

CHAPTER XXV—I MEET A CHEERFUL EXTRAVAGANT

I pass over the next fifty or sixty leagues of our journey without comment. The reader must be growing weary of scenes of travel; and for my own part I have no cause to recall these particular miles with any pleasure. We were mainly occupied with attempts to obliterate our trail, which (as the result showed) were far from successful; for, on my cousin following, he was able to run me home with the least possible loss of time, following the claret-coloured chaise to Kirkby-Lonsdale, where I think the landlord must have wept to learn what he had missed, and tracing us thereafter to the doors of the coach-office in Edinburgh without a single check. Fortune did not favour me, and why should I recapitulate the details of futile precautions which deceived nobody, and wearisome arts which proved to be artless?

The day was drawing to an end when Mr. Rowley and I bowled into Edinburgh

to the stirring sound of the guard's bugle and the clattering team. I was here upon my field of battle; on the scene of my former captivity, escape and exploits; and in the same city with my love. My heart expanded; I have rarely felt more of a hero. All down the Bridges I sat

by the driver with my arms folded and my face set, unflinchingly meeting every eye, and prepared every moment for a cry of recognition. Hundreds of the population were in the habit of visiting the Castle, where it was my practice (before the days of Flora) to make myself conspicuous among the prisoners; and I think it an extraordinary thing that I should have encountered so few to recognise me. But doubtless a clean chin is a disguise in itself; and the change is great from a suit of sulphur-yellow to fine linen, a well-fitting mouse-coloured great-coat furred in black, a pair of tight trousers of fashionable cut, and a hat of inimitable curl. After all, it was more likely that I should have recognised our visitors, than that they should have identified the modish gentleman with the miserable prisoner in the Castle.

I was glad to set foot on the flagstones, and to escape from the crowd that had assembled to receive the mail. Here we were, with but little daylight before us, and that on Saturday afternoon, the eve of the famous Scottish Sabbath, adrift in the New Town of Edinburgh, and overladen with baggage. We carried it ourselves. I would not take a cab, nor so much as hire a porter, who might afterwards serve as a link between my lodgings and the mail, and connect me again with the claret-coloured chaise and Aylesbury. For I was resolved to break the chain of evidence for good, and to begin life afresh (so far as regards caution) with a new character. The first step was to find lodgings, and to find them quickly. This was the more needful as Mr. Rowley and I, in our smart clothes and with our cumbrous burthen, made a noticeable appearance in the streets at that time of the day and in that quarter of the town,

which was largely given up to fine folk, bucks and dandies and young ladies, or respectable professional men on their way home to dinner.

On the north side of St. James' Square I was so happy as to spy a bill in a third-floor window. I was equally indifferent to cost and convenience in my choice of a lodging—'any port in a storm' was the principle on which I was prepared to act; and Rowley and I made at once for the common entrance and sealed the stair.

We were admitted by a very sour-looking female in bombazine. I gathered she had all her life been depressed by a series of bereavements, the last of which might very well have befallen her the day before; and I instinctively lowered my voice when I addressed her. She admitted she had rooms to let—even showed them to us—a sitting-room and bedroom in a suite, commanding a fine prospect to the Firth and Fifeshire, and in themselves well proportioned and comfortably furnished, with pictures on the wall, shells on the mantelpiece, and several books upon the table which I found afterwards to be all of a devotional character, and all presentation copies, 'to my Christian friend,' or 'to my devout acquaintance in the Lord, Bethiah McRankine.' Beyond this my 'Christian friend' could not be made to advance: no, not even to do that which seemed the most natural and pleasing thing in the world—I mean to name her price—but stood before us shaking her head, and at times mourning like the dove, the picture of depression and defence. She had a voice the most querulous I have ever heard, and with this she produced a whole regiment of difficulties and criticisms.

She could not promise an attendance.

'Well, madam,' said I, 'and what is my servant for?'

'Him?' she asked. 'Be gude to us! Is he your servant?'

'I am sorry, ma'am, he meets with your disapproval.'

'Na, I never said that. But he's young. He'll be a great breaker, I'm thinkin'. Ay! he'll be a great responsibeelity to ye, like. Does he attend to his releegion?'

'Yes, m'm,' returned Rowley, with admirable promptitude, and, immediately closing his eyes, as if from habit, repeated the following distich with more celerity than fervour:—

'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

Bless the bed that I lie on!'

'Nhm!' said the lady, and maintained an awful silence.

'Well, ma'am,' said I, 'it seems we are never to hear the beginning of your terms, let alone the end of them. Come—a good movement! and let us be either off or on.'

She opened her lips slowly. 'Ony raferences?' she inquired, in a voice like a bell.

I opened my pocket-book and showed her a handful of bank bills. 'I think, madam, that these are unexceptionable,' said I.

'Ye'll be wantin' breakfast late?' was her reply.

'Madam, we want breakfast at whatever hour it suits you to give it, from four in the morning till four in the afternoon!' I cried. 'Only tell us your figure, if your mouth be large enough to let it out!'

'I couldnae give ye supper the nicht,' came the echo.

'We shall go out to supper, you incorrigible female!' I vowed, between laughter and tears. 'Here—this is going to end! I want you for a landlady—let me tell you that!—and I am going to have my way. You won't tell me what you charge? Very well; I will do without! I can trust you! You don't seem to know when you have a good lodger; but I know perfectly when I have an honest landlady! Rowley, unstrap the valises!'

