CHAPTER XXIV—THE INN-KEEPER OF KIRKBY-LONSDALE

I had hitherto conceived and partly carried out an ideal that was dear to my heart. Rowley and I descended from our claret-coloured chaise, a couple of correctly dressed, brisk, bright-eyed young fellows, like a pair of aristocratic mice; attending singly to our own affairs, communicating solely with each other, and that with the niceties and civilities of drill. We would pass through the little crowd before the door with high-bred preoccupation, inoffensively haughty, after the best English pattern; and disappear within, followed by the envy and admiration of the bystanders, a model master and servant, point-device in every part. It was a heavy thought to me, as we drew up before the inn at Kirkby-Lonsdale, that this scene was now to be enacted for the last time. Alas! and had I known it, it was to go of with so inferior a grace!

I had been injudiciously liberal to the post-boys of the chaise and four. My own post-boy, he of the patched breeches, now stood before me, his eyes glittering with greed, his hand advanced. It was plain he anticipated something extraordinary by way of a pourboire; and considering the marches and counter-marches by which I had extended the stage, the military character of our affairs with Mr. Bellamy, and the bad example I had set before him at the archdeacon's, something exceptional was certainly to be done. But these are always nice questions, to a foreigner above all: a shade too little will suggest

niggardliness, a shilling too much smells of hush-money. Fresh from the scene at the archdeacon's, and flushed by the idea that I was now nearly done with the responsibilities of the claret-coloured chaise, I put into his hands five guineas; and the amount served only to waken his cupidity.

'O, come, sir, you ain't going to fob me of with this? Why, I seen fire at your side!' he cried.

It would never do to give him more; I felt I should become the fable of Kirkby-Lonsdale if I did; and I looked him in the face, sternly but still smiling, and addressed him with a voice of uncompromising firmness.

'If you do not like it, give it back,' said I.

He pocketed the guineas with the quickness of a conjurer, and, like a base-born cockney as he was, fell instantly to casting dirt.

''Ave your own way of it, Mr. Ramornie—leastways Mr. St. Eaves, or whatever your blessed name may be. Look 'ere'—turning for sympathy to the stable-boys—'this is a blessed business. Blessed 'ard, I calls it. 'Ere I takes up a blessed son of a pop-gun what calls hisself anything you care to mention, and turns out to be a blessed mounseer at the end of it! 'Ere 'ave I been drivin' of him up and down all day, a-carrying off of gals, a-shootin' of pistyils, and a-drinkin' of sherry and hale; and wot does he up and give me but a blank, blank, blanketing blank!'

The fellow's language had become too powerful for reproduction, and I passed it by.

Meanwhile I observed Rowley fretting visibly at the bit; another moment, and he would have added a last touch of the ridiculous to our arrival by coming to his hands with the postillion.

'Rowley!' cried I reprovingly.

Strictly it should have been Gammon; but in the hurry of the moment, my fault (I can only hope) passed unperceived. At the same time I caught the eye of the postmaster. He was long and lean, and brown and bilious; he had the drooping nose of the humourist, and the quick attention of a man of parts. He read my embarrassment in a glance, stepped instantly forward, sent the post-boy to the rightabout with half a word, and was back next moment at my side.

'Dinner in a private room, sir? Very well. John, No. 4! What wine would you care to mention? Very well, sir. Will you please to order fresh horses? Not, sir? Very well.'

Each of these expressions was accompanied by something in the nature of a bow, and all were prefaced by something in the nature of a smile, which I could very well have done without. The man's politeness was from the teeth outwards; behind and within, I was conscious of a perpetual scrutiny: the scene at his doorstep, the random confidences of the

post-boy, had not been thrown away on this observer; and it was under a strong fear of coming trouble that I was shown at last into my private room. I was in half a mind to have put off the whole business. But the truth is, now my name had got abroad, my fear of the mail that was coming, and the handbills it should contain, had waxed inordinately, and I felt I could never eat a meal in peace till I had severed my connection with the claret-coloured chaise.

