## CHAPTER XV—THE ADVENTURE OF THE ATTORNEY'S CLERK

I have mentioned our usual course, which was to eat in inconsiderable wayside hostelries, known to King. It was a dangerous business; we went daily under fire to satisfy our appetite, and put our head in the loin's mouth for a piece of bread. Sometimes, to minimise the risk, we would all dismount before we came in view of the house, straggle in severally, and give what orders we pleased, like disconnected strangers. In like manner we departed, to find the cart at an appointed place, some half a mile beyond. The Colonel and the Major had each a word or two of English—God help their pronunciation! But they did well enough to order a rasher and a pot or call a reckoning; and, to say truth, these country folks did not give themselves the pains, and had scarce the knowledge, to be critical.

About nine or ten at night the pains of hunger and cold drove us to an alehouse in the flats of Bedfordshire, not far from Bedford itself. In the inn kitchen was a long, lean, characteristic-looking fellow of perhaps forty, dressed in black. He sat on a settle by the fireside, smoking a long pipe, such as they call a yard of clay. His hat and wig were hanged upon the knob behind him, his head as bald as a bladder of lard, and his expression very shrewd, cantankerous, and inquisitive. He seemed to value himself above his company, to give himself the airs of a man of the world among that rustic herd; which was often no more than his

due; being, as I afterwards discovered, an attorney's clerk. I took upon myself the more ungrateful part of arriving last; and by the time I entered on the scene the Major was already served at a side table. Some general conversation must have passed, and I smelled danger in the air. The Major looked flustered, the attorney's clerk triumphant, and three or four peasants in smock-frocks (who sat about the fire to play chorus) had let their pipes go out.

'Give you good evening, sir!' said the attorney's clerk to me.

'The same to you, sir,' said I.

'I think this one will do,' quoth the clerk to the yokels with a wink; and then, as soon as I had given my order, 'Pray, sir, whither are you bound?' he added.

'Sir,' said I, 'I am not one of those who speak either of their business or their destination in houses of public entertainment.'

'A good answer,' said he, 'and an excellent principle. Sir, do you speak French?'

'Why, no, sir,' said I. 'A little Spanish at your service.'

'But you know the French accent, perhaps?' said the clerk.

'Well do I do that!' said I. 'The French accent? Why, I believe I can tell a Frenchman in ten words.'

'Here is a puzzle for you, then!' he said. 'I have no material doubt myself, but some of these gentlemen are more backward. The lack of education, you know. I make bold to say that a man cannot walk, cannot hear, and cannot see, without the blessings of education.'

He turned to the Major, whose food plainly stuck in his throat.

'Now, sir,' pursued the clerk, 'let me have the pleasure to hear your voice again. Where are you going, did you say?'

'Sare, I am go-ing to Lon-don,' said the Major.

I could have flung my plate at him to be such an ass, and to have so little a gift of languages where that was the essential.

'What think ye of that?' said the clerk. 'Is that French enough?'

'Good God!' cried I, leaping up like one who should suddenly perceive an acquaintance, 'is this you, Mr. Dubois? Why, who would have dreamed of encountering you so far from home?' As I spoke, I shook hands with the Major heartily; and turning to our tormentor, 'Oh, sir, you may be perfectly reassured! This is a very honest fellow, a late neighbour of mine in the city of Carlisle.'

I thought the attorney looked put out; I little knew the man!

'But he is French,' said he, 'for all that?'

'Ay, to be sure!' said I. 'A Frenchman of the emigration! None of your Buonaparte lot. I will warrant his views of politics to be as sound as your own.'

'What is a little strange,' said the clerk quietly, 'is that Mr. Dubois should deny it.'

I got it fair in the face, and took it smiling; but the shock was rude, and in the course of the next words I contrived to do what I have rarely done, and make a slip in my English. I kept my liberty and life by my proficiency all these months, and for once that I failed, it is not to be supposed that I would make a public exhibition of the details. Enough, that it was a very little error, and one that might have passed ninety-nine times in a hundred. But my limb of the law was as swift to pick it up as though he had been by trade a master of languages.