Will it be credited? The monomaniac fell to rating me for my indiscretion! But the battle was over; these were her last guns, and more in the nature of a salute than of renewed hostilities. And presently she condescended on very moderate terms, and Rowley and I were able to escape in quest of supper. Much time had, however, been lost;

the sun was long down, the lamps glimmered along the streets, and the voice of a watchman already resounded in the neighbouring Leith Road. On our first arrival I had observed a place of entertainment not far off, in a street behind the Register House. Thither we found our way, and sat down to a late dinner alone. But we had scarce given our orders before the door opened, and a tall young fellow entered with something of a lurch, looked about him, and approached the same table.

‘Give you good evening, most grave and reverend seniors!’ said he. ‘Will you permit a wanderer, a pilgrim—the pilgrim of love, in short—to come to temporary anchor under your lee? I care not who knows it, but I have a passionate aversion from the bestial practice of solitary feeding!’

‘You are welcome, sir,’ said I, ‘if I may take upon me so far to play the host in a public place.’

He looked startled, and fixed a hazy eye on me, as he sat down.

‘Sir,’ said he, ‘you are a man not without some tincture of letters, I perceive! What shall we drink, sir?’

I mentioned I had already called for a pot of porter.

‘A modest pot—the seasonable quencher?’ said he. ‘Well, I do not know but what I could look at a modest pot myself! I am, for the moment, in

precarious health. Much study hath heated my brain, much walking wearied

my—well, it seems to be more my eyes!’

‘You have walked far, I dare say?’ I suggested.

‘Not so much far as often,’ he replied. ‘There is in this city—to which, I think, you are a stranger? Sir, to your very good health and our better acquaintance!—there is, in this city of Dunedin, a certain implication of streets which reflects the utmost credit on the designer and the publicans—at every hundred yards is seated the Judicious Tavern, so that persons of contemplative mind are secure, at moderate distances, of refreshment. I have been doing a trot in that favoured quarter, favoured by art and nature. A few chosen comrades—enemies of publicity and friends to wit and wine—obliged me with their society. “Along the cool, sequestered vale of Register Street we kept the uneven tenor of our way,” sir.’

‘It struck me, as you came in—’ I began.

‘O, don’t make any bones about it!’ he interrupted. ‘Of course it struck you! and let me tell you I was devilish lucky not to strike myself. When I entered this apartment I shone “with all the pomp and prodigality of brandy and water,” as the poet Gray has in another place expressed it. Powerful bard, Gray! but a niminy-piminy creature, afraid of a petticoat and a bottle—not a man, sir, not a man! Excuse me for being so

troublesome, but what the devil have I done with my fork? Thank you, I am sure. *Temulentia, quoad me ipsum, brevis colligo est.* I sit and eat, sir, in a London fog. I should bring a link-boy to table with me; and I would too, if the little brutes were only washed! I intend to found a Philanthropical Society for Washing the Deserving Poor and Shaving Soldiers. I am pleased to observe that, although not of an unmilitary bearing, you are apparently shaved. In my calendar of the virtues shaving comes next to drinking. A gentleman may be a low-minded ruffian without sixpence, but he will always be close shaved. See me, with the eye of fancy, in the chill hours of the morning, say about a quarter to twelve, noon—see me awake! First thing of all, without one thought of the plausible but unsatisfactory small beer, or the healthful though insipid soda-water, I take the deadly razor in my vacillating grasp; I proceed to skate upon the margin of eternity. Stimulating thought! I bleed, perhaps, but with medicable wounds. The stubble reaped, I pass out of my chamber, calm but triumphant. To employ a hackneyed phrase, I would not call Lord Wellington my uncle! I, too, have dared, perhaps bled, before the imminent deadly shaving-table.'

In this manner the bombastic fellow continued to entertain me all through dinner, and by a common error of drunkards, because he had been extremely

talkative himself, leaped to the conclusion that he had chanced on very genial company. He told me his name, his address; he begged we should meet again; finally he proposed that I should dine with him in the country at an early date.

‘The dinner is official,’ he explained. ‘The office-bearers and Senatus of the University of Cramond—an educational institution in which I have the honour to be Professor of Nonsense—meet to do honour to our friend Icarus, at the old-established howff, Cramond Bridge. One place is vacant, fascinating stranger,—I offer it to you!’

‘And who is your friend Icarus?’ I asked,

‘The aspiring son of Daedalus!’ said he. ‘Is it possible that you have never heard the name of Byfield?’

‘Possible and true,’ said I.

‘And is fame so small a thing?’ cried he. ‘Byfield, sir, is an aeronaut. He apes the fame of a Lunardi, and is on the point of offering to the inhabitants—I beg your pardon, to the nobility and gentry of our neighbourhood—the spectacle of an ascension. As one of the gentry concerned I may be permitted to remark that I am unmoved. I care not a Tinker’s Damn for his ascension. No more—I breathe it in your ear—does anybody else. The business is stale, sir, stale. Lunardi did it, and overdid it. A whimsical, fiddling, vain fellow, by all accounts—for I was at that time rocking in my cradle. But once was enough. If Lunardi went up and came down, there was the matter settled. We prefer to grant the point. We do not want to see the experiment repeated ad nauseam by Byfield, and Brown, and Butler, and Brodie, and Bottomley. Ah! if they

would go up and not come down again! But this is by the question. The University of Cramond delights to honour merit in the man, sir, rather than utility in the profession; and Byfield, though an ignorant dog, is a sound reliable drinker, and really not amiss over his cups. Under the radiance of the kindly jar partiality might even credit him with wit.'

It will be seen afterwards that this was more my business than I thought it at the time. Indeed, I was impatient to be gone. Even as my friend maundered ahead a squall burst, the jaws of the rain were opened against the coffee-house windows, and at that inclement signal I remembered I was due elsewhere.