Accordingly, as soon as I had done with dinner, I sent my compliments to the landlord and requested he should take a glass of wine with me. He came; we exchanged the necessary civilities, and presently I approached my business.

'By the bye,' said I, 'we had a brush down the road to-day. I dare say you may have heard of it?'

He nodded.

'And I was so unlucky as to get a pistol ball in the panel of my chaise,' I continued, 'which makes it simply useless to me. Do you know any one likely to buy?'

'I can well understand that,' said the landlord, 'I was looking at it just now; it's as good as ruined, is that chaise. General rule, people don't like chaises with bullet-holes.'

'Too much Romance of the Forest?' I suggested, recalling my little friend of the morning, and what I was sure had been her favourite reading—Mrs. Radcliffe's novels.

'Just so,' said he. 'They may be right, they may be wrong; I'm not the judge. But I suppose it's natural, after all, for respectable people to like things respectable about them; not bullet-holes, nor puddles of blood, nor men with aliases.'

I took a glass of wine and held it up to the light to show that my hand was steady.

'Yes,' said I, 'I suppose so.'

'You have papers, of course, showing you are the proper owner?' he inquired.

'There is the bill, stamped and receipted,' said I, tossing it across to him.

He looked at it.

'This all you have?' he asked.

'It is enough, at least,' said I. 'It shows you where I bought and what I paid for it.'

'Well, I don't know,' he said. 'You want some paper of identification.'

'To identify the chaise?' I inquired.

'Not at all: to identify you,' said he.

'My good sir, remember yourself!' said I. 'The title-deeds of my estate are in that despatch-box; but you do not seriously suppose that I should allow you to examine them?'

'Well, you see, this paper proves that some Mr. Ramornie paid seventy guineas for a chaise,' said the fellow. 'That's all well and good; but who's to prove to me that you are Mr. Ramornie?'

'Fellow!' cried I.

'O, fellow as much as you please!' said he. 'Fellow, with all my heart! That changes nothing. I am fellow, of course—obtrusive fellow, impudent fellow, if you like—but who are you? I hear of you with two names; I hear of you running away with young ladies, and getting cheered for a Frenchman, which seems odd; and one thing I will go bail for, that you were in a blue fright when the post-boy began to tell tales at my door. In short, sir, you may be a very good gentleman; but I don't know enough about you, and I'll trouble you for your papers, or to go before a magistrate. Take your choice; if I'm not fine enough, I hope the

magistrates are.'

'My good man,' I stammered, for though I had found my voice, I could scarce be said to have recovered my wits, 'this is most unusual, most rude. Is it the custom in Westmorland that gentlemen should be insulted?'

'That depends,' said he. 'When it's suspected that gentlemen are spies it is the custom; and a good custom, too. No no,' he broke out, perceiving me to make a movement. 'Both hands upon the table, my gentleman! I want no pistol balls in my chaise panels.'

'Surely, sir, you do me strange injustice!' said I, now the master of myself. 'You see me sitting here, a monument of tranquillity: pray may I help myself to wine without umbraging you?'

I took this attitude in sheer despair. I had no plan, no hope. The best I could imagine was to spin the business out some minutes longer, then capitulate. At least, I would not capituatle one moment too soon.

'Am I to take that for no?' he asked.

'Referring to your former obliging proposal?' said I. 'My good sir, you are to take it, as you say, for "No." Certainly I will not show you my deeds; certainly I will not rise from table and trundle out to see your magistrates. I have too much respect for my digestion, and too little

curiosity in justices of the peace.'

He leaned forward, looked me nearly in the face, and reached out one hand to the bell-rope. 'See here, my fine fellow!' said he. 'Do you see that bell-rope? Let me tell you, there's a boy waiting below: one jingle, and he goes to fetch the constable.'

'Do you tell me so?' said I. 'Well, there's no accounting for tastes! I have a prejudice against the society of constables, but if it is your fancy to have one in for the dessert—' I shrugged my shoulders lightly. 'Really, you know,' I added, 'this is vastly entertaining. I assure you, I am looking on, with all the interest of a man of the world, at the development of your highly original character.'