'Aha!' cries he; 'and you are French, too! Your tongue bewrays you. Two Frenchmen coming into an alehouse, severally and accidentally, not knowing each other, at ten of the clock at night, in the middle of Bedfordshire? No, sir, that shall not pass! You are all prisoners escaping, if you are nothing worse. Consider yourselves under arrest. I

have to trouble you for your papers.'

'Where is your warrant, if you come to that?' said I. 'My papers! A likely thing that I would show my papers on the ipse dixit of an unknown fellow in a hedge alehouse!'

'Would you resist the law?' says he.

'Not the law, sir!' said I. 'I hope I am too good a subject for that. But for a nameless fellow with a bald head and a pair of gingham small-clothes, why certainly! 'Tis my birthright as an Englishman. Where's Magna Charta, else?'

'We will see about that,' says he; and then, addressing the assistants, 'where does the constable live?'

'Lord love you, sir!' cried the landlord, 'what are you thinking of? The constable at past ten at night! Why, he's abed and asleep, and good and drunk two hours agone!'

'Ah that a' be!' came in chorus from the yokels.

The attorney's clerk was put to a stand. He could not think of force; there was little sign of martial ardour about the landlord, and the peasants were indifferent—they only listened, and gaped, and now scratched a head, and now would get a light to their pipes from the

embers on the hearth. On the other hand, the Major and I put a bold front on the business and defied him, not without some ground of law. In this state of matters he proposed I should go along with him to one Squire Merton, a great man of the neighbourhood, who was in the commission of the peace, the end of his avenue but three lanes away. I told him I would not stir a foot for him if it were to save his soul. Next he proposed I should stay all night where I was, and the constable could see to my affair in the morning, when he was sober. I replied I should go when and where I pleased; that we were lawful travellers in the fear of God and the king, and I for one would suffer myself to be stayed by nobody. At the same time, I was thinking the matter had lasted altogether too long, and I determined to bring it to an end at once.

'See here,' said I, getting up, for till now I had remained carelessly seated, 'there's only one way to decide a thing like this—only one way that's right English—and that's man to man. Take off your coat, sir, and these gentlemen shall see fair play.' At this there came a look in his eye that I could not mistake. His education had been neglected in one essential and eminently British particular: he could not box. No more could I, you may say; but then I had the more impudence—and I had made the proposal.

'He says I'm no Englishman, but the proof of the pudding is the eating of it,' I continued. And here I stripped my coat and fell into the proper attitude, which was just about all I knew of this barbarian art. 'Why, sir, you seem to me to hang back a little,' said I. 'Come, I'll meet

you; I'll give you an appetiser—though hang me if I can understand the man that wants any enticement to hold up his hands.' I drew a bank-note out of my fob and tossed it to the landlord. 'There are the stakes,' said I. 'I'll fight you for first blood, since you seem to make so much work about it. If you tap my claret first, there are five guineas for you, and I'll go with you to any squire you choose to mention. If I tap yours, you'll perhaps let on that I'm the better man, and allow me to go about my lawful business at my own time and convenience, by God; is that fair, my lads?' says I, appealing to the company.

'Ay, ay,' said the chorus of chawbacons; 'he can't say no fairer nor that, he can't. Take off thy coat master!'

The limb of the law was now on the wrong side of public opinion, and, what heartened me to go on, the position was rapidly changing in our favour. Already the Major was paying his shot to the very indifferent landlord, and I could see the white face of King at the back-door, making signals of haste.

'Oho!' quoth my enemy, 'you are as full of doubles as a fox, are you not? But I see through you; I see through and through you. You would change the venue, would you?'

'I may be transparent, sir,' says I, 'but if you'll do me the favour to stand up, you'll find I can hit dam hard.'

'Which is a point, if you will observe, that I had never called in question,' said he. 'Why, you ignorant clowns,' he proceeded, addressing the company, 'can't you see the fellow's gulling you before your eyes? Can't you see that he has changed the point upon me? I say he's a French prisoner, and he answers that he can box! What has that to do with it? I would not wonder but what he can dance, too—they're all dancing masters over there. I say, and I stick to it, that he's a Frenchy. He says he isn't. Well then, let him out with his papers, if he has them! If he had, would he not show them? If he had, would he not jump at the idea of going to Squire Merton, a man you all know? Now, you are all plain, straightforward Bedfordshire men, and I wouldn't ask a better lot to appeal to. You're not the kind to be talked over with any French gammon, and he's plenty of that. But let me tell him, he can take his pigs to another market; they'll never do here; they'll never go down in Bedfordshire. Why! look at the man! Look at his feet! Has anybody got a foot in the room like that? See how he stands! do any of you fellows stand like that? Does the landlord, there? Why, he has Frenchman wrote all over him, as big as a sign-post!'

