could not turn my back on his distress; could not leave him alone with the selfish trooper who snored on the next mattress. 'Champdivers, my lad, your health!' said a voice in my ear, and stopped me—and there are few things I am more glad of in the retrospect than that it did.

It must have been about four in the afternoon—at least the rain had taken off, and the sun was setting with some wintry pomp—when the current of my reflections was effectually changed by the arrival of two visitors in a gig. They were farmers of the neighbourhood, I suppose—big, burly fellows in great-coats and top-boots, mightily flushed with liquor when

they arrived, and, before they left, inimitably drunk. They stayed long in the kitchen with Burchell, drinking, shouting, singing, and keeping it up; and the sound of their merry minstrelsy kept me a kind of company. The night fell, and the shine of the fire brightened and blinked on the panelled wall. Our illuminated windows must have been visible not only from the back lane of which Fenn had spoken, but from the court where the farmers' gig awaited them. In the far end of the firelit room lay my companions, the one silent, the other clamorously noisy, the images of death and drunkenness. Little wonder if I were tempted to join in the choruses below, and sometimes could hardly refrain from laughter, and sometimes, I believe, from tears—so unmitigated was the tedium, so cruel the suspense, of this period.

At last, about six at night, I should fancy, the noisy minstrels appeared in the court, headed by Fenn with a lantern, and knocking together as they came. The visitors clambered noisily into the gig, one of them shook the reins, and they were snatched out of sight and hearing with a suddenness that partook of the nature of prodigy. I am well aware there is a Providence for drunken men, that holds the reins for them and presides over their troubles; doubtless he had his work cut out for him with this particular gigful! Fenn rescued his toes with an ejaculation from under the departing wheels, and turned at once with uncertain steps and devious lantern to the far end of the court. There, through the open doors of a coach-house, the shock-headed lad was already to be seen drawing forth the covered cart. If I wished any private talk with our host, it must be now or never.

Accordingly I groped my way downstairs, and came to him as he looked on at and lighted the harnessing of the horses.

'The hour approaches when we have to part,' said I; 'and I shall be obliged if you will tell your servant to drop me at the nearest point for Dunstable. I am determined to go so far with our friends, Colonel X and Major Y, but my business is peremptory, and it takes me to the neighbourhood of Dunstable.'

Orders were given to my satisfaction, with an obsequiousness that seemed only inflamed by his potations.