

CHAPTER XIV—TRAVELS OF THE COVERED CART

My companions were aroused with difficulty: the Colonel, poor old gentleman, to a sort of permanent dream, in which you could say of him only that he was very deaf and anxiously polite; the Major still maudlin drunk. We had a dish of tea by the fireside, and then issued like criminals into the scathing cold of the night. For the weather had in the meantime changed. Upon the cessation of the rain, a strict frost had succeeded. The moon, being young, was already near the zenith when we started, glittered everywhere on sheets of ice, and sparkled in ten thousand icicles. A more unpromising night for a journey it was hard to conceive. But in the course of the afternoon the horses had been well roughed; and King (for such was the name of the shock-headed lad) was very positive that he could drive us without misadventure. He was as good as his word; indeed, despite a gawky air, he was simply invaluable in his present employment, showing marked sagacity in all that concerned the care of horses, and guiding us by one short cut after another for days, and without a fault.

The interior of that engine of torture, the covered cart, was fitted with a bench, on which we took our places; the door was shut; in a moment, the night closed upon us solid and stifling; and we felt that we were being driven carefully out of the courtyard. Careful was the word all night, and it was an alleviation of our miseries that we did not often enjoy. In general, as we were driven the better part of the night and day, often

at a pretty quick pace and always through a labyrinth of the most infamous country lanes and by-roads, we were so bruised upon the bench, so dashed against the top and sides of the cart, that we reached the end of a stage in truly pitiable case, sometimes flung ourselves down without the formality of eating, made but one sleep of it until the hour of departure returned, and were only properly awakened by the first jolt of the renewed journey. There were interruptions, at times, that we hailed as alleviations. At times the cart was bogged, once it was upset, and we must alight and lend the driver the assistance of our arms; at times, too (as on the occasion when I had first encountered it), the horses gave out, and we had to trail alongside in mud or frost until the first peep of daylight, or the approach to a hamlet or a high road, bade us disappear like ghosts into our prison.

The main roads of England are incomparable for excellence, of a beautiful smoothness, very ingeniously laid down, and so well kept that in most weathers you could take your dinner off any part of them without distaste. On them, to the note of the bugle, the mail did its sixty miles a day; innumerable chaises whisked after the bobbing postboys; or some young blood would flit by in a curricle and tandem, to the vast delight and danger of the lieges. On them, the slow-pacing waggons made a music of bells, and all day long the travellers on horse-back and the travellers on foot (like happy Mr. St. Ives so little a while before!) kept coming and going, and baiting and gaping at each other, as though a fair were due, and they were gathering to it from all England. No, nowhere in the world is travel so great a pleasure as in that country.

But unhappily our one need was to be secret; and all this rapid and animated picture of the road swept quite apart from us, as we lumbered up hill and down dale, under hedge and over stone, among circuitous byways. Only twice did I receive, as it were, a whiff of the highway. The first reached my ears alone. I might have been anywhere. I only knew I was walking in the dark night and among ruts, when I heard very far off, over the silent country that surrounded us, the guard's horn wailing its signal to the next post-house for a change of horses. It was like the voice of the day heard in darkness, a voice of the world heard in prison, the note of a cock crowing in the mid-seas—in short, I cannot tell you what it was like, you will have to fancy for yourself—but I could have wept to hear it. Once we were belated: the cattle could hardly crawl, the day was at hand, it was a nipping, rigorous morning, King was lashing his horses, I was giving an arm to the old Colonel, and the Major was coughing in our rear. I must suppose that King was a thought careless, being nearly in desperation about his team, and, in spite of the cold morning, breathing hot with his exertions. We came, at last, a little before sunrise to the summit of a hill, and saw the high-road passing at right angles through an open country of meadows and hedgerow pollards; and not only the York mail, speeding smoothly at the gallop of the four horses, but a post-chaise besides, with the post-boy titupping briskly, and the traveller himself putting his head out of the window, but whether to breathe the dawn, or the better to observe the passage of the mail, I do not know. So that we enjoyed for an instant a picture of free life on the road, in its most luxurious forms of despatch and comfort. And thereafter, with a poignant feeling of contrast in our hearts, we must

mount again into our wheeled dungeon.

We came to our stages at all sorts of odd hours, and they were in all kinds of odd places. I may say at once that my first experience was my best. Nowhere again were we so well entertained as at Burchell Fenn's. And this, I suppose, was natural, and indeed inevitable, in so long and secret a journey. The first stop, we lay six hours in a barn standing by itself in a poor, marshy orchard, and packed with hay; to make it more attractive, we were told it had been the scene of an abominable murder, and was now haunted. But the day was beginning to break, and our fatigue was too extreme for visionary terrors. The second or third, we alighted on a barren heath about midnight, built a fire to warm us under the shelter of some thorns, supped like beggars on bread and a piece of cold bacon, and slept like gipsies with our feet to the fire. In the meanwhile, King was gone with the cart, I know not where, to get a change of horses, and it was late in the dark morning when he returned and we were able to resume our journey. In the middle of another night, we came to a stop by an ancient, whitewashed cottage of two stories; a privet hedge surrounded it; the frosty moon shone blankly on the upper windows; but through those of the kitchen the firelight was seen glinting on the roof and reflected from the dishes on the wall. Here, after much hammering on the door, King managed to arouse an old crone from the chimney-corner chair, where she had been dozing in the watch; and we were had in, and entertained with a dish of hot tea. This old lady was an aunt of Burchell Fenn's—and an unwilling partner in his dangerous trade. Though the house stood solitary, and the hour was an unlikely one for any

passenger upon the road, King and she conversed in whispers only. There was something dismal, something of the sick-room, in this perpetual, guarded sibilation. The apprehensions of our hostess insensibly communicated themselves to every one present. We ate like mice in a cat's ear; if one of us jingled a teaspoon, all would start; and when the hour came to take the road again, we drew a long breath of relief, and climbed to our places in the covered cart with a positive sense of escape. The most of our meals, however, were taken boldly at hedgerow alehouses, usually at untimely hours of the day, when the clients were in the field or the farmyard at labour. I shall have to tell presently of our last experience of the sort, and how unfortunately it miscarried; but as that was the signal for my separation from my fellow-travellers, I must first finish with them.