This was all very well; and in a different scene I might even have been gratified by his remarks; but I saw clearly, if I were to allow him to talk, he might turn the tables on me altogether. He might not be much of a hand at boxing; but I was much mistaken, or he had studied forensic eloquence in a good school. In this predicament I could think of nothing more ingenious than to burst out of the house, under the pretext of an ungovernable rage. It was certainly not very ingenious—it was

elementary, but I had no choice.

'You white-livered dog!' I broke out. 'Do you dare to tell me you're an Englishman, and won't fight? But I'll stand no more of this! I leave this place, where I've been insulted! Here! what's to pay? Pay yourself!' I went on, offering the landlord a handful of silver, 'and give me back my bank-note!'

The landlord, following his usual policy of obliging everybody, offered no opposition to my design. The position of my adversary was now thoroughly bad. He had lost my two companions. He was on the point of losing me also. There was plainly no hope of arousing the company to help; and watching him with a corner of my eye, I saw him hesitate for a moment. The next, he had taken down his hat and his wig, which was of black horsehair; and I saw him draw from behind the settle a vast hooded great-coat and a small valise. 'The devil!' thought I: 'is the rascal going to follow me?'

I was scarce clear of the inn before the limb of the law was at my heels. I saw his face plain in the moonlight; and the most resolute purpose showed in it, along with an unmoved composure. A chill went over me. 'This is no common adventure,' thinks I to myself. 'You have got hold of a man of character, St. Ives! A bite-hard, a bull-dog, a weasel is on your trail; and how are you to throw him off?' Who was he? By some of his expressions I judged he was a hanger-on of courts. But in what character had he followed the assizes? As a simple spectator, as a

lawyer's clerk, as a criminal himself, or—last and worst supposition—as a Bow-street 'runner'?

The cart would wait for me, perhaps, half a mile down our onward road, which I was already following. And I told myself that in a few minutes' walking, Bow-street runner or not, I should have him at my mercy. And then reflection came to me in time. Of all things, one was out of the question. Upon no account must this obtrusive fellow see the cart. Until I had killed or shook him off, I was quite divorced from my companions—alone, in the midst of England, on a frosty by-way leading whither I knew not, with a sleuth-hound at my heels, and never a friend but the holly-stick!

We came at the same time to a crossing of lanes. The branch to the left was overhung with trees, deeply sunken and dark. Not a ray of moonlight penetrated its recesses; and I took it at a venture. The wretch followed my example in silence; and for some time we crunched together over frozen pools without a word. Then he found his voice, with a chuckle.

'This is not the way to Mr. Merton's,' said he.

'No?' said I. 'It is mine, however.'

'And therefore mine,' said he.

Again we fell silent; and we may thus have covered half a mile before the

lane, taking a sudden turn, brought us forth again into the moonshine. With his hooded great-coat on his back, his valise in his hand, his black wig adjusted, and footing it on the ice with a sort of sober doggedness of manner, my enemy was changed almost beyond recognition: changed in everything but a certain dry, polemical, pedantic air, that spoke of a sedentary occupation and high stools. I observed, too, that his valise was heavy; and, putting this and that together, hit upon a plan.

'A seasonable night, sir,' said I. 'What do you say to a bit of running? The frost has me by the toes.'

'With all the pleasure in life,' says he.

His voice seemed well assured, which pleased me little. However, there was nothing else to try, except violence, for which it would always be too soon. I took to my heels accordingly, he after me; and for some time the slapping of our feet on the hard road might have been heard a mile away. He had started a pace behind me, and he finished in the same position. For all his extra years and the weight of his valise, he had not lost a hair's breadth. The devil might race him for me—I had enough of it!