He continued to study my face without speech, his hand still on the button of the bell-rope, his eyes in mine; this was the decisive heat. My face seemed to myself to dislimn under his gaze, my expression to change, the smile (with which I had began) to degenerate into the grin of the man upon the rack. I was besides harassed with doubts. An innocent man, I argued, would have resented the fellow's impudence an hour ago; and by my continued endurance of the ordeal, I was simply signing and sealing my confession; in short, I had reached the end of my powers.

'Have you any objection to my putting my hands in my breeches pockets?' I inquired. 'Excuse me mentioning it, but you showed yourself so extremely nervous a moment back.' My voice was not all I could have wished, but it

sufficed. I could hear it tremble, but the landlord apparently could not. He turned away and drew a long breath, and you may be sure I was quick to follow his example.

'You're a cool hand at least, and that's the sort I like,' said he. 'Be you what you please, I'll deal square. I'll take the chaise for a hundred pound down, and throw the dinner in.'

'I beg your pardon,' I cried, wholly mystified by this form of words.

'You pay me a hundred down,' he repeated, 'and I'll take the chaise. It's very little more than it cost,' he added, with a grin, 'and you know you must get it off your hands somehow.'

I do not know when I have been better entertained than by this impudent proposal. It was broadly funny, and I suppose the least tempting offer in the world. For all that, it came very welcome, for it gave me the occasion to laugh. This I did with the most complete abandonment, till the tears ran down my cheeks; and ever and again, as the fit abated, I would get another view of the landlord's face, and go off into another paroxysm.

'You droll creature, you will be the death of me yet!' I cried, drying my eyes.

My friend was now wholly disconcerted; he knew not where to look, nor yet

what to say; and began for the first time to conceive it possible he was mistaken.

'You seem rather to enjoy a laugh, sir,' said he.

'O, yes! I am quite an original,' I replied, and laughed again.

Presently, in a changed voice, he offered me twenty pounds for the chaise; I ran him up to twenty-five, and closed with the offer: indeed, I was glad to get anything; and if I haggled, it was not in the desire of gain, but with the view at any price of securing a safe retreat. For although hostilities were suspended, he was yet far from satisfied; and I could read his continued suspicions in the cloudy eye that still hovered about my face. At last they took shape in words.

'This is all very well,' says he: 'you carry it off well; but for all that, I must do my duty.'

I had my strong effect in reserve; it was to burn my ships with a vengeance! I rose. 'Leave the room,' said I. 'This is insuperable. Is the man mad?' And then, as if already half-ashamed of my passion: 'I can take a joke as well as any one,' I added; 'but this passes measure. Send my servant and the bill.'

When he had left me alone, I considered my own valour with amazement. I had insulted him; I had sent him away alone; now, if ever, he would take

what was the only sensible resource, and fetch the constable. But there was something instinctively treacherous about the man which shrank from plain courses. And, with all his cleverness, he missed the occasion of fame. Rowley and I were suffered to walk out of his door, with all our baggage, on foot, with no destination named, except in the vague statement that we were come 'to view the lakes'; and my friend only watched our departure with his chin in his hand, still moodily irresolute.

I think this one of my great successes. I was exposed, unmasked, summoned to do a perfectly natural act, which must prove my doom and which I had not the slightest pretext for refusing. I kept my head, stuck to my guns, and, against all likelihood, here I was once more at liberty and in the king's highway. This was a strong lesson never to despair; and, at the same time, how many hints to be cautious! and what a perplexed and dubious business the whole question of my escape now appeared! That I should have risked perishing upon a trumpery question of a pourboire, depicted in lively colours the perils that perpetually surrounded us. Though, to be sure, the initial mistake had been committed before that; and if I had not suffered myself to be drawn a little deep in confidences to the innocent Dolly, there need have been no tumble at the inn of Kirkby-Lonsdale. I took the lesson to heart, and promised myself in the future to be more reserved. It was none of my business to attend to broken chaises or shipwrecked travellers. I had my hands full of my own affairs; and my best defence would be a little more natural selfishness and a trifle less imbecile good-nature.