I had never any occasion to waver in my first judgment of the Colonel. The old gentleman seemed to me, and still seems in the retrospect, the salt of the earth. I had occasion to see him in the extremes of hardship, hunger and cold; he was dying, and he looked it; and yet I cannot remember any hasty, harsh, or impatient word to have fallen from his lips. On the contrary, he ever showed himself careful to please; and even if he rambled in his talk, rambled always gently—like a humane, half-witted old hero, true to his colours to the last. I would not dare to say how often he awoke suddenly from a lethargy, and told us again, as though we had never heard it, the story of how he had earned the cross, how it had been given him by the hand of the Emperor, and of the innocent—and, indeed, foolish—sayings of his daughter when he returned

with it on his bosom. He had another anecdote which he was very apt to give, by way of a rebuke, when the Major wearied us beyond endurance with dispraises of the English. This was an account of the braves gens with whom he had been boarding. True enough, he was a man so simple and grateful by nature, that the most common civilities were able to touch him to the heart, and would remain written in his memory; but from a thousand inconsiderable but conclusive indications, I gathered that this family had really loved him, and loaded him with kindness. They made a fire in his bedroom, which the sons and daughters tended with their own hands; letters from France were looked for with scarce more eagerness by himself than by these alien sympathisers; when they came, he would read them aloud in the parlour to the assembled family, translating as he went. The Colonel's English was elementary; his daughter not in the least likely to be an amusing correspondent; and, as I conceived these scenes in the parlour, I felt sure the interest centred in the Colonel himself, and I thought I could feel in my own heart that mixture of the ridiculous and the pathetic, the contest of tears and laughter, which must have shaken the bosoms of the family. Their kindness had continued till the end. It appears they were privy to his flight, the camlet cloak had been lined expressly for him, and he was the bearer of a letter from the daughter of the house to his own daughter in Paris. The last evening, when the time came to say good-night, it was tacitly known to all that they were to look upon his face no more. He rose, pleading fatigue, and turned to the daughter, who had been his chief ally: 'You will permit me, my dear—to an old and very unhappy soldier—and may God bless you for your goodness!' The girl threw her arms about his neck and

sobbed upon his bosom; the lady of the house burst into tears; 'et je vous le jure, le père se mouchait!' quoth the Colonel, twisting his moustaches with a cavalry air, and at the same time blinking the water from his eyes at the mere recollection.

It was a good thought to me that he had found these friends in captivity; that he had started on this fatal journey from so cordial a farewell. He had broken his parole for his daughter: that he should ever live to reach her sick-bed, that he could continue to endure to an end the hardships, the crushing fatigue, the savage cold, of our pilgrimage, I had early ceased to hope. I did for him what I was able,—nursed him, kept him covered, watched over his slumbers, sometimes held him in my arms at the rough places of the road. 'Champdivers,' he once said, 'you are like a son to me—like a son.' It is good to remember, though at the time it put me on the rack. All was to no purpose. Fast as we were travelling towards France, he was travelling faster still to another destination. Daily he grew weaker and more indifferent. An old rustic accent of Lower Normandy reappeared in his speech, from which it had long been banished, and grew stronger; old words of the patois, too: Ouistreham, matrasé, and others, the sense of which we were sometimes unable to guess. On the very last day he began again his eternal story of the cross and the Emperor. The Major, who was particularly ill, or at least particularly cross, uttered some angry words of protest.

'Pardonnez-moi, monsieur le commandant, mais c'est pour monsieur,' said the Colonel: 'Monsieur has not yet heard the circumstance, and is good enough to feel an interest.' Presently after, however, he began to

lose the thread of his narrative; and at last: 'Qué que j'ai? Je m'embrouille!' says he, 'Suffit: s'm'a la donné, et Berthe en était bien contente.' It struck me as the falling of the curtain or the closing of the sepulchre doors.

Sure enough, in but a little while after, he fell into a sleep as gentle as an infant's, which insensibly changed into the sleep of death. I had my arm about his body at the time and remarked nothing, unless it were that he once stretched himself a little, so kindly the end came to that disastrous life. It was only at our evening halt that the Major and I discovered we were travelling alone with the poor clay. That night we stole a spade from a field—I think near Market Bosworth—and a little farther on, in a wood of young oak trees and by the light of King's lantern, we buried the old soldier of the Empire with both prayers and tears.

We had needs invent Heaven if it had not been revealed to us; there are some things that fall so bitterly ill on this side Time! As for the Major, I have long since forgiven him. He broke the news to the poor Colonel's daughter; I am told he did it kindly; and sure, nobody could have done it without tears! His share of purgatory will be brief; and in this world, as I could not very well praise him, I have suppressed his name. The Colonel's also, for the sake of his parole. Requiescat.