And, besides, to run so fast was contrary to my interests. We could not run long without arriving somewhere. At any moment we might turn a corner and find ourselves at the lodge-gate of some Squire Merton, in the midst of a village whose constable was sober, or in the hands of a

patrol. There was no help for it—I must finish with him on the spot, as long as it was possible. I looked about me, and the place seemed suitable; never a light, never a house—nothing but stubble-fields, fallows, and a few stunted trees. I stopped and eyed him in the moonlight with an angry stare.

'Enough of this foolery!' said I.

He had tamed, and now faced me full, very pale, but with no sign of shrinking.

'I am quite of your opinion,' said he. 'You have tried me at the running; you can try me next at the high jump. It will be all the same. It must end the one way.'

I made my holly whistle about my head.

'I believe you know what way!' said I. 'We are alone, it is night, and I am wholly resolved. Are you not frightened?'

'No,' he said, 'not in the smallest. I do not box, sir; but I am not a coward, as you may have supposed. Perhaps it will simplify our relations if I tell you at the outset that I walk armed.'

Quick as lightning I made a feint at his head; as quickly he gave ground, and at the same time I saw a pistol glitter in his hand.

'No more of that, Mr. French-Prisoner!' he said. 'It will do me no good to have your death at my door.'

'Faith, nor me either!' said I; and I lowered my stick and considered the man, not without a twinkle of admiration. 'You see,' I said, 'there is one consideration that you appear to overlook: there are a great many chances that your pistol may miss fire.'

'I have a pair,' he returned. 'Never travel without a brace of barkers.'

'I make you my compliment,' said I. 'You are able to take care of yourself, and that is a good trait. But, my good man! let us look at this matter dispassionately. You are not a coward, and no more am I; we are both men of excellent sense; I have good reason, whatever it may be, to keep my concerns to myself and to walk alone. Now I put it to you pointedly, am I likely to stand it? Am I likely to put up with your continued and—excuse me—highly impudent ingérence into my private affairs?'

'Another French word,' says he composedly.

'Oh! damn your French words!' cried I. 'You seem to be a Frenchman yourself!'

'I have had many opportunities by which I have profited,' he explained.

‘Few men are better acquainted with the similarities and differences, whether of idiom or accent, of the two languages.’

‘You are a pompous fellow, too!’ said I.

‘Oh, I can make distinctions, sir,’ says he. ‘I can talk with Bedfordshire peasants; and I can express myself becomingly, I hope, in the company of a gentleman of education like yourself.’

‘If you set up to be a gentleman—’ I began.

‘Pardon me,’ he interrupted: ‘I make no such claim. I only see the nobility and gentry in the way of business. I am quite a plain person.’

‘For the Lord’s sake,’ I exclaimed, ‘set my mind at rest upon one point. In the name of mystery, who and what are you?’

‘I have no cause to be ashamed of my name, sir,’ said he, ‘nor yet my trade. I am Thomas Dudgeon, at your service, clerk to Mr. Daniel Romaine, solicitor of London; High Holborn is our address, sir.’

It was only by the ecstasy of the relief that I knew how horribly I had been frightened. I flung my stick on the road.

‘Romaine?’ I cried. ‘Daniel Romaine? An old hunks with a red face and a big head, and got up like a Quaker? My dear friend, to my arms!’

'Keep back, I say!' said Dudgeon weakly.

I would not listen to him. With the end of my own alarm, I felt as if I must infallibly be at the end of all dangers likewise; as if the pistol that he held in one hand were no more to be feared than the valise that he carried with the other, and now put up like a barrier against my advance.

'Keep back, or I declare I will fire,' he was crying. 'Have a care, for God's sake! My pistol—'

He might scream as be pleased. Willy nilly, I folded him to my breast, I pressed him there, I kissed his ugly mug as it had never been kissed before and would never be kissed again; and in the doing so knocked his wig awry and his hat off. He bleated in my embrace; so bleats the sheep in the arms of the butcher. The whole thing, on looking back, appears incomparably reckless and absurd; I no better than a madman for offering to advance on Dudgeon, and he no better than a fool for not shooting me while I was about it. But all's well that ends well; or, as the people in these days kept singing and whistling on the streets:—

'There's a sweet little cherub that sits up aloft
And looks out for the life of poor Jack.'

'There!' said I, releasing him a little, but still keeping my hands on

his shoulders, 'je vous ai bel et bien embrassé—and, as you would say, there is another French word.' With his wig over one eye, he looked incredibly rueful and put out. 'Cheer up, Dudgeon; the ordeal is over, you shall be embraced no more. But do, first of all, for God's-sake, put away your pistol; you handle it as if you were a cockatrice; some time or other, depend upon it, it will certainly go off. Here is your hat. No, let me put it on square, and the wig before it. Never suffer any stress of circumstances to come between you and the duty you owe to yourself. If you have nobody else to dress for, dress for God!

'Put your wig straight
On your bald pate,
Keep your chin scraped,
And your figure draped.

Can you match me that? The whole duty of man in a quatrain! And remark,
I do not set up to be a professional bard; these are the outpourings of a dilettante.'

'But, my dear sir!' he exclaimed.

'But, my dear sir!' I echoed, 'I will allow no man to interrupt the flow of my ideas. Give me your opinion on my quatrain, or I vow we shall have a quarrel of it.'

‘Certainly you are quite an original,’ he said.

‘Quite,’ said I; ‘and I believe I have my counterpart before me.’

‘Well, for a choice,’ says he, smiling, ‘and whether for sense or poetry, give me

> “‘Worth makes the man, and want of it the fellow:
> The rest is all but leather and prunello.”’

‘Oh, but that’s not fair—that’s Pope! It’s not original, Dudgeon. Understand me,’ said I, wringing his breast-button, ‘the first duty of all poetry is to be mine, sir—mine. Inspiration now swells in my bosom, because—to tell you the plain truth, and descend a little in style—I am devilish relieved at the turn things have taken. So, I dare say, are you yourself, Dudgeon, if you would only allow it. And à propos, let me ask you a home question. Between friends, have you ever fired that pistol?’

‘Why, yes, sir,’ he replied. ‘Twice—at hedgesparrows.’

‘And you would have fired at me, you bloody-minded man?’ I cried.

‘If you go to that, you seemed mighty reckless with your stick,’ said Dudgeon.

'Did I indeed? Well, well, 'tis all past history; ancient as King Pharamond—which is another French word, if you cared to accumulate more evidence,' says I. 'But happily we are now the best of friends, and have all our interests in common.'

'You go a little too fast, if you'll excuse me, Mr. ---: I do not know your name, that I am aware,' said Dudgeon.

'No, to be sure!' said I. 'Never heard of it!'

'A word of explanation—' he began.

'No, Dudgeon!' I interrupted. 'Be practical; I know what you want, and the name of it is supper. Rien ne creuse comme l'emotion. I am hungry myself, and yet I am more accustomed to warlike palpitations than you, who are but a hunter of hedgesparrows. Let me look at your face critically: your bill of fare is three slices of cold rare roast beef, a Welsh rabbit, a pot of stout, and a glass or two of sound tawny port, old in bottle—the right milk of Englishmen.' Methought there seemed a brightening in his eye and a melting about his mouth at this enumeration.

'The night is young,' I continued; 'not much past eleven, for a wager. Where can we find a good inn? And remark that I say good, for the port must be up to the occasion—not a headache in a pipe of it.'

'Really, sir,' he said, smiling a little, 'you have a way of carrying things—'

'Will nothing make you stick to the subject?' I cried; 'you have the most irrelevant mind! How do you expect to rise in your profession? The inn?'

'Well, I will say you are a facetious gentleman!' said he. 'You must have your way, I see. We are not three miles from Bedford by this very road.'

'Done!' cried I. 'Bedford be it!'

I tucked his arm under mine, possessed myself of the valise, and walked him off unresisting. Presently we came to an open piece of country lying a thought downhill. The road was smooth and free of ice, the moonshine thin and bright over the meadows and the leafless trees. I was now honestly done with the purgatory of the covered cart; I was close to my great-uncle's; I had no more fear of Mr. Dudgeon; which were all grounds enough for jollity. And I was aware, besides, of us two as of a pair of tiny and solitary dolls under the vast frosty cupola of the midnight; the rooms decked, the moon burnished, the least of the stars lighted, the floor swept and waxed, and nothing wanting but for the band to strike up and the dancing to begin. In the exhilaration of my heart I took the music on myself—

'Merrily danced the Quaker's wife,
And merrily danced the Quaker.'

I broke into that animated and appropriate air, clapped my arm about Dudgeon's waist, and away down the hill at a dancing step! He hung back a little at the start, but the impulse of the tune, the night, and my example, were not to be resisted. A man made of putty must have danced, and even Dudgeon showed himself to be a human being. Higher and higher were the capers that we cut; the moon repeated in shadow our antic footsteps and gestures; and it came over my mind of a sudden—really like balm—what appearance of man I was dancing with, what a long bilious countenance he had shown under his shaven pate, and what a world of trouble the rascal had given me in the immediate past.

Presently we began to see the lights of Bedford. My Puritanic companion stopped and disengaged himself.

'This is a trifle infra dig., sir, is it not?' said he. 'A party might suppose we had been drinking.'

'And so you shall be, Dudgeon,' said I. 'You shall not only be drinking, you old hypocrite, but you shall be drunk—dead drunk, sir—and the boots shall put you to bed! We'll warn him when we go in. Never neglect a precaution; never put off till to-morrow what you can do to-day!'

But he had no more frivolity to complain of. We finished our stage and

came to the inn-door with decorum, to find the house still alight and in a bustle with many late arrivals; to give our orders with a prompt severity which ensured obedience, and to be served soon after at a side-table, close to the fire and in a blaze of candle-light, with such a meal as I had been dreaming of for days past. For days, you are to remember, I had been skulking in the covered cart, a prey to cold, hunger, and an accumulation of discomforts that might have daunted the most brave; and the white table napery, the bright crystal, the reverberation of the fire, the red curtains, the Turkey carpet, the portraits on the coffee-room wall, the placid faces of the two or three late guests who were silently prolonging the pleasures of digestion, and (last, but not by any means least) a glass of an excellent light dry port, put me in a humour only to be described as heavenly. The thought of the Colonel, of how he would have enjoyed this snug room and roaring fire, and of his cold grave in the wood by Market Bosworth, lingered on my palate, amari aliquid, like an after-taste, but was not able—I say it with shame—entirely to dispel my self-complacency. After all, in this world every dog hangs by its own tail. I was a free adventurer, who had just brought to a successful end—or, at least, within view of it—an adventure very difficult and alarming; and I looked across at Mr. Dudgeon, as the port rose to his cheeks, and a smile, that was semi-confidential and a trifle foolish, began to play upon his leathery features, not only with composure, but with a suspicion of kindness. The rascal had been brave, a quality for which I would value the devil; and if he had been pertinacious in the beginning, he had more than made up for it before the end.

'And now, Dudgeon, to explain,' I began. 'I know your master, he knows me, and he knows and approves of my errand. So much I may tell you, that I am on my way to Amersham Place.'

'Oho!' quoth Dudgeon, 'I begin to see.'

'I am heartily glad of it,' said I, passing the bottle, 'because that is about all I can tell you. You must take my word for the remainder. Either believe me or don't. If you don't, let's take a chaise; you can carry me to-morrow to High Holborn, and confront me with Mr. Romaine; the result of which will be to set your mind at rest—and to make the holiest disorder in your master's plans. If I judge you aright (for I find you a shrewd fellow), this will not be at all to your mind. You know what a subordinate gets by officiousness; if I can trust my memory, old Romaine has not at all the face that I should care to see in anger; and I venture to predict surprising results upon your weekly salary—if you are paid by the week, that is. In short, let me go free, and 'tis an end of the matter; take me to London, and 'tis only a beginning—and, by my opinion, a beginning of troubles. You can take your choice.'

'And that is soon taken,' said he. 'Go to Amersham tomorrow, or go to the devil if you prefer—I wash my hands of you and the whole transaction. No, you don't find me putting my head in between Romaine and a client! A good man of business, sir, but hard as millstone grit. I might get the

sack, and I shouldn't wonder! But, it's a pity, too,' he added, and sighed, shook his head, and took his glass off sadly.

'That reminds me,' said I. 'I have a great curiosity, and you can satisfy it. Why were you so forward to meddle with poor Mr. Dubois? Why did you transfer your attentions to me? And generally, what induced you to make yourself such a nuisance?'

He blushed deeply.

'Why, sir,' says he, 'there is such a thing as patriotism, I hope.'